



**HOME**  
*sweet home*

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

**LACEY BLACK**

**HOME**  
*sweet home*

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

**LACEY BLACK**

# Home Sweet Home

## *Burgers and Brew Crüe, book 6*

Copyright © 2022 Lacey Black

Cover Design by Melissa Gill Designs

Photographer Wander Aguiar

Model Josh Larson

Editing by Kara Hildebrand

Proofreading by Sandra Shipman, Joanne Thompson, and  
Karen Hrdlicka

Format by Brenda Wright, Formatting Done Wright

This book is a work of fiction. Any reference to historical events, real people, or real places are used fictitiously. Other names, characters, places and events are products of the author's imagination, and any resemblance to actual events or places or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

No part of this publication may be reproduced by any means without the prior written permission of the author.

Published in the United States of America.

All rights reserved.





# Index

[Chapter One](#)

[Chapter Two](#)

[Chapter Three](#)

[Chapter Four](#)

[Chapter Five](#)

[Chapter Six](#)

[Chapter Seven](#)

[Chapter Eight](#)

[Chapter Nine](#)

[Chapter Ten](#)

[Chapter Eleven](#)

[Chapter Twelve](#)

[Chapter Thirteen](#)

[Chapter Fourteen](#)

[Chapter Fifteen](#)

[Chapter Sixteen](#)

[Chapter Seventeen](#)

[Chapter Eighteen](#)

[Chapter Nineteen](#)

[Chapter Twenty](#)

[Chapter Twenty-One](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Two](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Three](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Four](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Five](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Another Epilogue](#)

[Bonus Scene](#)

[Also by Lacey Black](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

[About the Author](#)

# Chapter One

## *Kallie*

“Who’s the hottie at the end of the bar?”

I glance up at Angie, who’s smiling widely, as she sets a tray full of dirty glasses down on the bar beside me. She’s looking over my shoulder, and I don’t have to follow her line of sight to know who she’s talking about.

“Garreth’s friend,” I reply, filling a draft mug for the wedding guest in front of me.

We’re celebrating Garreth and Reagan’s wedding, which took a dramatic turn when the bride’s water broke a few weeks early. The newlyweds took off to the hospital, promising to keep everyone posted as the night went on and insisting guests stay and enjoy the celebration. The food and alcohol are already covered, so we might as well not let it go to waste.

“Now he looks familiar. I’m not used to seeing him all dressed up,” she deduces as the guy across from me slips a few dollars into our overflowing tip jar.

When I was asked to work tonight’s private event, I agreed readily. Not only because I was being paid handsomely to cover the wedding, but because I’d do just about anything for the four guys who own this establishment, as well as the manager, Garreth. Walker, the man in charge of the bar, gave me a job when I needed it most. I had no experience, but I think he recognized the desperation in my eyes that day. I vowed to be quiet and listen, learning everything I could from the man who was such a natural behind the bar. He taught me what I needed to know to do my job, but also about being a good person.

Walker met his wife, Mallory, when she was hired as a server. He actually fought his attraction to the gorgeous

blonde, but in the end, he was unable to deny how he felt for her and her daughter, Lizzie. They've added two sons, Duncan and Waylon, to their family, and I've never seen him happier. She still works on occasion at the restaurant when we're short-staffed, but spends most of her time at home, raising her growing family.

Glancing down at the end of the bar, I spot the rest of the Crüe, as they often refer to themselves. Jasper is there. He's known as the magician in the kitchen. He serves as the chef of the business, crafting amazing, mouthwatering burgers that keep patrons lined up for a table. He's married to Lyndee, an equally amazing baker with her own bakery across the street. They have Elliott, who is almost three, as well as a newborn daughter, Elsa.

Isaac, or Numbers as everyone calls him, doesn't look so out of place tonight in his charcoal gray suit and tie. I learned during the interview process, when he joined us at the table to go over the paperwork, a dress shirt and tie are part of his everyday wardrobe, and when you place him next to his wife, they are night and day different. But it works for them. BJ, short for Billie Jean, is a vibrant local tattoo artist and piercer, working in the only shop in town. Tonight, her hair is streaked with blue to match the tie around her husband's neck, which might be the cutest thing I've ever seen. They share a son, Rorik, who is a very inquisitive four-year-old, and I can't help but wonder if they'll add to their family anytime soon.

Jameson seems to be doing what he does best, just standing back and observing everything and everyone around him. He's definitely the quiet one of the group; though I know it's not because he doesn't have anything to say. His arm is around his wife, Madelyn, clearly trying to keep her calm. She's Reagan's cousin, and I know they've become pretty close in the time since Madelyn arrived in Stewart Grove. I imagine it was hard for her not to leave the reception to be at the hospital, but everyone decided to give Reagan, Garreth, and their parents this time to welcome the new baby into this crazy family.



And that's what we are. A family.

Every employee who works here is made to feel a part of the group, whether you're in front of the customers on a daily basis or washing the dishes in the back. Everyone is treated the same, which is one of the biggest reasons I love it here so much.

"Earth to Kallie," Angie hollers, waving her hand in front of my face.

"Sorry," I reply with a chuckle. "Just spaced out for a second."

"Well, stop spacing out. There's a gorgeous guy at the end of the bar who keeps watching you. In fact, don't look now," she starts, but stops when I begin to turn around. "I said don't look!" she whisper-yells.

"What if I was turning around to check on customers?" I mutter, trying hard not to let a grin fly.

Angie rolls her eyes. "Oh, whatever, girl," she sasses, setting the rest of the empty glasses on the counter to be washed, while I start to wash them. Turning to me, she pins me with a look and asks, "Now, what are you going to do about that fine piece of man meat down there watching you?"

This time, I do look over my shoulder and meet his gaze. I expect him to look away, but he doesn't. His gray eyes hold a tsunami of emotion, much I can't even describe. His hair is buzzed pretty short and his face cleanly shaved, unlike the last time he was in here having a drink. There's also a hint of silver around his neck, mostly concealed by the light blue dress shirt he's wearing. A necklace, perhaps. There's a hardness to him, an intensity that keeps me both weary and intrigued.

"Nothing," I answer. "I'm not in a good place to start anything with anyone."

That's true. The last thing I need is to try to start a relationship. Not with my life in complete chaos most of the time.

“If that were the case, no one would ever start a relationship. Everyone has *something* going on in their life, Kallie. If you don’t stop and look every now and again, the good will pass you by.”

Her words make complete sense, but I can’t stop the sadness that creeps into my chest. That happens every time I think back on the good I once had, and how quickly it evaporated in the blink of an eye.

Clearing my throat, I keep my focus on washing the glasses so she can’t see the tears welling in my eyes. “I hear you,” I say, trying to appease her and hopefully move on to a new subject. “When do you think we’ll hear from Garreth and Reagan?” I ask brightly, trying to help move it along.

“Oh, I imagine he’ll be in touch pretty soon. The excitement on his face as he rushed his new wife out the door could probably be felt throughout the county,” she says with a small chuckle.

She’s not wrong. The look on Garreth’s face when he realized their baby girl was coming wasn’t something I’ll be forgetting anytime soon. The man is head over heels in love with Reagan, and I’m not sure I’ve ever seen anyone more excited to become a father. He’s truly one of the good ones, and she’s so lucky to have him by her side.

I push the thickness in my throat and the pain in my chest aside and paste on a bright smile. “You’re probably right.”

“I’m gonna go back out and collect glasses so you can get to the line forming behind you. Also, the hottie at the end of the bar is almost done with his beer. He’s going to need you to *service* him soon,” she jokes with a suggestive waggle of her eyebrows.

A bubble of laughter falls from my lips. “You’re terrible. There will be no servicing, only serving.”

Angie glances around me as she leans in. “You know, I’d offer a good servicing, but I’m pretty sure he’s not interested

in me. Those eyes only see you. Dammit.” She offers me a wink before turning and walking away, heading back out to collect empty glasses.

I take a deep cleansing breath and steel my spine before slowly turning back around to face him. I expect him to avert his gaze, but he doesn’t. Leo follows my every move until I’m standing directly in front of him. “Ready for a refill?”

“Sure,” he replies in that deep timbre that seems to wake up my dormant lady parts. Leo slides his glass toward me, and I turn to refill the mug. I can practically feel his eyes on me as I work.

When I place his mug in front of him, I place my elbows on the bar and ask, “So, how long have you known Garreth?”

The corner of his mouth turns upward. It’s not quite a smile, but definitely the hint of one. “A long time. Since kindergarten.”

I let out a slow whistle. “That long?”

“Yep,” he replies, popping the P. “I’ve had to put up with his ass since he was a scrawny little shit who used to eat glue.”

I can’t help but chuckle. “Glue? Really?”

“I swear to it,” he states, taking a sip of his cold brew. “The teacher used to have to keep his glue locked up in her desk drawer.”

The bubble of glee flying from my mouth startles me, and I bring my hands up to cover my face. I’m not usually so quick to laugh. It’s a little embarrassing.

“Don’t do that.”

I peek through my fingers, curiously. “Do what?”

His eyes are like lasers as he says, “Cover up that beautiful laugh and smile.”

When was the last time I blushed? I don’t know, I’m not usually *that* girl. I’m a bartender, which means I’ve heard it all

in the last eight years, including one-night stand offers and marriage proposals. I've been called everything under the sun—including some not so nice things—and have heard every pickup line known to man. But listening to Leo call my smile and laugh beautiful, a laugh I think is too loud and awkward, well, that causes a whole new level of girly tingles to sweep through my veins.

I drop my hands, even though I'd rather keep them covering my heated face. "So, what about you? If Garreth was the glue eater and you're still friends with him, what's your deal?"

Meeting my gaze head-on, he replies, "I wet my pants in first grade."

"Oh no," I reply with a sad chuckle. "That's traumatic."

He nods, taking another drink. "It was, but it was mean ol' Mrs. Davidson's fault. I told her I had to go, and she wouldn't let me leave the classroom. I begged, and she made me sit down. Barely got my ass back in the chair before I pissed my pants."

This time, when he smiles, it's a full-wattage, panty-melting, *holy shit I almost came from watching him smile* smile.

It's magnificent.

"Kallie!" someone hollers from the opposite end of the bar.

"Excuse me," I say to Leo before turning and heading to where a short line of customers is waiting. "Sorry, guys. What can I get you?"

After a handful of minutes mixing drinks and pouring beers, I get through the partygoers and make my way back to where Leo sits, watching me. As soon as I'm close enough, I say, "When I was at a sleepover in sixth grade, I had a full bladder and one of my girlfriends made me laugh. I snorted root beer out my nose and peed in my sleeping bag. It was humiliating."

He grins and holds up his beer. “To glue eaters and pants pee-ers.”

I reach down and grab a small glass, pouring a shot of whiskey. I hold the glass up and clink it against his beer. “To new friends.”

Something flashes in his stunning eyes, but I try not to dissect it. It really could mean anything, and while I’ve always thought of myself as pretty intuitive, something tells me Leo is a hard nut to crack. I could spend hours trying to figure him out, but unless he wants me to know, I’ll probably be off base.

That alone is enough to usually make me take a step back, but I’m completely intrigued by the man in front of me. He has a hard exterior and a look in his eyes that screams wounded, but those qualities only make me want to get to know him more. Why? I have no clue. Usually, I avoid men with excess baggage and complications, but that doesn’t seem to be the case with this one.

I want to know more.

I want to get to know Leo.

Keeping my eyes on him, I toss back the alcohol, feeling the burn of the liquid as it slides down my throat. He takes a hearty drink of his beer, draining about half of it without so much as blinking. He places his glass back down on the coaster. There’re a few droplets of beer on his upper lip, and all I want to do is lick them off. Jeez, I don’t even like beer.

Movement catches out of the corner of my eye, a reminder of why I’m really here. I’m at work, for crying out loud. I’m not supposed to be flirting with the groom’s friend and best man. Placing my glass down with the dirties, I offer Leo a small smile and say, “Excuse me.”

I spend the next hour doing what I’m being paid to do. I fill drink orders and chat with guests, all while keeping an eye on the mysterious Leo at the end of the bar. I stopped by a little while ago when his beer was finished to offer another, but he declined, switching to water.

By the time the clock hits eleven, we're down to only a handful of wedding guests, mostly the owners, their wives, and the employees, both those working and the ones who didn't have to work tonight. Leo is still parked on his stool off to the side. A couple of people have stopped by to say hello to him, but he doesn't seem big on conversation. Don't get me wrong, he appears polite, but whoever is with him generally does most of the talking.

Finally, the phone call we've been waiting on happens. "It's Garreth," Madelyn announces to all who are left. The wives all seem to flock toward her, all eager to hear whatever news the father-to-be is sharing.

I keep cleaning up behind the bar, one ear pointed in their direction. The moment she gets off the phone, she announces, "Reagan is making progress. She's dilated to six centimeters and getting the epidural. The doctor thinks it'll be sometime early tomorrow morning."

The conversation turns lively as everyone discusses birth predictions, but I just focus on getting the bar ready to close down. Walker and Jameson both jump in to help, making sure everything is stocked and ready to go for tomorrow. Walker closes out the cash register, which didn't take in any money. The four partners are covering the bar tab for the night, despite Garreth arguing with them.

When we're down to only a few small tasks left, Walker looks over at me and says, "Clock out."

I reach for the soapy rag, but he moves, blocking me. "We're not done," I insist, narrowing my eyes at my boss and friend.

He mimics my gaze and replies, "You're done. Clock out. Take your tips. Enjoy what's left of your night. The guys and I have the rest."

Crossing my arms over my chest, I argue, "It would take like ten minutes to finish."

“That means the guys and I will be done in ten minutes. Go, Kal. Thank you for working tonight. We appreciate you helping cover the reception.”

Realizing I’m not going to win this argument, I sigh and reach for the tablet beneath the bar. I saw the others already clock out about fifteen minutes ago. “Fine, but I’d like it put on the record I was willing to stay and finish.”

“So noted,” he quips with a smile. “See you tomorrow, Kal,” he adds, turning to do the task I was about to start.

I tap on the tablet, bringing up my name and officially ending my shift for the night. Turning to the end of the bar, I find no one there. I can’t help but feel disappointment the moment I see that empty seat, knowing Leo left and didn’t bother to say goodbye. Not that he was required to. We’re not exactly friends. Just two people who may have gotten friendly.

With another sigh, I walk through the bar and down the hall to the staff break room. I open the locker I use to store my purse, grab my bag, and flip off the light as I exit the room. Then, I make my way down the hall to the back entrance. Just as I go to push open the door, I hear a door behind me open and close. I turn and find Leo exiting the restroom, our gazes instantly locking.

“You’re leaving,” he deduces, noticing my bag beneath my arm.

“Yeah. The guys sent me home for the night,” I reply.

He takes a step toward me. “I’ll walk you out.”

“Oh, you don’t have to. Jameson or one of the others usually do,” I state, glancing around Leo’s broad shoulders but not seeing any of the guys heading my way yet.

“I don’t mind.” He’s already on the move, pushing open the metal door and stepping aside, waiting for me to walk through ahead of him. As I pass, I catch a whiff of something woodsy, one that tickles my senses and causes moisture to flood my core. Between his rugged good looks and

intoxicating outdoorsy scent, I realize I might be in over my head here.

This man is potent, and I'm pretty sure he doesn't even know it.



# Chapter Two

## *Leo*

We walk in silence toward a line of vehicles in the parking lot. My heart is pounding so hard and loud, I'm certain Kallie must be able to hear it. I shove my hands in my pockets just so I don't reach out and touch her, something I've wanted to do since she walked over, got me a beer, and introduced herself earlier tonight.

"I've only seen you in the bar a few times," she says, approaching an older full-sized truck with a logo on the door. Kallie pulls out a set of keys and unlocks the driver's door before turning to face me.

I shrug, the collar on my dress shirt choking me, even though I ditched the necktie hours ago and the top button is open. "I don't really like crowds."

I can feel her eyes on me, but I choose to look elsewhere. I've become a professional at schooling my features, at hiding my emotions from the world. Something tells me, staring into those dark eyes may undo all the progress I've made in the last few years. There's something about them. The deep blue coloring and the hint of feistiness reflecting in the darkness. They call to me, like a siren's song.

I remember those eyes from several months ago. I had stopped by the bar to visit with my buddy, Garreth, and maybe grab some food. He wasn't there, so I sent a text, teasing him about all the gorgeous ladies he worked with. Little did I know, there was one specific lady he was very interested in, who happened to be working that night. He basically came running up there, and that's when I figured it out. I enjoyed teasing the fuck out of him where Reagan was concerned, but my eyes weren't drawn to her the way they were another.

Kallie.

I didn't know her name at the time, but she was gorgeous. Big smile, raven black hair, and soulful eyes that called to me. Every man with a pulse noticed her that night. Many were brazenly watching her every move. She had the grace of a dancer and a confidence I can appreciate in a woman.

She was also way out of my league.

Still is, actually.

Yet, here I am, walking her to her truck when I have no business doing so, just so I can steal a few more minutes of her time. Of course, it's under the guise of wanting to make sure she gets there safely, but I know it's bullshit. Jameson or any one of her bosses is more than capable of doing this task, one I know they always do anyway, yet here I am, standing by her truck and wishing I could invite her back to my place for a drink.

Or more.

"You work at Otto's, right?"

I shouldn't be surprised by her question, but I am. Stewart Grove is a small town, where everyone knows everything about you. That is, if you want to know. Once I left right out of high school, I made it my mission to keep my nose down and to myself upon my return. I don't need to know what my neighbors are up to or who they're screwing. Ain't my business, which is why I didn't ask about Kallie after that first time I saw her. I know she's not from here originally, but beyond that, she's an enigma.

A very beautiful enigma.

"Yeah," I reply, clearing my throat and finally meeting her gaze.

It's like lightning in my veins every time our eyes meet.

She nods slowly. "I thought I recognized you. I was in there a few months back for new tires. You were working on

an old Mustang,” she says, moving hair behind her ear.

My fingers itch to reach out and touch those long strands. They look so soft. “You’re a car girl?” I ask, only slightly surprised to hear this.

“No,” she responds with a chuckle that goes straight to my balls. “I just noticed the car. It was blue with the silver rally stripe down the hood. It stood out.”

“Belongs to a guy a few towns over. He had a bad experience at a local shop, so he’s been bringing it to us for the last couple of years.”

When the silence hangs between us a little too long, she turns back to her truck. “Well, thank you for walking me out.”

“You’re welcome.”

She pulls open the door and climbs inside. From what I can tell, the interior is taken care of, despite the truck being about as old as I am. When she’s situated on the seat and has herself buckled in, she turns and meets my gaze once more. “Maybe I’ll see you around sometime soon?”

My reply becomes lodged in my throat. I want to tell her no. While I like this place, especially when I get to see my friend, it’s not my usual hangout. In fact, I don’t have a hangout besides work, home, and my parents’ place. That’s why it’s incredibly out of character for me when I actually reply, “Maybe.”

It’s not a yes, but it’s not a no either.

Kallie flashes me a smile, one that makes my heart skip a beat as she fires up the engine on the old Ford truck, shuts the door, and rolls down the window. “Well, I suppose I might see you around then.”

Instead of answering, I just give her a small grin and step back. She slides the gear shifter into reverse and slowly backs out. I move out of the way and watch her go before turning to head toward my own truck parked on the opposite side of the lot. When I look up, I find Jameson standing by the

rear entrance, arms crossed over his broad chest as he watches.

“Hey,” I say as I approach.

“Everything all right out here?” he asks, his eyes assessing.

“Fine. Kallie was ready to go, so I walked her out.” I hold his gaze, refusing to waver under his intensity.

I’ve known Jameson my whole life. He and Walker were in my class in school, and while most people steered clear of him, I wasn’t one of them. No, we weren’t exactly friends, but I had no issues with the guy. Since I played basketball and football, I usually hung out with others on the team, like Garreth.

After several long seconds, he finally gives me a slight nod, and the tension in his shoulders seem to ebb slightly. “You coming back in?”

“No,” I reply, reaching into my pocket for my keys. “I’m heading home.”

Turning toward the entrance, he gives me a brisk, “See ya ‘round,” before disappearing inside.

I finally make my way to my truck, ready to head home. Before I climb inside, I pull the balled-up necktie from my pocket and toss it on the passenger seat. As I pull from the lot, my mind flashes back to a certain raven-haired beauty. Back when I was younger, Kallie was just the type of woman I’d go for. Attractive, great smile, friendly, and witty.

Beautiful.

But now?

When I reach the first of only a couple of stoplights on the main drag through town, I let out a deep breath and temporarily close my eyes. I still see her there, leaning over the bar and flashing me that grin.

*Fuck, I’m so screwed.*

The old me would have taken her home and had one hell of a night, but this new version doesn't like complications, and that's what Kallie would be. A very beautiful complication.

I drive toward the edge of town to the small house I call home. I was pretty fucking lucky to have this place, as well as my job, fall into my lap when I returned home almost three years ago. The alternative was crashing with my parents, and after doing that for a few weeks when I first got back, I knew I had to have my own place. I had lived on my own within the military for too long to be under the same roof as my mom and dad once again.

My boss, Otto, owns this house. It used to belong to his parents, and when they passed, it went to their only son. He left it sitting for a few years before doing anything with it, but I didn't mind. I wasn't looking for anything special or fancy when I returned to town, just something that could be my own.

The thought of sharing a house with someone sends a bolt of terror through my veins.

I had my work cut out for me at first. The house was packed full of someone else's life, and Otto didn't want to deal with it. We settled on me keeping what furniture and kitchen stuff I wanted, and putting anything I thought he might want to go through in the shed out back, and the rest went into a dumpster. I felt terrible clearing out his parents' stuff, but he really wanted no part of it. He said he had all the memories and the few keepsakes he wanted. The rest was just stuff.

I let myself in, toss my keys on the counter, and grab a beer out of the fridge. While taking a hearty drink, my phone dings with a text. I pull it out and smile when I see the groom's name on the screen.

**Garreth:** Thanks for everything today, man. I'm sorry I wasn't there at the end of the celebration.

**Me:** I think your reasoning for missing it is pretty solid.

Then, because I'm an asshole to my oldest friend, I fire back a second message.

**Me:** Your new wife asking about me?

I take a drink of my beer and just wait, a smile already crossing my lips.

**Garreth:** Nope, not once. She's too busy having MY baby to worry about you.

Laughing, I take my beer and my phone into the living room and plop down on the old eighties-style floral couch.

**Me:** Yeah, you're right. She's probably not going to ask about me in front of you.

I can practically see the steam billowing from his ears.

**Me:** Speaking of baby, how's it going?

**Garreth:** I'm getting anxious to meet her. Reagan's resting now, thanks to the drugs. Doc says it could be just a few more hours.

**Me:** Well, keep me posted. I'm happy for you, man. Really. No one deserves all this happiness bullshit more than you.

I think back on Garreth's first marriage to Shelby, which wasn't an easy one, and know he definitely found a more fitting wife this time around. His ex wasn't happy he was working in a restaurant instead of using the engineering degree he obtained in college. He moved back home following the divorce and met Reagan. Though, from what I understand, their road to getting together wasn't easy at first. She was in a relationship and my friend spent a lot of time pining after her. Reagan's pretty awesome, and the fact they're having a baby together—right now, actually—brings a smile to my face.

He's finally getting the family he's always wanted.

**Garreth:** Thanks, Leo. I'll send you a message when she's here. You're welcome to come up and meet her.

My palms start to sweat at the thought. I haven't been inside a hospital since...Jesus.

*Germany.*

I fucking hate hospitals.

I fire off a quick "sounds good" even though it sounds anything but. Yes, I want to meet their baby, but I think I'll wait until both mom and daughter are home. Isn't that the most respectful thing to do anyway? Visit after they've had a few days to recoup and get settled?

I kick my feet up on the coffee table and finish my beer. My brain wanders, first toward the day we started by celebrating Garreth and Reagan's nuptials, which quickly transformed into celebrating the birth of their baby. Then, back to a certain raven-haired beauty who I have no business thinking about.

She's just the type of woman I would have pursued not that long ago. Back when my biggest worry in life was where we were drinking beer at the end of the day and who I might be taking home with me.

I wasn't one of *those* military guys. You know the ones. The guys who sleep with every pussy they can find, married or not. I knew plenty of those during my time in the Army, but I was never one of them. Yes, I might have had a few one-night stands over the years, but only if they were single and knew the score. I didn't sleep with married women and I wasn't a manwhore. If anything, I was the flirt of the group. The guys used me to break the ice in just about any situation.

Hard to believe I used to be that guy.

Carefree.

Fun.

Now, I work six days a week, putting in as many hours as I can, just to get out of my own head for a while. Between worrying about my mom's declining health and the shit I try to keep buried, I'm probably the least fun guy in Stewart Grove.

Hell, probably in the entire state of Ohio.

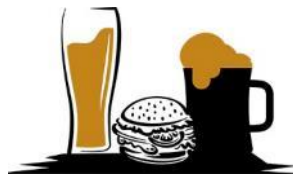
Oh, well.

I don't need fun.

What I do need is a little sleep.

Closing my eyes, I lean my head back, trying to get comfortable on the lumpy couch that was made before I was born. My mind instantly conjures up images of Kallie. The way she looked tonight behind the bar and the way she'd appeared the couple of times I've seen her prior. Always with those striking dark eyes that seem to draw me in, like a moth to a flame.

Something tells me, if I'm not careful, I'll definitely get burned.



*I can't move.*

*When I open my eyes, all I see is pitch black.*

*There's no sound.*

*Why is there no noise?*

*My head is pounding with the rumble of a freight train, and it's hard to put a thought together.*

*I try to turn, to find out from Gomez what the hell's going on, but when I look, all I see is darkness.*

*It's everywhere.*

*Surrounding me, suffocating me.*



*Grabbing ahold of my body and dragging me down.*

*I open my mouth, but nothing comes out. No words. No sound.*

*Nothing.*

*The silence is broken by a cry. It's pained and close.*

*So fucking close.*

*What the hell is that?*

*I turn to ask one of the guys, but...something's wrong.*

*Where the hell are they?*

*Where am I?*

*Why am I alone in the dark?*

*The cry grows louder.*

*So loud it makes my ears hurt.*

*I try to lift my hands, to cover my ears, but I can't move them. I can't move anything. My arms, my legs, my body, it's all...stuck.*

*This time, I try hard to move. I start to shake, trying to throw my weight into my shoulder to help budge whatever's weighing me down, but nothing works.*

*Nothing moves this invisible heaviness.*

*Panic starts to set in, along with the realization that something's terribly wrong.*

*I open my mouth once more, only this time, I hear it. A deep, agonizing scream pierces my ears, but the most startling revelation is realizing who it's coming from.*

*From me.*

*Fear grips my chest, refusing to let even the faintest whisper of oxygen into my lungs.*

*I can't breathe.*

*I'm going to die.*

*That's when the screaming stops, and I'm once again surrounded by silence.*

*And the scent of death.*

*It's everywhere.*

*No matter what I do, I can't get away from it.*

*It's a part of me.*

*I start to thrash, my mouth moving as I beg for help.*

*Help me.*

*Help my friends.*

*But no one comes.*

*I'm all alone.*

*Drowning.*

*Suffocating.*

*Dying.*

*Alone.*

I jump with a start, my heart pounding, my body covered in sweat. My eyes are wide open as I try to bring what's in front of me into focus. It takes me only a few seconds to recognize my TV on the wall and the old cabinet positioned beneath it.

I'm in my house.

Not overseas.

My hands are shaking as I bring them to my head and run my fingers through my hair. "Fuck," I grumble, trying to calm my racing heartbeat.

I want to close my eyes, to take a few deep, cleansing breaths like the doctors said I should, but I don't dare. At least not yet. Shutting my eyes right now is the worst thing I can do. Instead, I jump up. With wobbly legs, I move to the lamp on the opposite side of the room and flip it on, bathing the room

in light. Why I didn't do that before I got comfortable and prepared to sleep is beyond me.

I know better.

But I let my guard down.

I haven't had a nightmare in almost two weeks, which is probably why I didn't consider the lack of light situation. Just as I approach the couch, my phone lights up. I see Garreth's name on the screen and notice the time. It's just after three in the morning, but that doesn't stop me from clicking on the message.

**Garreth:** Meet Evangeline Rosalyn Taylor, fifteen minutes old, weighing in at seven pounds, three ounces and nineteen inches long.

The accompanying photo is of this tiny wrinkly baby, her eyes wide open as she looks up at her mom. Reagan is giving the camera a watery, exhausted smile, while Garreth gazes at his wife with so much love and adoration, it pours through the screen.

It's a gorgeous first family photo.

**Me:** Congrats, man. Can't wait to meet her.

**Garreth:** I never want to let her go.

I'm not sure who's he's referring to, but I suppose it's fitting of them both in this moment.

I get up and stretch, surprised to find I'm still wearing my dress clothes from the wedding. Picking up the empty beer bottle, I throw it in the trash and make sure the back door's locked before heading to my bedroom. There, I strip off my clothes, tossing them in the hamper, and climb into bed. I make sure the television is on before flipping onto my stomach and sighing.

I'm pretty sure I won't actually be able to fall back asleep. I never do when I have a nightmare, but I'll try. A few extra hours of shut-eye will come in handy, considering I'm covering for Otto tomorrow with the tow truck.

Too bad sleep will no doubt evade me.

It always does after a nightmare.

Memories that continue to chase me, long after my  
time in the Army was done.

# Chapter Three

## *Kallie*

“We’re out of the sausage patties. Are links okay?” I holler, gazing at the near-empty fridge and trying to gauge if I have time to go to the store before work tonight. I’m sure I can slip it in between feeding the horses, taking Dolly for a ride, and heading into town for my next shift at Burgers and Brew.

“There is no bad sausage, Kallie girl,” my dad says, the sound of his walker sliding and tapping against the old linoleum flooring.

“That’s what she said.” I’m barely able to get the joke out before bursting into a fit of laughter.

“Mature,” my dad teases, making me giggle harder.

Out of the corner of my eye, I watch as he slowly turns and lowers himself into his favorite chair at the kitchen table. We eat all of our meals in here, clearing out the formal dining room years ago when we needed the space for his hospital bed. Now, he’s in his own room again, though this time on the main floor. Dad will probably never be able to safely do stairs on his own, thanks to the spinal injury he received eight years ago. I’m just happy he’s able to walk at all, because it was pretty iffy those first few years post-accident.

“I get it from you,” I state with a smile. I set the eggs and sausage links down on the counter and grab the skillet. “I’m going to run to town later for groceries. Any requests?” I ask, firing up the stove.

After a few seconds, he responds, but it’s not what I was expecting. “When was the last time you went on a date?”

Slowly, I turn and face my dad. “What does that have to do with breakfast?”

He shrugs his shoulders. “Nothing. But I was trying to recall the last time some nice boy came and took you out, and I don’t recall it happening since you’ve been back.”

I swallow over the sudden lump in my throat. Turning my attention back to breakfast, I start cracking eggs. “I don’t need to date, Dad. I have you,” I reply, flashing him a big, fake smile.

His sigh is audible over the crackling of the food. “That’s what I was afraid of. You *do* need to date, Kallie girl.”

“I’m fine, Dad,” I reiterate, forcing another big smile.

“You spend all your time here, taking care of me and this place. Then five nights a week at the bar. Unless you’re dating one of those guys you work for,” he starts, but I quickly cut him off.

“They’re all happily married.”

“Exactly. The other bartenders?” he pushes, clearly not letting this go, and it’s too early on a Sunday for this.

“Just friends, Dad. All of the guys I work with, we’re just friends.”

He exhales loudly, but I keep my focus on the stove. No way can I turn and look right now. The last thing I want to see is the guilt in his eyes, which I know I’d see. It’s always there, in spades, anytime we start to have a discussion like this. Dad feels guilty I’m stuck here, taking care of him, but the truth is I’d rather be here than anywhere else. He’s my only living family member.

“You’ve been home eight years, Kallie girl.”

I swallow over the lump of emotion lodged in my throat. Has it really been that long? Some days it feels like longer, while others, the pain and emotion feel like it happened yesterday. “What’s your point?” I ask as politely as I can, all things considered.

“My point is, it’s time to get back on the horse. You’re not still hung up on what’s his name, are you?”

My blood stills in my veins as I turn to look at my dad. "What? No."

He nods. "Good. That asshole didn't deserve you, Kallie girl."

A smile crosses my lips. A real one this time, because Dad is completely right. Andrew didn't deserve me. "On that we agree," I quip, turning off the stove and starting to remove the sausage links and eggs.

He reaches for the stack of paper plates we keep readily accessible on the table and a fork from the basket beside it. While he sets two settings, I place the steaming food in the middle of the table.

Dad waits for me to scoop some eggs onto my plate and taking two sausage links before serving himself. Even during that difficult time following his accident, he would insist I get my food first before he'd take a single bite. It's one of the memories I've always carried of my parents together from when I was little. Dad would always make sure Mom and I had food first before he's served himself. Always.

"I just want you to be happy, Kallie girl," he says, always calling me by the nickname he gave me when I was a small child.

Chewing slowly, I flash him a grateful grin. "I am happy, Dad."

"Living here with your old man?" he questions sarcastically, biting off half a link from his fork.

"There's nowhere else I'd rather be," I insist, reaching over and squeezing his aged hand. "Besides, if I wasn't here every day, you'd eat nothing but bacon and Oatmeal Cream Pies."

"Bacon is tasteless slices of cardboard!" he bellows, narrowing his humor-filled eyes at me. "Sausage is where it's at, daughter. Don't you forget it," he adds, pointing his fork in my direction.

I'm already laughing though, knowing I can get under his skin so easily, just by mentioning bacon. He's never been a fan of the pork product, much to everyone's dismay. I mean, who doesn't like bacon?

He clears his throat and sets his fork down. "There's more to life than living here, taking care of your old man. Promise me, if you get the chance to live your own life on your terms, you'll take it. Promise me you'll keep those beautiful blue eyes, that are identical to your mother's, wide open and jump at the chance to find love. What I had with your mother is out there waiting for you. Promise me, if you find it, you'll grab it and never let it go."

It's hard to swallow, hard to see through the tears welling in my eyes. His light green eyes are pleading with me, waiting for a response. It kills me every time he speaks about his life with my mother, mostly because I can tell he's still so pained by her death. Even now, after almost twenty years, he still refers to her as the love of his life. The great love he had and lost.

"I promise," I whisper, squeezing his hand and blinking hard to keep the tears from sliding down my cheek.

He nods, as if appeased by my answer, and reaches for his fork again. "Eat up before your food gets cold," he instructs, diving into his breakfast, shoveling a whole link into his mouth. I can't help but smile.

My life took a drastic turn eight years ago. A change that ultimately brought me to Stewart Grove. I never foresaw it coming, but I wouldn't go back and change the outcome if I could. It made me who I am, but also taught me more than any college ever could. It reiterated the importance of family, which is why I'd never leave my dad when he needs me the most.

Whether he likes it or not, I'm here to stay.

He's not getting rid of me.

Ever.





CCR blasts through the speakers in my dad's old truck, the cool spring air whipping through my hair, as I head out of town toward home. I have just enough time to get the groceries unloaded, put away, feed the horses, and shower before I head back to town for my shift at the bar. It'll be a tight fit, but I can make it work. It's not the first time I've pushed the envelope when it comes to getting to work on time.

I used to never—and I do mean *never*—be late. Back when I was living and working in Cincinnati, I was ten to fifteen minutes early everywhere I went. I get that from my mom. She was always insisting we leave plenty early, giving yourself enough time to arrive, just in case something happened along the way.

Dad is the exact opposite. He's the one jumping into the shower five minutes after we are scheduled to leave. I remember it drove my mom absolutely nuts, but after the annoyance wore off, she always just shook her head and laughed at him. Looking back now, they seemed to be so different, yet that's exactly what worked in their favor.

Just as I reach the stop sign to head west toward my dad's place, the old truck sputters and stalls before dying completely. "Shit," I mutter, throwing the shifter into Park before trying the key. The engine tries to turn over but isn't successful.

So I try it a second time.

And a third.

When I was leaving the grocery store, I noticed it didn't start as quickly as it usually does but didn't think much of it. I mean, I was in a hurry. Now I'm sitting at a stop sign, three miles away from where I live, and the truck won't start.

Fuck my life.

There goes my carefully crafted tight schedule for today.

I jump out, pulling the hood release as I go. The air feels cooler, brisker than it did just a few short minutes ago. It's like Mother Nature is mocking me too. As soon as I open the heavy hood, I glance inside, as if it will somehow tell me exactly what's wrong and how to fix it. Of course, no such message is displayed, which means I'm a sitting duck. "Shitballs!" I yell out.

Stepping back, I contemplate my options. My automotive knowledge is pretty basic. I can change the oil in the truck, add fluids, and check tire pressure. Anything past that is out of my wheelhouse and requires a mechanic.

Now what? I can't call Dad. It's not like he can hop in a vehicle and come pick me up. He hasn't sat behind the wheel since his accident, and we don't exactly have a backup vehicle. When I moved home to take care of him, I ended up selling my car. I had quit my job and wasn't sure if or when I'd be going back to work, so the extra monthly payment had to go. But that was okay. This old truck has worked just fine.

Well, until now.

The deep rumble of a vehicle has me spinning around. I blink several times, knowing I'm hallucinating now. My mind conjured up the tow truck headed my way. It must have. How else would you explain the big blue rescue vehicle approaching and slowing down?

"It's your lucky day, Kallie. You don't even have to call Otto for a tow. One showed up all on its own," I mutter to myself, moving to the cab of the truck to grab my purse. I spin around, just as Otto's climbing from the cab. "Holy shit, I could kiss you," I holler toward the old man, taking two steps in his direction and stopping in my tracks.

Leo crosses his broad arms over his chest and flashes me a huge smile. The gesture lights up his face in a way I haven't seen before. The shadows and edginess from last

night are gone, replaced by this carefree version that makes my heart skip a few beats and my panties a little damp. “Well, that’s the best offer I’ve had all day.”

“Where’s Otto?” I reply, still trying to figure out what Leo’s doing here, especially when I’ve barely been able to push him out of my thoughts.

“Probably still out shopping with his wife. Last I heard, she was making him take her to dinner *after* they spent all day at the mall,” he chuckles a deep sound that’s like lightning to my lady bits.

“Poor guy,” I mutter.

“Not a fan of the mall? I thought all women like shopping,” Leo replies, his muscular arms still poised across his broad chest.

I can’t help but glance down at my watch as I retort, “Not all women. Shit.”

“Late for something?” he asks, humor dancing in his gray eyes.

“Actually, yes. I need to feed the horses before I go to work, and I have a truck cab full of groceries that are thawing as we speak because the truck died three miles from home,” I reply, biting back the urge to growl in frustration.

“Well, you’re in luck,” he announces, slapping his hands together. “I have to run and pick up the Johnsons’ truck down past the boat ramp. I can drop you off on my way there, pick up his truck, run it to the garage, and then come back for your truck,” he adds, walking straight toward my passenger door and pulling it open.

“That doesn’t help me much, actually, and what are you doing?”

He stops and pins me with a look. “Helping you move the groceries.” He didn’t say it, but I felt his *duh* on the end of the sentence.

I run over and grab the two remaining bags from the floorboard. “Any chance you can just...I don’t know, try and start it?”

He sets the bags down in the cab of his tow truck and turns back to face me. His eyebrows are drawn together in question. “Have you tried?” he asks. When I nod, he adds, “Honey, I’m guessing your issue is either air or fuel related. If it died when you were at the stop sign, it was either lacking O2 or gas. You didn’t run it out of gas, did you?”

I sigh dramatically, trying to refrain from snapping at him, as well as completely ignoring the fact he called me honey...and I liked it. “Of course I didn’t. I’m not one of those useless girls.”

His hands go up in a defensive motion. “I’m not implying you are, but you’d be surprised at how many out of gas calls we get a year. Anyway, why does this not help you?” he asks, staring at me as he awaits my answer.

“Because I still have to get to work and don’t have a vehicle,” I mutter, trying to figure out if one of the guys can run out and grab me. I’d hate to call off, especially this close to start-time. With Garreth off for the next two weeks, following the birth of his baby early this morning, all of the owners will be stepping up and working adjusted shifts.

“What time?”

“Four.”

“No big deal,” he responds, waving my response off. “I’ll drop you off and then pick you back up after I take the trucks to the shop. I should have enough time to load them both and be back to get you by three thirty,” he announces, climbing back into the driver’s seat.

I run back to Dad’s truck, flip on the hazards, grab the keys, and lock it up. Not that anyone would mess with it, but you never know. “Do you think it’ll be okay here?” I ask as I climb up into the tall cab of the tow truck. It’s not off the road because it just died, but that doesn’t mean we can’t try. I’m

not so sure I should just leave it, but I'm guessing pushing it off the country roadway wouldn't be a fun job either.

"It'll be fine. I'll text the sheriff and let them know it's out here just until I can pick it up in a bit. This way, if anyone calls it in, we're covered."

"Okay. Thanks," I say, getting comfortable in the worn passenger seat, while trying to straddle the bags of groceries.

An old country song plays softly through the speakers as we pull back onto the road, the cool breeze blowing through the truck. He takes an immediate left, heading in the right direction. "You know where I live?" I ask, trying to recall if I shared that detail. Not that it would be hard to figure out. Stewart Grove is a small town of only eight thousand residents, most of which have known each other since birth.

"No, but I assume it's the old Houston farm. You said horses, and there's not a lot of places with them," he replies, sticking his elbow out the window.

I can't help but notice the corded muscles of his forearm and the way his shirt sleeve molds to his bicep like a second skin. Last night, his button-down hid the definition in his arms behind looser material, but now that he's wearing just a T-shirt, it's on full display. I didn't realize I was so much of an arm-girl, but here I am, practically drooling over a tight shirt and hard muscles.

"Kallie?"

I blink, dropping back down to earth from my arm-porn ride in the clouds. "Hmm?"

"Is it this one?" he asks, humor lacing his question, as if he knows exactly where my mind was loitering.

I glance at our surroundings and realize we're practically stopped in the road in front of the farm. "Oh. Yep, this is it."

He turns, heading up the long lane. When he reaches the Y in the driveway, he follows it to the right, taking us

toward the house. The left side of the Y goes straight to the barns and buildings along the side of the property.

As soon as he stops the truck, I practically jump out. "Thanks for the lift," I holler, reaching for bags of groceries on the floorboard.

"Let me help you."

I jump a foot into the air, not realizing Leo got out of the truck and walked up behind me so quickly and silently. When I jump, I end up falling backward, right into his chest. I can now confirm, it is just as deliciously hard and muscular as his arms. "I'm so sorry," I practically shout, jumping forward to put a little distance between us.

"No worries," he replies with a chuckle, reaching around me and brushing his arm against mine. Electricity courses through my veins, but I try to ignore it. Leo throws me a wink before reaching around me and grabbing more bags.

"Where are you going?"

"Inside," he replies, his gray eyes dancing with mischief. Leo turns and heads straight for the front door.

"I can take them," I quickly insist, grabbing the last two bags and shutting the door.

"I don't mind helping, honey," he says, walking up the wheelchair ramp without asking a single question about it. It's as if he doesn't even notice it. "Besides," he says, stopping in front of the door and waiting for me to catch up. "I figured I might as well wait for my reward."

I stop beside him, confusion written all over my face. "Your reward? What's that?"

A big wolfish grin slowly spreads across his perfectly delectable lips. "My kiss."

# Chapter Four

## *Leo*

“What’s this I hear about kissing my daughter?”

The deep voice behind me catches me by surprise, but I school my features before turning around. “Good afternoon, sir.”

He takes in my appearance before him, from my grease-stained jeans to my dusty work boots. When his eyes return to mine, he gives me a smile and pushes through the screened door. “No need for that sir bullshit. Name’s Al. You can call me that,” the man says, using a walker to step through the doorway.

“Dad, I’m coming inside. There’s no reason for you to step out into the cold,” Kallie states, stepping around me to help hold the door open.

“This isn’t cold, Kallie girl. Cold is camping outside of Anchorage, Alaska in January.” The man I now know as Kallie’s dad glances my way. “Almost lost three toes to frostbite that weekend.” He flashes me another wide smile, one that looks identical to the woman beside me.

“Dad, let’s get this stuff inside so Leo can be on his way,” Kallie announces, making sure the door is open wide enough for her father and his walker to go through.

I hang back, giving the man plenty of room to maneuver before following in his wake. “You can just set those down on the floor. I can take them into the kitchen,” Kallie says behind me, but I ignore her. Why create more work for her when I’m perfectly capable of carrying some groceries through a few rooms.

I don’t reply to her statement, just continue through the living room and into the open farmhouse kitchen. Al goes over and carefully takes a seat in a chair at the table, but since

it appears there's more room on the counter, I deliver the bags of food there.

"So, let's talk about this kiss," Al says, bringing a smile to my face.

I like this guy.

"No, let's not," Kallie argues. "There was no kiss. Won't be a kiss," she adds, setting her bags beside the ones I carried. I try to ignore the disappointment I suddenly feel from her comment. "The truck broke down and Leo was driving by. He's saving me a call to Otto."

Al perks up at that. "What's wrong with the truck?"

Kallie shrugs, so I jump in. "I'll take it to the shop and check it out, sir," I assure him.

Al runs his shaky hand down his face. "Well, shit. And the old beater out back isn't running either," he says absently before glancing at his daughter. They share a look. One I can't decipher.

"Well, I better get going so I can pick up both trucks before coming back to grab Kallie for work," I state. The surprised look on her dad's face lets me know we left a few details out when we were filling him in on the plan.

Kallie starts pulling food out of the closest bag while she says, "Leo was on his way to pick up another truck to take back to the shop. He agreed to grab ours too."

Her dad looks my way. "That's very kind of you. Let me know how much the bill is."

I wave off his comment. "Otto handles all that, so I'm sure he'll settle up with you soon. Let's worry about getting it back to the shop and running again."

Al reaches for his walker and starts to stand. His arms wobble as he moves, making me worried he's going to fall. But he doesn't. Once he's upright, he takes a few steps forward until he's directly in front of me. "Thank you, Leo," he



states, the question hanging between us as he extends his hand.

I place my much bigger, rougher hand against his and give it a friendly shake. "Martinez. Leo Martinez."

"Pleasure, Leo Martinez. Hope to see you around again."

I nod and release his hand before turning back to face Kallie. Her eyes are wide as she watches our exchange. "Three thirty still okay?"

"Yes," she replies a little hoarsely. "Thank you." She steps forward and hands me her keys.

I turn and head for the front entrance, needing to put just a little distance between us. I don't know what it is about Kallie, but I'm drawn. Have been since the very first moment I saw her behind the bar, but it's more than just attraction. Even though I know I should probably stay away, I can't. I was just arguing with myself about whether or not I should go to the bar tonight for dinner when I happened upon her broken down on the side of the road. Call it fate or whatever in the hell you want, but I'm taking it as a sign.

I see no harm in getting to know her a little better. Doesn't mean I have to date her, right? Hanging out doesn't mean I have to share my deepest, darkest secrets with her. Just the thought makes my stomach drop and gives me the urge to vomit all over my boots.

Pushing that as far out of my head as possible, I climb back into the cab of the tow truck. As much as I try not to glance back toward the front door, I do, and the realization I'm a little sad she's not standing there hits me like a hammer to the chest.

*What the hell is wrong with me?*

Her dad was definitely an interesting guy, and as I drive back down the long driveway, I can't help but wonder what happened to him. I noticed the ramp when we first pulled up, but Kallie never mentioned living with anyone, so when he

was suddenly there, behind me, it was a bit of a shock. But Al seems like a decent guy, and I can't help but wonder when I'll get to see him again.

I find the Johnsons' truck easily in the parking lot, just south of the boat dock, keys waiting for me above the visor as advised. While I don't do the tows too often, I've been doing them enough in the few years I've worked for Otto that it doesn't take me long to get it loaded up. I'm familiar with the truck and the process and am quickly heading back to the shop.

Pulling into the back lot, I park it alongside a Honda I'll have to work on in the morning. As soon as it's dropped and the keys secured inside, I head out again, this time to grab Kallie's truck. I backtrack to the country road outside of town and maneuver my truck in front of hers.

Hopping out, I prep the winch and lower the boom. With her keys in my hand, I make my way to her truck to put it in neutral. When I open the driver's door, I hear a sound. Something soft that makes me stop in my tracks. Glancing around, I search for the source of the noise, but come up empty. There's nothing out here but crickets and fresh air.

I reach for the winch cable and slip it under the front end of the truck, attaching it to the frame. Just as I'm about to climb back out, movement catches out of the corner of my eye. I barely have time to turn when I see a golden mess of hair rubbing against my face and curling into my neck.

I jump so damn high, I practically hit my head on the bottom of the truck. "Jesus," I mutter, trying to calm my racing heart and figure out what to do. The little ball of fur just stares up at me with big, trusting puppy eyes. "What are you doing here, little guy?" I ask, slowly reaching out and stroking his floppy ear.

He casts his eyes down, as if trying to hide from the fact I was talking to him. Without thinking, I reach out and gently pick him up, shifting myself out from under the vehicle

without letting him go. Once I'm standing, the pup gets comfy against my chest, and I hear him sigh.

"Where did you come from?" I ask, noticing his lack of collar or any identification. What I do notice is how skinny and sad he looks. Plus, his coat is dirty and I can't help but wonder how long he's been out here. The nearest farmhouse is about a mile down the road, but I don't recall them having dogs. Doesn't mean they didn't get one recently, so I'll check it out in a bit.

It's hard to finish loading the truck with a puppy in my arms, so I take him over to the cab of the truck. There's an old flannel shirt stuffed down between the seats, so I toss that on the floorboard and set him down on top of it. "Okay, little guy, you hang out here for a few minutes while I load the truck. Then we'll pick up Kallie for work and see if we can find your owner."

*I'm talking to a puppy. Does that make me sound a little crazy?*

The pup just stares back at me as I close the door. Since the windows are down, I can hear his soft whimpers, so I make the rest of the load quick. By the time the vehicle is secured on the back of the truck and I head for the driver's seat, the whimpering has stopped.

Slowly opening the door, I find the little guy's curled up and sound asleep. Well, until the door squeaks, startling him awake. Instantly, he starts to whimper again and moves toward me. Picking him up with my left hand, I climb up in the cab and shut the door. I start the engine, pick up the flannel and carefully lay it out on the passenger seat. Then, I place the puppy on top of it so I can drive back to the shop.

As soon as I'm on my way, he moves toward me. His front paws go up on the armrest as he tries to climb over it. He stumbles a little, but gets over the big plastic hump in front of him and is teetering between the passenger seat and my seat. "I'm not so sure you should be moving around there,

little guy. You're gonna fall down," I tell him, reaching over and returning him to the seat.

Instantly, he starts the process all over again, this time, a little faster and more careful. When he gets back on top of the armrest, I sigh and grab him again. "Listen, that's probably not a good idea," I state, setting him down on my lap while I approach the turn to take me back into town.

The moment I'm through the turn and shifting through the gears, I glance down and find the puppy sound asleep on my lap. I shake my head and just concentrate on driving through the main drag through town until I'm pulling behind the shop. Backing the tow truck up, I line Kallie's disabled vehicle beside the one I dropped just a short time ago, and when I go to climb out, I realize I have a small problem.

And he's giving me the biggest set of puppy dog eyes I've ever seen.

They're a dark chocolate color that calls to my soul.

"All right, pup. You're gonna have to sit here while I drop the load. Then, we'll get you back home."

This time, I set him in the driver's seat and shut the door. The whimpering starts immediately, and I wonder if it has to do with the fact he can no longer see me. But inside the truck is the safest spot for him. While I'm unloading, I won't be able to watch for him, and the last thing I want is to accidentally drop the damn truck on the little guy.

So, I ignore his whining and finish unloading my second truck of the day. This time, I notice he doesn't quiet down. Instead of running the keys inside, I opt to grab my passenger and take him with me. He's sitting on the seat, his tail instantly wagging as soon as he sees me. I reach out and pet his head, rubbing around his ears before picking him back up. "You thirsty, buddy?" I glance down at my watch, confirming I have a few extra minutes. "Let's grab a quick drink and then we'll go pick up Kallie for work."

I set him down on the ground, and he eagerly trots behind me, his little legs doing everything he can to keep up with me. Inside, I head straight for the office with my new shadow hot on my heels. His tongue is lolling out of his mouth as he checks out his new surroundings, but he stays with me. Once the keys are hanging and the tow tickets filled out, I return to the main shop and head for the big wash tub.

“Sorry we don’t have a doggy bowl here, but this will have to do,” I state—again, talking to the dog—and fill an empty coffee cup with tap water. The moment I have it set on the floor; the dog starts drinking greedily.

He splashes it all over the floor, but I’m not too worried about it. It’s a concrete shop. There’s been plenty of water sloshed across it over the years. Just as he’s finishing, I notice he squats. “No,” I bellow, already reaching down to grab him. My holler causes him to cower and tuck his head. “We potty outside, little dude,” I say, much softer this time, hurrying to take him out the back door.

I set him down, and while he gazes up at me, I say, “Go ahead. You can potty now.”

I don’t know if he actually understands me or if it’s just dumb luck, but he squats and goes. “Good boy,” I tell him, scooping him back up when he’s finished. “Let’s go get Kallie, shall we?”

This time, I jump in my own truck after making sure the shop and tow truck are locked up. I set the dog over on the passenger seat, but he quickly eliminates the space between us and curls up at my side, head resting on my lap.

“I have to admit, you’re a cute fella,” I tell him, reaching down to scratch under his neck. “Your owners are probably missing ya, though.”

Driving out of town, I make my way back to the horse ranch I now know belongs to Kallie and her dad. As soon as my truck hits the lane, I see the front door open and the woman herself step onto the aging front porch. She turns and

hollers back inside before walking my way. I take a few minutes to appreciate the view. Kallie's wearing tight jeans and a fitted tee with the bar logo on the front. It dips down just enough in the front to get a good view of cleavage.

Suddenly, I think about all those fuckers at the bar staring at those lush mounds of tits, and a bubble of jealousy sweeps through my veins. It's crazy how quickly I went into overprotective jealous mode, considering I'm pretty sure I've never ever gone there. Even back in high school when my then-girlfriend, Missy, was drunk and trying to make out with someone right in front of me.

"Hey," she greets, pulling open the passenger door. "Thanks for giving me a ride, I—" She stops cold, her eyes wide and locked on the golden ball of fur at my side. "You have a dog?"

"Nope. Do you have a dog? I found it under your truck when I was loading it up," I tell her as she slides inside.

"Not mine, but oh my God, it's adorable," she coos, reaching over and petting the pup. "Is it a boy or girl?"

"I'm pretty sure it's a boy," I tell her, throwing the shifter into reverse and backing out of my spot.

"Are you keeping him?" she asks, picking him up and cuddling the dog to her chest. "He's so stinkin' cute."

"Uhh, no. I don't have time for a dog. After I drop you off, I'll run down to that house about a mile up the road from where you broke down. I'm hoping it's theirs."

Kallie is barely paying any attention to me. She has the pup practically right in her face, cooing, cuddling, and kissing on him.

*Is it bad I'm really fucking jealous of a dog right now?*

"He's a little skinny," she adds, laying him down on her lap and rubbing his belly. "And his fur is pretty matted on his underside. I think he's been running for a while, which is

really sad. He's pretty young. I bet he's only eight to ten weeks old."

I thought he was pretty young, but eight to ten weeks sounds too young. Like he should still be with his mom, not running around the countryside lost. It doesn't sit right with me, and the more I think about it, the more determined I am to find his home.

I drive back into town, heading for Burgers and Brew, all while Kallie holds and talks to the puppy. He gazes up at her, his tongue dangling out, as he hangs on her every word.

*Trust me, buddy. I know the feeling.*

# Chapter Five

## *Kallie*

“Shit,” I mumble, reaching into my bag and grabbing my phone. I was so distracted by the puppy, I forgot to let Mrs. Wolfe know I was leaving.

“Everything okay?” Leo asks as I text the woman who lives down the road.

“Yeah, sorry. I usually let Mrs. Wolfe know when I’m leaving so she can check on Dad for me,” I tell him, happy when I get a reply acknowledgement letting me know she’ll go down at dinnertime.

“So, your dad,” he starts, leaving the door wide open for me to fill in the gaps. I’m surprised he doesn’t know, but then again, it sounds like Leo was in the military during his accident all those years ago.

Just as he’s pulling into a parking spot, I reply, “A little over eight years ago, Dad was working with some horses in the pasture. There was one in particular, that was giving him fits, and at some point, he was thrown off. It was a day his helper, Russell, was off, so there was no one there to assist. He knew his back was hurt bad because he couldn’t move his legs. Mrs. Wolfe drove past that afternoon and noticed the horse running around. She just happened to look over at the right moment and see Dad’s hand up in the air from the middle of the pasture. He lay there all day, yelling for help. It still amazes me she was able to spot him at the exact moment he raised his hand.”

My heart trips over itself with grief, like it does every time I recall that day. I was living in Cincinnati, just wrapping up my workday, when I got the call. I don’t even remember the drive back to the house I shared with then-boyfriend, Andrew. I was packing a bag with whatever clothes and



toiletries I could throw inside when he got home. I remember crying, trying to get out the words to explain what happened. I thought he might jump into action and go with me, but that's not what happened. Instead, he just shrugged and walked away, heading to the kitchen and grumbling about having to find something himself for dinner.

"Damn, Kallie. That sucks," he says, turning in his seat and giving me his full attention.

"It was hard the first few years. He experienced a temporary paralysis from the waist down due to a spinal cord injury. It took a lot of physical therapy to rehab him back to being able to walk, but he was determined. Unfortunately, he'll never ride a horse again. It took him a while to come to terms with it, but he understands the risks are too great. Anyway, I moved here and have been taking care of him and the ranch ever since."

I glance up and meet Leo's gray eyes, not realizing I was focused down on the pup in my lap. "I hope you find his owner," I repeat, glancing down once more at the sleeping ball of golden fur on my lap.

"Me too."

I flash him a small, friendly smile, only to realize my time is up. "I need to get inside. Thank you for the ride."

As I'm reaching for the door handle, he asks, "What time do you get off?"

My mind? Oh, it bolts straight into Naughtyville. All I can think about suddenly is...getting off...with Leo.

I clear my throat and the very inappropriate images from my mind. "We close at ten tonight, so usually by ten thirty or so."

"I'll be back then," he states, reaching for the snoozing pup.

I don't know what to focus on—or *not* focus on. The fact his hand brushes against my stomach as he takes the

animal or the part about him coming back to get me. “You don’t have to. I can ask Jameson or another employee to take me home,” I insist, my eyes riveted to the sight of this sexy, alpha male cuddling a puppy against his chest.

“No need. I volunteer.”

“You don’t have to,” I repeat, watching those big hands stroke the matted fur on the dog’s belly.

“No, but I want to. See you at close, Kallie,” he says, setting the puppy in the seat beside him. Thank goodness the truck has an adjustable center console. It comes in handy to have it up and out of the way right now.

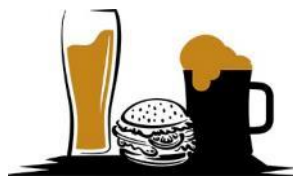
“Thank you,” I whisper, still shocked Leo volunteered to be my ride home, especially because I’m certain he has to work tomorrow. Perhaps he’s a night owl or he operates off very little sleep, like me. Either way, I hate to put him out, but I’m appreciative of his offer.

“No problem,” he says, flashing his own small smile before reaching for the gear shift.

I close the door, ignoring the cool air seeping through my tee as I head toward the rear entrance of the business. A swift glance at my watch confirms I’m nearly late, but today, it doesn’t bother me. Instead, I find myself quick to grin at the recollection of why. Sure, my afternoon started off in the shitter, but it definitely turned around when Leo showed up on the scene to rescue me.

Now, I just have to get through my shift, and I’ll be able to see him again.

Why does that make me deliriously excited?



At eight thirty, I look up at the sound of the front door opening, surprised to see Leo. No, not really surprised to see him, but shocked to see the puppy in his arms. He walks

solemnly toward the end of the bar where he sat last night at the wedding reception and takes a seat, the dog positioned on his lap. When he meets my gaze, he asks, "Is this okay?"

I know he's referring to the dog. "Of course," I reply instantly, placing a cardboard coaster in front of him. "What happened?"

He sighs, running his hand down his face. "I went to every house out there, but no one recognized him or had a dog that had puppies. The only clue about where he came from was from Ennis Foster, who said her husband found a golden retriever on the side of the road about a week ago. She had been hit by a car. Had no identification or anything, so they called their son to help take it back to their property and bury her. I'm assuming that was this guy's mother."

My eyes fill with tears as I listen. "That's terrible. Now what?"

"No one wanted him," Leo states unnecessarily. I came to that conclusion already, based on the fact he still has the pup. "I'll call the vet in the morning and see where I should take him."

"Or you could just keep him," I toss out there, a big smile already spreading across my face.

"Can't. Too busy with work. Plus, I'd make a shitty pet owner, unless it was a goldfish. But then again, I'd probably forget to feed him, and he'd be belly-up within a week." Something crosses his features, but I'm not sure what. Sadness, perhaps?

"Well, what can I get you to drink?" I ask, taking a quick glance down to the opposite end of the bar where a couple of our regulars sit, watching a basketball game.

"Just ice water, please. Is the grill still open? I'm fucking starving."

"It is," I confirm, reaching below the bar to grab a plastic menu.

He takes a few minutes to scan the list before placing his order. "I'll take the Bangin' Bacon Burger," he says.

It's a good thing I'm hidden behind the counter because my thighs just quivered when he said bangin'.

"Fries?"

"Please," he replies, sliding the menu back across the bar.

"Do you want something for the pup?"

"No, I think he's good right now. I'm afraid if I give him too much water, he'll pee. He just had some and went to the bathroom before we came in, so I think he's all right for a little bit."

Nodding, I turn back around and place the order with the kitchen. I know we're nearing closing time for them, since the restaurant only serves until nine, but they don't complain about last-minute orders. The owners all make sure of it. The last thing you want is word getting out the kitchen staff was pissed about having to dirty up the kitchen right before closing. Keeping a solid reputation is important to everyone here.

"How are you guys holding up?" I ask as I wander over to the other end of the bar to check on my regulars.

Larry, one of the two Sunday night regulars, nods. "We're good, Kal. How's your ol' man doing?"

"He's doing just fine," I state, as I do each and every week. They always ask. At first, several years ago, it bothered me a little. I didn't know these people and in return, they barely knew us. I grew up in Cincinnati, a much bigger city than Stewart Grove. It wasn't until I realized they weren't asking for the gossip or dirt. It was because they cared. About me and my family. That's what this place is. One big fat family, and that includes the patrons, especially the regulars.

"How do you think the Bengals will do this season?" the other man, Fred, asks.

I can't help but laugh. "Is that a basketball team?" I tease, knowing it will rile them both up.

"Dang it, Kallie," Larry chastises good-heartedly. "Have we not taught you anything in the last decade?"

"It hasn't been a decade," I remind them. "I've only been here about eight years."

"Close enough. When you hit our age, the years pass you by a lot faster. You remember that, Kallie. Don't waste your younger years all alone like I did," Fred adds, a look of sadness crossing his features.

The story he told me years ago was his first and only love left him before they married. He was so hurt and angry, he pushed everyone away, including years' worth of potential loves. By the time he finally let everything go, he realized how much of his life passed him by, and now in his seventies, he's resolved to being fun Uncle Fred to his plethora of extended family members, which includes his oldest friend Larry's family.

Larry's story is a little different. He married fresh out of the military when he was twenty-four and had seven children. Over the years, they welcomed twenty-six grandchildren and two great-grandchildren until Mauve's passing just two years ago. Larry still comes up here every Sunday. I think it's because he's lonely, his house too quiet now.

I had met Mauve a few times over the years. Occasionally, she'd come up with Larry and Fred for a drink, but not too often. She preferred to stay home and read or knit. In fact, I still have the gorgeous navy-and-cream-colored scarf she made me for Christmas a few years ago. She was a lovely woman, and I can see how much Larry misses her every day.

Realizing he's waiting on my response, I nod to Fred, reaching out and squeezing his wrinkled hand. "I promise I won't," I state, even though it feels a little bit like a lie.

The truth is, I'm not in a rush to find love. Been there, done that, didn't even get the T-shirt. Not that I'd want it anyway. Andrew would have probably just used it as a way to make me feel guilty like always.

"Holler if you need me," I tell the two guys at the bar before turning my attention back down to where Leo sits. "Still doing okay down here?" I ask, noticing his water glass is nearly empty. Reaching for the soda dispenser, I tap the button for water and refill his glass.

"Yep."

"Kallie, I got an order up."

Spinning around, I find Jameson standing behind me, holding a plate of food. "Right here," I tell him, reaching for the plate of hot food.

"Hey, Leo," Jameson greets as he hands over the meal.

"Hi, Jameson."

Just then, the puppy on Leo's lap whimpers, and even though I'm turning around to grab a bottle of ketchup from the cooler, there's no missing Jameson's arched eyebrows. "Leo found a puppy," I announce, placing the cold tomato condiment in front of Leo.

Jameson's eyebrows shoot higher toward his hairline. "A puppy?"

Leo squeezes a blob of ketchup onto his fries and nods. "Yep. I was picking up Kallie's truck earlier and the little thing came out of nowhere. Scared the shit out of me," he says with a chuckle, reaching down and scratching the pup's chin.

"Wait. What happened to your truck?" Jameson asks, giving me his full attention.

I shrug and grab a clean cloth to wipe down the area around us. "I don't know. It died on my way home from the store. Leo just happened to be driving by."

Jameson turns his cool gaze back on the man sitting at the bar. “Oh, really,” he says, the skepticism very clear in his voice.

Leo holds up his hands in surrender. “Really. I was on my way to grab the Johnsons’ disabled truck when I happened upon Kal.”

Jameson looks my way again. “How did you get here? That old Ford is still broken down behind the barn, right?”

Jameson worked as a mechanic before he joined forces with his friends to open this business. In fact, I’m pretty sure I heard he worked at Otto’s place. He’s actually the one who showed me how to change my oil several years ago, since money had been tight with Dad’s extensive rehab. Over the years he’s helped make sure my dad’s truck is well maintained and in good running condition.

“It is. Leo brought me.”

The corner of Jameson’s mouth ticks, and to be honest, I’m not sure what it means. I’ve known him since my first day of working here, but he’s definitely a hard nut to crack sometimes. I can’t tell if he’s humored or angry by that piece of information. Then, he pins me with a look. “Where’s the truck now?”

“Leo took it to Otto’s.”

Concern fills his light brown eyes. “Is that okay?” he asks softly so no one else can hear.

I nod, appreciative of his concern. “It is. I’ve been saving lately, so I’m good,” I assure him.

He nods once before turning his attention back to Leo. Half his burger and a good portion of his fries are gone, but he’s intently watching our exchange. Jameson leans an elbow on the bar. “So a puppy, huh? You keepin’ it?”

“Nope. You want him?” Leo responds, glancing down at the sleeping form in his lap.

“No way. I got enough going on with the baby at home,” he replies, referring to his four-month-old daughter, Rose.

“I’m taking him to the vet in the morning to see what she thinks. I’m hoping she’ll refer me to a shelter or something.”

“A shelter? Good luck finding one who’ll take the little guy,” Larry hollers from his end of the bar, clearly listening in on the conversation on this end. “I was reading a newspaper article last week about the overcrowding of animal shelters. The only one in this county is in Henderson, and I’m pretty sure they’re completely full.”

“Shit,” Leo mutters, absorbing the news. “Maybe one of the other guys will want him?” he asks, hopeful.

Jameson laughs. “Walker’s house is already like a zoo, and can you imagine Jasper with a puppy? He’d be so anal, I bet he’d train the dog to piss in the toilet.”

“What about Isaac and BJ?” Leo asks, referring to Jameson’s sister and brother-in-law.

“I’m pretty sure they’re having another baby, but just haven’t told anyone yet.”

That news brings a big smile to my face. “Really?”

Jameson shrugs his big shoulders. “Just an observation.”

A wave of excitement runs through me. I can’t believe all the babies we now have here. When I started working for Burgers and Brew, it was for four single guys—well, if you don’t count Isaac’s on-again, off-again relationship with Savannah. Now, they’re all married with a collective seven kids between them. Add in Garreth and Reagan’s new baby, and you have eight.

My, how things have changed.

Jameson and Leo chat for a while longer, and before I know it, it’s nearing closing time. It doesn’t take me long to start the closedown process, thanks to a pretty slow Sunday night. Jameson jumps in and helps, restocking the cooler,



while I take care of cleaning the bar and tables. When I start flipping the stools over, Leo is there, grabbing the ones beside me and helping. He's barely able to take a step without tripping over the puppy, who's trailing his every move.

When I hand over the money bag to Jameson, he leans in. "You sure you don't want a ride home?"

Jameson lives the opposite direction as me, and while I know he'd instantly step up and run me home, I don't want to put him out. He has a wife and young daughter at home, waiting. Instantly, I shake my head. "No, I'll be all right."

He gives me a single nod before turning back to Leo. His voice is stern as he asks, "You'll make sure she gets home safely?"

I can tell Leo is offended by the question. His jaw tightens as he says, "Of course. I'd never let anything happen to her or anyone."

My gruff boss stares at the man across from him for several long seconds, and I swear my heart is going to pound out of my chest. Jameson has always been the biggest protector of anyone who works here, especially the women. He makes sure everyone is walked to their vehicles safely every night he works and insists one of the owners or Kellen, another bartender, does the same.

Finally, Jameson nods and takes a step back. I don't really know what just happened, but I feel like a small crisis was averted.

I finish my job and reach for the tablet under the bar, ready to clock out. As soon as I do, I turn my attention to the gorgeous man holding a puppy. He seems...hesitant. Like he's in uncharted waters and doesn't really know what to do. Is he questioning his reasons for staying and offering me a lift? Is he wondering why Jameson seemed a little hostile toward him where I was concerned?

Any look on his face is quickly replaced with a grin as he asks, "Ready?"

I nod and fall in line beside him and the puppy. For some reason, his question feels much bigger than it should, yet that doesn't stop me from responding the only way I can. "Ready."

I'm just not sure what I'm ready for.

# Chapter Six

## *Leo*

As soon as we step outside, I let the pup down so he can go to the bathroom. He doesn't get too far away from my boots, something I've noticed he usually does. He watches, following my every move. "You mind if we walk over to that grassy area behind the lot? I want to let the dog go to the bathroom again before we leave."

"Of course not," she replies, glancing down and smiling. "He's so stinkin' cute. I bet he'll be a big dog. Do you see the size of his paws? Definitely some golden retriever in him, but I can't help but wonder what else?" Kallie says as we stroll over to the lawn.

Once my boots reach the grass, the pup squats and pees, just like he did an hour ago. "I'm not sure. I really don't know much about dog breeds. We had a black lab mix when I was younger, but that's about my extent on dog knowledge."

"What are you planning on doing with him tonight?" she asks curiously.

I've thought of this a dozen times throughout the course of the evening. Well, ever since the last home I stopped at told me they weren't interested in the puppy either. "I stopped and bought some puppy food at the grocery store before I came here. I don't really have anything else, so I'm hoping he's fine in my laundry room for the night."

The corner of her mouth turns up. "Do you have a kennel?"

"No. Do I need one?" I ask, the bubble of panic starting low in my chest and working its way up.

Kallie shrugs. "I'm not sure, really, but you may wake up to accidents without one."

I exhale deeply. “Yeah, I thought about that. I’m gonna put down an old blanket for him. The internet said not to give him food or water after a certain time, until he’s potty trained, but since I only have to worry about it for one night, I’m hoping it won’t be too bad.”

The little guy finishes relieving himself and runs back over, tail wagging as he gazes up at me. To be honest, it’s hard not to fall for those big brown puppy eyes when he looks up at me with so much trust.

Without saying a word, Kallie and I head over to my truck. As soon as she’s inside, I pick up the puppy and set him on the seat. He instantly goes over to her and starts sniffing her hands before curling up at her side and sighing. Within seconds, his eyes are closed and he’s nodding off to sleep again.

“Good night tonight? It seemed a little slow,” I state as I back out of the parking spot and drive toward the street.

“It was busier beforehand this evening. Dinnertime is pretty hectic, but the bar side clears out somewhat early on Sunday, unless there’s a big game on TV. Then it can stay busy up until close.”

I nod and listen as she recounts a few funny conversations she had with patrons. It amazes me how easy it is to just sit here and listen to her talk. It’s not really her voice I find comforting, though I do enjoy listening to her. It’s more the way she makes me feel. I’m calmer when she’s around, not nearly as anxious as I usually am. Considering I’ve really only known her for the day, that’s saying something. Usually, I’m much more guarded when it comes to people.

“Thanks for the lift.” Her words pull me out of my own head, and suddenly, I realize I’m driving down her long lane, taking the slight right that leads to the house.

“You’re welcome.” I pull up alongside the porch and stop.

Kallie looks my way, and even though she's hidden by the darkness surrounding us, I can see the soft lines of her heart-shaped face and the depth swirling in her blue eyes. She offers me a small smile and reaches for the door handle.

Just as she starts to push it open, I blurt out, "Do you have to work tomorrow? I mean, I can make sure you get to work again, if necessary."

She pauses and turns to face me. "I'm off tomorrow, but thank you for the offer." Then, she asks, "Any idea when Otto will look at our truck? I mean, I'm sure it will take a few days. I know you guys are busy."

I nod in confirmation. "We are, but I'll take a look at it as soon as I get in. I'm going in early so I can run to the vet when they open, but either Otto or myself will be in touch."

She nods. "I feel bad. You're going in early, and here you are, staying up late to chauffeur me around."

"I volunteered," I remind adamantly.

"I know, but still. You need to get home to get some sleep," she suggests, sliding from the truck.

I don't bother telling her I don't sleep that well at night. Whether I go home now or two hours ago isn't going to make a difference with that.

Just as she goes to shut the door, she pauses again. "Leo? Can you let me know how it goes with the vet? I'd be anxious to hear what she suggests you do with the little fella," she says, reaching in and petting his long, golden fur.

"Of course," I agree instantly. I don't bother telling her I don't have her number. I know Otto does. The man has decades' worth of information at that place, all in paper form, since he doesn't have time to learn how to use a computer.

"Do you have my number?" she asks softly, as if reading my mind.

I pull my phone from my breast pocket of my T-shirt and hold it out. When she grabs it, our fingers brush against each

other and a bolt of desire shoots straight through my body, landing firmly in my balls.

She types on my phone and says, “You should have this passcode protected. What if someone steals it?”

I shrug, knowing there isn’t much kept in my phone but a handful of contact numbers. I don’t play games and I don’t have apps. My banking is done in person, not online. “I would get a new one.”

She seems a little shocked by my statement but doesn’t say anything else. She continues to type in my phone before handing it back. As she does, her own phone dings, signaling the arrival of a text. “There. Now I have your number too,” she announces with a wink.

A moment later, she’s gone, quietly shutting my truck door so she doesn’t disturb the sleeping puppy. I watch her all the way to the house, telling myself it’s to make sure she arrives safely, but deep down, I know better. It’s because I’m drawn to her. She’s under my skin, and I can’t explain why, nor can I deny the fact.

Once she’s inside, I turn the truck around and aim for home. My mind circles back around to Kallie though. To trying to figure out why she seems so different. I don’t know what it is. She’s stunning, with her long, raven hair and her beautiful, hypnotic eyes. She has curves and an ass I can picture fitting perfectly in my palm. And don’t get me started on her smile. I’ve been all sorts of twisted-up since I first saw her behind the bar months ago.

But my attraction is more than just to her physical appearance. She has as huge heart for her dad and animals. She dropped everything to move here when her dad fell off that horse and has been doing whatever needed done since. Even now, knowing he’s walking again, she didn’t return to Cincinnati. She stayed and is helping take care of the property and horses.

Then there's her kindheartedness toward the puppy. Sure, everyone loves snuggling a dog, but she's been concerned about him every step of the way. The proof is in the fact she gave me her number so I can keep her updated on his condition. And now that I have said number, all I can think about is calling it.

I force my eyes to remain on the road the entire way home, fighting the urge to check to see if she's sent me a message.

Even though I haven't heard any sound to alert me of a notification.

I park in the garage and reach for the ball of fur. He seems eager for me to pick him up and equally disappointed when I put him down on the ground. "Come on. Let's go see if you have to use the potty again, and then we'll go to bed."

His tail wags as he follows me out, jumping a little when the garage door starts to close. When he hits the grass, he walks around and sniffs for a few seconds before lowering his butt and doing his business. I hope that's a good sign he won't have any accidents tonight.

The pup trots up beside me and tries the steps. His still-little legs struggle with the coordination, but he manages. Once up on the back porch, he anxiously waits for me to unlock the door and push it open. "Well, go ahead," I tell him. He takes off immediately, nose already to the faded linoleum as he checks out his newest surroundings.

When I step inside and close and lock the door, I finally let out a long sigh. It's been a long-ass day. One that had me finding Kallie on the side of the road, picking up two vehicles instead of one, and stumbling upon a puppy. No, it hasn't just been a long day. It's been a weird one.

"All right, little guy. Let's get a bed ready," I announce, heading off to the hall closet. I find an old blanket on a shelf; one I think left by Otto's parents. "Here ya go, fella," I say, turning and practically tripping over my little shadow.

Scooping him up on my way by, I scratch behind his ears and return to the laundry room. I set him back on the floor and unfold the blanket beside him, the pup watching my every move. “You know, I wish you had a name, but it’s probably best for your new owner to give it to you, huh?”

Picking him up, I set him in the middle of the blanket. He just stares up at me, big eyes following my every move. “Okay, little fella. Sleep tight,” I state, standing up and stepping out of the room. I flip off the light and shut the door, instantly hearing the sound of the puppy whining.

Is it the dark? Should I leave the light on?

I crack open the door, the noise of his whimpering pouring through the crack, and flip back on the light. I look down just in time to see his little nose poke through the sliver of space between the door and the doorjamb, just enough room to fit my hand. And apparently, his nose.

Sighing, I open the door wider, careful not to run over a paw, and grab him once more. Once he’s back in the middle of the blanket, I head out, shutting the door behind me. Immediately, he starts crying, but I ignore it. He’ll settle down in a few moments.

Stopping by the kitchen, I grab a bottle of water and try to ignore the sounds of despair coming from the opposite side of my laundry room door. I even head to my bedroom and get ready for bed, only to have those same sounds somehow seem louder. Slipping into the bathroom across the hall, I brush my teeth and pee before flipping off the light and returning to where I sleep. As soon as I do, I hear it.

The puppy crying.

My heart breaks, and even though I know I shouldn’t, my bare feet carry me right back to the room where I left him. I push open the door and he practically barrels through it, stumbling over my foot and rolling across the floor. He jumps up and comes over to me, sitting directly between my feet and not making a single sound.



But those eyes? They're so hopeful and excited to see me, the only thing left for me to do is pick him up.

"Listen, little guy, I'm not sure this is the right thing to do, but I'm gonna require a little bit of sleep tonight, so we'll give this a try. Don't get used to it, okay? Your future owners may not be in favor of you hanging out in their bedroom," I tell him.

When I reach my bedroom once more, I stop in my tracks. Is this it? Have I officially lost my mind? I'm talking to a damn puppy as if he were able to understand me, for crying out loud. The guys in my unit would give me so much shit.

Just like that, the memories come flooding back. My heart is trying to pound out of my chest and I'm getting a little sweaty. I can feel my breathing starting to labor as I pinch my eyes closed, trying to ward off the barrage of images and sounds flooding my mind. Sully's high-pitched laughter. The way Adam Gomez used to poke fun at him because it was so unexpected from the big man. Sully, or Austin Sullivan, was easily six six, and you'd never expect such a cackle to come from the man. Richie, my close friend also known as Jon Richman, just sitting there, laughing at their antics as the other two carried on.

I fight off the other memories, the ones I know will suck me into the murky abyss of despair. I try to count to ten, but only get to two before the panic starts to set in. I blindly step aside, my back finding the wall as I slide down to the floor. My heart is racing, beating so loudly, I'm certain everyone in town can hear the thunder. I try to focus on drawing oxygen into my lungs, but, fuck, it's just so damn hard.

Suddenly, I feel something cool and wet against my arm and hear the faintest whimper. It's not like the cries from my nightmares, but something soothing and much closer. My eyes crack open as soft hair tickles my arm. The pup's chin is resting on my arm as he watches me out of the corner of his eye. My hand automatically moves to pet him, and I swear I feel this weird calming sensation wash over me instantly.

It takes a few minutes to get my breathing and heart rate under control, and I keep my hand on the puppy the entire time. When I feel like myself again, albeit incredibly exhausted now, I carefully get up and move to the bed, flipping off the overhead light as I go.

Leaving on the dim lamp on the nightstand, I crawl beneath the covers and turn on my side. The pup maneuvers around, sniffing the bedding before getting himself comfortable against me. His little body curls up at the edge of the comforter, his eyes watching my every move. "Don't tell anyone, okay? You can stay up here with me, but just for tonight."

I feel him sigh, his head lying across my arm as his eyes slowly close. Making sure I don't move, I watch him sleep for a while, even though my own fatigue is trying to consume me. My mind threatens to wander back to dark places, but with my eyes locked on the now-sleeping pup, I'm able to keep it from going there. Instead, I think about Kallie. Of her warm, friendly smile and her amazing eyes.

My heartbeat starts to pick up again, but for an entirely different reason. Suddenly, I can't wait to see her again. To talk to her. I know she's not working at the bar tomorrow, so my only opportunity will be to fill her in on whatever I find out at the vet. It's weird to actually *want* to talk to someone. I've spent the time since my return to town trying to avoid conversation, yet here I am, hoping to have more with her. To find out what makes her tick, makes her smile.

Because, fuck, I really love the way she smiles.

That's the last thing I think about as I drift off to sleep.

# Chapter Seven

## *Kallie*

This day has been tough. It's been cool and drizzly since my alarm went off, which meant I was doing barn chores with an extra layer of clothing. Dad woke up on the wrong side of the bed, thanks to a headache, so breakfast was a treat, and then Otto called just after lunch to give the news about the truck. Turns out it's the fuel pump that went bad, but apparently, when Leo was checking it over, he also found a mouse nest in the wiring and an oil leak at the valve cover.

Swell.

Sounds expensive too.

By the time it's nearing dinnertime, the rain has finally let up and I'm able to take a few horses out to work with them. Morris, our part-timer who helps out a few days a week, was off today, which means it's up to me to get the horses their exercise. I'm leading one back into the barn when my phone chimes with a notification. As soon as I have Mitch back in his stall and brushed down, I pull out the device and glance at the screen, smiling at the name I keyed in last night for Leo.

**Puppy Rescuer:** Hey, just got off work. Got some bad news at the vet.

My heart rate spikes as I read his message. Instantly, I type out my response.

**Me:** What's wrong with Mr. Cutie Pie?

**Puppy Rescuer:** Mr. Cutie Pie? Is that my new nickname?

**Me:** No, you're Mr. Grumpy Pants. Mr. Cutie Pie is the adorable little puppy you rescued from under my truck. What's wrong with him?

**Puppy Rescuer:** Nothing wrong with him, but his name isn't Mr. Cutie Pie. No self-respecting macho dog can go by the name Mr. Cutie Pie. He'll be the laughingstock of the park.

**Me:** Not true. He'll get all the ladies. Have you seen those big puppy dog eyes?

**Me:** I'm almost afraid to ask, but what happened at the vet?

I find myself pacing the floor of the barn, watching the screen and waiting for his reply. Three times those little bubbles appear, only to vanish moments later. Finally, after the world's longest thirty seconds, his reply appears.

**Puppy Rescuer:** The shelters are all full, and the only one who would take him is a kill shelter. A fucking kill shelter, Kal. If he's not adopted within a certain timeframe, they euthanize him. Fuck that shit. I'm not sending him there. The vet didn't even want to tell me about the place because she's completely against it. She said sometimes you can find foster homes for them until a spot opens up in a shelter, but she said even those are hard to come by around here. I made some calls but couldn't find any place to take him.

**Me:** That's terrible! I'm so glad you didn't have him sent off. Where is he?

A moment later, a photo appears on my screen, which has me completely smiling. It's a photo of the puppy lying on the truck seat beside Leo's leg. His tongue is hanging out and he seems...happy. As if he knows Leo somehow saved his life.

**Me:** So what does that mean for Mr. Cutie Pie?

**Puppy Rescuer:** He goes by Axl now, Kal. As in Axl Rose. Tough. Manly. Rockin'.

I burst out laughing, not even bothering to contain my too-loud giggles echoing through the barn.

**Me:** Axl. Love it. I mean, not as good as Mr. Cutie Pie, but it's a close second. Maybe it can be his middle name. Axl Rose Mr. Cutie Pie.

**Puppy Rescuer:** Why would you torture him like that?

**Me:** Fine, we'll go with Axl Rose.

After a few seconds, I finally ask what I've been wanting to find out since we started our text exchange.

**Me:** What are you up to this evening?

I slip my phone back in my pocket so I don't reply too quickly. You know, I don't want to seem too eager, even though I'm completely excited to talk to him. I feel the vibration at the same time I hear the ding of an incoming message, but I leave it there for a good ten seconds before finally removing it from my pocket.

**Puppy Rescuer:** Nothing. Just got off work and heading home.

Before I can stop myself, I'm typing out a reply.

**Me:** I'm out walking horses. If you're looking for a place for Mr. Cutie Pie to run, you're welcome to stop by.

As soon as I hit send, I wish I could take back my offer. I've only known the guy for forty-eight hours, and I'm pretty sure he has his own yard Axl can run in. Leo probably thinks I'm one of those clingy girls who will end up boiling his bunny by the end of the week. That's why I'm completely shocked—and also a little happy—when he sends a reply and doesn't just block my number.

**Puppy Rescuer:** On my way.

Slipping my phone back in my pocket again, I try to fight the smile threatening to spread across my lips. I'm completely unsuccessful. So I don't fret over my appearance, which I give minimal attention to on days I don't work at the bar, I head

over to the stall for today's final walk around the pen and groan.

Bud stares back at me, pure stubbornness evident in his big brown eyes. Bud is a twenty-year-old stallion who my dad bought as a breeding horse just over eight years ago. From day one, Bud has been difficult. Dad was told he was a great horse, loved to be ridden, but that's not entirely the case. In fact, Bud is quite stubborn and only wants to do things on his terms. It was Bud who Dad was riding when he had his accident. Bud threw him off only a few minutes after being mounted.

Since that day, no one has ridden him. Morris says he's too old to deal with the moody stallion and I happen to agree. Bud often pulls my hair whenever I'm near and won't turn his back and eat until we're past his stall.

I've thought about selling him. Actually, I've all but pulled the trigger on loading him up and taking him to a new farm, but Dad refuses. Even after Bud caused Dad's accident and partial paralysis. He insists Bud is at home here, although he doesn't seem to be. He's stubborn, slightly defiant, and a complete moody prick on a good day, but for some strange reason, Dad wants to keep him.

"All right, Bud. It's time to go outside," I tell the stallion, who continues to watch me with cautious eyes. I grab his halter, bridle, and lead rope and hold out my hand so he can see it. "You ready?"

It takes him a few long minutes before he finally steps forward and sticks his head out the top of the door so I can get him ready. Once everything is in place, and the lead rope is secured, I open his stall door and step aside. The large horse watches me for several long seconds, and I can't help but wonder if he's actually going to take his first step.

He does, eventually walking into the open area of the barn and heading toward the back. I walk alongside him, guiding him toward the round pen and carefully opening the gate. Once inside, I close and secure it before giving my

complete attention to Bud. “Okay, big guy. Let’s go for a stroll,” I state, leading him slowly around the edge of the pen.

Bud ignores me, like always, pretending I’m not there, but I can see his eyes moving, watching. We make one complete circle around the sixty-foot pen when he jerks to the left. I didn’t even hear Leo’s truck approaching until Bud reacted. “It’s okay, Bud. That’s my friend, Leo, stopping by for a visit,” I tell the horse, keeping him walking around the circle.

He continues his march, while also keeping an eye on the newcomer. As Leo approaches, I can hear him talking to Axl. I glance over and smile. The puppy looks bigger today than he did yesterday. Cleaner too. “Someone got a bath,” I announce when they reach the pen.

“He did. The vet felt bad for him, so after his check-up and some shots, she had her assistant come in and help with trimming his nails and cutting out the matted fur,” Leo replies.

I’m able to get a good look at his post-work appearance. He’s wearing stained blue jeans with a black T-shirt tucked in. His gray eyes seem to match the sky above us, and believe it or not, they look a little brighter today than under sunny skies the day before. There’s a grease smudge on his cheek, right above his scruffy jaw, and his hands appear a little dirtier than yesterday. Yet, he still looks positively edible on so many levels.

Leo Martinez is one gorgeous man.

“Well, Axl looks super handsome now,” I say, smiling down at the puppy sitting quietly at his new owner’s feet. As if he understands me, Axl grins. Yes, he actually smiles proudly at me, making me laugh.

The sound must startle Bud, because he jerks his head hard, pulling my arm practically out of the socket. “Hey,” I chastise the big stallion. “Don’t be a jerk.”

The horse snorts and shakes his head before he continues his walk once more. “How did you come up with

the name Axl Rose?" I ask, looking over to where Leo stands near the pen.

His face looks...hard as he stares at the horse. "Is he always like that?" he bites out, his jaw tight, his eyes narrow, and his entire body taut with tension. Frankly, he looks a little scary, though I'm not scared of him. He suddenly looks like the bad-ass military man I've been told he is.

Goosebumps pepper my flesh as I take in his stance. Why is seeing this side of him so...arousing?

Clearing my throat, I finally find words. "Bud? Yeah, he's a little...moody."

"He's being an asshole," Leo says, catching me off guard and making me laugh again.

I cover my mouth so I don't startle Bud again. "He can be, yes." I continue to lead him around the pen. "He was who my dad was riding when he was thrown."

When I'm met with silence, I risk another glance Leo's way. The look on his face hasn't changed. If anything, his jaw seems even tighter. I'm a little worried he'll crack a tooth with how tense he is.

Finally, he looks up and meets my gaze, the hard lines around his eyes slowly ebbing away. "Axl picked his own name," he informs me, a hint of pride in his voice. "When we got back in my truck at the vet, I turned on the radio and Guns N' Roses was playing. He seemed very happy to hear *Sweet Child O' Mine*, so I named him Axl right then and there."

Even though I hear every word, I keep my attention forward and on Bud. "Sounds like he has good taste in music, but if I had my pick, I'd name him Nikki or Sixx."

Leo dramatically sighs behind me. "Spoken like a true woman. Let me guess, you had Kallie loves Nikki written on your notebook back in school."

"Actually, it was my Trapper Keeper, thank you very much."



He barks out a laugh. "I forgot about those stupid things."

"Oh, they were definitely not stupid. They were life, especially if you scored a Lisa Frank design. That pretty much put you in a whole different stratosphere of cool," I insist, approaching where Leo and Axl wait. "That's why I was destined to work at Burgers and Brew. I'm a Crüe girl."

As I get closer, Axl's tail starts to wag, and he jumps up on his hind legs. He's very happy to see me, or at least, that's what I tell myself. The moment we reach where they wait, Bud starts to pull against me. "It's okay, Bud. These are our friends," I say softly, reaching up to pet his neck. When I do, Bud decides to jerk away from me once more. This time, he rips the rope from my hand and takes off across the pen.

Before I can even react, movement catches out of the corner of my eye and Leo is charging toward the stallion at a very determined pace. "Axl, stay!" he hollers over his shoulder as he stomps to where Bud stands.

I reach down and scoop up the puppy before he can run after his owner and watch as Leo approaches Bud. There's no hesitancy in his walk, but there is a carefulness to it. He knows he's dealing with an animal much bigger and stronger than he is, but he refuses to let Bud get the upper hand.

He slowly reaches up, showing Bud his hand the entire time, as he grabs the lead rope and meets his eyes. "Listen, Bud, there is no reason to be an asshole. Kallie has been very nice to you, but you're being a fucking jerk. Knock off the bullshit before you hurt her. You want to be a dick to me, fine, but don't be one to her. Do you hear me?"

The horse just stares back at him. It feels like some sort of standoff, and I'm not sure I'm breathing. My heart is galloping in my chest as I wait to see what happens. Even Axl appears to be enthralled with the scene playing out in front of us.

“Do we have an understanding, Bud?” Leo asks, getting closer to Bud’s face than I’m comfortable with. But I don’t say a word. I just stand here and wait. “You’re supposed to protect Kallie, not endanger her. I won’t stand for it.”

Then, the most miraculous thing happens. Bud actually nods his head, as if acknowledging and understanding what Leo said. Leo reaches up and scratches the horse’s neck as he adds, “Good. You be a good boy, Bud, or you’ll have to deal with me. You understand?”

Bud whinnies, and I’m left with my jaw lying on the ground in complete shock. “Holy shit,” I mutter as Leo leads Bud back toward me. “How’d you do that?”

Leo shrugs and continues to walk the horse around the pen. “I just told him I wasn’t putting up with his crap. Animals are a lot like humans and just need a little discipline every now and again.”

I scratch around Axl’s big, fluffy ears, earning a lick across my knuckles. “Have you ever had horses?” I ask, because he looks natural leading the big stallion around the pen.

“Nope.”

“Wow, you’re really good with them,” I compliment.

“I see the wounded warrior in his eyes, and I have a little experience in dealing with that,” he says, his words soft but striking my heart with the force of a hammer. I’ve always known there was more to his story than what little I’ve heard about him, and he all but confirms it.

Knowing it’s not my place to ask questions, I decide to return the conversation back to Axl. “So, you’re keeping him, huh?”

He stops walking, looks my way and exhales loudly. “I guess so. I thought about asking around to try to find someone, but he was so good today, and Otto really took a likin’ to him. He said he liked having a shop dog running around again.” He stops and shrugs his broad shoulders. “So,

as long as he behaves and Otto doesn't mind me bringing him with me to work, I guess I'm keeping him. For now."

I don't even try to stop the smile from spreading across my lips. His eyes seem brighter suddenly, more blue than gray. "Yay!" Bending down, I put my nose next to Axl's soft coat. "Did you hear that, Mr. Cutie Pie? You get to live with Leo forever and ever."

"I didn't say that," Leo grumbles, but there's no bite in his bark.

Watching as he continues to walk Bud around the pen, I ask, "Did the vet say he was in decent health?"

"Surprisingly, yes. He's a little underweight, but his stool was clear of worms and his ears looked good. She started him on heartworm and flea and tick meds. Damn dog appointment cost more than human ones. She says he's definitely golden retriever and she sees some Labrador in him, so she's assuming dad was a yellow lab."

"Interesting." Looking down, I stare at his cute little face. "Do you mind if I let him down?"

"Nope," Leo says.

Setting Axl down on the grass, I watch as he sniffs the area at my feet before looking up and spotting Leo. Before I can grab him, Axl takes off through the pen. "Axl, no!" I holler, making a move toward the gate.

"It's okay," Leo hollers at me.

I watch as he stops walking Bud and gently talks to him, as if trying to ease his anxiety. Axl takes his sweet time getting over to where his new owner stands and puts his nose down. He smells Bud's foot, and thankfully, Bud just stands there. I can see his eyes on Leo though, as if he's taking his cues from him.

After a minute or so, Bud bends down and puts his nose by the puppy. My heart is trying to jump out of my chest as I watch. The horse tilts his head to the side, as if studying the

dog, trying to figure him out. The pup sits and stares up at the big animal, their noses practically touching.

It would be really cute, if I wasn't so damn scared Bud is going to hurt Axl.

Leo reaches down and picks up the puppy. "This is Axl, Bud. He's a friend, and he's little right now. We have to be careful around him too. Got it?"

Bud looks up and meets Leo's gaze. I swear, they have an entire conversation with just their eyes.

Leo places Axl back on the ground and clicks his tongue. Bud immediately starts following him, walking around the pen and, thankfully, not stepping on Axl. I let them go for about ten more minutes before I realize it's well past the time I'd usually finish up out here and head inside for dinner. Dad's probably getting hungry, and even though I know he could easily reheat leftovers in the fridge, I prefer to cook good meals on the nights I have off.

"All right, Bud, it's time for dinner," I announce. To my surprise, the horse looks my way and acknowledges me. He lets Leo walk him to the gate and back to the barn, all while Axl runs circles around his new friend.

If I didn't see it with my own eyes, I wouldn't believe it. "Dad will not believe this," I mutter, shaking my head.

Once Bud is back in his stall, brushed down, and fed, I join Leo out in the main walkway and turn toward the exit. "I think I'm still in shock. I can't believe you got him to listen to you like that."

Leo slips his hands in his pockets and shrugs. "He's a good horse, just needs a little discipline."

"That's what my dad always says," I reply, feeling guilty that I've just written Bud off all these years. I still don't think he's completely changed, but if he's a little less difficult, I'm all for it.

When we step outside, I shut off the lights, leaving on just a few single designated bulbs. We walk in silence toward the house, Axl hot on our heels. The moment my boots hit the sidewalk, I stop and face Leo. The April sun has set, and the sky is starting to darken. Yet, I can still see those gray eyes so clearly. They really are breathtaking.

Before I can think better of it, I ask, "Wanna come in for dinner?"

I'm rewarded with a small smile, one that makes my heart skip a beat.

"Love to."

# Chapter Eight

## *Leo*

“I hope you like pork chops and mashed potatoes and gravy,” she says as we walk toward the house. There’s a hint of nervousness in her voice, as if she surprised even herself with the offer for dinner.

“Love it, actually,” I tell her, stopping outside the back door and looking down at Axl. “You mind if he comes in? We’re still working on the potty-training thing, but he hasn’t had an accident yet. I just make sure to take him out often and don’t leave him unattended,” I add with a chuckle, hearing a few horror stories from customers who were captivated with Axl at the shop today.

“Of course! We have old linoleum in the kitchen and hardwood in the living room. If he has an accident, it’s fine. It’ll clean,” she says with a shrug, as if bringing a young puppy into the house is no big deal.

I’m nervous, however. I don’t want him to piss or shit in her house, so I’ll definitely keep a close eye on him. He did surprisingly well last night and this morning. He woke up around one, insistently licking my arm. Once I realized what was going on, I jumped up and carried him outside, and then praised him for waking me up and not pissing in my bed.

We went through the same motions around three, so when my alarm went off at five thirty, I was draggin’ ass. A quick shower helped wake me up, even though I had to put Axl in the laundry room, much to his dismay. He ate while I made a large travel mug of coffee and then we took off for work. I was able to get Kallie’s truck in the shop and assessed before I left for the vet, and then finished up with the Johnsons’ as soon as I got back.

“Otto called you about the truck, right?” I say, reaching down to unlace my work boots.

“He did,” she says, a hint of nervousness in her voice that has me looking up. She gives me a tight smile, her hands fidgeting with the front of her shirt.

“Is everything okay?” I ask, standing up and giving her my full attention.

“Yes,” she quickly reassures me before adding, “Otto’s awesome.”

But there’s no missing the worry in her dark eyes. She tries to hide it, to push it away, but it’s there, lingering in the shadows, as if she can’t truly get rid of it.

That’s when it hits me.

Her dad can’t work due to his accident, and she’s taking care of the house and farm, as well as working full time at the bar. She’s driving his old truck instead of something newer and fancier. I imagine things are a little tight for her, or at least she’s on a budget, which might not include fixing her dad’s truck.

Trying to quickly decide how to play this and not offend her, I say, “I’d be happy to fix it after hours tomorrow,” I offer, hoping I’m not stepping in a big pile of shit. The truth is, Otto has let me fix vehicles after hours before for family. We run the parts through the office, but the labor is left off the bill.

“Oh, no. It’s okay,” she insists. “Otto is usually good about letting us do a payment plan for the bigger things.”

I can tell this conversation is making her uncomfortable, so I nod and drop back down to finish removing my boots. “That’s good of him, but the offer stands anytime,” I state. “He lets me work on family vehicles after hours any time I need to.”

When I look up, she swallows hard and nods in agreement. “Thank you for the offer.” There’s a sincerity etched on her face; it almost knocks me on my ass.

*God, have I ever seen a more beautiful woman?*

Even in boots, holey jeans, and a dusty hoodie, she takes my breath away, and I know deep down, I'm royally screwed. I couldn't walk away right now if I was hog-tied and dragged. I've known her less than forty-eight hours, and I'm already hooked. What kind of voodoo magic does she possess? That's the only way to describe how I've been able to keep everyone at arm's length for almost three years now, and all I want to do is draw her close.

"You sure your dad won't mind me joining you guys?" I ask, setting my boots off to the side of the steps.

"No way. He'll probably be so excited to talk to someone other than myself and Mrs. Wolfe," she says, finally opening the door and stepping inside.

Axl leaps up the stairs, stumbling a little but hurrying, as if he's afraid to be left outside. I scoop him up and carry him the rest of the way. "All right, Axl. Let's not make a mess in Kallie's house, okay?"

His little tongue darts out, licking my cheek, and earning a giggle from Kallie. "Such a cutie," she says, reaching over and ruffling the long hair on his head.

"Thank you," I state, knowing she's talking about the dog but unable to stop myself.

The moment she rolls her eyes, I laugh.

"Well, this is a pleasant surprise."

I turn around and find Kallie's dad standing there, a knowing grin on his face. "Good afternoon, sir."

The older man with the walker rolls his eyes and sighs. "What did I say about that sir bullshit? It's Al," he informs me with a grin.

"I invited Leo and Axl to stay for dinner," Kallie says, bending down to slip off her cowboy boots. My eyes are there for it too, drinking in the view of her ass as she leans over in



well-fitted jeans. It's a sight to behold, and one I won't be forgetting anytime soon.

"Kallie girl, you must have something on your butt. Leo's staring so hard at it, I'm afraid something's wrong with his eyesight."

My cheeks flood with warmth as I burst into laughter. When was the last time I was actually embarrassed? Hell, I went through basic, where the main goal is to humiliate you on a daily basis, but I still don't think I ever felt like this. "No, sir. My eyesight is perfect."

Al exhales and shakes his head. "That's what I was afraid of. Come on, then. Let's go into the kitchen so that puppy of yours can run around. What'd you say his name was? Alice?"

"No, sir. Axl," I state, cracking a grin as I follow him into the kitchen.

He slowly lowers himself into the chair. "Like on a car."

"Yes," I respond, slowly letting Axl down at my feet.

"Also like Axl Rose, the lead singer of Guns N' Roses," Kallie says as she joins us in the kitchen.

Al shakes his head. "You kids and your hip-hop music," he mutters, rubbing his shaky hand along his forehead.

I glance over at Kallie, who just rolls her eyes. She walks over to the fridge and starts pulling out food and placing it on the counter. "It's not hip-hop, silly. It's classic rock."

"No, The Doors and Led Zeppelin are classic rock. That other stuff is just loud noise." Al glances down at Axl, who is circling his feet. He bends down a little, as if he's going to pick him up, but I can see the effect the movement has on him. He doesn't quite have the flexibility he once had. That's evident in watching him try to reach down and scoop up the pup. I'm ready to step forward and help, when he's finally able to grab Axl and place him on his lap. The puppy sniffs his hands, licks his forearm, and curls into a ball, ready to take a quick nap.

Not really knowing what to do, I turn my attention to where Kallie stands at the counter. "Want some help?"

"How are you with cutting vegetables?" she asks, holding up a blue paring knife and a potato.

"Excellent." I head to the sink and wash my hands before turning my attention to the cutting board and the pile of vegetables beside it.

While I cut potatoes and slice mushrooms, onions, and peppers, I listen to Al talk to Axl, telling him all about some show he watched on HGTV. "I used to never watch TV. Now, it's all I do," he adds, making me feel bad for the guy. I can't imagine having the ability to go and do anything and everything and then have it unexpectedly ripped away from you.

When I have all the vegetables cut, Kallie moves beside me and places them in the middle of a big piece of aluminum foil. I watch as she adds slices of butter and seasoning to the mixture before sealing the edges, enclosing the food inside.

"How's everything at the barn?" Al finally asks as his daughter places the foil packet and seasoned pork chops in the oven.

Before she replies, Kallie pulls a bottle of water and a bottle of beer from the fridge and holds them out for me. Even though I'd love to have the beer, I choose the water, taking the drink and joining Al at the table. "Good. Morris will be here in the morning for a few hours," Kallie says, taking the third seat, across from me.

"I'd like to go down to the barn and say hello after dinner."

I watch their exchange, instantly noticing the bit of worry marring Kallie's features. "Okay," she replies slowly, taking a quick sip of her water.

Al looks my way. "She's nervous because I almost fell a few days ago when we went out to the barn."

Kallie pins her dad with a look. “The gate to Harley’s stall almost knocked you over.”

He waves her off, then immediately goes right back to petting a sleeping Axl. “I was fine. My walker caught me. And it was just a little scratch.”

Her eyes narrow, and I have to fight the smile threatening to spread across my lips. A fired-up Kallie is a sexy as fuck Kallie, but I imagine saying so right now wouldn’t be in my best interest. “You’re lucky the latch only caught your arm and not your head.”

Al smiles genuinely at his daughter before looking my way. “She’s been taking care of me so long, sometimes she forgets I’m the parent and she’s the child.”

“I’m not a child,” Kallie argues.

“You’re *my* child. Besides, my head is harder than you think,” he states, knocking softly on the top of his noggin.

“Believe me, I’m aware of how hard your head is,” Kallie quips.

“And you, Kallie girl, are just like me.” Al looks my way and adds, “She may look like her mother, but that girl is as stubborn as they come. She gets that from me.” He flashes a proud grin.

“Good to know,” I reply between sips of water.

“Anyway,” Kallie starts, drawing out that word and adding a little dramatics, “yes, we can go out to the barn after dinner for a bit, as long as you promise you’ll be careful. I don’t have a truck to take you to the ER.” She adds a smile to let us know she’s teasing, but I can still see the worry in those beautiful blue eyes.

That’s probably why I end up saying, “I’ll go too.”

She seems surprised by my offer. “You don’t have to do that. I’m sure you have better things to do on a Monday night.”

I shrug my shoulders. “Not really. Besides, I wouldn’t mind seeing Bud again. Make sure he’s being nice.”

That gets Al’s attention. “Bud? You saw Bud?”

Kallie gets up to check on the pans on the stove. “Not only did he see him, but he got on Bud’s ass for being a pain in the rear when we went for a walk, and it changed Bud’s demeanor the rest of the time he was out.”

Al responds with a big grin. “I knew it. I knew that boy was something special and would just take a little work to bring out the good in him.”

Kallie looks over her shoulder and narrows her eyes. “Dad, that *boy* injured you.”

He just shrugs his shoulders and looks my way. “He didn’t mean to hurt me like that. He was just flexing his muscles and trying to show me who was boss.”

“He did,” Kallie grumbles, pulling the pans from the oven and placing them on the stovetop.

Al turns his attention to me. “He’s a good horse, just has a stubborn streak a mile wide.” Then he glances over at his daughter and adds, “Kinda like someone else I know.” Leveling me with a gaze, he says, “I knew someone would be able to get through to him. Kallie isn’t the one. I don’t think he’d ever do anything to truly hurt her, much like I know he didn’t mean to hurt me, but he doesn’t respect her authority. I was makin’ headway with him, but then I fell off him and all that progress was lost. No one rides him. Even Morris says he doesn’t trust him, but I think he’s still a good horse. Just needs that firm hand to take control and show him the way. He needs you.”

I sit there, silent, suddenly overcome with emotion. This man barely knows me, yet seems to have faith and trust in me when it comes to dealing with one of his more complicated horses. I want to tell him I’m the last person he should trust to reach Bud, but the words get lost. Not that I’d ever hurt an animal or risk harming another individual, but I couldn’t help

my friends when they needed me. How does he know I'd be beneficial to Bud in any way?

"Dinner's ready," Kallie announces, and the moment seems to pass. I'm glad too. What would I have said?

Throughout the meal, the conversation moves from the farm to the bar to the auto repair shop, all with Axl sitting politely at my feet. He's probably waiting for me to drop some food, but he never jumps up or begs. He just watches, waiting for a cue.

Just as we're wrapping up the meal comes the question I've been waiting for. "Are you from this area?" Al asks, stabbing the last few pieces of vegetables with his fork.

"I am. I grew up here."

"Yeah? Who are your parents?"

"Valerie and Bruno Martinez."

"Ahh, yes. I know Bruno well. Or at least, I used to. We order feed through him at the feed store," Al replies.

"Bruno is your dad?" Kallie says, seeming shocked by the revelation.

"He is," I confirm. "I look a lot like my mom," I add with a chuckle. My dad has features of his Mexican heritage, which is why everyone is always surprised when they find out we're related, considering I have blond hair, thanks to strong genes on my mom's side.

"Well, I'll be damned. It's a small world. I remember when I used to go to pick up the feed. He used to boast proudly about his son in the military," Al says, making the food in my stomach churn. He gives me his full attention and adds, "Thank you for your service."

I nod, not really knowing what else to say.

Al pushes back from the table, dropping his napkin on his plate. "Well, that would explain all the sir bullshit. It's engrained in your brain."

That makes me smile. "It is, sir."

His eyes narrow at me, but he doesn't call me out on it. Instead, he says, "Your dad stopped by a few times after I was back home from the rehab facility. Brought me a rhubarb and blueberry pie."

Grinning, I state, "Mom's known for her rhubarb pies. Grows it along the garage and freezes it so she can use it year-round."

"She's been sick."

My throat is suddenly so dry, it's hard to swallow. "Yes, sir. Beat stomach cancer last year."

He nods once. "Happy to hear that. Praying all her troubles are in the past. Now, what do you say we all go out to the barn so I can see my horses," he announces, and I've never been more grateful for a change in conversation than I am right now.

Talking about my mom is...hard. So fucking hard. Even after she beat the odds and beat her cancer. I consider that part of my life the second darkest time, and I, in no way, want to relive it. I have enough demons following me around to have to go back and retell that entire terrifying ordeal.

Kallie jumps up and places the leftovers in the fridge before helping her dad, making sure he has what he needs to go outside, including a thinner jacket she assists him with slipping on over his flannel shirt. Axl follows eagerly behind me as we all head for the front door and down the wheelchair ramp. As soon as we reach the sidewalk, Axl trots up beside Al, sniffing the grass and wagging his tail as they go.

Kallie falls back and walks slowly alongside me. Our hands brush against each other, and I swear it's like being zapped with lightning. In fact, I look up just to make sure a storm hasn't blown in that I was unaware of.

"I'm sorry I didn't put two and two together and realize Bruno was your dad. I haven't seen him in a while, since Morris usually does the feed and supplies pickups, but I feel

bad for not paying closer attention,” she whispers as we make our way down the gravel lane toward the barn.

Shoving my hands in my pockets to keep from reaching for her, I shrug my shoulders. “It’s fine, really. I wasn’t home until a couple of years ago.”

After a few moments, she adds, “I’m happy to hear your mom is doing better.”

“Me too. It was tough last year, but she’s a fighter.”

We reach the barn, which is still open, and Al and Axl eagerly walk in. I can see a little extra spring in the older man’s step, his eyes instantly darting from one stall to the next. The excitement and anticipation are written all over him, despite the fact he’s resolved to using a walker to help him get around. There’s still mad love for the animals, including Bud, who, surprisingly, is his first stop.

Together, we stand back and watch as Bud puts his head over the top of the gate and lets Al pet him. The horse glances my way, his big brown eyes observing. I nod at him, though I’m not sure why. I guess I’m just letting him know I’m watching? That it’s okay to be nice to Al?

Maybe a little of both.

Kallie sighs in contentment and reaches down, wrapping her delicate fingers around my wrist. She doesn’t seem to care that my hands are in my pockets. She just places her hand on me and leans in just a fraction. Enough I can smell her shampoo mixed with fresh air and hay. It’s a heady scent, one I quickly realize I fucking love.

It’s pure Kallie.

“Come on,” she says, gazing up at me with excited blue eyes, “let’s go see Bud.”

# Chapter Nine

## *Kallie*

“How’s the truck?”

I look up, recognizing the owner of that deep timbred voice, and give Leo a smile, one he returns.

He’s freshly showered, the tips of his hair still wet. My libido goes into overdrive, picturing him beneath the water spray, lathering up his chest and arms before venturing down to his cock. Of course, it’s hard. In all the fantasies I’ve entertained throughout the last few days, it’s always hard and always ready. Ever since he left my place Monday night, I’ve thought about him. He’s monopolized my every waking thought.

My dreams too.

After he left Monday, I had to listen to my dad sing his praises for a good hour. And not just him, but Axl too. Since, Dad has been talking about how nice it would be to have a farm dog. Even though I agree, it might be fun, the thought of a puppy getting underfoot when he’s trying to walk is scary. I can’t imagine finding another puppy as good as Axl seems to be.

“It’s running like a champ,” I tell him, setting a napkin down at his spot at the bar. “Drink?”

“Just an iced tea.”

I nod, turning around to retrieve a glass and the pitcher of iced tea in the cooler. “Where’s your partner in crime tonight?”

“At home in his kennel, probably plotting my demise,” he quips with a chuckle. It goes straight to my lady parts, making them stand up and take notice of the sexy male in front of me.



“Kennel training, huh?” I ask, smiling as I picture Axl sending his dad big ol’ puppy eyes. “How’s that going?” I ask, setting the glass in front of him.

“Not well,” he replies with another grin. “He hates it and whines.”

I pop my hip against the counter beneath the bar. “And then you let him out?”

“I hate listening to him cry.”

A bubble of laughter spills from my mouth and I instantly cover it.

“Don’t do that. I love your laugh. Sometimes, it’s the only thing that gets me through the night.” He averts his gaze instantly, but I see it.

The shadows.

I want to ask, but don’t. I don’t feel it’s my place. I mean, are we friends? Yes, but maybe not in the traditional sense. I’ve really only known him since the wedding Saturday night, even though I’ve seen him a few times and knew his name. It wasn’t until my truck broke down and he helped me that I started to get a glimpse at the person behind that gorgeous face and muscular body. Something tells me there’s a lot there.

But doesn’t everyone have baggage?

Lord knows I have a shit ton. Even before everything happened with my dad and I moved here, my life was complicated and nothing like the perfect picture I portrayed on social media. It’s not that I was trying to deceive anyone, but frankly, my problems weren’t their business. So I played the part, smiled for the camera, and kept the hurt and pain to myself.

Slowly, I lower my hand and reach for a menu. “Are you eating dinner?”

Leo nods, taking the plastic menu and giving it a glance. I can’t help but take a few appreciative moments to observe

his appearance. His jaw is squared and covered with scruff, something I've always found attractive, even if Andrew thought it was tacky. Leo's shirt is formfitting and only seems to magnify the hard muscles of his shoulders, arms, and chest, and I can see dark ink on his bicep.

I wonder where else he has tattoos...

"Would you get me Between the Sheets?"

I look up, my wide gaze meeting his gray eyes. He must realize exactly where my mind went with his words, because those hypnotic eyes darken, almost to the color of coal, and a big wolfish smile spreads across his kissable lips. My face, on the other hand, does its best imitation of a tomato, transforming into a very unflattering shade of red.

"I was talking about the burger, but I like the way you think, Kal." Then he winks at me and politely sets the menu down on the bar before lifting his tea to his lips and taking a drink. The entire time, his eyes remain locked on mine, and I swear, you could cut the sudden sexual tension with a butter knife.

Maybe it's just me and my lack of any sort of sexual anything over the last few years, but I don't think it is. I see it in his eyes, reflecting back at me as clear as crystal. There's desire there, as if he's now picturing the exact same thing I am.

Him.

Me.

In bed.

Together.

Clearing my throat, I take the menu from the bar and slide it back down on the shelf. "I'll just go put in your order," I state, making him smile even more. "I mean, in back. In the kitchen."

And now my mind is picturing us going at it in the kitchen.

I close my eyes and force myself to stop talking. I don't think I've ever put my foot this far in my mouth before in my life, and considering I'm one to speak my mind, that's saying something.

Leo chuckles a low, grumbly sound that renders my panties completely useless. "I look forward to receiving my order."

With that, I turn and practically sprint down the bar to the computer system to key in his selection. I head to the kitchen to deliver the ticket and find another order almost complete. I take the opportunity to hang out for a few seconds and calm my racing heart.

"You okay?" Jasper asks, approaching with a concerned look on his face.

"Oh, yeah," I say with a quick grin.

He watches me intently for several seconds before adding, "You're all flushed."

"It's hot out there," I reply, which, in a way, is the truth. The temperature of the room is fine. The hotness of one specific patron is another story.

His eyes scrutinize me for a few moments before he nods. "We can turn down the AC a little."

I wave off his comment. "That's not necessary. I'm fine."

"Order up," someone hollers behind Jasper, so I quickly head over to take the prepared tray.

"We would have delivered it," Jasper says, making sure everything is in order on the tray.

"I know, but I was already here, so I thought I'd grab it."

He nods, making his way back to the grill. "Okay. Holler if you need help. Numbers is still upstairs, and he can come down if needed," he informs me before giving his full attention back to his work.

Carrying the tray with food, I return to the bar, happy to see Max has a handle on everything. I take the food over to a pub table and make sure they have everything they need before making my way behind the bar.

“Thanks. I was just getting ready to head over and check on them,” Max says, wiping his hands on a bar towel.

“You’re fine. I took an order to the kitchen and decided to wait on their food since it was almost done,” I tell him, slipping effortlessly behind the counter and getting back to it.

Max goes back out to check on the tables, while I work on getting refills for the customers at the bar. I work my way down to where Leo sits. Even though I don’t look up, I can sense his eyes on me. It’s like a caress without physically touching me. Yet, I feel it from my head all the way down to my toes.

I grab the jug of tea from the cooler and refill his glass. “Your order should be up soon.”

“I’m in no hurry,” he responds, reaching for his drink once it’s filled.

“You might not be, but Axl probably is,” I quip with a giggle.

He smiles once more, the gesture reaching his eyes and making them shine brightly. “You’re probably right.”

“Order up,” Isaac hollers, approaching from behind.

I reach out and take the plate, sliding it in front of Leo. “I was just getting ready to go check on that,” I tell him, turning and grabbing a bottle of ketchup from the cooler and setting it in front of Leo. He reaches for it and our hands touch for the briefest of moments. I swear, it’s electricity. So strong, so powerful, it renders me completely helpless and mesmerized at the same time.

“Mind if I join you?” Isaac asks, suddenly appearing on the opposite side of the bar. It’s then I notice he has a second plate of food.

“Not at all,” Leo replies, sliding the bottle of ketchup to the side.

“What can I get you to drink?” I ask one of the owners.

“I can get it,” he says, starting to slide from his stool.

“Stop. Sit. What do you want?” I ask with a little more authority in my voice.

He holds up his hands in surrender. “Just an ice water, please. You don’t have to get aggressive with me,” he teases.

“I do when dealing with stubborn patrons,” I add with a wink.

“She always like this?” Leo asks, a hint of humor lacing his questions.

“Always. A real ballbuster, this one,” Isaac replies with his own wink and playful grin.

“All right, you two, I’ll let you eat in peace. Holler if you need me.” With that, I turn and head back down to the opposite end of the bar to fill a few drink orders.

After checking on the customers at the bar and filling a few more table orders for Max, I return to the end where Leo and Isaac chat, and even though I don’t mean to eavesdrop, I can’t help but overhear their conversation.

“Jax did the one on my chest,” Leo says between bites of fries. “He did a great job, but it was pretty basic. I’ve been thinking of getting another.”

“BJ is an amazing artist. I think you’d be happy with her,” Isaac replies, obvious pride in his voice when talking about his talented wife.

“She is,” I confirm, taking Isaac’s glass and topping off his water.

“You have a tattoo?” Leo asks, his gray eyes holding a mixture of surprise and eagerness in them.

“Two, actually,” I confirm, pouring a bit of tea into his glass, even though he really doesn’t need it. It just gives me something to do with my hands.

I don’t miss the way his eyes scan my body, or at least what he can see not hidden behind the bar. I can also confirm he’s not going to see anything in his perusal. Not unless I remove clothing.

“Just call the studio and Amanda will get you in. Though she’s usually booked out several weeks,” Isaac adds, drawing me back to the conversation.

Leo reaches for his tea and gives me a quick, “Thank you,” before turning his attention back to the man sitting beside him. “I will. I’m not in a hurry, so I don’t mind waiting.”

I leave them alone to finish their meals, and much sooner than I will admit aloud, Leo’s paying his bill and preparing to leave. He leaves a more than generous tip again, something I’ve noticed he does every single time he dines.

“Thanks for stopping in,” I say lamely, slipping the black folder with his check in it behind the counter.

He gets up and stretches his arms over his head. The motion causes his shirt to inch up at the waist, displaying a sliver of dark hair and skin. My mouth goes Sahara dry as my eyes betray me and zero in on the flesh. “The food was good, but that’s not why I stopped in.”

I rip my eyes away from smooth skin and meet his humorous gaze, as if he clearly saw me gawking at his stomach. “It’s not?” I ask, my voice hoarse and throat dry.

He grins that slow, sexy smile that makes my heart rate spike and a thousand butterflies take flight in my stomach. “Nope. Pretty bartender,” he says with a wink and a smile before turning and walking toward the front door. All I can do is watch him go, my mind reeling from his simple, yet effective compliment.

Just before he pushes through the heavy front door, he glances over his shoulder. There’s no smile, no wink this time.

Just the swirl of desire and maybe a little confliction in those gray orbs. I don't think he wants to be drawn to me. He hasn't said as much, but I'm usually pretty good at reading body language. He keeps me at arm's length, like he's trying to ignore the attraction he feels, yet he does little things like showing up here on a Thursday night for dinner and tells me I'm pretty.

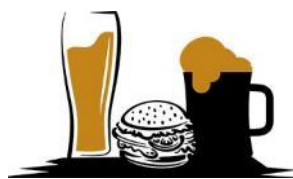
He's fighting it, but somehow, it's winning.

I should put him out of his misery and end this now. I don't need the complications of a relationship, and something tells me he feels the same way. In less than a week, I've learned he's a complex person with shadows that follow him wherever he goes. I get the impression he's fighting demons, and that's the last thing I should want to add to my already full plate.

But he told me I was pretty, and I felt that compliment deeply. Maybe because he's the first guy I've felt any pull toward since I moved here, leaving my old life and old love behind. Or maybe because it's been a lot longer than I want to admit since I've had sex, and now the thought of getting naked with Leo has taken root and is growing like a weed in my brain.

So where do we go from here?

I guess time will tell.



It's Saturday night, and the bar is packed. Jameson is wrapping up his set, and there isn't an empty seat in the room. Groups stand in clusters near the bar, trying not to block the view of the stage, while remaining close to where they get refills.

I watch a couple slowly get up from their seats at the far end of the bar and quickly make my way down to clear away

their empties and wipe down the bar, knowing these seats will be snatched in a matter of seconds. I just turn around to throw away the empty bottle in the trash bin and set the glass in the sink to be washed when I catch movement out of the corner of my eye. Knowing those prime seats wouldn't stay empty for long, I turn with a smile on my face.

Leo.

I haven't seen him in nine days. Not since that Thursday night he told me I was pretty as he was leaving. Since, he hasn't been in, and I've tried not to let that bother me, but it has. We had one text exchange earlier this week, when I sent him a pic of Bud letting me pet him. Ever since Leo's interaction with the stubborn horse, he's been somewhat tolerable, allowing me to pet him Monday night after his walk. I was so shocked he didn't pull away; I grabbed my phone and snapped a quick picture of my hand on his forehead. He replied with a thumbs-up and told me he was happy the horse was behaving, but that was it.

Now, he's here, and I'm trying to ignore the way my heart rate spikes and my breathing halts in my throat when I notice how absolutely stunning he looks in his blue flannel shirt. His hair is short again, as if he recently had a haircut, and his jaw freshly shaved. It makes his face look softer somehow, and I'm not just referring to the smoothness of his skin. It softens the lines on his face and makes his eyes look brighter.

"Hey," I greet, setting the cardboard coaster in front of him. "What can I get you?"

He opens his mouth but closes it just as quickly. With his hands folded together on the bar top, he holds my gaze and finally answers, "Just an ice water, please."

I nod, turning to retrieve a glass and fill it with ice. I tell myself his presence here means nothing. I mean, his message was pretty clear. I tried to initiate conversation, but his lack of reply said more than the words he actually typed. I can tell a



brush-off when I see one, and that's exactly what I've gotten in the last nine days from Leo.

And that's okay. I've been saying since the first night I met him I wasn't looking for anything, and even though he's never led me to believe he was looking too, I thought maybe we were friends. But I'm not sure what to think at this point.

Placing the glass in front of him, I offer a small smile. "Anything else?"

His eyes hold a storm of emotion that makes my throat feel tight and scratchy. Slowly, he shakes his head. "No, thank you. I'm good for now."

Nodding, I turn around and move down the bar, filling drink orders and closing out tabs for those leaving, but the entire time, I feel them. His eyes. They're both comforting and confusing, as I try to figure out what his presence here tonight means.

I sigh deeply.

I could speculate all night long, but what will that solve? Nothing. I guess if I want to know what's going on, I just need to ask him.

# Chapter Ten

## *Leo*

I fucked up.

I knew it Monday when I gave her a lame reply to her text about Bud. I should have asked how it was going, how her day was, how her dad was doing. Something. Instead, I set my phone down and refused to look at it the rest of the night. Why? Because by that point I had convinced myself I was everything she didn't need to get tangled up with.

But even then, I still wanted her.

I worked extra hours, so I didn't have to go home, alone. I turned off my phone more often than not, so I wasn't constantly disappointed when she didn't send me another random text. I visited my parents, in hopes it would help me forget all about the woman I longed to spend just a little more time with.

Nothing worked.

I still thought of her nonstop.

And that's why I'm here, even when my head tells me to leave.

I watch her move with the grace of a dancer as she works. Her smile is quick and genuine as she deals with customers, and I try not to think about how easy that smile was with me the last time I saw her. Now, there's a touch of hesitancy in it, and I don't like it. Not one bit. But I also don't blame her for it. I'd feel guarded right now too, if I was her.

At the end of Jameson's set, the entire room goes quiet as Walker heads for the jukebox. I've only seen this part of the night once before, and I find it a little odd, yet very entertaining to witness. Once the music starts to play a Mötley Crüe song, everyone erupts into cheers, singing along

to the familiar words of “Kickstart My Heart” with drinks raised high above their heads.

When the song ends, patrons flock to the bar for refills, most likely knowing their time here is limited. Walker works quickly, slinging drinks like something out of that movie *Cocktail*, while Kallie moves just as effectively without tossing bottles into the air. They make a great team, working together and carrying on, and for some reason, that doesn't sit well with me. I've never been a jealous man, but sitting here, watching them together, brings all sorts of green-eyed tendencies flooding my mind, even when I know there's nothing there.

That's how I know I'm royally screwed where she's concerned.

Kallie's down at the far end of the bar, bending over to grab a bottle of something from the back of a low shelf, when someone reaches around the bar and slaps her on the ass. Hard. She screeches loudly, and even over the music, I can hear her. I'm out of my seat before I can even think about what I'm doing. Somehow, I make it around to the opposite side of the bar without running over too many patrons and have the guy facedown on the bar, one arm pinned behind his back.

“Leo,” she hollers, but I don't so much as flinch a muscle. All I do is tighten my hold on his arm, causing him to bellow in discomfort.

“Leo,” she says much softer this time, standing directly beside me, her delicate hand wrapping around my forearm. Even through my flannel, I can feel the heat of her touch. It's that moment which finally snaps me out of it. I look to my right and meet her gaze, those blue eyes soft and full of compassion.

She slips her hand around my arm, her fingers gripping me like a lifeline. “It's okay,” she whispers. “I'm okay.”

“Hey, Leo,” Jameson says over my left shoulder, causing me to turn and look the other way. I notice he’s close, but not touching me. “I can take this guy.”

I don’t release the asshole who touched Kallie right away, not until I notice the same anger reflecting at me through Jameson’s hard gaze. He lifts his hands, letting them hover over where I’m pinning this pencil dick down. Understanding sets in, and at the same time I release my hold on him, Jameson moves in.

“My arm!” the dick hollers, turning and glaring at me.

My nostrils flare with anger as I grit out, “You’re lucky I didn’t break both of your hands, so you’d learn to keep them to your fucking self.”

“Let’s go, Samson. I’ll explain the rules regarding keeping your fucking hands to yourself on the way out,” Jameson states, a hardness to his face that would make a weaker man tremble.

I can feel everyone’s eyes on me as reality sets in, which is like being doused with cold water. My flannel starts to feel too heavy and my throat too tight.

“Take a few minutes. I got this.”

Confusion hits me, as I look over at Jasper. He flashes me a grateful grin before sliding behind the bar. I look at Walker, who’s standing behind Kallie, arms crossed over his broad chest and a scowl on his face. When our eyes meet, his face relaxes, and he lifts his chin. “Thanks for your help,” he says, before returning to his job.

Finally, I look down at Kallie. Her hands are still firmly around my forearm and her eyes filled with concern. “Come on.”

She pulls me away from the bar, down the hallway, and out the back entrance of the building. “Where are we going? You’re working,” I counter, still trying to get my bearings.

“Jasper’s covering for me for a bit.” She leads me to a picnic table. “Sit.”

I do as instructed; leaning against the top of the table and finally able to pull my first deep breath of oxygen into my lungs since I charged across the room and confronted the asshole who touched her. “I’m sorry I reacted that way,” I tell her, knowing she’s probably about to tell me to leave and never come back. If I hadn’t ruined any chance of being her friend before, I put the nail in the coffin with tonight’s stunt.

Kallie steps between my legs and places her finger on my lips, silencing me. The touch...damn, the feel of her soft finger against my mouth goes straight to my balls, rendering me completely speechless and helpless at the exact same time. “Don’t apologize. That guy was out of line,” she says, moving her hand against my cheek. “I rarely see you freshly shaved.”

I shrug, trying my damndest to ignore the electricity coursing through my veins as she touches me. “I never make it a priority.”

She gazes up at me, her hand stilling against my cheek, and the only thing I can think about is kissing her. I want to take her mouth with my own and see if it’s as amazing as I’ve dreamed it would be.

“I like you with the stubble too,” she says softly, her body now pressed firmly against mine.

After a few moments of silence, I wrap my arms around her, resting my joined hands on her lower back. “Does that happen a lot?” When she gives me a curious look, I add, “Guys touching you?”

She exhales deeply. “No, not very often. Most know what’ll happen if they touch a server or bartender. The owners don’t put up with that. Anyone who gets handsy or acts inappropriate gets escorted out immediately. No questions asked.”

“I shouldn’t have reacted the way I did,” I say again, trying to explain why I reacted that way. Well, besides the fact it was *her* he touched. “When I was in the Army, a group of us went out one night to a local bar. One of the patrons kept getting handsy with a server. A few of us intervened and tossed him out on his ass. We had been drinking pretty heavily, and all ended up leaving not long after that. Found out a few days later, that server had been assaulted in the alley later that night. No one walked her out or thought that douche would hang around. He was so pissed about being humiliated in front of his friends; he beat the shit out of an innocent woman.”

Kallie instantly wraps her arms around me, holding on tightly. “I’m sorry that happened to her. Guys like that, the ones who feel entitled to touch and take what they want from someone else, are the lowest form of humans.”

My throat is thick as I swallow. “I agree. That’s why I got so mad when he touched you. And not just because it was some asshole touching the bartender. Because it was *you*.”

She meets my gaze and gives me the softest smile. “Thank you. For having my back.”

I nod, bringing my arms up to her shoulders and drawing her even closer. Her chest molds to mine as I absorb the comfort she’s providing as much as I give it. Who knew a simple hug could mean so much?

“You okay?” she whispers, her breath tickling my neck.

“I should be asking you that question.”

“I’m okay,” she insists, leaning back and looking at me. “I’m okay because I have good people watching out for me. Because I have you.”

It’s on the tip of my tongue to tell her she’s right. She does have me. Despite me trying to push her away or keep her at arm’s length. Maybe it’s because of that I realize nothing could keep me away from her. She somehow slipped beneath my armor, wormed her way past the wall of

protection I've erected around myself. She got in, despite my efforts to keep her from it.

"I should probably get back in there. It's almost time for last call," she says, resting her cheek against my chest.

"Yeah." But I don't let go. After a few more seconds, I ask, "Can I stay?"

"Of course you can." She looks up, those dark blue eyes holding my gaze. "I'd be sad if you left."

Reaching for her hand, I lead her back to the building. She inputs her security code to get in, the upbeat rock music pumping through the speakers. I don't release her hand until we reach the bar, and only then do I reluctantly let go. Kallie slips behind the bar and jumps right in, and as much as I want to stand here and watch her, I know I can't.

I shift through the crowd, returning to where I left my drink, surprised to find Jameson sitting there. As soon as I approach, he gets up and steps back. "Your seat."

Instead of sitting, I face my old classmate head-on. "You didn't have to do that."

He shrugs, shoving his hands in his pockets as he maintains my gaze. "You didn't have to do what you did either, but I appreciate that you did."

The seat beside me is still vacant too, so I nod toward it as I sit. Jameson slides onto the stool and takes the glass of ice water Walker slips in front of him. He quickly refills my glass too, before grabbing a beer for the guy on my left.

"We don't have many instances where they get handsy with a bartender. Early on it happened every so often, but rarely now. They know not to fuck with us," he states with a hard edge. "If anything, it happens more to the guys behind the bar more than Kallie. Sometimes you get drunk women in here and they think they're at a Magic Mike show. Especially back when Walker used to do his shit up on the bar."

I can't help but snort a laugh. Even though I never witnessed it, I've heard about his old bar-top dancing, complete with panties being thrown at him and numbers slipped across the bar on cocktail napkins. "I don't know if I'm disappointed I missed the show or should be happy."

Jameson cracks a smile. "They weren't bad. The guy can actually move and used it to his advantage. The tips after one of his dances were usually quite substantial. Then he got married and became an instant dad to Lizzie, and all of a sudden, he didn't want to do it anymore. Even though he never took it too far and always left his clothes on, he just decided one day, he was done."

I glance over at the man behind the bar. He laughs at something a group of women say as he mixes their drinks. Walker was always charismatic in school, even though he was a little guarded. He kept his circle close, and that usually involved Jameson and maybe two other guys.

Then my mind shifts to the gorgeous black-haired beauty working beside him. She's clearly good at her job too. The patrons seem to love her, and not just because she's stunningly beautiful. She's quick with a smile and makes everyone feel welcome. She also seems to get along well with her coworkers. She works weekends with Walker, but during the week, there's a couple of other guys with her behind the bar.

Jameson and I catch up for a bit while the bar starts to clear out. Even though he's engaged in our conversation, he constantly keeps one eye on the door, making sure there are no problems as everyone leaves. When he sees the same group of women who were ordering drinks and talking to Walker earlier head for the door, he stands up. "Give me five minutes. I'm gonna walk them to their vehicles," he says, leaving his glass of water on the bar and walking toward the entrance.

"He always makes sure the females get to their vehicles without problems."



I glance up and find Isaac standing in front of me, sipping something that looks like whiskey. Nodding, I reply, "That doesn't surprise me. He was pretty protective back in school too. Especially with his sister."

Isaac snorts. "Still is," he mutters with a knowing grin.

When Jameson comes back and the bar is empty, Isaac retrieves a bottle of something from the top shelf and pours several shot glasses. "Can I have everyone's attention, please?"

Walker, Jasper, Jameson, and Kallie all turn their attention to the man standing at the front of the bar, handing out shots. I'm surprised when he sets one down in front of me too, mostly because I'm not in their group. Not really. I'm just hanging around, waiting to walk Kallie to her truck at the end of the night, even though I know that'll be covered.

Once everyone has a shot glass, Isaac holds his up. "I just wanted to say how much I appreciate and love you all."

"How many of those have you already had?" Jasper quips, making everyone laugh.

"Only one," Isaac replies, smiling widely. "Tonight, we're celebrating."

"What are we celebrating?" Kallie asks, eyeing the man wearing a dress shirt and tie skeptically.

"We're celebrating the fact my wife is having another baby," Isaac answers, excitement and joy radiating from him like a furnace.

The guys all cheer, holding their drinks up and saluting the proud father-to-be. I feel like an outsider, like I really shouldn't be part of their celebration, but not really sure how to excuse myself without looking rude. So, instead of stepping away from the small group, I hold up my glass when Jameson instructs everyone to.

"To Numbers and Beej. I don't know anyone who could be a better fit for my baby sister than you, man."

Congratulations.” Everyone downs their shot of whiskey, including me. It holds a slight burn to my throat but goes down smooth and silky. Definitely not the cheap stuff.

When all the glasses are set back down, Walker grabs the bottle and refills every glass. Everyone notices too, Numbers and Jasper already smiling. “Since we’re celebrating, let’s toast to one more baby on the way.”

“No shit?” Jasper asks with a chuckle. “I thought you lost your balls at Christmas to prevent that.”

“And apparently, my sperm is still pretty potent.”

The room erupts with more cheers and laughter, and this time, it’s Kallie who raises her glass in the air. “To Walker and Mallory.”

Everyone repeats the toast and downs their second shot. Once I set my empty glass down, they all jump back in to closing down the bar. It’s quite fascinating to watch, actually. They seem to all work in unison, everyone having a task. I hate to just sit here and watch and am about to get up, offering to do *something* when Walker approaches and flips a stool to rest on top of the bar.

“Congratulations,” I say to him, causing him to stop beside me.

Grinning, he replies, “Thanks. It was a rather shocking development, considering I had a vasectomy right after Christmas. Apparently, the pill isn’t quite as effective when you’re on antibiotics, as we’ve since discovered.”

I shake my head. “Not that I want to talk about your balls or anything, but shouldn’t your surgery have still prevented that?”

He shrugs and flips another barstool. “You’d think, but they say it takes three to six months to get a sterile sample. This was before we hit the three-month mark, even though my results came back clear a couple of weeks later. I guess I still had some stragglers.”

“Well, I’m happy for you, man.”

He flashes me a wide grin. “Thanks. We’re in no way prepared for this but couldn’t be luckier. Four kids. I never thought I’d be that guy. Numbers, yes. He’ll have a big family before it’s said and done, but me? I didn’t see it coming.” He takes a deep breath before glancing behind the bar where the woman I can’t stop thinking about is stocking the cooler. “So... Kallie, huh?”

I sit up a little straighter in my seat and try not to show my irritation at his question. “Friends.”

He holds up his hands in surrender. “Not saying anything. I like her.” As if realizing what he just said, he quickly amends, “She’s like a little sister to me. Started here not long after we opened, and has been a loyal, dedicated employee and friend since. She’s good people. She and her dad.”

I nod, agreeing, even though I obviously don’t know her as well as he does. “This okay? That I sit here?”

“No,” he states, reaching for another stool. “If you’re gonna hang out, get your ass up and help me put these stools up, so I can get home to my wife.”

Chuckling, I do as ordered, grateful for the task. With both of us working, the stools are up in no time and I’m being tossed a hot cloth with disinfectant to wipe down all the tables. Finally, everything is done and Kallie’s being told to clock out.

When Kallie does as instructed and goes to the break room to get her bag, I follow behind until I’m standing at the back entrance. Jameson is there, arms crossed over his big chest and a hard look on his face. “You got her?”

“Yeah,” I reply, my hands shoved in my pockets as I hold his eyes.

He nods and slaps me on the back. “Good. Don’t fuck with her or there’ll be hell to pay.” Then he’s gone, leaving me standing there, contemplating his words.

Will I hurt her? Physically, hell no. Never. I've never raised my hand to a woman, despite doing some not-so-good things in the Army. It's the mental hurt I'm worried about. I'm certain I'm the last guy who should be in any sort of relationship, yet as much as I've tried to stay away, I can't.

All I can do is my best and pray I don't fuck it all up in the end. Not because I'm afraid of Jameson. Far from it. I've gone toe to toe with bigger, badder guys than him in the military. I worry about her, because being with me won't be easy. I have baggage. Lots of baggage. Shit I've carried home with me from foreign soil. Stuff I will never forget and never get over. Things that are always on my mind, like a grenade with the pin pulled.

You never know when it'll blow.

# Chapter Eleven

## *Kallie*

We step out the door, the night air wrapping around me warm and comforting and a bit unusual for the beginning of May. Leo walks beside me, silently, as I make my way to my truck. There are only a few vehicles left, including his, which is parked beside mine. Reaching the driver's door to my dad's old truck, I turn to face him.

"Thanks for walking me out."

"No problem," he replies, his hands in his pockets and suddenly looking a little nervous. I can't help but wonder what he's thinking. He doesn't give much away, that's for sure. Sometimes, I feel I can get a read on him pretty well, but others, I feel like I'm not even looking at the right book.

His gaze meets mine and holds for several long seconds. I can't get over how incredibly kissable his lips are. Full and starring in every late-night fantasy I seem to have lately. Despite the fact he ghosted me for more than a week, I still picture kissing those lips. How messed up is that?

Leo leans back against his own truck door and continues to watch me. We maintain our silent stare off, and when the burning question gets to be too much, I finally ask. "What are you thinking about?"

"You." His answer is one word. One simple word that makes my heart race and a thousand butterflies take flight in my stomach.

"Do you want to go somewhere? With me?" I ask, taking a chance he's not quite ready for this night to end either.

"Yes."

A small smile spreads across my lips. "Great. Follow me," I instruct, climbing into my truck cab and getting settled behind the wheel. I glance over, noticing he hasn't moved a muscle. When I roll down the window, he pushes off his truck and steps forward. "Are you coming?"

A wicked grin spreads across those full lips. "Yes, Kal. I'm *comin'*."

"Well, let's go, slow poke."

This time, he moves to the driver's side of his truck and climbs in. Once he's ready to go, I finish pulling out of my parking spot and head for the exit. Even if I couldn't see Leo's headlights in my rearview mirror, I'd know he was there. I can *feel* him, which is probably why my offer has bad idea written all over it.

In permanent marker.

But I don't stop, don't text him to cancel. I just drive toward my house with him following behind.

What's my big plan?

Not *that*.

Even though my lady bits and pieces are wide awake and hoping that's exactly what's on the menu for tonight.

I pull into my driveway, wondering if Leo will just keep going and circle back to town. He must be wondering what in the world we're doing here, together. I try not to think too hard about the fact I'm bringing him home with me, even though that's exactly where my mind goes and then lingers.

"Stop it. That's not what this is," I chastise myself. "You're going to the barn, not the house." I swear I can hear my body cry in sadness when I pass the fork in the drive that leads to the house, or more specifically, to my bedroom. Instead, I focus on the lane ahead of me and park in front of the barn. Leo stops beside me, shuts off the engine, and hops out.

Shoving his hands in his pockets, he asks, "Are you going to make me do chores?"

I can't help but giggle as I reach for the barn door and slide it open to let the moonlight in. "No," I reply, stepping inside and making my way toward the ladder. There's just enough light from the single bulb in the middle of the barn and the full moon that I don't need to flip on the main overhead switch.

Climbing to the hayloft, I wait at the top for Leo to reach the platform before moving over to the far wall. It's almost completely dark up here, but I know where I'm going. I've done this enough I can find my way in the darkest of night. I grip the handle and tug open the sliding door that overlooks the back of our property, the breeze and moonlight pouring in.

"Wow," he says, stepping up beside me and gazing out at the dark landscape.

"It's my favorite place in the whole world," I whisper, lowering myself onto the floor and letting my feet hang over the ledge.

Leo does the same, his large, muscular body providing a little extra warmth seeping through my shirt. "You can see the entire town from here."

"You don't even notice the slight incline when you're driving out here. It isn't until you're up in the hayloft that you can really see it. Isn't it beautiful? When I moved here after my dad's accident, I was up here working one evening when I opened the door to let the summer breeze in. I probably stood here for ten minutes and just took it all in."

Gazing out at the vast area before me, the entire town is littered with lights, reminding me of lightning bugs in the summer. I can see the church steeple, thanks to the full moon, and the water tower with the name of the town written across it.

He reaches down and takes my hand, linking our fingers together and resting them on his leg. I glance his way, and even though I'm certain he can feel my gaze, he continues to watch the view. He looks more relaxed than I've ever seen him. After a few moments of studying his profile, I return my sight back to the city and country in front of us.

"I'm sorry I stopped communicating."

I risk a quick look his way as I ask, "Why did you?"

Leo exhales and shifts his body so he's angled toward me. He doesn't let go of my hand though, continuing to hold it, palm to palm. "I thought it would be best for both of us."

"Why?"

His gray eyes look black as he speaks his confession. "Because I have a lot of baggage, Kallie. A lot of dark stuff."

I move my hand, bringing his with it, and resting them both on my lap. My fingers move, stroking his calloused hands and scarred knuckles. "I think we all have stuff we're dealing with in our past. The important thing is not to let it control your future."

He glances my way and meets my gaze before those gray eyes drop to our joined hands. "That's pretty good advice."

I shrug and flash him a smile. "If only I'd take my own advice," I quip.

He flips our hands around so his is on top and pulls them apart enough to stroke my palm with his thumb. The touch causes goosebumps to pepper my skin and my nipples to pebble against my bra. "Maybe someday you'll share your stuff," he says softly, bumping his shoulder gently against mine.

"Maybe," I reply, knocking my shoulder against his too. "And maybe you'll share yours down the road too."

He flashes me a panty-dropping smile. "Maybe."



We sit in comfortable silence for a while, just taking in the view and listening to the night. Bud whinnies from his stall down below, letting me know he's aware of our visitor and isn't too happy Leo hasn't stopped by. "I think someone's jealous," I finally say.

He gives me a skeptical look. "Who?"

"Bud. He doesn't appear to be happy you haven't said hello yet." Just as I get the words out, Bud kicks the wall.

"Bud, you're just going to have to wait a little bit," Leo says loudly. "I know there's a bro code and all, but sometimes, the pretty girl comes first, okay? Especially when you're hoping to steal a kiss at the end of the night."

My heart is trying to tap-dance right out of my chest. "You want to kiss me?"

His gray eyes turn molten as he holds my gaze. "I've wanted nothing more since I saw you at the wedding."

I swallow hard, a lump magically forming in my throat. I want to tell him I haven't been able to think of anything else since either, but decide to show him instead. I move, my chin lifting as my mouth meets his, pressing firmly against those full, kissable lips.

It only takes a moment to register. His firm lips take control, coaxing my mouth open, his tongue delving deep. A moan spills from my throat as his hand cups my jaw. His kiss is...everything. Everything a first kiss should be. Everything I didn't realize was missing from my life.

He releases my lips and trails soft open-mouthed kisses across my jaw and down my neck. I suck in greedy breaths of oxygen, my mind essentially broken. I can't think. I can't breathe. I can't speak.

And I want more.

"Again," I whisper, turning my head to grant him better access.

Leo chuckles, nipping at the tender skin just below my ear. "So demanding. I like it."

Then, he claims my lips once more in a bruising, insistent kiss, and all I can do is hang on and enjoy the ride. And what a ride it is. He kisses me soundly, so deliriously, I practically forget my name. I've always heard women boast about those kinds of kisses, but never experienced one for myself.

Until Leo.

We kiss for what feels like an eternity, and yet, it's still not enough. I want more. When he finally releases my lips, they're tender and swollen, but I don't care. His fingers are still threaded in my hair as he nibbles on the corner of my mouth before gently pulling me into his arms. He shifts my head to rest against his chest, the strong thunder of his heart echoing below my cheek.

We sit together, his arm around my shoulder as I snuggle against his body. He's so warm, his scent intoxicating. It's woody and clean and it takes everything I have not to bury my nose in the soft material of the flannel. I mean, I'm weird, but not *that* weird.

After covering my second yawn of the night, Leo sighs and places a kiss against the crown of my head. "I should go so you can get some rest."

I want to argue, but I know he's right. I'm beat. After being on my feet for more than eight hours, I'm to the point where exhaustion is taking over and I'm struggling to keep my eyes open. Or it could quite possibly be snuggled up to this big, warm man who has me totally relaxed and comfortable.

Clearing my throat, I slowly pull back, despite my body yearning to lean forward and return to its previous position. "Thank you for coming here."

"Thank you for inviting me to your favorite spot. It means a lot to me."

I nod, taking one last look out over the landscape, before slowly rising to my feet. Leo does the same while I close the hayloft doors.

Once that task is complete, he reaches for my hand and leads me to the ladder. "I'll go down first." Moments later, he disappears and waits for me below. As soon as I'm within arm's reach, his hands are on me, but not in the sexual way I'd expect. Instead, it's reassuring, as he guides me to the ground, his eyes meeting mine. Instantly, I yawn again. "Come on, sleepyhead," he says with a chuckle.

We start to make our way toward the barn doors, but I feel his hesitation as he glances over to Bud's stall. "Go say hello."

He glances my way. "I don't want to keep you up any longer than necessary," he counters, but I'm already moving in that direction.

"It won't take but a few minutes. Besides, then I can spend a few more with you." I feel myself blush at my honest confession, and when I see him smile widely and feel him squeeze my hand, I realize I didn't completely put my foot in my mouth.

Bud already has his head out when we approach, and I loosen my hold on Leo's hand. He doesn't drop it, however, just reaches over to pet the horse with his opposite hand. "Hey, Bud. You behaving?" The horse whinnies and shakes his head, as if to say no. We both laugh as Leo strokes his neck and moves his hand to his forehead. "Well, at least you're honest," he quips with a smile.

We visit for a few more minutes, and I can't get over how responsive Bud is to Leo. After years of attitude, he seems like the other horses we've worked with and boarded. Friendly, even. It's night and day different than his usual demeanor.

"All right, Bud, time for bed. Kallie is dead on her feet, so we need to get going," Leo says to the horse, running a

gentle hand down to his muzzle. I swear, the horse leans into his touch. “Ready?” Leo asks, squeezing my hand and escorting me toward the exit.

We walk hand-in-hand, only stopping long enough for him to pull the barn door closed. I don’t say a word as he leads us to the back door of the old farmhouse. The light is on over the kitchen sink, as it always is, in case Dad gets up in the middle of the night. The door is unlocked, even though I’ve tried to tell him it’s not safe to leave the house open like that, but Dad grew up in a different time. No one locked their doors back then, even in the bigger cities like where he grew up.

Moving up on the first step, I turn to face him. Before I can even say a word, he leans in and whispers, “Thank you, again, for inviting me here.”

I turn my head slightly, taking in those gorgeous gray eyes. We’re close enough I can feel his warm breath against my cheek, and suddenly, I’m anxious for another kiss. As if reading my mind, he moves, brushing his mouth against mine. It’s soft, gentle, and nothing like the kisses we shared in the loft, though it still seems to pack a punch. This one is the perfect kiss to end our night together.

“Goodnight, Kallie,” he whispers against my lips, his warm fingers entwined with strands of my hair.

“Goodnight, Leo.” My reply comes out all breathless and gaspy.

It’s on the tip of my tongue to invite him inside. I’ve never done that, not since moving here to take care of my dad. I haven’t been a monk in the eight years I’ve lived in Stewart Grove, but I haven’t exactly dated much either.

“What are you doing tomorrow?” he asks.

“Umm, I usually grocery shop in the morning and take care of the horses since Morris is off. Then, I have to work at the bar. What about you?”

“I have to help my dad in the morning, but that’s it. I hate to just invite myself over, but do you want help with the

horses? I wouldn't mind taking Bud out for a ride."

My heart does this weird little happy dance in my chest. "Of course. You're welcome anytime," I reply, and it has nothing to do with him coming to help with the rambunctious stallion.

He slides his thumb across the apple of my cheek before bringing his lips to mine one last time. "I'll see you tomorrow."

I practically purr like a kitten as his mouth slides against mine, my fingers digging into the flannel he's wearing.

Chuckling, he pulls back and releases me. "Night."

"Goodnight," I repeat, this time for the last time.

I step inside and shut the door, peeking out through the blinds to watch him go. When he heads back to the barn to retrieve his truck, I flip the lock and take off to the living room, enjoying the hell out of the view of him walking away. There's just enough light from the security lighting that I can see his amazing ass sculpted in well-worn blue jeans. It's a sight to behold. I stand there, like the stalking lunatic I apparently am, and watch him climb into his truck and back out. It isn't until he's moving toward the road to return to town that I finally draw a deep breath into my lungs.

"You okay?"

I startle with a cry and spin around. "Jesus, Dad."

He smiles knowingly, making a production of checking his watch. "You're home late."

Rolling my eyes, I move away from the window. "I've been home for a while. I was in the barn," I tell him, walking past him and returning to the kitchen to get a drink of water. "What are you doing up?"

"Heard the door. Thought I'd make sure everything was all right since it was so late."

Guilt nips at my neck. "Sorry to wake you."

He keeps both hands on his walker as he smiles. "How's Leo?"

Sighing, I take a long drink of my water to buy some time to get myself together. "He's fine." Clearing my throat, I add, "I think he's going to stop by tomorrow and see Bud. He's talking about riding him."

That makes my dad grin from ear to ear. "Really? Good. I think he's just what that ol' stallion needs to get over his attitude." There's something in the look in his eyes and the innocent way he says it that makes my eyes narrow just a bit.

"Anyway, I'm going to bed," I state, setting my empty glass down on the counter and moving toward the stairs.

"Night, Kallie girl. Sweet dreams," Dad replies, just as he used to say when I was a little girl. He shuffles past the staircase and down the short hall to his first-floor bedroom and disappears behind the door.

I quietly walk up the steps to the master bedroom on the second floor. When Dad had his accident and knew he'd never be able to maneuver up the stairs again, he insisted I take the larger room he once used. We combined two rooms downstairs for him to use, including the addition of his own handicap-accessible bathroom. It was an expense we didn't need while drowning in medical debt, but thanks to the help of a local church and the FFA Chapter through the school, a lot of the labor was free.

Once inside my room, I take a quick shower to wash the bar and the barn off me, put on a pair of warm PJs and cozy socks, and slip beneath my comforter. There's nothing I hate more than being cold when I'm trying to sleep. I even have a heated blanket I use during the frigid winter months.

Instead of being chilled, I find myself a little flushed and thinking about Leo. About the kisses we shared. About the way his gray eyes bore into mine with so much heat and desire, I'm still a little achy with need long after he left. A very

specific ache that I probably should have taken care of in the shower.

I flip to my side, desperate to find a comfortable position. Unfortunately, no matter which way I lie, I still think of Leo and the attraction I feel for him only intensifies as I replay every single one of the kisses we shared over and over again.

Yeah, it's going to be a long night.

# Chapter Twelve

## *Leo*

“Hello!” I holler as I step inside my parents’ house without knocking. Axl barrels through, his nose already leading him straight to the kitchen.

“In here,” my dad replies, chuckling as soon as he hears the pup’s hurried nails clicking on the hardwood floors. “Good morning, Axl,” he greets, bending down and giving the dog some welcome attention.

“How’s it going?” I ask, taking a seat at the same kitchen table I ate cereal at every morning before school.

“Good,” he replies. Once Axl’s bowls have food and water, he heads back over to the stove. “I was just making some eggs and toast. Want some?”

“No thanks. How’s she feeling?”

Dad sighs. “Okay. Tired today,” he replies, pouring the scrambled eggs into the skillet. “She should be joining us shortly. How’s my favorite grandpup?”

I roll my eyes at his wording. Usually, it’s the moms who badger her offspring about grandkids, but in the Martinez house, it’s been the other way around. My dad has been not-so-subtle with his hints about wanting grandkids in the near future. It started even before I was released from the Army, when there was no woman I wanted to attach myself to for the rest of my life, which is why I rarely dated. I liked being single.

Answering his question, I reply, “He pissed on the laundry room floor this morning, five minutes after we came back inside.”

He barks out a laugh as he stirs the eggs. “Puppies are a lot of work.”



“No shit,” I grumble, dropping my head to my arms on the table. “He does awesome at night, but then takes his annoyance out on me when I put him back in his kennel.”

I can feel Dad’s eyes on me, so I turn my head to look his way. “He does well at night, because...he’s not in the kennel?” The humor is written all over his face.

Narrowing my eyes, I reply through a sudden yawn, “He sleeps with me.” My old man barks out a laugh, so I go ahead and add the rest. “He has his own pillow now.”

Dad doubles over in a fit of laughter as Mom walks in the kitchen. “Who sleeps with you? What’s her name?”

I take a moment to survey her appearance, instantly noticing how right Dad is. She looks very tired, even though she tries to hide it behind her familiar smile and laughing eyes. “Not a her, Ma. Axl sleeps with me now.”

Mom slowly makes her way to where the pup is eating. As soon as he spots her approaching, he leaves his food bowl and scampers her way for more attention. “Of course he does. A dog’s place is beside his owner, even in bed. Right, Axl?” she singsongs to the dog as she reaches down to pet him.

I stand up and pull out her chair, placing a kiss on her cheek before she takes a seat. “Thank you,” she says.

As she sits, her sweater sleeve shifts, and I notice the bruising on her wrist. “Holy shit, woman. What did you do?” I reach for her arm and survey the dark purple markings on her skin.

She tries to pull it away, but I won’t let her. I don’t squeeze or hurt her, but I need to see the damage to her skin with my own eyes. “It’s nothing, Leo. Just hit my hand in the shower yesterday.”

My heart aches as I look down at the angry bruising. “Mom,” I whisper, my throat thick.

“I should be more careful,” she says, setting her other hand on top of mine, just as she used to do when I was a

child. "I'll be okay," she adds with a tender pat.

"Breakfast is ready, love," Dad announces, bringing the pan of eggs over to the table and placing it on the potholder. Then, he moves back to the counter and pops a few pieces of bread in the toaster. While he waits, he meets my gaze from across the small room. His eyes are filled with worry and guilt, as if he's carrying the weight of her injury on his shoulders.

Knowing my dad, he is.

"How's work going?" Mom asks, scooping a small pile of scrambled eggs onto her plate and taking a single slice of toast when it's placed on the table.

"Busy. That part-timer Otto hired to help three days a week already quit. Well, I'm assuming he quit, since he just stopped coming to work," I state, getting up and making myself a cup of coffee while Dad sits down and digs into the food.

I enjoy just being in their presence, listening to them discuss their schedules for the first part of the week. Dad's still working and will take Tuesday afternoon off for Mom's oncology appointment. He works at the local feed store, and the owner has been tremendous at adjusting Dad's work schedule to accommodate Mom's many medical appointments or procedures.

As I sit here, my mind drifts to Kallie. I know she gave up her life in Cincinnati to take care of her own dad when he had his accident. I don't know much about her life prior to Stewart Grove, but I'm discovering a lot about her now. She's extremely empathetic with a touch of sass and stubbornness. Her laugh, while I can tell she hates it, makes me want to slay dragons in the off chance I might hear it again. It has quickly become my favorite sound in the whole world.

"Who is she?"

I startle from the question and turn to face my mom. She's giving me a wide, knowing smile, one that reminds me of when I was in school and would adamantly deny being

somewhere I shouldn't have been, like a party by the creek bank. Somehow, Mom always knew.

"What?" I ask, reaching for my mug and taking a too-big sip, scorching my tongue. Serves me right.

She chuckles and shakes her head. "Oh, Leo. You don't think a mother knows when her son has met someone?" When I just stare back at her and blink, she laughs harder. "You're doing a terrible job at hiding it, if that's what you're trying to do."

Clearing my throat, I look down at my hands and reply, "I'm not tryin' to hide anything. It's just...new."

"I see. Where did you meet her? Is she from here?"

"Not originally, but she's lived here for a while. I met her officially at Garreth's wedding."

"Oh, shoot. So if we would have been able to go, I might have met her?" Mom asks with regret in her eyes. She hadn't been feeling well that day, so she and Dad decided not to attend. The radiation she took over the winter was bad enough, but now that they've added in chemo every two weeks, she has more rough days than good ones.

"I don't know about that," I state, pretty sure I probably wouldn't have been sitting at the bar, watching the gorgeous bartender half the night if my parents were there.

Mom leans in, her eyes sparkling once again with excitement. "Tell me about her."

"It's nothing, really," I counter, even though it's not exactly the truth.

She pins me with a look. "Leo Jackson Martinez, don't you dare lie to me."

My mouth falls open. "Why'd you middle name me?"

"Because you flat-out lied to my face," she argues. "Now, try again."

I can't help the smile that spreads across my lips. "Her name is Kallie. She works at Burgers and Brew."

"Kallie Carpenter?" Dad asks just as he swallows a mouth full of food. When I nod in confirmation, he continues, "I've met her a few times at the feed store. Her father is Al, the man who bought the old Houston place, right?"

Nodding, I confirm his question. "Yes."

"He's the man who fell off the horse," Mom says, almost absently to herself. "I remember providing food for them through the church."

"He named the farm Pearl Sunset, after his wife Pearl. She passed away a while ago. Gosh, probably twenty or so years ago now," Dad adds, clearly having conversations with Al back when he was still caring for the day-to-day.

"I'm not exactly sure when she passed, but it's been quite a while. Their only daughter, Kallie, moved here when he had his accident and has been taking care of him ever since."

"She was a nurse, I believe," Dad adds, making my heartbeat jump.

I didn't know that. I knew she came here from Cincinnati, but I wasn't aware of what she did then. Why does it make me a little jealous, knowing my old man may know more about Kallie than I do? Of course, he most likely heard it from Al, the proud father, years ago, but still. The fact she was a nurse prior to working at the bar doesn't sit well with me. I should have known that particular piece of information.

"I haven't seen her in a while though. Usually, it's Morris who comes in to pick up their feed and stuff. I think he only works part time to help her out and doesn't charge her much. I'm sure money is still pretty tight, thanks to all the medical bills and renovations they had to make to the house to accommodate his return home. Russell Albertson worked there for a while, but I think he was let go when the accident happened because they couldn't keep him on full time."

I absorb the information he shares, thanks to his direct contact with Al, Kallie, and the employees they've had over the years. "She keeps pretty busy, working at the farm during the day and then at the bar at night."

Axl barks by the back door, letting us know he needs to go outside. "I've got him," Dad states, pushing his empty plate forward and getting up. "Leave the mess for me to clean," he adds, walking to the door and clipping the leash on his collar.

As soon as he's gone, I get up and grab the dirty dishes. "You listen like your father does," Mom quips with a smile on her face.

"I learned from the best," I inform her, slipping the dirty plates and forks in the empty egg pan and taking them to the sink.

"So?"

I glance her way and find her smiling as she watches me. "So, what?"

"Don't play stupid. I didn't raise a stupid boy."

I bark out a laugh. "I beg to differ. I believe you may have used those exact words a few times over the years."

She tsks and shakes her head. "Just because you did stupid things doesn't mean you were stupid. All kids do stupid things, Leo. Like jumping out of the oak tree in the backyard and thinking you could land on the trampoline."

A bubble of laughter flies from my mouth. "I almost had it."

"You're lucky you only sprained your ankle and didn't break it. You would have been out of basketball the whole season, not just two weeks. There was a girl involved in that moment of stupidity, if I remember correctly."

"Amber. Head cheerleader."

Mom shakes her head. "Was she impressed with your acrobatics?"

With a deep sigh, I turn off the water and prop a hip against the counter. “No. She spent the rest of the day with Dane Showman at the public pool while I was at the emergency room.”

She cracks up laughing, and while I want to tease her about finding humor in my early high school pain, I don’t because the sound is like music to my ears, and I don’t hear it nearly enough. “Oh, well. You’re probably better off.”

“Probably,” I agree. “I heard she’s twice divorced and has four kids by three guys.”

She holds my gaze for a few long seconds before asking the burning question. “Do you like her?”

I don’t have to ask who she’s referring to, and it’s not Amber. “Yeah.”

“Good.” She offers me another happy grin. “You deserve someone who makes you smile. It’s been so long since I’ve seen a genuine one on your handsome face, I almost forgot what they look like.” She’s teasing. I know she is, but it’s not far from the truth either. I haven’t had much to smile about in the last couple of years.

“It’s pretty new and nothing is labeled, so don’t go getting your hopes up for a big wedding and grandbabies in the near future,” I counter.

She feigns shock, her hand covering her heart. “Would I do that?”

Again, a loud bark of laughter spills from my mouth. “Wouldn’t you?”

Mom just smiles innocently back at me, even though we both know Dad is the one more likely to make a comment about my future. “Have you told her...about the other thing?”

My throat goes dry and my heart tries to leap out of my chest. “No.”

She nods in understanding. “You’re carrying some hefty baggage on your back, Leo, and while you’ve come a long way

since you've returned home, I know it's still there. Promise me you'll tell her when the time's right. Secrets, no matter how big or small, can cause a lot of damage to a relationship, especially one that's somewhat new and fragile."

I have no clue how I get the words past the Buick-sized lump in my throat. "I will."

"I can't wait to meet her," she adds with a happy little grin.

"He had to sniff every blade of grass in the yard, but business is finally done," Dad announces as he enters the back door.

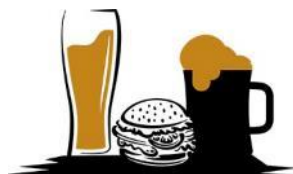
Axl's tail wags happily as he walks over to the cabinet where he knows the treats await and sits anxiously. Mom shakes her head. "He has your number," she says after Dad hangs the leash on the hook they specifically installed for Axl and retrieves a treat from the new container.

Dad crouches down and pets the eager puppy. "He's such a good boy," he sings, scratching the canine behind the ears as he rewards him for using the bathroom outside. Glancing to where I stand at the sink, clearly noticing I took care of the dirty dishes, he asks, "So, what did I miss?"

"Just your son and his desire to give you grandbabies."

My head snaps over to the woman who gave me life and my mouth drops open. She's already laughing because she knows exactly what she's done with her comment. My eyes narrow and as menacing as I try to make my face, I know it falls short. I could never be angry at my mother. Not now, not ever. "Thanks for that, traitor," I grumble, causing her to giggle even more.

Dad practically floats toward me on a cloud of happiness. "Let's talk about these babies."



I pull into the long driveway that leads to Kallie's place and follow it toward the barn. The doors are open, and I can already spot horses in the back pasture. I park in the same spot I was in last night and hop out. Axl bolts the moment I'm out of the way. At first, he heads for the barn, until he hears his name called.

"Axl!"

The puppy instantly changes directions and runs straight for Al, who is seated on a chair beneath the old oak tree behind his house. From where he's sitting, he has a perfect view of the barn and pastures, to where Kallie is preparing to ride one of the horses.

"Hey, buddy," Kallie's dad says to Axl, as he reaches down to pet the eager pup. "Hello, Leo," he adds as I approach.

"Good afternoon, sir," I reply. "Gorgeous day, isn't it?"

Al looks up at the sky and takes a deep breath. "The perfect day. Blue skies and fresh air. The sun is warm and the horses are enjoying some riding."

Axl curls up at Al's feet and closes his eyes, as if he's ready for an afternoon nap. My eyes are instantly drawn to a horse exiting the back of the barn, the most stunning woman riding her.

"She's a natural with horses, just like her mom was," Al says, drawing my attention away from Kallie as she leads the horse around the enclosure. "Pearl grew up with them and had a couple while we were married. We boarded them at a great place in Cincinnati and would go almost every weekend to ride. From the time Kallie girl was old enough to walk, her mom had her on a horse. When Pearl passed away, she stopped riding for a while. It was too hard on her, mostly because it reminded her of her mother."

I glance to the pasture, to where Kallie picks up the pace of the horse with a trot. She's sitting tall and proud in the saddle, completely comfortable and poised.



“That one’s Stella. She’s a good mare to ride. Kallie prefers her when she’s looking to just ride for enjoyment and not work.”

My eyes don’t sway from watching her. She’s wearing a black, three-quarter-length, sleeved shirt, jeans, and work boots, but best of all is the fitted ball cap on her head. I’ve never seen a hat look so damn sexy before in my life.

“So, what brings you out here today? Well, besides the obvious gawking at my daughter.”

It takes a few extra seconds for his statement to register, and the moment it does, I spin back around to face Al. He’s wearing a wide, knowing grin, his eyes dancing with humor. “Uhh, sorry, sir. Didn’t mean to disrespect,” I state, wondering what the hell is wrong with me. Every time I’m around this man, he catches me checking out his daughter.

He laughs. “None taken, Leo.”

“Actually, I thought about riding Bud.”

His eyes light up. “Really?”

“Yes, sir. If that’s okay with you. I know no one rides him —” I start, but he quickly cuts me off.

“That’s a great idea.”

“Yeah?”

He immediately nods. “Of course. That horse has been waiting for the right man to come along. He’s ready.”

A few moments later, Kallie looks over, probably checking on her dad, and spots me standing beside him. She disembarks Stella and takes her to the pen before making her way toward us.

“Hey!”

“Hi,” I reply, noticing the way my heart beats faster as she approaches.

She looks to her dad. “Feeling okay?”

“Just fine, Kallie girl. Leo was just telling me he’s gonna ride Bud.”

“That’s the plan,” she says, adjusting the ponytail sticking out of the back of her ball cap. She takes a quick drink from the water bottle on the table beside her dad before turning and giving me a sassy grin. The one gesture makes my cock twitch in my jeans. Then, she reaches out and places her hand on my forearm. “Come on, cowboy. Let’s ride.”

# Chapter Thirteen

## *Kallie*

Leo Martinez in a pair of well-worn blue jeans and a Henley is a sight. A gorgeous, sexy vision that makes my panties damp and my nipples pebble against my bra, and considering my present company, I need to get myself in check before I embarrass myself.

“Have fun, kids. I’ve got Axl,” Dad hollers as Leo and I head for the barn. The pup barely cracks open his eyes when he hears his name, just readjusts his little body into a ball.

When we reach the entrance, I say, “I think Bud knows something’s going on. He’s been very attentive today, watching me closely and seems to be in a good mood.”

“I’m excited to ride him,” he says, his eagerness evident in his voice.

We walk over to Bud’s stall, and I swear the horse perks up as soon as he spots Leo. He whinnies and shakes his head, but not in the defiant manner I’m used to. Instead, it appears the horse is anxious to find out what’s in store for him this afternoon.

“Hey, Bud,” Leo says calmly as he approaches. He holds up his hand so the horse can see it before slowly and gently reaching forward and petting his neck. “You behaving?” The horse snorts, which makes Leo chuckle. “At least you’re honest,” he adds, continuing to stroke his neck. “How do you feel about a ride, big guy? I heard it’s been a while.”

Bud doesn’t take his eyes off the man talking to him. He seems to hang on his every word, watching and waiting.

I move to gather everything needed to ride and start to bring it over to the stall. When I reach where Leo stands, still petting and talking to Bud, I can’t help but smile. When I meet them, Leo turns to me and says, “I’ve never done this, but

maybe it'd be best if I get him ready? Can you talk me through it?"

My throat suddenly becomes thick with emotions. He's putting Bud's best interest first, doing what he thinks is best to keep him calm and comfortable. The attraction I feel toward this man just quadrupled in a single moment. "Sure," I whisper, my voice a little hoarse.

I talk him through the process of tacking up, from the pad and saddle to the bit. Once he has everything in place, I say, "Go ahead and open the stall door, and you can walk him out. It's been a while for him, so you might have to lead him around the pasture for a bit before you mount."

Leo nods and does as instructed. I stand back, allowing him to take the reins, literally and figuratively. Bud doesn't so much as flinch when the stall door is opened and Leo steps inside. He talks to him the entire time as he walks him out of the stall and through the back of the barn. All I can do is stand back and watch.

He leads him to the open pasture and starts to walk the horse. Bud seems more content than I've ever seen him. Almost peaceful and happy. Usually, he's giving me fits and seems tense. Perhaps he's just that excited about having someone ride him. Of course, it could have everything to do with who the rider is. I've definitely noticed a change in Bud since Leo stepped in to help me deal with his attitude.

After a few minutes, I can't help but glance over my shoulder and check on my dad. He's sitting up straight in the chair, a faint smile on his face, as he watches Leo and Bud together. I'm sure he's eager to see Leo mount the horse. Dad has a ton of faith in Leo, despite only knowing him a very short time, but also in Bud. Hell, for years, he's the only one to see the good in the willful horse.

As the duo walks my way, I can tell they're both at ease and comfortable. "Looking good, Bud," I say, leaning on the painted white fence.

Leo stops directly in front of me. "I think we're ready."

"Okay. Are you good with mounting?"

Leo's eyebrows skyrocket to his hairline and a naughty smirk spreads across his lush lips. "I think I'm pretty good with mounting, Kallie," he whispers, his voice deep and husky.

Instantly, I think about sex, and by the look in his eye, I'd say he's thinking the same.

Clearing my throat, I ignore the innuendo and say, "I mean the horse. Do you need help mounting the horse?"

"No, I think I've got it. It's been a while, but I used to ride with an old friend on his property." Something dark passes over his face, and I can't help but wonder who the friend is. I want to ask, but the way the light in his eyes dims tremendously, I think better of it.

"Okay, well, have at it."

Leo clicks his tongue and stops walking. Immediately, Bud stands still, waiting to receive cues. "All right, big guy, let's not do anything too crazy, all right? It's been a few years since I rode a horse, and it sounds like it's been even longer for you. Let's take this nice and easy and see what happens. Deal?"

The horse stares at him before taking a step to the side and angling his body toward Leo. My mouth drops open with shock. Did the horse just understand what he said and move so Leo can mount him easier? It sure as hell looks that way.

I watch with bated breath as Leo grabs the saddle horn, places his left boot in the stirrup, and hoists himself up. He moves effortlessly, as if he's ridden horses his whole life. Once he's comfortably seated in the saddle, he takes the reins, clicks his tongue, and taps his heel into Bud's side. The horse moves slowly and confidently, his head held high. I find myself holding my breath, praying for a positive outcome with today's ride. The entire scene brings a tear to my eye as I witness this amazing moment.

After two laps around the pasture, I pull out my phone and take a few pictures. I know the ride isn't over and anything can happen, but I want to document this day. Not just for Leo, but for Dad too. He's always had faith in this horse, even when no one else did.

"I knew he was special."

I startle, turning around and finding Dad approaching the fence. "What are you doing over here?" I ask.

He tsks, carefully approaching the fence with the use of his walker. "I'm fine. I wanted to get a better look at our boy."

Once I know Dad is stable, I look back out at the pasture. "I can't believe he's letting him ride him like that. Bud looks like he's been doing this all along."

"I told you he was special," Dad repeats.

"Never in a million years would I have agreed Bud was special," I mutter with a chuckle, my eyes riveted ahead.

"I wasn't talking about the horse."

Realization hits me hard. I glance at Dad before returning my gaze to the man on the most stubborn horse I've ever known. My gut tells me he's right. Leo is special. Every time I'm near him, I can feel it. In my head and in my heart. Every moment I'm with him, I'm drawn to something new.

Axl appears and runs beneath the fence toward his owner. I jump forward, ready to grab the rambunctious puppy, but Leo takes control of the situation immediately. "Axl, stop," he says, holding up his hand.

The puppy comes to a halt, his little tail wagging, as he waits for instruction. Axl was surprisingly well-behaved when Leo found him, but now, after working with him for just a few weeks the pair is making great strides in training.

"Come 'ere," he says to the pup, patting his leg.

Axl takes off at an eager pace and slows as he reaches his owner's side. He starts sniffing Bud's front left leg, and I

find myself holding my breath as I wait to see how the horse will react. Leo begins speaking to Bud in a calm, soothing voice, and the two animals take a few seconds to sniff each other.

“Let’s go, Bud,” Leo says, giving his side a gentle kick.

They make five laps around the pasture with Axl happily tagging along and Dad looking on like a proud papa. “I’m going to take care of Stella and brush her down, okay? Want me to bring you a chair?”

“No, I’m okay,” Dad says, smiling fondly off to his left as he watches them ride.

“I think I’ve been replaced,” I mutter goodheartedly.

Dad scoffs. “Never, Kallie girl. You’ll always be my number one.”

My throat dries and I struggle to swallow over the lump forming. “You’ll always be my number one too,” I state.

He gives me a wink and a smile before returning his attention to the pasture. “Go. I’ll be fine.”

“I’ll only be a few minutes. Holler if you need me, okay?”

“I’ll be fine, Kallie girl.”

Nodding, I walk straight to the pen and retrieve Stella. I escort her back to the barn, where I remove her saddle, pad, and bit, hanging them up where they belong. Then, I grab the brush and get to work. When the task is complete, I grab an apple from the basket, lead her to her stall, and hand over the treat when she’s situated.

Then, I quickly make my way back to where I left my dad standing along the fence. Leo is standing on the opposite side of the white wooden slats, talking to him. Dad reaches out and gently pets Bud’s neck, while Axl tries running circles around them all.

“She does,” I hear Dad say as I approach.

“Talking about me?”

They both turn my way. “Leo was just asking me if you liked Mexican food.” My eyebrows arch heavenward. “I was about to tell him you’ve never found a bad taco.”

“That’s not true. Remember that little dive place down the road from my first apartment? *They* had some bad tacos.”

“I do recall. Spent a lot of time in the bathroom that night,” Dad replies with a chuckle. “Anyway, I’m needing to sit down for a while. Axl, why don’t you come rest with me.”

Dad slowly turns his walker and moves toward the tree. Axl is hot on his heels too.

“So, Mexican food?” I ask, running my fingers through Bud’s dark mane.

“I was thinking we could go sometime. Maybe on your night off this week.”

“Were you asking my dad for permission?” I quip, feeling heat creep up my neck.

Leo shrugs his shoulders and gives me one of those panty-melting smiles. “Maybe.”

I let the quiet hang between us for a good minute before I readjust the ball cap on my head. “I’m off tomorrow night.”

He flashes me another grin, one that makes my heart beat a little faster and my panties practically useless. “Tomorrow night it is.”



I’m not sure I’ve ever been this bored in my entire life. It’s dead, thanks to the annual church fish fry and family carnival going on across town. I was told the lunch rush wasn’t terrible, but the dinner crowd is practically nonexistent. I’ve been easily able to manage the entire bar, as



well as keep up with drink orders for the restaurant side, without having to utilize Jameson for backup.

When I catch movement coming from the back hallway, I'm surprised to see Madelyn heading this way, her husband behind her and carrying an infant carrier. "What a lovely surprise," I say as she approaches, wearing a friendly smile.

"Hi, Kallie," Madelyn greets, looking as fresh and happy as ever. Their baby, Rose, is four months old and has the fullest head of dark brown hair, the same color as her dad's. The moment he sets the carrier on top of a table, he's unclipping her restraints and cradling her in his big arms. Madelyn just shakes her head and smiles. "You'd think it's been four days since he's seen her, not four hours."

"He's such a good daddy," I reply, smiling fondly at the father/daughter pair. They all are, really. All four of the owners are some of the most attentive, affectionate dads I've ever seen. It's heartwarming and always makes me smile when I see them all together.

"He is," Madelyn agrees, setting her bag on the chair.

"Are you eating?" I ask, grabbing a couple of menus from behind the bar.

"Yes, but I'm waiting for—" She stops talking when the back entrance door opens again. This time, it's an even bigger surprise than before when Reagan and Garreth walk in.

"Oh my goodness!" I holler, setting the menus down on the corner of the bar and heading their way. "What are you guys doing here?"

"I had to get out of the house. The walls were starting to close in on me," Reagan announces, throwing her arms around my shoulders and giving me a hug.

"I'm so excited you're here," I tell her. "I've been meaning to stop by and meet Evangeline but wanted to give you time to settle."

Reagan nods in understanding. “I get that. Those first few days are complete chaos. Everyone wants to see the baby. You’re barely sleeping and trying to figure out why your baby is crying. I think I cried more last week than I ever have in my life. Parenthood is hard sometimes,” she states with a chuckle.

“Go sit down, and I’ll bring over water and menus.”

“You do not have to wait on us,” Garreth says as he approaches.

“Yes, I do,” I demand, giving him a small hug as well. “You deserve it, and that’s what I get paid to do. Congratulations, by the way.”

“Thank you.” He glances over at his wife, who is handing over baby Evangeline to her cousin, Madelyn. “Best thing I’ve ever done,” he adds with a far-off smile on his face. When he turns back to face me, he asks, “Everything going okay here?”

“Of course. We’ve got it.”

“I know you do, but I’ll be back to work tomorrow.”

“So soon?”

He laughs. “It’s been two weeks, Kal. As much as I love being home with my family, it’s time to get back to work. Diapers are expensive,” he quips.

“I’ll take your word for it. Now, go sit down and I’ll bring water and menus over, though you probably don’t need them.”

“Will you bring five?” he concedes, finally allowing me to do my job.

“Absolutely,” I state, stepping around the bar and grabbing five glasses.

Just as I start to fill them with water, the front door opens. My heart beats a little faster the moment I see Leo walk through the door, Axl beside him on a leash. He’s wearing a different flannel and jeans, most likely having showered away the horse smell from his ride.

I try to ignore the way my eyes are drawn to him, like a moth to a flame, but I'm unable to fight it. Apparently, he's in the same boat, but the moment he clears the doorway, his eyes are seeking me out, the faintest smile spreads across his lips.

Garreth, of course, notices right away. His eyebrows draw up to his hairline as he glances curiously from his friend back to me a few times. I feel my neck heat, the flames slowly creeping into my cheeks, as I finish filling the glasses with ice and grab the dispenser with water. I glance up just in time to see Garreth head to his friend. "There he is!" Garreth hollers, giving him one of those one-handed back slap hugs.

"Sorry, I'm late. Axl decided he needed a few extra minutes outside," Leo says to his friend as they walk over to the round pub tables the owners and their wives usually occupy.

"We just got here," Reagan says, standing up and giving Leo a hug. "Good to see you again."

Before I can lift the tray of waters, Jameson is there and practically takes it right from my hands. I sigh, knowing there's no reason to argue because it'll fall on deaf ears. Instead, I grab the menus and follow behind to where the small group of five, with two tiny babies, sits. Jameson distributes water while I hand out the menus.

"Oh my God, I've been craving an Up All Night burger for days," Reagan groans.

"Why didn't you tell me? I would have gotten you one. Or six," Garreth counters, narrowing his eyes at his wife.

She shrugs. "Sorry. I get so exhausted; I sometimes forget what I walked into the kitchen for."

"I hear you," Madelyn says, taking a small sip of her water.

"What can I get ya to drink?"

One by one, they all relay their beverage choice, and once I deliver two iced teas and a Coke back to the table, Jameson waves me off. “We’ve got it from here. I’ll go put our order in the kitchen.”

I narrow my eyes and place my hands on my hips. “I’m perfectly capable.”

“You’re *more* than capable, yes, but there’s no reason for you to wait on us when you have new customers coming in.”

I glance over my shoulder and spot a group of three guys entering. They head straight for the bar, and a big part of me is disappointed I have to go to work. I’d much rather stay over here and help this table, especially Leo. “Fine, but I’ll be back.”

Leo catches my eye before I completely retreat and winks at me. “I’m counting on it.”

# Chapter Fourteen

## *Leo*

“What was that?”

I rip my eyes away from Kallie’s retreating backside and look at Reagan. “What?” I ask, taking a sip of my tea.

“Don’t play dumb with me, Leo Martinez. You were totally staring at her ass.” Leave it to Reagan to call me out. She reaches down and pets Axl, who’s making a quick lap around the table to say hello.

Once he’s sniffed everyone, he returns to where I sit and lies down at my feet. Shrugging my shoulders at her comment, I lean back in the chair. “That’s not illegal, is it?”

“Of course it’s not, but it is pretty damn annoying you’re playing aloof right now instead of just confessing your deep, dark feelings,” she sasses, making me bark out a laugh.

“She’s a handful,” I state to her husband, my oldest friend.

He gazes at her with so much love and adoration in his eyes, it makes me a little uncomfortable...and a bit envious too. “Don’t I know it.”

Reagan stares at me from across the table, clearly not giving up in her quest for details. With a sigh, I finally reply, “She’s cool. We’re hanging out.”

“Hanging out? As in...”

Before I can say another word, Garreth leans over and kisses her cheek. “As in leave him alone. We both know Kallie is way out of his league,” my oldest friend teases with a wide grin.

“You’re not wrong,” I agree, unable to stop myself from glancing back to the bar and where she’s standing.

Kallie must feel my eyes on her, because she instantly looks up from her task and winks. Her black hair is pulled back in a ponytail high on her head and all I can think about is wrapping my hand around it and giving it a slight tug. Yes, my mind went there. It seems to go there more and more frequently in the last few days.

The truth is, I want her—*bad*—and the more I'm around her, the more intense the desire gets. Especially after tasting her lips. I've thought of nothing since, and it's kept me in a perpetual state of arousal.

"Oh, yeah. He's got it bad," Reagan mutters with a giggle.

I turn my attention back to the table and ignore their ribbing. Jameson grabs an order card and starts writing everyone's food choice down. When he gets to me, he asks, "So, I'm gonna assume you want Strip and Go Naked? Maybe Between the Sheets? Or perhaps Doggie Style?"

My eyes narrow. "I didn't peg you for being the funny guy."

Jameson flashes me a rare, wide grin. "I enjoy poking fun at my friends when the time is right."

"Noted," I reply before giving him my order. "Bangin' Bacon, hold the bacon."

"See? Was that so hard? Oh, wait. Don't answer that," he quips with an ornery grin that lets me know exactly what he's referring to when he said *hard*.

With a sigh, I grab my tea and take a sip. "I hate you."

"No you don't." Then, he spins around and heads off to the kitchen.

"You gonna hold my daughter or what?" Garreth asks after taking his tiny baby in his arms.

I rub the back of my neck as nerves settle in my gut. "I'm not so sure that's a good idea."

“Of course it is,” he argues as he approaches, stopping directly in front of me and gently placing his daughter in my stiff arms. “You two have the same mentality. You’ll be fine.”

“I would be offended, but I’m too busy trying not to freak out right now,” I counter, staring down at the cutest little bundle of newborn.

“Breathe, man,” Garreth says with a chuckle. He slaps me gently on the back and returns to his seat, leaving me all alone holding a baby for the first time in my life.

*Fuck.*

“First time?”

I startle, not realizing Kallie had approached the table. “Yeah. Does it show?”

She giggles, reaching down and rubbing her finger along Evangeline’s chubby cheek. “She’s so adorable,” she whispers, almost absently.

Glancing down, I watch as the baby brings her tiny hand to her mouth and latches on to her knuckles, gently sucking. “I have a feeling he set me up, knowing his daughter would be getting hungry soon.”

“Oh, for sure. She’s about to let out a very unhappy cry when she realizes she’s not getting anything out of her hand.”

I bend down and mutter, “Your dad might be my friend, but I’m not very fond of him right now.” Baby Evangeline yawns. “On the other hand, you are pretty cute. You couldn’t possibly be that bad, right?”

Her little eyes open and meet mine. She watches me for a few long seconds before her little mouth opens up once more. This time, the loudest, most ear-piercing wail erupts from her tiny body. It startles me. It startles Axl. It startles Henry Jarvis, the deaf old man who lives on the outskirts of town.

“Aww, is my baby girl hungry?” Reagan coos, stepping up to rescue me. “Mind if I use your office?” she asks her

husband as she cradles her daughter against her chest.

“Of course not. Want some help?”

She winks. “I think I’ve got it, handsome. I’ll be back in a few minutes.”

“I’m going to run and change this one’s diaper before dinner arrives,” Madelyn says, picking up Rose and a huge bag of stuff off the floor and heading toward the hallway.

“Use Numbers’ office,” Jameson offers, handing over his keys as he sits back down at the table. “Throw the dirty diaper in his trash.”

“Be right back,” she replies with a wink, placing a kiss on her husband’s cheek as she takes the keys.

Shaking my head, I can’t help but quip, “Hard to believe you two are fathers. That’s some crazy-ass shit right there.”

“You’re not wrong,” Jameson states with a laugh. “Scariest and best thing I’ve ever done. Well, besides marrying Madelyn.”

“Agreed,” Garreth adds, that big dopey grin on his face.

“And with that, I’m going to run and check on your food,” Kallie says, dismissing herself to head to the kitchen. I, of course, check out her ass as she walks away.

Garreth grabs my attention once more. “Best thing ever. Marriage and babies. You should try it.”

I snort a laugh. “Seriously? Are you high?”

Garreth just smiles. “Nope. Stop deflecting.”

With a sigh, I glance around the mostly empty bar and reach for my drink. “You know that’s not for me.”

Jameson leans back in his chair. “I thought the same thing once upon a time.”

“Yeah, but that’s different. I have...stuff.”

I see the look that flashes in Garreth’s eyes. Even though we’ve never talked about the details, he’s one of the



few who knows about what happened during my time in the military. Or specifically, at the end of it.

“We all have stuff, man. You have to decide how much of it you’ll willingly keep carrying around with you. Eventually, all you’re doing is letting it dictate the rest of your life,” Jameson says.

My throat feels tight, and I want to tug at the cotton of the T-shirt under my flannel. I keep myself from fidgeting somehow and meet his gaze. Fortunately, I’m saved from replying when I see Kallie rounding the corner, carrying a big tray of food. Instantly, I jump up, careful not to kick a sleeping Axl, and reach for the tray. “Let me help you.”

“Thanks,” she says, helping me set the tray down on the nearest empty table. As she’s passing out the plates, Madelyn returns with a happy Rose and a few moments after her, Reagan and Evangeline. “Can I get you anything else?” she asks after topping off our drinks.

“No, I think we’re good,” Reagan replies, staring down at her burger in consideration.

“Here.” Kallie moves to Reagan and holds out her arms. “I’d be happy to hold her while you eat.”

“Really?” Reagan asks, surprise and excitement evident in her bright eyes.

“Absolutely. She’s content right now, so eat your food while it’s hot.”

“Wow, thank you so much, Kallie.” Reagan hands her daughter over to Kallie and makes sure she’s content before giving all of her attention to the food on her plate.

Jameson takes Rose, somehow balancing the baby in one arm and his cheeseburger in the other hand and making it look easy. All four parents dive into their food as if they rarely have the luxury of eating a hot meal, and I suppose when you have a new baby, that’s often the case.

Then, my eyes are drawn to the gorgeous woman holding a newborn baby in her arms, gently bouncing her from side to side. I'll admit, the sight does something to me. It quickens my heartbeat and causes odd bubbles of hope and contentment to erupt in my chest. When was the last time I felt either one of those? Years?

Probably.

Kallie glances over at the bar and asks, "Do you mind if I walk her over there?"

"Of course not," Reagan replies with her mouth full. "If you need me to take her, just holler."

"We got this, don't we, Evangeline?" Kallie coos to the baby, kissing the crown of her fuzzy head.

They take off behind the bar and using just one hand, she easily pulls two fresh bottles out of the cooler and sets them on the bar. However, removing the caps is a different story. I'm up and moving before I can even think about what I'm doing. "Stay," I tell Axl, whose head pops up the moment I move. I walk around the end of the bar like I own the joint and take the first bottle, twisting off the lid. Once it's placed in front of the patron, I do the same to the second.

Kallie takes the money and sets the change at the edge of the bar in front of the group of guys, who are talking about the basketball game on TV. "Thank you."

"I'm sure you would have figured it out," I tell her, running my finger along the baby's cheek. Of course, as I do, my palm brushes against her arm and causes goosebumps to erupt across her flesh.

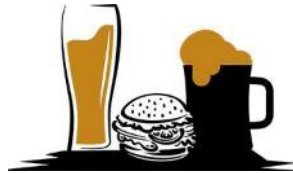
"Maybe. I don't exactly have a lot of experience bartending with a baby in my arms," she remarks with a grin.

"No? Well, if anyone can figure it out, it's you," I insist, propping my hip against the counter and holding her gaze. I wonder if anyone can see the sparks flying between us. The ones I feel every time I touch her. That electricity that courses

through my veins and swirls in my stomach. The desire raging inside me, begging to be unleashed.

“Plans later tonight?” she whispers huskily, her eyes filling with the same fire I’m sure she sees reflecting in my own.

“You, Kallie. The only plan I have later involves you.”



“Maybe I should run you home,” I say aloud, glancing over to where Axl sits on the passenger seat of my truck, tail wagging in anticipation.

When I practically invited myself to Kallie’s place earlier, I assumed I’d be running Axl home to his kennel. Fortunately for him, Kallie wouldn’t hear it. She insisted I bring the dog with me to her house, despite the fact it’s fairly late at night and there’s a heady insinuation hanging between us.

Having sex with Kallie isn’t the reason I’m following behind her as she drives home. Spending a little more time with her is, but if the former were to happen too, I’d be okay with that. As long as she is. In fact, I’m letting her take the lead. If all she wants to do is cuddle and kiss in the barn, I’m fine with that. I’m more than fine with it, in fact. Having my lips on hers is the best part of my day, and I’d be a liar if I said I haven’t been looking forward to it all damn night.

She pulls into her driveway and passes the lane that goes to the house. Instead, she continues to the barn and parks just off to the side of the open doors. It’s a gorgeous spring night in early May with only a light, cool breeze. Axl eagerly gets out of the truck and goes to find the perfect blades of grass to relieve himself before running over to where I wait. The moment he sees Kallie, he takes off, tail wagging.

She scoops up the canine, who looks bigger in her arms than he did the last time she held him and walks my way. “I think he’s getting bigger,” she says, scratching beneath his jaw.

“I was just thinking the same thing.” Noticing a strand of hair hanging on the side of her face, I sweep it behind her ear, reveling in the warmth of her skin against my fingers.

Axl moves, licking her cheek and making her giggle. The moment she puts him down, he takes off for the barn, running through the doorway. Reaching for her hand, I entwine our fingers and follow behind the eager pup into the barn. He’s making his way straight to Bud, who is watching the dog’s approach. Axl maneuvers beneath the stall door and goes to the large horse, not seeming to have a worry in the world regarding the size of the other animal.

Bud bends down and sniffs the pup before nudging him with his nose. Axl does the same, making me smile.

“Wanna go for a short walk?” Kallie asks.

“Of course. Come on, Axl. It’s Bud’s bedtime,” I say to the dog, who doesn’t seem to want to leave the horse, but begrudgingly follows us out the door.

“It’s not far. Just up the lane a little.” We walk in silence, the puppy exploring his surroundings, until we get to a patch of timber at the back of the property. Even though I grew up in Stewart Grove, I’ve never been back on this particular property and find the fact there’s an abandoned building fascinating.

“What was this?” I ask, taking in the short structure. Axl goes over to check it out.

“It’s an old storm shelter. Most of it’s underground.”

“Very cool. Have you ever been down there?”

“Once, when Dad bought the place. Andrew and I had come for a weekend visit to help him get settled, and Dad wanted to come check it out. He pretty much bought the property sight unseen, which didn’t surprise me. Ever since

Mom died, he had talked about wanting to honor her with the purchase of a small horse ranch, so when he found this place online, he jumped off the diving board without even checking to see how deep the water was.”

“I remember this place being pretty old, but was it in rough shape?”

“Actually, no. I was surprised when we came the first time. Everything was dated and in need of a good cleaning, but the house was structurally sound. Barn too. Dad didn’t care about the house as much as he did the barn. All he wanted was to work with horses.”

After a few minutes of looking at the old building, I turn my attention to her. “So...Andrew?”

She flashes me a smile. “I wondered if you were going to ask. Andrew was my then-boyfriend.”

“I hate him.”

She giggles and bumps my arm with her shoulder. “You don’t even know him.”

“No, but even in the darkness, I can see the shadows that fill your eyes when you mention him.”

She looks forward and shrugs. “It was a long time ago.”

I don’t take my eyes off her as I deduce, “He hurt you.”

She turns to face me and gives me a small, sad smile. “Yeah, he did. Not physically, but sometimes emotional scars are just as painful as the physical ones.”

I nod, understanding her statement better than most would. The physical scars on my body are nothing compared to the ones I carry that can’t be seen with the naked eye. Those are the ones that haunt my dreams.

“Can I ask you something? Something incredibly personal that I probably have no right to ask you now?”

“You can ask me anything.”

She seems to hesitate for a moment, but eventually, she asks, “Do you want to have kids? Someday, I mean?”

I blow out a breath and consider her question.

“You don’t have to answer that. I didn’t mean to ask something so personal, it’s just...well...”

Turning to face her, I bring our joined hands to my mouth. “I wasn’t kidding when I said you can ask me anything, and I will most certainly answer your question, but first, I want to tell you why I’m answering it. It’s because something’s different when I’m with you, Kallie. I don’t know what it is, but I feel...lighter than I have in a while. I enjoy being with you and want to get to know you better, and that includes the deep, personal shit.”

“I like you, Leo,” she whispers, her voice holding a slight shake, as if she’s afraid to admit it aloud. “I *really* like you.”

I can’t help but flash her a smile. “Well, good, because I *really* like you too.”

Her smile lights up the entire night sky, brighter than the stars and the moon above. It’s the best fucking thing I’ve ever seen and all I want to do is ensure I witness its beauty every chance I get.

I lean forward, brushing my mouth against hers. Warmth floods my veins as my free hand moves to cup the back of her neck. I move our joined hands to her lower back, shifting her forward and pressing her body against mine. She molds against me, fitting perfectly like a puzzle piece.

The urge to simply devour is strong, but I fight it. Even when she rocks against my erection, ensuring every drop of blood in my body moves to that one concentrated area. My fingertips curl into her hair, careful not to pull.

I rip my mouth from hers, both of us breathing hard. Her eyes dance with fire and desire, a heavy mixture I feel licking at my own nerve endings, ready to consume. “God, I could kiss you forever and never get tired of it,” I state,

nipping at the corner of her mouth and trailing my lips across her jaw.

Her lips curl upward as she closes her eyes in contentment. "Same, Leo. Very much the same."

# Chapter Fifteen

## *Kallie*

A shiver runs up my spine, but it's not from the cooler night air. It's the same reaction I get every time he touches me.

He notices and wraps his arms around me, drawing me close and sharing his body heat. Of course, I can feel his hard erection pressed firmly between us. It's large and thick, just like the man himself, and I have an incredibly overwhelming urge to explore it—and him—more.

With. My. Tongue.

"Ready to head back?" he asks.

"Sure," I reply, gazing up at his intoxicating gray eyes.

"Come on, Kal," he says, taking my hand once more and whistling for Axl. The puppy appears moments later, his tail wagging happily as he follows his owner away from the old storm shelter. As we walk away, he says, "You know, I'm surprised the storm shelter is so far away from the house. Usually they're a lot closer, aren't they?"

"The story I was told was there used to be an old house back here. It was built in the late eighteen hundreds with the storm shelter being added sometime after. In the nineteen forties, the current house was built, and about a decade after that, the barn. The old house eventually started to fall in on itself and they had it demolished but left the shelter."

"You guys have never had to use it?"

"Nope, never. We've only ever been in there that one day. There's old bedding and a cot, some candles and lanterns down there, as well as questionable canned goods and jugs of water. It's pretty basic."

"Well, I hope you guys never have to use it," he says, sending goosebumps peppering my skin once more. Not



because we'd have to use the old building, but because I'd be more worried about actually getting to it. It's too far for Dad to comfortably walk and we'd only be able to bring a vehicle back so far.

"Me too," I whisper, trying to keep the fear out of my voice.

As we make our way back to the lane, he squeezes my hand. "So, to answer your question," he starts, clearing his throat before he continues. "Do I want to have kids? I'm not certain either way."

His answer surprises me, honestly, because most guys I've known want kids eventually. Andrew wanted them, which was why he was so angry at me for so long, and I think a big reason why he cast me aside so easily at the end.

Leading me toward the wooden swing under the big tree, he asks, "Is there a reason you asked that particular question?" He seems genuinely curious, not like he's worried I'm about to propose marriage and have children. That's a plus.

I shrug my shoulders and watch Axl explore the yard where we sit. "It's a pretty heavy conversation and probably not appropriate for this stage in a relationship."

He meets my gaze. "First off, I'm glad you used the word relationship. I haven't been in one in a very long time, Kal, but if you're willing to try, so am I. I have a lot of heavy shit too." He closes his eyes for a moment, but there's no missing the pain that flashes through them. "A lot of heavy shit, but I know I feel better when I'm with you. You can talk to me about anything. When you're ready. I'm not always good at the people thing, but I'm willing to try. For you."

I nod, my throat thick and tight from the onslaught of emotions. When our eyes meet, I feel the heat clear down to my toes. Leaning forward, I press my lips to his once more, needing that connection. I don't know what it is about Leo Martinez but kissing him is like the oxygen I need to breathe.

The kiss, while starting slow, turns molten in a matter of seconds. His hands are everywhere. My hair, my neck, my back, my waist. His touch is like the accelerant to an already blazing inferno. His lips are like euphoric magic, everything I didn't even know I needed in my life but never want to be without again.

The moment he pulls his lips from mine, I know I need more. "Leo?"

He trails his tongue down my neck, making me gasp. My nipples pebble hard against my bra, my core floods with wetness. "Yes?"

"Will you take me upstairs?"

He pulls back just enough to gaze into my eyes. "You sure?"

"Hell yes."

He moves quickly, placing a hard, chaste kiss on my lips before he stands. He takes my hands, helps me rise from the swing, and then leads me toward the back door. As if suddenly remembering Axl, he stops and turns. The puppy is at our side immediately.

"Shit, I forgot about him."

"It's okay. He can come upstairs. The master bedroom is big."

I let us into the house and chuckle when Axl immediately runs in and starts looking around. "I think he's looking for your dad," Leo whispers.

Making sure the door is locked behind me, I take his hand and quietly lead him through the kitchen and to the stairs in the hallway. I point to the closed door on the right, indicating that's the room my dad uses now. He nods in understanding and moves silently up the old, creaky stairs.

The moment we hit the second floor, I practically drag him into my bedroom, making sure Axl is inside, and close the door securely behind me. I flip the lock, even though I know

my dad won't be coming upstairs. Finally able to take a deep breath, I spin around and lean against the back of my door.

"I have to admit, it's been a really long time since I've had to sneak in—or out—of a girl's bedroom," he quips softly, running his thumb across my collarbone.

"Something tells me you did it a lot back in the day," I murmur with a gasp as he trails his thumb down my shirt to my right nipple and swirls it around the hardened peak.

He flashes me a wolfish grin. "There might have been some bedroom sneaking back in high school."

I throw my arms around his neck, pressing myself against his hard body. "I have no doubt there was," I reply.

Reaching down, he grabs my ass and lifts. My legs automatically wrap around his waist as he carries me over to the bed. Laying me on top of the comforter, he whispers, "This one is my favorite bedroom I've ever snuck into though."

"Mine too," I reply as his mouth crashes down on mine.

His tongue slides inside, licking and tasting mine. My hips rock forward, rubbing against his hard cock and causing a moan of pleasure to slide from my throat. He rips his mouth from mine, those gray eyes dilated and black with desire. "You sure?"

"God, yes. Please, Leo," I plead, knowing it sounds like I'm begging and not caring in the least.

Leo nods subtly before releasing his hold on me. I feel his absence as soon as he stands up but am too transfixed on the sight before me. First thing he does is picks up Axl, who is circling his feet, and places him on the couch. "Stay." The puppy does as instructed, sniffing the couch cushion before spinning around once and getting comfortable against the armrest.

His attention is turned back to me as he slips his flannel shirt off his arms and tosses it on the floor. Then, he reaches behind his neck and pulls his T-shirt over his head in one

quick, fluid motion. It's the first time I get a view of his naked chest, and even though I'm seeing it with only the moon lighting the room, I can tell how magnificent his body is. Hard, chiseled, and with ink on his right pec. My fingers itch to explore his flesh, but something in his eyes has me rooted where I am, watching and waiting.

Leo unlaces his boots, kicking them off and out of the way, before releasing his belt and button. When he lowers his zipper, I swear the entire countryside can hear the bite of the teeth and what it represents. My thighs clench reflexively, and my mouth goes dry. Slowly, as if he knows how much I'm enjoying the show, he pushes his jeans and boxer briefs down his hips and thighs, letting his cock spring free. A small gasp slips from my lips as I take in his considerable size.

He chuckles, stepping out of his jeans and approaching the bed. "Your turn," he says, a hint of challenge in his lust-filled eyes.

I get up, my legs a little shaky, and stand at the end of the bed. He takes my spot and lies back, his hands behind his head and completely naked as if he doesn't have a care in the world. Hell, if I had a body like his, I probably wouldn't have a care in the world either.

Digging deep past the self-consciousness bubbling to the surface, I find my bravado and let it fall into place as I kick off my shoes and remove my socks. Then, reaching for the hem of my fitted work T-shirt, I lift it up and over my head, tossing it off to the side. I remove my jeans next, ever-so-slowly slipping the tight denim down my legs with a little extra shimmy he seems to appreciate. Now, I'm left standing in my red satin and lace bra and matching panties. I didn't think I'd be showing them off tonight when I dressed earlier, but I'm sure as hell glad I picked one of my sexiest sets to wear.

"Jesus," he groans, running his hand down his face as he continues to gawk at me. "You are the most beautiful woman I've ever seen."

“Your flattery isn’t necessary, but it’s definitely appreciated,” I tease with a wink.

“Found your tattoos,” he says, staring at the small colorful butterfly just above my panty line on my lower left stomach and the horse head over my heart. He makes a twirling motion with his finger. “Turn around.”

I do as told, slowly moving until he has a full view of my backside.

“Fuck me,” he groans.

Glancing over my shoulder, I watch as he devours me with his eyes. It’s a pretty heady feeling, knowing I’m driving him as wild as he drives me. He reaches down and grips his cock, squeezing and stroking it. Beads of moisture appear on the head and make my mouth water to taste.

“As much as I’d love to just lie here and enjoy one hell of a view, I think you should remove the rest of that sexy as fuck lingerie and sit on my face.”

A whimper fills the room, one that came from me. I return to face him and release the clasp of my bra, letting the red material spill down my arms. When it’s lying on the floor, I slip my fingers beneath the waistband of my panties and carefully slide them down my body. Once they join the rest of my clothes, I stand tall and proud, letting him drink his fill.

“You’re so fucking beautiful. Come ’ere.”

I head toward him, stopping in front of my nightstand to retrieve a condom. A few days ago, I picked up a small box when I was out of town, hoping I might actually have a reason to use them. Of course, Leo was the one and only reason why I felt the need to buy them. I know guys usually make sure they have them, but you never know. Tossing the protection on the bed beside him, I climb onto the mattress.

“I have two in my wallet,” he says. As I move to straddle his hips, he trails a finger over the butterfly tattoo on my hip. “I’m going to ask about your tattoos, but not now. Now, I eat.”

Suddenly, I'm being lifted as if I weigh nothing. Leo positions me above his face, my knees brushing against the stubble on his cheeks. He grips my ass in his big hands, lifts his face to meet me, and licks.

A groan fills the room as pleasure courses through my blood.

"You taste like pure heaven dipped in sugar and honey, Kal," he mutters before licking my swollen clit once more.

My brain wants to say something, but the moment his lips latch on to my clit, all ability to speak flees. All I can do is feel. I grip the old headboard and hold on tight as Leo demonstrates how magnificent he is with his mouth. He licks, sucks, and fucks me with his tongue, driving me closer to ecstasy. It takes only minutes before I'm there, teetering on the edge of bliss, the orgasm looming, coiling tightly and ready to explode.

My hips rock on their own as I seek out more of that amazing friction. My thighs burn from a combination of rubbing against his stubble and using muscles I rarely use, but neither are a good enough reason to stop. Not when it feels so damn good.

"Come on my face, Kallie. I want to taste you all over my tongue," he demands.

The moment he latches on to my clit and sucks it hard into his mouth, I explode into a million pieces, shattering like china on a concrete floor. I lean forward, riding waves of pleasure so intense, it makes it hard to breathe.

"Mmm," he mutters against my flesh, sending shock waves of rapture through my numb limbs. "Divine," he adds, turning his head and placing open-mouthed kisses on my thigh. As he trails his tongue across my sore flesh, a fresh surge of adrenaline settles in.

I'm moving, the hunger to feel him inside of me so intense, I wonder if I could actually die if I don't get what I crave. I grab the condom and rip it open. Even though I'd love

to feel his hard cock in my hand, taste him on my tongue, it's going to have to wait. Leo holds completely still, his burning eyes watching my every move. Taking his cock in my hand, I feel it flex beneath my touch as a hiss slips through his lips.

Rolling the protection into place, I toss the wrapper on the floor and swing my leg over his lap, setting my hands on his chest. My fingers dance along the sets of numbers printed on his flesh. Even though I have no idea what they mean, it's a beautiful tattoo. Simple and unique.

Gripping his cock in my hand once more, I line it up with my entrance. Just before I start to lower myself onto him, he reaches out and strokes my jaw with his rough hand. "Are you sure?"

Instead of answering him with words, I move, taking him slow and deep. The stretch is intense, and as much as I try to relax to accommodate his size, it's difficult. Leo reaches up and pulls me down, claiming my mouth with his. The kiss is leisurely, his tongue gentle as it caresses mine. I feel myself starting to relax, letting the tender movement of his lips do exactly as he intended for them to do.

When he's completely seated inside me, I feel him tense. "Christ, Kallie. It's never felt this good before," he whispers, gritting his teeth and closing his eyes.

Placing my hands on his chest, I push up, returning to my previous position, and start to move. My pace is slow at first, but with his hands on my hips, helping guide my movements, it starts to quicken. Desire and lust swirl together like a tornado, touching down in every part of my body.

He reaches up and places his hand behind my neck. This thumb slides along my flesh, causing my nipples to pebble even harder. I never knew a simple touch could feel so good, so right. He continues to explore as my hips gyrate faster. The tip of his thumb glides across my bottom lip, and all I can think about is taking it in my mouth. So I do. I lick the pad before wrapping my mouth around it and sucking hard.

Leo responds with a groan, his cock thickening even more. "That's the sexiest thing I've ever seen," he mutters, his eyes transfixed on my mouth.

I pause and release my hold on him, just long enough to say, "Next, it will be your cock."

His other hand grips my hip, his fingers digging into my flesh painfully, but I don't care. I latch back onto his thumb as he thrusts up, burying himself to the hilt. He reaches that pleasurable spot deep inside me, causing me to cry out. Over and over, he moves his hips until I'm there, ready to orgasm for a second time.

With his thumb still in my mouth, he meets my gaze and whispers, "Let go, Kallie."

I do.

I come so hard, white light fills the room.

My orgasm triggers his own as his fingers flex once more into my flesh and he pistons his hips up, holding completely still for several seconds as he moans the start of his release. With small pumps, he rides it out before my body falls limp against his. We're both panting and sweaty, our limbs as tangled as the bedding we lie on.

"Hell, woman. I think you killed me," Leo mutters, turning his head to the side and running his nose along my hairline.

A giggle spills from my lips. "Best way to go."

He snorts a laugh and tightens his arms around me, kissing my forehead as he sighs. "You got that right, Kal."



# Chapter Sixteen

## *Leo*

She takes my breath away.

Literally and figuratively.

Right now, it's the most comfortable and natural feeling in the world to just lie here, holding her against me, my cock still nestled in her warm pussy. The fact she took complete control earlier was something I'll never forget, let alone the explosive outcome. I've had good sex before, but this? This was so far past good, a word hasn't even been invented yet.

"I should go take care of the condom, but I really don't want to move," I mutter, my eyelids heavy and wanting to close.

"I need to get up too," she whispers with a sigh, making no move either.

"I'll get you a cloth to clean up with," I insist, placing another kiss on her forehead and turning us onto the side so I can slide out of her body.

"Thank you for the offer, but I still should get up." I can see a hint of embarrassment on her face, but before I can say anything, she sits up straight, those glorious tits of hers on full display, as she adds, "I need to use the restroom after sex. I was plagued with chronic bladder infections when I was younger, and one of the things they drilled into my head as a teenager was to always pee after sex."

Cradling her jaw in my hand, I reply, "Well, you better go first then to take care of business."

She flashes me a quick smile, leans forward and presses her lips to my own, and jumps up from the bed, giving me a full view of her delectable ass as she walks away. I lean back, hands behind my head, and just enjoy.

Fuck, she's breathtaking.

A whimper draws my attention, and I glance to the couch. Axl is awake, those sad puppy eyes aimed right at me, most likely because he's not used to not lying without me in bed. "Sorry, buddy, but if you were in my shoes, you'd understand," I say, climbing up from Kallie's comfortable bed and stretching my arms over my head.

I'm able to really take in her bedroom for the first time. It's a big room, spanning from one side of the house to the other. There are two doors, one for an en suite bathroom, since she disappeared in there a few moments ago, and what I'm assuming is a closet. There's an older couch and table along the outside wall, as well as a handful of bookshelves filled with paperbacks, hardbacks, and picture frames.

As much as I want to go check out the photos, I need to take care of the condom. I spot a box of Kleenex on her nightstand, so I grab two tissues and use them to wrap up the rubber, tossing it in the trash can beneath the small square table. Then, I retrieve the wrapper pieces and throw them both in the garbage as well.

The door opens and lights spill into the bedroom, illuminating Kallie's naked body with an angelic glow that goes straight to my dick. Her ponytail is askew, her long black hair spilling haphazardly from the elastic band. Even in the darkness, I can see the flush on her skin from the sex and the redness marking her thighs from my jaw.

That makes me smile.

"You're up," she announces, heading my way. The moment she passes me, she swats at my bare ass. "Ouch! Jesus, is that thing made out of titanium or what?"

When I spin around, chuckling, she's standing behind me, shaking her hand. "Took years of work to get an ass this sweet, darlin'." With a wink, I head to the bathroom to clean up a little.

As I'm washing my hands, I wonder what happens next. The logical thing is for me to leave. I have Axl, for one. Two, I haven't slept in someone else's house—besides my parents' for a short time—since I got home from the military. The nightmares cause enough anxiety, and I've always been terrified to see what would happen if one started while I had company. That's the main reason I've never invited anyone to stay at my place, nor have I ever spent the whole night at someone else's. It was never worth the worry and fear.

But the thought of leaving Kallie's now doesn't sit well with me either. For once, I want to stay, to hold someone in my arms and fall asleep together. For the first time in my life, I don't want to just cut and run. I want to see what happens next, after the sex.

After drying my hands, I decide to go back in there and see what she thinks. If she wants me to go, I will with no complaints. This is her house—well, the one she shares with her dad. I'm sure that adds a layer of awkwardness, knowing he's downstairs. If she's dressed when I step out of here, I'll definitely throw on my clothes and make a quiet exit.

But when I open the door, the sight before me stops me in my tracks. She's not dressed and waiting for me to do the same. She's lying in her bed, still naked by the looks of it, and has Axl curled up against her. "I hope you don't mind I brought him over here. He was whining."

"Of course he was." I sigh, heading to where she lies. "He manipulated you."

She feigns shock. "He wouldn't do such a thing. He was sad and alone over on the couch."

I snort a laugh and sit on the bed. "It's okay. He totally manipulates me all the time. It's the eyes," I confess, reaching over and stroking his belly. I'm pretty sure he smiles at me.

When I don't move to join her, she asks, "Are you coming to bed?"

I meet her gaze and run my fingertips up her bare arm. "I wasn't sure what the plan was."

"Well, the plan is for you to get into bed with me."

"I don't have to stay," I toss out there, giving her an out if she wants it.

"Do you not want to?" she asks, suddenly nervous as she sits up.

"No," I reply instantly. "I want to." And I do. I didn't realize how much I really wanted to stay with her tonight until this very moment.

She flashes me a grateful little grin and slides over. Well, as far as she can move, considering Axl has claimed a big part of the bed as his own.

I slip beneath the comforter and sheet to join her and move in behind her. She's lying on her side, my front to her back. I drape an arm over her hip and slide the other one under her neck. "I do have to get up early in the morning for work. I'll set an alarm on my cell phone." *Wherever in the hell that is*, I think to myself. I don't tell her I probably don't need it. I'll be too afraid of having a nightmare to get any ounce of decent sleep tonight.

"Dad usually gets up around six thirty," she says through a yawn.

"Well, I'll be out of here by six. I'll have to run home, shower, and take care of Axl before I head into work at seven."

"Okay," she replies through another yawn.

"Sleep, Kallie," I instruct softly, leaning forward and placing a kiss on her temple.

"Good night, Leo."

"Night, Kal."

I try to relax, but it's hard. I'm in a new place and Kallie's naked ass is pressed against my cock, who apparently thinks it's time for round two. Instead of showering him with the

attention he thinks he needs, I focus on the sound of her breathing and on the softness of her skin. After several minutes, a gentle snore echoes through the room, but it's not hers.

It's Axl.

"Leo?"

"Hmm?" I mutter, shifting my head so my nose is buried in her hair. It smells amazing, like fruit and cleanliness.

"You know earlier, when I mentioned Andrew?"

I have to force myself to remain completely still and to not react in any way. "Yes."

She sighs deeply and snuggles against my arm. "Well, we dated for a while back when I lived in Cincinnati. It was serious, or so I thought. We lived together for about a year in a small apartment in a nice neighborhood.

"One day on my day off, I was home cleaning the apartment. I hadn't been feeling well all day, but I knew I was going to be on three days in a row, so I forced myself to keep working. Eventually, the pain got so intense, I called my friend and coworker, Jill. She came over right away and took me to the hospital. I tried to get ahold of Andrew, but he was in a meeting and wasn't to be disturbed."

Her fingers brush across my arm, and I notice how hurried her movements get as her story continues, as if she's getting anxious just thinking about it. "The ER doc was worried my appendix was bursting, even though the pain wasn't in the right spot. When that came back normal, they ran more blood work and determined I was pregnant. They brought in an ultrasound machine, even though they assumed I was having a miscarriage. Turns out, it was an ectopic pregnancy."

"What's that?" I ask.

"To be blunt, it's when the fertilized egg doesn't make it down to the uterus. Instead, it attaches in the fallopian tube.

It's extremely dangerous because the tube can rupture." She takes a deep, cleansing breath. "That's what happened to me. When they realized my tube was rupturing, I was rushed to surgery immediately. When I woke, Andrew was there, but he was distant and quiet. I thought he was just processing everything, but the next day, he seemed so...mad.

"Turns out, he blamed me for losing the baby. He told me he immediately wanted to try again, even though we weren't trying the first time, and I just remember feeling so confused. I was still in pain from the surgery, in shock from losing a fallopian tube, and now he was insisting we have a baby. I mean, we hadn't really talked much about it at that point, and here he was basically demanding we have a baby."

My body is completely rigid as I listen to her recount her past, the pain and sorrow so evident in her voice, it makes me angry.

"I told him I wasn't physically or emotionally ready for that, but he just kept insisting. A month later, I got the call about my dad's accident. When I was packing to come here, Andrew didn't show any emotion or offer to come with me. We broke up a few days later when I called him with an update, and he told me he was busy at work and couldn't talk. That's when I knew it was over. I went back to Cincinnati that next weekend, quit my job as a nurse at a hospital, packed up all of my personal belongings from our shared apartment, and moved here to care for my dad. Andrew never showed up the day I moved out, and a mutual friend told me he was dating someone practically immediately and moved her into the apartment. They married a few weeks later and were expecting a baby soon after."

"Jesus," I mutter, holding her tightly against my body without even realizing I was doing it. The need to protect her is so fierce, it's almost overwhelming, and I'm not sure what to make of it. "Now I really do hate him."

She snickers and glances over her shoulder, meeting my gaze. "I'm not much of a fan either, but over time, my anger

toward him faded. Now, I'm just sorry I gave him the time I did, even if most of it wasn't bad."

"Well, I'm sorry he was such a dick, but in a way, I'm not sorry he's a jackass, because it led you here."

*To me.*

But I don't say that part. It's way too soon and there's still so much to eventually talk about. All the things jumbled in my own head, the things I try to bury but always end of bubbling to the surface anyway.

Suddenly, I'm overcome with too many emotions. Sadness for what she's gone through, pain that I continue to struggle with my own demons, and elation that through the crap, we're still here together.

Desire consumes me so fast; all I can think about is how good she makes me feel. How the gorgeous bartender I met only weeks ago now consumes my every thought. Her smile lights up the world on the darkest days and her laugh is a soothing balm to my scarred soul. The thought of not having her in my arms, in my life, hurts on a level I didn't anticipate, and as scary as that thought is, I won't hide from it. I can't.

Rolling us both over, I cover her body with my own, tenderly taking her lips with mine. Her legs wrap around my hips, my cock already nudging at her wet pussy. Kallie grips my shoulders, her fingernails digging ever so gently into my flesh. It's a bite I revel in, letting the sting fuel me. I move only long enough to grab another condom out of the drawer and cover my erection. When she's back in my arms, I stare into those dark eyes and whisper, "I'm going to make you forget everything about him."

Her eyes are misty as she gazes up at me. "As long as I'm with you, I've already forgotten."

With that, I push home, filling her completely.

Home.

That's how it feels to be with her, and there's no place I'd rather be.



A noise pulls me from the most restful night of sleep I've ever had—at least in the last couple of years. My eyes open and it only takes a few seconds to remember where I am. I'm in Kallie's room, her naked body curled against mine as she sleeps peacefully.

Realization hits me hard.

I stayed and didn't have a single nightmare. In fact, my night was the complete opposite of what I expected. I was able to secure about five hours of solid, deep sleep, and that's no doubt thanks to the woman in my arms. Instead of the usual fitful night of tossing and turning, I slept soundly and am waking refreshed.

I hear the noise once more, which is followed immediately by a wet tongue across my cheek. Axl is there, his big eyes wide with happiness and worry as he leans in and sticks his nose against my neck and whimpers. "Shit," I mutter, throwing the comforter off me and carefully getting up. "Sorry, buddy. Let's go."

He waits eagerly for me to help him off the bed before running over to wait by the door. I grab my jeans and slip them on, glancing at my watch. It's almost five thirty. I reach for my shirt, but Axl whimpers and I know he's going to have an accident if I don't hurry. Forgoing my shirt and socks, I hurry to the door and slowly pull it open. As soon as I do, Axl darts out, hitting the stairs with a flurry. I quietly follow behind, doing everything I can not to wake anyone in the house.

I walk through the somewhat dark kitchen, grateful for the light above the sink, and head straight for the back door. After unlocking it, I open the door and let Axl go first. He runs



straight to the grass and does his business, a look of relief washing over his face, while I wait for him on the walkway. The early morning air is cool against my skin, and all I can think about is getting back to bed with Kallie, even though my time with her is nearing an end this morning. I need to leave by six, which only gives me a handful of minutes to wake her up properly before I get ready to leave.

“Come on,” I state once he’s finished, my hands shoved in my pockets, and return to the door. My toes are numb against the cold concrete and I’m really wishing I would have taken the time to at least grab my flannel. “Be quiet, buddy. We need to head back upstairs and get ready to go, okay?”

I silently step inside the house, relocking the door behind me, and enter the kitchen. Suddenly, I stop in my tracks, Axl eagerly running straight to the table. Or specifically, to the man sitting at the table. My heart starts to pound in my chest like a teenage boy busted for breaking curfew.

Or maybe for sneaking out of his girlfriend’s window late one night.

Al reaches down and pets Axl before lifting his gaze and smiling up at me. “Well, good morning, Leo. Fancy seeing you in my kitchen this early in the morning, and without a shirt even.”

I swallow hard and drop my head in embarrassment. “Good morning, sir. Can we pretend this didn’t happen?”

He chuckles. “You mean pretend I didn’t find you standing in my kitchen in the wee hours of the morning, wearing only a pair of pants? No, I don’t think I can overlook this. Have a seat.”

# Chapter Seventeen

## *Kallie*

I slowly rouse from an amazing deep sleep, stretching my naked body beneath the blankets. Muscles I didn't even realize I possess are aching, especially the ones between my legs. That area is deliciously sore, which brings a smile to my face.

Until I realize I'm alone.

I sit up, letting the blankets fall to my waist and glance around the room. Leo's boots are still on the floor, as are his flannel and T-shirt. Listening closely, I don't hear any sound in the bathroom, and since there is no light spilling from beneath the door, I assume he's not in there, which means only one thing.

He went downstairs.

Picking up the flannel, I slip it on and secure a few buttons so the shirt isn't gaping. Then, I tiptoe to the bedroom door and pull it open. Not hearing anything, I silently move to the stairs and start to descend. Just when I'm about to the bottom, I hear something and stop. Is that... laughter?

Quickening my pace, I reach the floor, move through the dining room, and round the corner, coming to a complete stop in the kitchen entrance.

"Good morning," my dad greets cheerfully, bringing his mug to his mouth. After he takes a sip, he asks, "Coffee?"

My wide eyes jump to the man sitting across from him. Leo's shirtless, sipping his own cup of coffee, completely relaxed. I don't know whether to smack him or kiss him senseless, but when he glances down at my bare legs and to the flannel that hits me mid-thigh, and his eyes light up with

humor, I'm leaning toward the former. "Your dad and I were just discussing breakfast food."

I walk to the coffee pot and pour myself a cup, adding a bit of caramel creamer before turning around. "Breakfast food?"

Dad holds up his mug in a salute. "Leo prefers sausage over bacon too. He can stay."

Jesus, I almost spit out my coffee. Hot liquid goes down the wrong pipe and I end up choking on it instead.

Dad's eyebrows draw together, humor written all over his face. "You okay?"

"Fine," I sputter, trying to clear the coffee from my lungs. "Just fine," I add with a grumble, wishing I had grabbed a damn pair of pants before traipsing down the stairs to find Leo. Now, here I stand, in my kitchen, wearing his shirt and chastising myself for not at least slipping on a bra and pair of panties.

"Well, I need to get home and get ready for work. Thanks for the coffee, Al," Leo announces, standing up and stretching his arms over his head, as if he doesn't have a care in the world.

"Anytime, Leo. Come back anytime," Dad replies with a knowing grin.

It's at that point I almost die of embarrassment. What I wouldn't give for the floor to open up and swallow me whole.

"Good morning, Kallie," he says softly as he steps up beside me. Leo places a kiss on my lips and whispers, "You can keep the shirt."

I whimper in mortification, while my dad chuckles. Clearly his hearing is in tip-top shape.

Swell.

As Leo disappears to head back upstairs, I glance down at Axl, who is loving the attention from my dad this morning.

“I’m just gonna...” I stammer, pointing up. Then, I hightail it out of the kitchen, putting as much distance between myself and my dad as humanly possible.

When I practically stumble into my bedroom and shut the door behind me, my eyes are immediately drawn to the sexy man slipping his T-shirt over his head, his feet already covered in his boots. He flashes me a wide grin, which only fuels my embarrassment even more. “This isn’t funny.”

He chuckles. “It’s a little funny.”

“It’s not,” I groan, walking over and dramatically tossing myself down on my bed. “It’s the most humiliating thing to ever happen. Not only does my dad know you spent the night, but we both came downstairs practically naked.”

That gorgeous smile is back as he approaches me. He places his hands on the bed and leans over. “Yeah, that wasn’t ideal. I thought for sure I was about to get a lecture about my intentions with his daughter. Instead, he made a pot of coffee and asked me about my preferred breakfast foods. It felt like a test.”

Closing my eyes for a brief moment, I shake my head. “Oh, it was. Apparently, you passed though.”

“With flying colors, baby,” he boasts proudly before placing his lips against mine. “I have to go. What time should I pick you up tonight?” he asks, referring to our first official date.

“You decide. I’m off, so I can be ready anytime.”

He nibbles on the corner of my mouth with his lips. “How about six?”

“Mmm,” I reply as his mouth slowly trails across my jaw and down my neck.

His hand moves, his finger gliding across my exposed collarbone. “I think you should wear my shirt again later tonight. I look forward to taking it off you.”

“Later?”

“Yeah. Your dad offered to watch Axl for us,” Leo announces. “He said he’ll help make breakfast in the morning since he’ll have a little more notice to the fact he has company.”

A groan falls from my mouth as I bring a hand up to cover my face. “Oh my God, seriously? Could this be any more embarrassing?”

He openly laughs at my mortification. “I imagine it could be, yes. Look at it this way, at least your dad likes me. He could be pissed he found a half-naked man in his kitchen at five thirty in the morning, clearly having slipped out of his daughter’s bedroom.”

I peek from behind my hand. “I suppose that’s true.”

This time, his kiss is slow and leisurely as he devours my mouth with his own. “I’m going to leave right this second, or I’ll strip you naked and fuck you until Wednesday.”

A whimper vibrates at the back of my throat. “I like that plan,” I mutter, a little dazed from his kisses and the desire they stir to life.

With a smile, he places one more hard kiss against my lips and stands up. His erection is strained against his jeans, and all I can think about is wrapping my hand around it as I guide it toward my mouth.

“Stop it.”

I glance up, meeting his hungry gaze. “What?” I ask innocently.

He barks out a laugh. “Don’t play coy with me, vixen. You were thinking very dirty thoughts.”

I bat my eyelashes at him and smile sweetly. “I was. I was thinking about sucking your co—”

“Stop,” he interrupts, his voice hoarse. “If you say one more word, I’ll be locking that door and fucking you hard, my job be damned.”

I wait for several seconds before whispering, “Cock.”

Leo closes his eyes and shakes his head. “Fuck, Kallie, you’re evil.”

“Just giving you something to look forward to.”

“Oh, I’m definitely looking forward to it. I’ll be hard all damn day,” he grumbles, placing one more kiss on my lips before standing up and walking to the door. “I’ll be here at six.”

“Can’t wait.”

Just before he exits the room, he stops and glances back. “Oh, and Kallie? Don’t you dare touch yourself before tonight.”

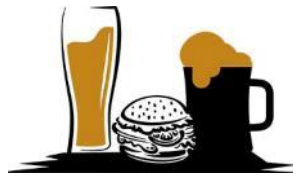
I slowly sit up, letting the collar of the flannel fall open on one shoulder. “I make no promises.”

His nostrils flare, but I know it’s not from anger. He’s point five seconds away from stomping back into my bedroom and ripping the shirt from my body. “See you tonight, Leo,” I add sweetly.

Holding my gaze, he reaches down and adjusts his erection. “I’ll make you pay for that,” he quips, having no heat behind his threat.

“I look forward to it.”

And I do. I can’t wait until later tonight.



“Your server will be with you in a few moments,” the hostess says, as she places a basket of warm tortilla chips and homemade salsa on our table.

“Thank you,” I reply with a smile and flip open the menu. “How was work?”

“Not bad.” He reaches for a chip and dips it in the salsa. “Busy, but it is every day. How’s everything at the farm?”

“Good. Morris was there today, so I worked on mucking stalls while he worked with the horses. He asked if you were going to ride Bud again,” I tell him, making my entrée decision and then diving into the chips and salsa.

“He did?”

“Yep. Said he’s seen solid improvements in Bud’s demeanor since you rode him. He said Bud didn’t pull against him once today when he was working with him.”

Leo nods. “Good. I thought I could stop by and ride him again this weekend, if it works with your schedule.”

“Of course,” I reply instantly. First off, it’s great for Bud, but the main reason is because I really like having him around. “I work both Saturday and Sunday evenings, but I’ll be home during the day.”

Just as he goes to reply, a couple who looks vaguely familiar walks up to the table. “Pardon us for interrupting,” the woman says, offering Leo a warm smile. “We just wanted to say hello and ask about your mom, Leo. How is she feeling?”

“She’s doing all right, Mrs. Trammen. Improving every day.”

The woman seems visibly relieved, bringing her hands up to cover her heart. “Oh, I’m so happy to hear that. We pray for her every Sunday in church.”

“We all appreciate it,” he replies, fidgeting with his menu.

“If they need anything, please let us know. The Ladies Aid at church would be happy to prepare meals again at any time.”

“Thank you for the offer. I’ll let Dad know.” Even though he’s polite, I can hear the faintest edge in his voice. Adding in

the way his entire body is rigid confirms he doesn't like talking about his mom's sickness.

"Have a good evening," she says with a warm smile before walking away, her husband right behind her.

After a couple of seconds, he mutters, "Sorry about that."

I dip a chip in the salsa, refraining from reaching over and grabbing his hand. Something tells me he doesn't want that type of attention or pity, and the last thing I want is to make him uncomfortable. "Don't apologize." Taking a deep breath, I add, "I'm glad your mom is doing okay."

He exhales loudly, jabbing his chip in the tomato mixture with a little extra force. "Thanks."

Deciding to ignore that niggling feeling of worry, I reach across the booth and place my hand on his. He pauses, his eyes glued to the place I touch him, until he finally lets out a long sigh. "Sorry, I'm not trying to be short. It's just, well, I don't like talking about my mom. Even though I'm grateful so many people ask and care, it's that constant reminder she's not the Wonder Woman I thought she was when I was young. She could do anything. She was the strongest, toughest person I knew, and then when I came home, she was so...sick. It's been...hard."

I squeeze his hand in silent support. "I remember your mom. She was always smiling."

He nods, a soft grin on his face. "She was. She still does," he says, picking at the corner of his napkin with his unoccupied hand. "She smiles all the damn time. Even when it hurts."

"She's a strong woman."

He meets my gaze, his gray eyes full of emotion. "She wants to officially meet you."

My heart skips a beat in my chest at the thought. "Yeah?"



He nods, his eyes scanning the menu for a brief moment. "Yeah."

Feeling like I need to address the elephant in the room, I reply, "Well, I look forward to it whenever. I know we're nothing official and probably not to the point of meeting parents. Though, I suppose that's not entirely accurate, considering you had coffee with my dad this morning." I add in an awkward chuckle and reach for a chip to shove in my mouth.

"Hey." When I glance up, he continues. "First off, I wouldn't have brought up her wanting to meet you if I wasn't okay with it. Actually, the more I think about it, the more okay I get. I've never taken a woman home to meet my parents, Kallie. Not past the typical high school girlfriend BS. When I enlisted, I kept my focus on my job. I dated, but it was never anything serious. Then, when I got home, well, I wasn't in the right place to date. Some stuff happened and my mom was sick, and women were the last thing on my mind."

He takes a deep breath, reaches for my hand, and meets my wide eyes. "When I met you at the wedding, I wasn't looking for anything. In fact, I kept telling myself to stay away from you, even though I was really fucking attracted. Since that day, you're all I've thought of and I've quickly come to terms with the fact I might not be ready or right for a relationship, but I want to try.

"So, if we need to put a label on this, then that's what we'll do. I'd like to date you, exclusively, because the thought of sharing you with anyone else makes me a little ragey. I want to keep spending more time with you, getting to know you, and yes, I'd like you to meet my parents. They're completely nuts though, and I have to warn you, by doing so, they'll probably jump four stages ahead and have a wedding and grandbabies planned before you even leave. You'll probably drop me like yesterday's trash and run away screaming."

I blink several times, trying to clear the moisture out of my eyes. A sudden onslaught of emotions has me on the verge of tears, and I don't even really know why. I guess it's because no one has ever spoken so candidly and beautifully to me, certainly not Andrew, even though he said some pretty nice things to me in the beginning. But Leo's words are raw. They're heartfelt and hold no punches when it comes to what's on his mind and in his heart.

"Sorry to keep you waiting," a polite server says as he approaches our table. "Can I get you two something to drink?"

Leo smiles from across the table as I try to focus on the question asked. "Umm, water please."

"I'll have the same," he replies.

"Are you guys ready to order, or do you need a few minutes?" the server asks.

"Go ahead and give us a few minutes, please," Leo responds. When we're left alone once more, he adds, "Sorry to just dump all of that on you."

"It's okay," I state, reaching for his hand and entwining our fingers. "I'm glad you did. I'd rather you just be straight with me, always."

He nods. "I will."

"And I always will too. So, to comment on what you said, yes, I'd love to meet your family. I'm glad what we have is exclusive, because I'd probably hurt a bitch for touching you, and I don't need a label. As long as we're both on the same page, that's all I need moving forward."

Leo leans forward and places his lips against my knuckles. The action causes lightning to zip through my veins and land squarely between my thighs. I'm already wet and achy, much like I've been all day in anticipation of this evening. "Kallie?" he whispers, his eyes suddenly blazing red hot with need.

“Yes?” I murmur, wrapping my fingers around his index finger and gently stroking.

“Did you touch yourself after I left?”

Slowly, I shake my head. “I wanted to, but I didn’t.”

“Why not?”

“Because I wanted to come with you.”

His eyes dilate even more as he swallows hard. “Good girl. For that, I’ll make sure you come no less than three times tonight.”

“Three?” I ask, unable to hide my shock.

“You don’t think I can do it?”

“No, I’m not sure *I* can do it. I’ve only ever had two like maybe twice in my entire life.”

Leo narrows his eyes. “That’s because you’ve been with the wrong guys, Kallie. From now on, you always get two.”

A grin spreads across my lips as my thighs clench together in anticipation. “You’re awfully sure of yourself there, big guy.”

Leaning in even more, he mutters, “Always when it comes to you. I’d give my last breath to ensure you get what you need, Kallie, and by the look in your eyes, I’d say you definitely *need* multiple orgasms.”

“All right, are you ready to order?” the server asks. I’m not sure if I’m disappointed or grateful for his interruption.

Leo grins a wide, natural smile as he sits back in his seat. “Oh, yeah. We’re definitely ready.”

# Chapter Eighteen

## *Leo*

"I'm so excited," Mom announces for the third time since I met her and Dad at their house twenty minutes ago.

We've been talking about this day for the last few weeks, since Kallie and I discussed her meeting my parents. She requested a Sunday off from work so we wouldn't be short on time, and that took a little time to work into the schedule, but here we are, getting ready to officially meet the parents.

We talked about how we wanted to do this. Neither of us preferring the pomp and circumstance of a big ordeal, we opted to have a simple lunch at the farm, catered by the deli. My mom has been asking a lot about the horses, so Kallie suggested they come out for a visit and offered to let them ride.

"You act like you've never been to a horse farm before," I tease, knowing exactly why she's excited.

"Oh, stop," she replies, shaking her head and unable to stop herself from smiling. "I'm excited we're finally getting to meet Kallie."

I try to extend my legs, but there isn't a lot of leg room in the backseat of Mom's car. "You've met her before," I remind her, even though it's been a while.

"Yes, but now she's your girlfriend and that's different."

I don't argue with her because it's true. Bringing my parents over to meet her and Al is a huge step for me. It's different because *she's* different.

"Are you going to ride Bud today?" Dad asks. Over the last couple of weeks, I've told him about Bud and the great strides we've made together in breaking him of his surly

attitude. There've been a couple of times I had to get on him, but when I do, it seems to change his tune for the better.

"I'm not sure," I reply, tapping my hand on my thigh like a fidgety teenager.

"I can't wait to meet him. Maybe someday he'll let me ride him too," Mom says, a glimmer of hope evident in her tired voice.

There's no doubt in my mind Mom would love to ride a horse today, but she's been on the weaker side these last few weeks. Another new bruise appeared on her arm, and despite her telling us she's fine, I can tell it bothers her. Personally, I'm grateful she's chosen to forego the horseback riding. I'd be a nervous wreck the entire time she was on the horse, and there's no way I'd let her near Bud.

Dad pulls into the driveway and follows the lane around the house to the barn. Before we left their house, I suggested he park at the barn. It's closer to the backyard, as well as the pasture where Kallie will have some of the horses.

As soon as he parks, I'm out the back door, anxious to stretch my legs and get out of the car. I've always hated smaller spaces and hate riding in a car even more. I prefer to drive, to be in control of my surroundings.

Shaking off the reason why, I help Mom open the passenger door and hold out my hand. Axl runs over to say hello, after staying here with Kallie and Al to prepare for today's lunch. "Oh, look at those gorgeous horses," Mom says as she climbs from the car. "Axl," she adds, bending down to greet the happy puppy.

"That's Stella, Kallie's favorite horse, and Jasmine. The big white one with the brown mane is Twilight. She's got a crush on Morris," I tell her as Dad meets us at the back of the car.

I look up to see Kallie heading our way, a warm smile on her face. Mom releases her hold on me and walks straight to

the woman who captivates me. “Hello, Mrs. Martinez,” Kallie greets when she reaches my mom.

“Valerie, please. It’s so lovely to finally meet you, Kallie.” Mom reaches for Kallie and pulls her into a big hug. When she pulls back, she adds, “You’re so pretty. I can see why my son is so enthralled with you.”

Kallie blushes a gorgeous shade of red. “Oh. Thank you, Mrs. Martinez.”

“It’s Valerie,” Mom reminds with her ever-present smile.

“Kallie.” Dad walks up and gives her a warm hug. “It’s great to see you again.”

“You as well, Mr. Martinez.”

“What is that crap? It’s Bruno, just like it is at the feed store.”

“Please. We insist,” Mom replies, taking Dad’s offered hand.

“All right,” Kallie says with a nod, finally glancing my way. “Hello.”

I step forward and place a kiss on her cheek, even though I’d much rather claim her lips, but I don’t want to embarrass her any more than necessary. I imagine taking her in my arms and kissing her senseless would do just that.

“Mom, Dad, let’s go see Al,” I state, taking Kallie’s hand and following behind my parents to where Al stands beneath the tree in the backyard.

Even though they know each other already, I make quick introductions before they take a seat in the shade. I lead Kallie to the swing, keeping her hand in mine. I can’t believe how natural it feels to be here, to entwine her family with my own.

My parents and Al immediately fall into conversation, and even though I try to pay attention, my eyes are drawn to the woman beside me. Her long, black hair hangs around her shoulders, and I can’t help but reach out and touch it. The

strands are so soft against my rough fingertips, and I catch a hint of fruit in the air. I have to keep myself from leaning forward, shoving my nose in her hair, and inhaling.

“What?” she asks, meeting my gaze.

“You’re beautiful.”

She smiles widely, clearly pleased by the unexpected compliment. “You’re not so bad yourself.”

“It’s all you, Kal. You’re the beauty to my beast.”

“That was my favorite movie when I was a child,” she says, a far-off look filling her eyes. “My mom and I used to watch it together all the time. She had planned to name her next horse Belle, but she was gone before that happened.”

I squeeze her hand and draw her against my chest, kissing the crown of her head. We sit like that for several minutes, listening to our parents catch up. If she’s embarrassed by my display of affection, she doesn’t show it. If anything, she appears to revel in it, drawing on the comfort my arms provide.

“What do you say we eat?” Al asks, turning to Kallie.

“Sounds good. I’ll grab the food,” she says, releasing my hand and standing up.

“I’ll help.” Following her into the house, we retrieve the sandwiches and sides from the fridge and the basket of utensils and plates from the table. When we reach the picnic table, I set everything down and retrieve drinks from the cooler sitting beside it. Kallie sets out the sandwiches and sides, which includes macaroni salad, potato salad, and fresh fruit. There’s also individual slices of cheesecake for dessert, which I know Kallie specifically asked for when I mentioned it was my mom’s favorite.

The conversation flows effortlessly throughout lunch. Dad and Al discuss the different aspects of the farm, while Mom and Kallie chat about everything and anything under the sun. I jump in from time to time, answering questions and

adding to the discussion, but for the most part, I just sit back and watch.

I'm not going to lie. I was nervous for today. Not because I thought they wouldn't get along, but because this was a first for me and I just wasn't sure what to expect. However, sitting here, watching them eat and talk, I realize I had absolutely nothing to worry about. My parents are enthralled with Kallie—and Al—just like I am. They see her goodness, her light, her beautiful soul the same as I do. And in return, she's making them feel comfortable and welcome.

It's a wonderful sight to see.

So is the realization that I'm falling in love with her.

Scary? Hell, yes. So damn scary, the urge for flight is strong, but then I look into her eyes and the storm raging in my gut seems to calm just a bit.

I'm quiet as lunch is finished, and I can tell by the worried look in Kallie's eyes that she fears something's wrong. It's not. It's the complete opposite. Everything is right. So very fucking right for the first time in...forever.

"Who wants to ride?" Al asks once our lunch mess is cleaned up.

"I wish I could, but I'd better keep two feet on the ground," my mom says with a grin. "I'd be happy to keep you company here."

Al carefully walks over to the chair he normally sits in, while Dad helps my mom sit on the swing off to his left. "I'd love to ride. I haven't been on a horse in years," my dad replies, looking just as eager as he did when he arrived.

"I'll help get you two saddled up," Kallie offers, leading the way to the barn. I can't help but notice Stella and Twilight are already on the move, heading toward the gate at the back of the barn.

I jump in and help, putting Twilight and Jasmine back in their stalls as Kallie preps Stella for riding. When I lead Bud



out, she gives me a look. "I'm not sure how he'll do with having Stella and your dad out there too," she states quietly, a hint of worry in those dark eyes.

"It'll be okay. I've got him, right, Bud?" I ask, patting him on the neck.

The horse seems hesitant, but I just give him a reassuring nod. Going through the steps that I now know by heart; I saddle up the big horse before guiding him outside to the pasture. Just before I mount up, Kallie leads Stella out, my dad proudly sitting in the saddle. I've never seen my dad ride a horse before, but there's an aura of comfort as he takes the reins and walks her into the pasture.

"He told me he's done this before."

I glance over and find Kallie standing beside me. "His grandparents had horses in Mexico. He used to tell stories about riding when he'd visit during the summer."

She nods but keeps her eyes on the rider. "I bet he has stories."

"Days' worth. I'm sure he'd love to share some with you," I tell her.

When she glances up at me, there's that familiar smile on her lips. "I'd love to hear some. Are you two going to be okay over here?"

"Of course," I insist. "You're not going to ride?"

"I thought I'd go sit with your mom for a bit and visit."

Now it's my turn to smile. "She'll love that."

"Holler if you need anything," she says, giving Bud a pat before she closes the gate and leaves us alone.

"All right, Bud, let's go over and see Stella and the old man, shall we?" I approach slowly, giving the big horse time to adjust to another being in the pasture with him. He seems a little hesitant as we move closer, but I make sure to keep

talking to help ensure he stays calm. “Good boy, Bud,” I say as we walk alongside the other.

“Have you told her yet?”

I look at my dad, trying to figure out what he’s talking about. “What? Are you losing it?”

Dad just narrows his eyes. “Of course not. I’m as with it today as I was when I was nineteen.”

I snort out a laugh. “I’m not sure if that’s a good comparison. Weren’t you fired for falling asleep in the back of the job trailer at nineteen?”

Dad shakes his head. “That wasn’t my fault.”

“No? Whose was it?”

“Jack Daniels.”

I bark out a laugh, which startles Bud. He pulls back against the reins and sidesteps, as if wanting to get away from the other horse. I grip the reins with one hand and reach down to gently reassure him with the other.

“You’re good with him,” Dad states when Bud is calmed back down. “I could see the caginess in his eyes. He was ready to bolt.”

“He was the one Al was riding when he was thrown.”

“Ahh, I can see it. A horse like that requires the right person to take control. Looks like you’re that person. I can see the respect when you talk to him. So now back to the other thing. Have you told her?”

I sigh and start to walk Bud clockwise around the pen. As I do, I can’t help but steal a few glances over to the big tree where Al, Kallie, and my mom sit. Kallie is laughing at something my mom says, and even from over here, I can see a glow reflecting from my mom’s eyes I haven’t seen in too long. She looks genuinely happy to be there, chatting with Kallie.

“She’s probably telling her all your embarrassing stories,” Dad states with a humor-laced voice.

“Oh, I’m sure.” I pause for a few moments, circling back to his question from a minute ago. The truth is, I know exactly what he’s talking about, even if I play dumb. “No, I haven’t told her.”

“Are ya gonna?” he asks, keeping his gaze looking forward.

“I—” I start but hesitate. I want to tell him I will, but the truth is much scarier to say aloud than to not say it at all. The fear of rejection is great, and I’m terrified to completely open up to someone. Maybe because my darkness is just that: dark and ugly. That’s why I try to keep it hidden from those around me, and why I don’t particularly welcome newcomers into my small little world or trust very easily.

“I’m not going to tell you what to do, Leo, but I am going to say this. I was dumb a long time ago and let the woman I loved get away. I was a wild young man and didn’t want to be tamed. Well, when I was least expecting it, I fell in love. Of course, like the true idiot I am, I ran away from it instead of facing those feelings head-on. Lost her.”

Honestly, I’m a little taken aback by his admission, mostly because he’s never talked about anyone else besides my mom. The thought of him loving someone else, someone before her, leaves me oddly unsettled. Clearing my throat, I ask, trying to find the relevance, “Uhh, okay, so what happened?”

He stops and faces me. “I married her.” Then, he kicks Stella in the side and takes off at a trot around the large pasture, leaving me sitting there.

Instinct has me looking over to my mom, to the woman who changed my dad’s life. Who grounded him and helped him settle down. My eyes bounce to the woman beside her, to the one who is quickly changing my life too, who makes me

want to be a better person because that's exactly what she deserves.

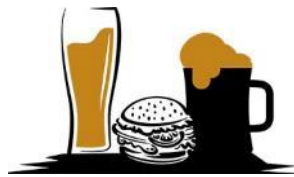
That only means one thing.

I'm going to have to come clean.

I'm going to have to tell her my past.

Recount every dark moment I've tried to bury.

Pray it doesn't pull us both down.



"Today was the best day ever," she whispers, curled against me as we lie together in her bed. Axl is snoring on the couch across the room.

"It was," I agree, running my lips across her bare shoulder. I would never get tired of touching her skin, of feeling it against me.

Kallie moves her fingers across the ink on my left bicep. "Why this?"

Glancing to my side, I see she's referring to the two tattoos on my arm. "The armband was one of those decisions at eighteen. Everyone was getting them, and even though I wasn't one to go with the crowd, a big chunk of the guys who finished boot camp with me all decided to get something. That was my something."

"And the palm tree?"

"My mom," I reply softly. "When I was younger, she used to love taking vacations to the beach. Every time I think of the ocean, I think of her and the way she'd smile. When she was first diagnosed with cancer, I went to a parlor outside of town and had it done."

"It's beautiful," she replies, running her fingers across the tree, the water, sand, and sunset.

She sits up quickly and straddles my lap. My cock, who's taking a small break from recent exertion, is suddenly perking up again and very interested in the naked woman sitting on top of him. "Tell me about this," she says, running her fingers across the numbers on my chest.

I've been waiting for this conversation almost since the moment I started this thing with Kallie, and despite wanting to change the subject to absolutely anything under the sun, I know it's time. It's all I've thought about since earlier this afternoon, when my dad and I were riding horses in the pasture.

I push down the panic and take a deep breath. "I got these not long after I moved back home from the military," I tell her, glancing down at the three sets of ten digits and feeling the pain in my heart at what they represent. "These numbers are DoD identification numbers, or dog tag numbers. They were my friends and teammates."

"Were," she whispers sadly, as she runs her fingers across the black ink. It's not a question.

"Yeah," I state, my throat suddenly dry. "We were in Afghanistan, on our way back to the base from a routine security check, when everything exploded. We hit a roadside bomb. It decimated our Humvee and killed them."

Tears fill her blue eyes as she gazes down at me. "I'm so sorry, Leo."

"I...I still struggle with it sometimes. I close my eyes and I can see them, like it happened yesterday."

"I don't know what to say," she whispers, a single tear falling down her cheek.

Reaching up, I swipe it away with the pad of my thumb. "You don't have to say anything. It's been a long, difficult road over the last three years, but do you know what is finally helping me?"

She shakes her head, that long, raven hair cascading around her bare shoulders and breasts.

Before I can change my mind, I speak the truth.

My truth.

“You, Kallie. You’re helping me.”

# Chapter Nineteen

## *Kallie*

*You're helping me.*

My heart is trying to pound out of my chest as I look down at the man I love. Yes, love. In the last several weeks, I've fallen completely in love with him. He's grumpy and rough around the edges sometimes, but he's also sweet and caring, patient and giving, and right now, I see the pain in his eyes. He's showing me the hurt without giving me the details.

I run my fingers across the series of numbers once more before bending down and placing my lips against them. I can feel his heart pounding beneath my mouth, a heavy, fast beat that makes me a little sad for the pain he's obviously carrying.

Knowing how difficult it was for him to share something hard from his past, I press myself against his chest and slip my arms beneath his neck. It's a simple hug, but it seems to be just what he needs in the moment. He wraps his own arms around me, holding me tightly. He exhales slowly, his warm breath tickling my neck.

When he finally releases me, I sit back up, my fingertips dancing across his incredibly fit chest. "I bet you were hot in your uniform," I quip, trying to lighten the heaviness in the room.

He snickers, the darkness in his eyes seeming to lift immediately. "I had no complaints."

"I'm sure," I say, shifting my hips to rub myself against his quickly hardening cock. "If I were sitting in a bar and you were there, you bet your ass I would have hit on you."

Even though the humor falls away from his face, the fire and desire are still very evident. "If I would have seen you in a bar, you wouldn't have had a chance to hit on me. Darlin', I would have been all over you."

Flexing my fingers into his flesh, I whisper, "And I would have gone home with you."

There's a growl moments before I'm moving, being spun around until I'm flat on my back. He presses me into the mattress, his hard body applying just enough pressure. Meeting my gaze, he says, "You would have been a game changer, Kallie. I didn't date, but if I had met you then, you would have changed everything."

I open my mouth, ready to speak my confession. To tell him I'm falling in love with him. But something holds the words back. Maybe it's because he's already had such a heavy night, sharing a few details of what happened in the military. Something tells me there's more, but he's not ready to talk about it yet, and I won't push him. If there's something I know about pain and grief, it's that it's different for everyone. There's no timeline and the steps can be in any order.

That's why I hold back my truth. I don't want to complicate this moment any more than it already is, especially if he weren't to feel the same.

Hitching my ankles behind his back, the motion causes his erection to hit exactly where I need him most. I whimper as lust swirls in my gut like a tornado.

"Do you like that?" he asks, rocking his hips and grounding his hardness across my clit.

"Yes. More."

"More? Of this?" He pulls back just slightly and presses down, causing the head of his cock to slip inside my body.

We groan in pleasure together, my muscles gripping at him, trying to draw him in. "Yes. This. I need more."

"Let me get a condom," he says, starting to sit up.

"No," I demand, gripping my arms around his neck and holding him in place. When his eyes meet mine, I add, "You said it had been a while, right?"



He visibly swallows hard. “Yeah. I haven’t been with anyone but you since I got home.”

“Well, it had been a while for me too, and since, I’ve been tested. I’m clean.”

His eyes are wide, partly in shock and the other part in anticipation. “Are you saying what I think you’re saying?”

I nod. “Yes. I’m on birth control, even though I probably don’t need it. With losing my fallopian tube and the scar tissue I have from the damage; it wouldn’t be easy for me to conceive. And I’d never trap you like that, Leo, I—”

He cuts me off with a hard kiss. “I trust you,” he confesses, his lips lingering against mine. “I fucking trust you, Kal.”

A tear spills down my face, disappearing into my hair. “I trust you too, Leo.”

There’s so much more left unspoken, but at the moment, nothing else needs to be said. I can see his truth in his eyes and feel it in the words left unsaid. I know his feelings for me match my own, even if neither of us has said it yet.

He gently presses forward, slowly filling me completely. I feel him in every part of my body and soul. It’s a homecoming, like I’ve finally found my other half, the one who was put on this earth for me.

“Home,” he whispers so softly, I wonder if he actually meant to say it out loud. He pulls back and glides back inside me until he’s fully seated inside me. “Home sweet home,” he adds, reaching for my hands and entwining our fingers together above my head.

He moves, rocking his hips over and over. I can feel my body climbing, the pleasure building like a tsunami ready to decimate. His mouth trails across my jaw, his lips kissing and nipping at my skin. He nibbles on my earlobe. The slight pain causing my internal muscles to clench around him.

“God, you feel so fucking good,” he mutters, “but if you do that again, it’s going to be over way before I’m ready.”

“You did that,” I tell him, offering him my ear once more.

Leo runs his nose down the column of my throat before returning his mouth to my ear and biting down a little firmer this time. I cry out, the pleasure almost too much to bear. “You like it a little rough,” he states, lifting my arms up higher, pinning me to the bed. The position leaves me completely vulnerable and exposed, and I find myself holding my breath with anticipation.

He bends down, swirling his tongue across my hard nipple before sucking it deep into his mouth. My body spasms, teetering on the edge of release. When he releases my nipple and poises himself above me, our eyes meet once more and that’s when it happens. That’s when he says, “I’m falling in love with you, Kallie.”

Moisture falls from my eyes as I state my confession. “I’m falling in love with you too.”

His eyes close as if he’s absorbing the words, and when they reopen, there’s a difference. There’s so much emotion in the depths of those gray eyes, it renders me speechless. I can see every bit of the truth in his words and I’ve never felt something so powerful and right in my entire life.

He rolls his hips, making me gasp as euphoria spreads through me like wildfire. He grinds down at the same time, applying pressure to my clit and causing me to explode like a rocket on the Fourth of July. The orgasm consumes me, as waves and waves of pleasure slam down on me like rocks on the shoreline.

Leo stills before letting his own release take control. His hips thrust as he slams into me, muttering my name. I can feel hot liquid coating us, but I don’t care. All I can do is hang on and enjoy the ride.

When he finally stops moving, he falls limp on top of me. The weight of his body is soothing, and even though I can't move, I revel in the feel of him coming completely undone and boneless in the moment. He turns his head, his mouth presses against my throat as he tries to get his breathing under control. "I promised you two."

I crack open my eyes and turn my head. "You've already given me two," I remind, recalling the two orgasms I had just a bit ago, thanks to his stellar mouth and amazing cock.

His tired eyes are laced with contentment. "No, my orgasms come in pairs, Kallie. Two at a time or I didn't do my job."

"I can barely move. I think you did your job just fine," I state, running my hand across his sweaty back.

"Mmm, give me a few minutes and we'll try again."

A bark of laughter slips from my lips. "I don't think I will survive a third, Leo."

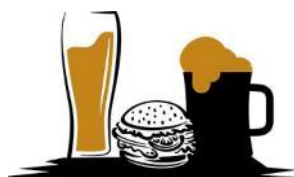
He sighs, turning on his side and taking me with him so we're facing each other, his cock still inside me. "Maybe a nap would be beneficial to both of us," he mumbles, his eyelids growing increasingly heavy.

"Probably," I whisper, slipping my arms around his neck and pulling him close. His head fits perfectly below my jaw, cradled against my throat.

"I should go get a washcloth so we can clean up," he whispers softly, holding me tightly.

"In a minute."

He lets out a deep breath. "Yeah, in a minute."



I'm pulled from sleep by a noise. It's a foreign sound that has me on instant high alert. My eyes are open, staring

up at the ceiling, as the comforter is pulled hard. I sit up and turn, watching in horror as Leo thrashes around. His head is whipping from side to side, his arms trying to move but unable, as if some unseen weight is holding them in place. The bedding is wrapped around his legs, but they don't move either. It appears as if he's pinned to the mattress, and it's terrifying.

"No!" he cries out, his eyes now open. However, they're completely unfocused.

"Leo?" I whisper softly, trying not to make a move to startle him. Axl is up on the couch, spinning in circles and barking aggressively. "Shhh, it's okay, Axl." Then, looking back at the man in my bed, I say his name again, a little louder this time. "Leo? Can you hear me?"

I've heard enough about nightmares to know you never touch someone having one. The last thing I'd want to do is cause him to lash out when he doesn't know what he's doing.

Axl is frantic now, barking and whimpering. He jumps off the couch and runs to the side of the bed, leaping up and trying to get to his owner. "It's okay, buddy," I say softly, climbing from the bed and going over to Axl.

My heart aches as I watch the nightmare unfold. Leo's clearly reliving something painful, his entire body rigid as he moves. "Sully!" he bellows, a pain so raw in his voice it brings tears to my eyes.

I pick up Axl, trying to hold the squirming puppy close to my bare chest. He's anxious to get to his owner though. His nails scratch at my skin as he pulls against me. He's so powerful in his quest to escape, my hold on him loosens and he's able to jump onto the bed.

"No, Axl!" I whisper-yell, trying to get the puppy's attention.

He ignores me completely, running straight to Leo's side. He positions himself against his head, licking his face in an attempt to help. I'm about to reach for him, to pull him

away from his owner so he doesn't get hurt, but then witness Leo start to settle down. His body starts to relax and his head stops moving. His breathing is still extremely labored, but his eyes slowly drift closed. Axl doesn't move, just keeps nudging Leo with his nose and licking his face.

Tears spill from my eyes as I watch the scene before me. How many times has this happened? How many nightmares has he had and Axl was there to somehow soothe and calm him down? My heart breaks for Leo, but I've never been more grateful for the puppy who came into his life than I am right now.

"Good boy, Axl," I say softly, unable to move.

Suddenly, Leo startles awake, his eyes wide in horror as he looks up at the ceiling. His breathing comes in short pants again as Axl curls into his neck and whimpers.

"Leo? Are you all right?" I ask, taking a tentative step forward.

His eyes move, focusing on where I stand beside him. "Kallie?"

"Yeah, it's me. I think...I think you were having a nightmare," I whisper, moisture still slipping from my eyes as I watch the realization set in.

He clears his throat and gingerly lifts an arm, as if testing the heaviness of the limb. When he notices his ability to move, he slowly sits up and kicks the blankets off his legs. Axl gets up too, sitting directly beside him and looking up at his owner with relief in his eyes.

"Do you do that often? Have nightmares, I mean?" I ask hesitantly, still rooted in place.

He sighs and closes his eyes and runs his hands over his face. "Yeah. Not every night, but...often."

Clearing the emotion from my throat, I take a very small step forward and ask, "And does he always do that? Axl, I mean. Does he always comfort you?"

Leo opens his eyes and gazes down at the dog. "Yeah, he does. The first night I had one, he seemed scared when I woke up. I thought I hurt him, but he never seemed scared of me." Gently, he reaches over and pets his dog in appreciation.

Axl moves, climbing on Leo's lap and lying with his head on his thigh. Neither seems to care that Leo's completely naked. They're both drawing comfort from one another in a time when they clearly both need it.

"He was amazing," I whisper, continuing to watch them. "He knew you needed him."

Leo scratches the puppy under the chin and hesitantly looks up at me. His eyes are pained and hold embarrassment. Something tells me he never wanted me to see what I witnessed tonight.

Then his eyes drop to my chest, and they widen with shock. "Holy shit, Kallie. What happened?" he asks, practically jumping from the bed and reaching for me.

I glance down, seeing the three, angry scratch marks and the blood they've created. "Oh," I reply, not even realizing I had been scratched that badly.

"Fuck," Leo states, reaching for the box of tissues on the nightstand. "Axl did this?" he asks, clearly stunned with realization.

"It's okay," I say, reaching for his hand as he applies pressure to the scrapes. "He didn't mean to."

"You're bleeding," he argues unnecessarily.

Grabbing his hand with both of mine, I hold it tightly against me. "It's okay, Leo. He was scared and trying to get to you. He didn't mean to hurt me," I insist, looking over to where Axl sits on my bed. "He didn't mean it," I repeat, hoping he understands.

Leo sighs loudly and closes his eyes. "No, he didn't," he concedes, moving his head forward and resting it against mine. "He'd never knowingly hurt you."

“Or you,” I state, wrapping my arms around his shoulders and holding him tightly. His entire body is covered in sweat, but I don’t care. I just need to feel him against me, to know he’s okay. “He loves you.”

“I know. He’s...he’s helped me. In many ways,” he murmurs softly, his body finally starting to relax once more.

We stand here for several minutes, just breathing each other in and finding every ounce of comfort we can. Axl goes over and lies down on Leo’s pillow, keeping one eye on his owner the entire time. My heart breaks for Leo and the constant reminders he’s having from his time in the military, but I’m so thankful he has Axl to help watch out for him. I don’t think it was an accident that puppy was under the tow truck all those weeks ago. He was put there for one reason and one reason only.

To find Leo.

“I have an idea,” I say softly, running my hands across his muscled shoulders. “Why don’t we go take a shower.”

He leans back and looks down at my scratched chest. “I want to put something on that.”

I nod. “Okay. Let’s shower first and then we can put some ointment on it. Maybe afterward, we’ll be able to get a little more sleep.”

I can tell by the look in his eyes, sleep won’t be finding him again. The clock says it’s just before three, but I doubt that matters to him. To be honest, I’m not sure I’ll be able to fall back asleep either. Not after witnessing his scary nightmare.

Taking his hand, I lead him to the en suite bathroom and turn on the hot water. Once the temperature is warm enough, I slip beneath the spray, gently pulling Leo with me. He closes his eyes, letting the water wash over him and the steam soothe his tired and taut muscles. I lather up my loofa and run it over his skin, wiping away the residual effects of the nightmare. When his body is clean, he takes the loofa from

me and does the same, careful when he reaches my chest and the scratches left by Axl.

When we're both rinsed clean, he turns off the water and grabs a towel, wrapping it around my body. He takes a second one, drying himself off before tying it at his trim waist. I don't think I've ever seen a towel look that good before.

He walks over to the medicine cabinet and pulls out an alcohol pad and tube of antibacterial ointment. I let the towel fall to the floor, not missing the way his eyes heat with desire, but he ignores whatever attraction he's feeling. Instead, he meticulously cleans and treats the scratches, which only bled for a very short time.

He lets his towel fall to the floor as well, takes my hand, and leads me back to the bed. We both ignore the sweaty, messed up bedding, choosing to deal with it in the morning. Right now, I think we both just need to hold each other. At least, I know that's what I crave.

He curls around me, his front pressed to my back, as he wraps his arms around me. "I'm sorry."

"Please don't be sorry," I whisper. "You couldn't control it."

"I know, but still. I hate that I have them."

Needing to see his face, I turn, slipping my leg between his and draping my arms around his torso. "I hate that you have them too. I wish you would have told me, but I understand why you didn't."

He sighs. "I should have. My mom has been on me to tell you."

I can't help but smile. "Your mom is a smart, wonderful woman."

"She is," he agrees, tucking my head beneath his chin. "Try to get some sleep, Kal."

"I will." The lie slips easily from my lips. "You too."



He doesn't reply. We both know he won't be sleeping anymore tonight.

My eyelids grow extremely heavy as I finally find comfort in his arms. A few minutes ago, I never would have thought I'd fall back asleep, but now that the adrenaline has worn off and I know he's okay, I feel sleep starting to claim me, but not before I hang on a little tighter to the man in my arms.

Something tells me, I'll remember this night for a very long time.

Maybe even forever.

# Chapter Twenty

*Leo*

I've been avoiding her.

All week, I've found every excuse under the sun to stay away from Kallie. Every time I think about the nightmare I had and recall the fear written all over her beautiful face, I get angry. Embarrassed. That was exactly why I made sure I never stayed over at someone's house. I didn't want anyone to witness one of the most humiliating moments of my life. I didn't want them to know how fucked up I am.

Well, she saw, and I'll never forget the look in her eyes and the tears on her face.

Since, I've made sure to work extra hours, especially on the nights she was off from the bar. When she was at the restaurant, I could give her the excuse about needing to go in early and wanting to go home to sleep. She didn't buy it, of course. I could see it in her eyes, but she's never called me on my lies. Instead, she just nodded in understanding and watched me leave.

Guilt nips at my heels. I need to talk to her, but I'm afraid. Yes, me. The man who has stared down the barrel of rifles too many times to count, who has jumped into danger without thinking of the consequences, is afraid. Terrified of the feelings I have for her, because they're so fucking strong, they're almost suffocating. Terrified I'm going to drag her down with me, because despite the light and goodness she possesses, I know I'm not the same. I'm too dark. Too broken.

I haven't spent the night with her since Sunday. Five whole nights of sleeping in my own bed, alone and cold, when I'd much rather be with her. But I can't risk another nightmare. What if I hurt her? What if I somehow injure her when I'm not lucid enough to stop myself? I'd never be able to

live with myself if that happened, which is why I've stayed away this week.

Now, as I get ready for work on Saturday morning, my mind automatically goes to her, as it always does. I know she worked last night and is probably still sleeping. We exchanged a few texts early in the day yesterday, but none since, and I know that's my fault.

"Let's go, Axl," I holler, filling my travel mug with strong, black coffee.

He's already at the door, waiting. I step outside, letting the warm late spring sun warm my skin as I head to my truck. Axl runs over to the grass and pees before joining me, anxious for me to pick him up and put him inside. He's growing fast but isn't quite big enough to jump up in the truck yet. I know it won't be long though.

I crank up the classic rock song on the radio as I drive, rolling down the windows and letting the wind therapy clear my head. Pulling into the parking lot of the auto repair shop I've been working at for almost three years, I stop my truck at the very back and jump out. Otto's not here yet, but that's not surprising. I usually beat him in.

I let myself in the back door and flip on the shop lights. Axl runs around the massive space, sniffing the car still sitting in the bay, as well as the few tools lying nearby. I leave the shop dark, since it's not time to open, and head over to finish the Trans Am I was working on yesterday.

That's where Otto finds me an hour later when he gets here. "Why am I not surprised to see you here already?" he asks with a chuckle. Axl runs straight to my boss and greets him, accepting pets and a good morning treat, like he does every morning.

I keep my eyes on what I'm doing, finishing the brake job on the classic eighty's sports car. "Mornin'. This one'll be ready to go for a test drive in about an hour."

“Okay. Just let me know when you have everything complete. I’ll call the owner. I’m sure he’ll be happy to get it back a few days early.”

“I bet,” I say, repositioning the tire over the final brake and getting ready to tighten it.

He moves on, opening up the front office and the large overhead garage bays. Cars start to arrive for their appointments, as well as the part-time high schooler who helps with oil changes and keeping an eye on the front counter.

My phone vibrates in my pocket, and I almost ignore it. However, my gut tells me to see who the message is from, and when I see her name on the screen, I’m glad I did.

**Kallie:** Good morning, handsome. Last night was crazy busy. Jameson had to break up a fight and throw someone out again.

My gut churns with the thought of something happening at the bar when I’m not there. I recall the night that douchebag grabbed her ass, resulting in him eating the bar top instead of my fist. Did something happen to her last night? Was she involved in the fight somehow?

**Me:** Sorry to hear that. Everything okay?

*Are you okay?* Is what I want to ask, but refrain.

Her reply comes a few minutes later.

**Kallie:** Yes, everything’s fine. Didn’t sleep well last night. Probably because I didn’t have Axl wedged against me like a tiny thermal blanket.

I can’t help but smile. He does love to sleep snuggled against Kallie, which coincidentally is exactly where I like to sleep too.

**Me:** He has good taste.

**Kallie:** Plans later?

I sigh, running my greasy hands down my jeans. There's no easy way to stay away from this woman. Even if I know I should, I can't. I love her too much.

**Me:** Not really.

**Kallie:** I'm working four to close. You should stop by.

**Me:** All right.

And I know I will. Not only do I want to see her, but I need it. Like an alcoholic craves a sip of whiskey, I crave her.

**Kallie:** See you later, Puppy Rescuer.

Laughing, I slip my phone back into my pocket and turn my attention back to the car in front of me. Once it's complete, I take it for the test drive, making sure it's ready for the owner to take possession. As soon as I sign off on it and hand the keys back to Dillon at the front counter, I grab the next work order and get to work.

The morning flies by and before I know it, it's almost noon and time to close the shop. Dillon stops by to say goodbye on his way out and takes Axl with him to use the bathroom. I have about twenty minutes left on this car and can call it a day, so I keep my nose under the hood, trying to finish up the job.

"Leo, you've got a visitor," Otto hollers, closing the remaining open overhead door.

My heart rate jumps with anticipation as I back out of the Ford's front end. I look up, expecting to see Kallie standing there, but the woman smiling at me most definitely isn't Kallie. "Olivia," I whisper, as if seeing a ghost standing before me.

"Hi, Leo," she greets with a warm, familiar smile.

It's in that moment I realize we're not alone. There's a small boy hiding behind her legs, peeking out from behind her with big, green eyes.

My heart clenches so hard in my chest I fear I'm having some sort of medical emergency. Those eyes. Those fucking green eyes. They're so much like the ones that haunt me, that gaze up at me with so much fear and sadness.

As if sensing my inner turmoil, Olivia bends down and picks the boy up, giving him a grin as she walks toward me. "This is my friend, Leo. Remember I told you we were going to say hello?" The little boy nods, keeping his eyes locked on me. Olivia turns her sad, blue eyes my way and takes a deep breath. "Leo, this is Jonathon. My son."

Her words cause me to take a step back, reeling from the sudden blow to my heart. "Jonathon."

She nods, her pretty eyes filling with tears. "Yep," she says proudly, glancing down at the happy little boy. "He's named after his father."

Everything inside of me feels her words clear down to the bottom of my soul. This boy, this adorable little guy is the perfect mixture of his parents. "He's beautiful, Liv. He looks just like his dad," I say, unable to take my eyes off him.

"It's the smile, right?" she says with a laugh. "Every time he giggles, I hear his dad." She clears her throat and looks over at me. "I'm sorry for just dropping by like this, but we weren't that far away. I wanted to see you, and I was afraid if I called you would avoid me."

Guilt gnaws at my insides, mostly because I know she's right. She knows she's right. "Yeah," I state. "I've been really busy."

Liv nods and looks around. "Sometimes busy is what we need to get through the day," she whispers before meeting my gaze. "So, listen, since we're here, mind coming to lunch with us?" She doesn't wait for me to reply before adding, "I'd really love to catch up with you, Leo. And...I'd really love for you to get to know Jonathon."

How can I say no to that? Not when she's standing directly in front of me, holding the child I didn't know she was

having with my former friend and teammate. "All right."

"Great," she beams, a look of relief etched in her smile. "How about the deli down the road?"

I run my hands through my hair as my mind tries to process her suggestion. "Actually, there's a great pizzeria a few miles from here. Wanna give it a try?" I ask, leaving off the reason why I'd prefer to leave town out of it.

"Sounds great. Jonathon loves pizza, don't you, buddy?" The little boy hides his mouth behind his hand but nods eagerly in reply. "You wanna ride with me?"

"I'm all greasy and dirty, Liv. I'm sure you don't want me in your car."

She's already waving off my concern. "It's fine. It's an older model with leather seats. It'll wash."

I give her a nod and point to the back area. "I'm going to run and wash up."

"I'll wait outside," she says, heading toward the office to go outside. My heart drops as I watch her go, at the little boy in her arms. Jon had a son. I'm certain he would have told me if he knew, which brings so many questions to the forefront of my mind.

The back door opens and closes with a heavy bang, followed by Axl's paws hitting the concrete. The pup follows me to the utility sink, where I scrub the grease and dirt off my hands. When they're as clean as they're gonna get for now, I make my way to the front office. "Hey, Otto? Can I ask a favor of you?"

"Anything," he replies, locking the cash drawer in the safe.

"Would you be able to take Axl to my place? That's an old friend who dropped by, and she's invited me to go have lunch with her and her kid."

"Of course," he replies, dropping to a knee and petting the dog. "I don't mind at all."

“I haven’t changed the locks. You still have a key, right?”

“I do,” Otto confirms.

“Just put him in his kennel. He’ll probably whine but be strong. He’ll be fine in there for an hour or two.”

Otto snorts a laugh. “Got it. Come on, Axl. Wanna go for a ride?” he asks the pup, who takes off like a rocket the moment Otto said the R word.

“Thanks, Otto. Appreciate it.”

“Anytime,” the old man says, following me outside and locking the door behind him.

While they head around to the back to jump in his truck, I shove my hands in my pockets and walk toward Olivia’s car. As I approach, the little boy in the seat in back hollers, “Puppy!” as he points out the window.

I climb inside, ignoring the way my knees cramp against the front dash. “Do you like puppies? His name is Axl.” Jonathon watches me with wide eyes for a moment before nodding.

“He loves them,” Olivia states, starting her car and pulling out of the parking spot. “He watches *Paw Patrol* all day long.”

I almost invite them to stop by and meet Axl, but I keep my mouth shut. Olivia and Jon lived in Indiana, and I’m assuming she’s still there with family and friends. Giving her the directions to the next town over, she drives us to where we’ll have lunch. “Are you still in Harrisburg?”

She nods, keeping her eyes on the road. “I could never leave. Not with my parents and sisters there, as well as Jon’s parents. Especially being pregnant. There was no way I could leave our families after that.”

“I don’t recall you being pregnant,” I state, trying to wrap my head around this new piece of information.



Olivia smiles as she glances over at me. “I found out not too long after you all returned to your deployment. I hadn’t told him yet. I had a doctor’s appointment coming up the next week and was planning to call him from the doctor’s office so he could be there with me.”

I swallow over the hard lump in my throat. “And that didn’t happen.”

A sad look crosses her face. “No.”

The truth was, we hadn’t been back in Afghanistan but a month when our Humvee got hit. After spending two weeks stateside, in which apparently Jon and Olivia were able to conceive a baby, we went back to work in a foreign country, in hopes to finish our assignment and be back on U.S. soil within a few more months. Three months. That’s all we had left in our deployment. Except, when I came home, it was after being discharged from a German military hospital in time to attend three military funerals for three close friends.

We park in the small lot for the pizzeria. Olivia releases Jonathon from the restraints of his seat and we walk in, a large bag thrown over her shoulder. We’re allowed to sit anywhere in the dining room, and I let her choose, considering she has a small child. “Will you get that?” she asks, pointing to a wooden highchair along an outer wall.

When I set it beside the table, she places her son inside the seat and buckles him in before taking the chair beside him. I take a seat across from her, smiling over at the little boy who is a great mixture of both his parents.

“You know, there’s usually only one reason a man takes a woman to a restaurant out of town,” Liv quips, grinning from ear to ear. “What’s her name?”

I open my mouth to argue but realize she’s right. Not because I’m trying to hide anything from Kallie, but the last thing I want is for dozens of sets of eyes in Stewart Grove to witness our meal and start rumors. “Kallie,” I reply, clearing

my throat. "And I'm not trying to hide you, but I know how that town is. We'd have no privacy anywhere."

She waves off my comment. "I get it. Strange woman shows up in town with a child in tow? Sounds like some juicy gossip story to me." The server delivers two glasses of ice water and a menu, promising to be right back. "Tell me about her."

Now it's my turn to smile. "She's...amazing. Beautiful, funny, and probably the toughest woman I know, present company excluded."

Liv giggles and sips her water. "Of course." When her smile fades, she adds, "Maybe I can meet her someday."

That thought causes my throat to tighten, as if I were being strangled by my collar.

"Listen, Leo, I know you've had a rough few years. I know you blame yourself for what happened over there, but you shouldn't. Nothing was your fault. You were as much a victim of that tragedy as Jon. And Sully. And Gomez. You deserve to be happy, to live a full life."

"Why me?" I ask, not caring my eyes are filling with tears. "Why, Liv?" I look over at the little boy holding a toy car. "He should be here. Not me. He was the one with something to live for." My words are hushed and angry, but not at her.

"I wish I knew the answer to that one, Leo. God saved you."

"I tried, Liv. I tried so fucking hard to save him. I knew it was too late for Sully and Gomez. I begged and pleaded for Jon to fight, to hang on until the medics got there."

She reaches over and covers my hand with hers. "I know you did what you could. I don't know why God takes some and saves others, but I do know you can't keep living in the past. You have to look at the road ahead of you. Otherwise, you're stuck and not really living."

I blink away the unshed tears and glance between her and her son. “How about you? Are you moving forward?”

She smiles a soft, genuine grin. “I am now. It took a while, but do you know what helped? This little guy,” she confirms, reaching over and ruffling his head of dark hair. “He’s my entire world, an extension of his daddy to keep me company and help watch over me.”

I take a deep breath. “I’m sorry I haven’t come by for a visit.”

She waves off my comment. “Don’t apologize. I know you were hurting too, and I don’t blame you for keeping your distance. For a while, I wasn’t good company anyway.”

I reach over and move the toy car along the top of the highchair. “But you’re doing okay now?”

She lets out a deep sigh. “Yeah, I’m doing okay. Being a mom is hard work, but it’s also the most rewarding thing I’ve ever done.”

She seems to dig deep for her composure as she adds, “Tomorrow is three years. Three hard, painful years. Some days it feels like just yesterday they showed up on my doorstep to inform me of my husband’s passing, while others feel like it happened a lifetime ago.”

I nod, knowing exactly what she means. Only I relive that day over and over, time after time again and again. I can’t escape it, despite my best efforts to try.

Olivia reaches into the bag and pulls out a wrapped gift. “I wanted to give you something.”

“What’s this?” I ask, taking the small package.

“Open it.”

There’s a slight tremble to my fingers as I remove the blue and white paper from the rectangular box. The moment I see the contents, my heart stops beating in my chest.

“I’ve always loved that photo of you four,” she says softly, referring to the top photograph in a wooden double frame. “And I thought you’d like to have a photo of Jonathon.”

“I love it,” I whisper, my voice hoarse with raw emotion.

All I can do is stare down at the two framed photographs. The top one is the four of us. Jon, Sully, Gomez, and myself, all dressed up at Jon and Olivia’s wedding. We’re holding tumblers of whiskey and fat cigars, all smiling and laughing at something one of them said. It’s a candid photo and captured the dynamics of our small group perfectly.

The photo below it is of Jon’s son. It was taken at Christmas, the boy sitting in front of a lit Christmas tree. He’s holding an ornament, the lights reflecting in his happy eyes like a thousand stars in the sky. It’s then that I notice what he’s holding. The ornament has his father’s name and rank printed on it, as well as his date of death.

Three years ago tomorrow.

My heart clenches in my chest.

“Thank you,” I whisper, my voice not sounding like my own.

“You’re welcome. Oh, and just so you know, he’s full name is Jonathon Leo Richman.”

I stare up at her, my eyes wide with disbelief. “What?”

She smiles softly, reaching over and stroking her son’s chubby cheek. “I named him after his father *and* the man who tried to save his life. The man who Jon loved like a brother and respected more than anyone else in this world. Jon would have wanted this. In fact, he was the one who came to me in a dream and suggested I use your name as Jonathon’s middle one.”

My mind is spinning and I’m not sure I’m able to properly draw oxygen into my lungs. It’s all too much. Clearing my throat, I mumble, “I don’t know what to say.”

She shrugs and grabs the menu. "You don't have to say anything, Leo. Jon loved you so much."

More tears cloud my vision, and I desperately try to blink them away. The server returns to take our order, but I have no idea how to make words flow from my mouth. Liv seems to realize I'm struggling and takes the liberty of ordering for us. I don't argue with any of her choices, my brain still trying to process everything that's happened today.

"Now," she says with a big, knowing grin the moment the server steps away. "Tell me more about this Kallie."

# Chapter Twenty-One

## *Kallie*

I glance down at my phone again, unable to tamp down the worry that keeps bubbling to the surface. It's almost ten o'clock and I still haven't seen or heard from Leo since this morning. Not that I expected him to drop whatever he's doing and run straight here. Especially after this last week.

Ever since Sunday night, he's pulled away a little. I can see it in his eyes when he looks at me. He didn't want me to see his nightmare, and I think it freaked him out. Since, we've talked and he's stopped by twice for dinner here, but he hasn't spent the night, despite me offering. I've been trying to give him space, time to come to terms with his feelings on the situation, but it's hard. I want to grab hold of him and shake him, insisting I'm not scared or going anywhere. His nightmares don't define him as a person, and even though I know that, I don't think he does.

So I'm giving him a little space to figure it out, making sure he still knows I'm here when he's ready to talk.

"Hey, Kal, can you grab another case of Ultra? We're running low," Kellen hollers, pulling two bottles of the beer out of the cooler and placing them on top of the bar for his customer.

"On it," I holler over the sound of Jameson playing guitar at the front of the room.

It's crazy-busy tonight, thanks to an alumni gathering at the school. The high school baseball team went to state this week, finishing in third place, for the first time in school history, so the alumni group quickly organized a celebration for their return home. They had firetrucks escorting them into town and a huge gathering at the ballfield. Now, everyone has migrated here, which meant we had to call in extra help for

both the restaurant and the bar side of the business. It's Walker, Kellen, and me behind the bar tonight, and I've never been more grateful to be working with the two best bartenders around.

As I'm carrying the case of bottles from the walk-in cooler, Numbers appears, reaching for the case in my hands. "I had it," I insist.

"I know, but they're starting to get backed up at the bar, and I figured Walker would be happier with you helping him than me," he replies with a chuckle.

"Probably right," I confirm, passing off the beer so I can get back up to the bar.

Isaac was correct. They're three deep almost the entire way around the bar. I slip in the mix, stepping up to the hardwood and starting to fill orders. It stays that way for what feels like forever, but in reality, it takes almost an hour of constant serving to get things caught up and for it to start slowing down.

As I'm approaching the end of the bar, I almost groan aloud when I see Amie Donnelly and her equally horrible friend, Bethani Lipman. "I'm telling you, he was with some chick with a toddler. Do you think it's his kid? Like he's hiding a family somewhere?" Bethani asks loudly, drawing the attention of those unfortunate enough to sit near them.

"Oh, I'm sure," Amie states, placing her empty martini glass on the bar. "Excuse me. I need a refill. Bethi too."

Bethani chugs the remains of her martini and sets the glass down on the counter beside Amie's. I reach for the dirty glasses and set them to the side to wash. "Are you supposed to be in here?" I ask Bethani, glancing over my shoulder to Walker.

Bethani and Walker have history. I'm not sure if they actually slept together or not, but Bethani turned all psycho stalker on him and ended up getting banned. She gapes at me with Botoxed, plump lips. "The restraining order expired years

ago!” she bellows dramatically, rolling her overly made-up eyes at me.

“Yeah, but I think you’re on the banned list,” I state, referring to the list of names we keep and can refuse service to.

Her eyes narrow. “He knows I’m here,” she declares, pinning me with a nasty look.

I grab two martini glasses and head over to the opposite side of the bar where Walker works. “Did you see who’s here?”

He doesn’t even bother to look Bethani’s way. “I saw. Kellen asked about serving her, and I told him to go ahead, as long as she doesn’t start anything. She says one word and she’s out of here.”

I nod at my boss and friend before returning to my end of the bar. The moment I reach for the vodka, she says, “See? I told you it was okay.”

“He did say you could stay, but if you say one word to him or start any shit, you’re gone.” This time it’s me who pins her with a hard, don’t fuck with us look.

Bethani rolls her eyes again. “Can you hurry up with our drinks?”

Amie leans in, smirking at me. “I see why he’s cheating. She’s vile and clearly has a stick up her ass.”

The hairs on the back of my neck stand up, but I don’t react. I’ve done this job long enough to know how to school my features and keep my expression to a minimum.

“Maybe she’s the homewrecker,” Bethani chimes in, staring at me from across the bar. “I mean, the other woman clearly has his kid.”

My throat goes completely dry as I listen to them spew their trash. It’s obvious they’re talking about me and most likely Leo, but what I can’t understand is why? What the hell are they up to?



“Everything okay here?” Garreth asks, stepping up beside me as I finish making their martinis.

“Yep, fine,” I say pleasantly, yet through gritted teeth.

“Garreth! Come celebrate with us!” Amie demands, reaching for her fresh drink.

“I don’t think so,” he replies.

“Twelve dollars,” I state, watching as they both start drinking their alcohol. Neither makes a move to pay.

“But we’re celebrating. I’m getting divorced,” Amie coos, reaching over and trying to touch Garreth. “Doesn’t that call for free drinks?”

Divorced. I’m not sure Amie truly understood what being married was anyway. She married an older man who worked out of town a lot and frequently visited this bar and others in the area looking for company. She’s always had a reputation and clearly lives up to it. I’ve witnessed my share of her escapades over the years and have never said a word because that’s my job, but it’s hard to watch someone treat other people like garbage and get away with it.

“No free drinks. Twelve dollars,” he replies, pulling his hand back so she can’t touch him.

Amie rolls her eyes as Bethani reaches into her designer clutch purse and pulls out a credit card. I take the card and run it, slipping the paper and card in front of her. She quickly signs it and tosses it back across the bar at me.

No tip.

Typical.

I put the charge slip in the bin and refuse to turn back around, even though they’re continuing to spew nastiness. The last thing I need to do is entertain one single thought in regard to something they’ve said. If they were referring to Leo and me, I know he’s not cheating. I know I’m not a homewrecker, and I’m damn certain he doesn’t have a kid.

He's reserved and holds his cards close to his chest, but not because he's hiding a family or has multiple girlfriends.

I can't help but pull my phone out of my pocket and check for missed messages. The screen is blank, of course, with no new messages from Leo. I worry about him, knowing how much his nightmare affected him. I just hate that it happened like that, when it did. We had an amazing day, having lunch with his parents and getting to know them. He shared with me the meaning behind his important tattoos, and then told me he loved me. Sure, he did it in the throes of passion, but that doesn't mean he was only thinking with his little head. Sometimes the biggest revelations happen in the best moments.

The rest of the evening passes by quickly. Once Jameson is finished playing, the bar gets rowdy again until last call. Finally, it starts to thin out and the real work begins. Sure, we're constantly moving while the business is open, but the closing down is the hardest part. Fortunately, everyone pitches in and makes the work go faster.

As patrons are filing out the front door, I glance down to the end of the bar where Barbie One and Barbie Two are still seated. "Sorry, ladies, we're closing. Time to find whoever you're taking home with you and be on your way."

*Yeah, sometimes I just can't help myself.*

"I'm waiting for Tank," Amie counters proudly, referring to Jameson. When she realizes eyes are still on her, she turns to her left and winks at a much younger man still sitting a few stools down.

"Good luck with that." I'm unable to hold my snippy comment back, and even though I probably shouldn't have said it, I'm not sorry I did. There's no way Jameson is taking her home. Ever since he met Madelyn, he's not the type to engage in meaningless sex with the town tramp just for the sake of getting off.

“Time to go, gentlemen,” Garreth announces, stepping over to where the small group of guys still gathers. They keep watching Amie and Bethani, clearly hoping to catch their eyes and perhaps improve the end of their nights. Slowly, they all get up, throwing a few bills on the bar top before making their way to the front entrance. “You too, ladies.”

“We’re waiting for Tank,” Amie replies with a smug grin.

“No you’re not,” Jameson counters, passing behind them on his way around to the back of the bar. “Time to go.”

“But, Tank,” Amie whines.

“No. Go.” He stops long enough to give her a hard look, leaving no room to question how serious he is.

She sighs dramatically. “Come on, Bethi. Maybe we’ll call Leo. Apparently, he’s always up for a good time.”

I grit my teeth as they both walk away, sashaying through the door and out into the night. “Bitches.”

“What was that about?” Garreth asks, unloading cases of beer into the cooler.

“Nothing,” I mutter, filling the sink with hot, soapy water to start cleaning.

“Why’d she mention Leo?”

I turn around and place my hands on my hips. “Apparently, Leo was with a woman and a young kid earlier today. Either he’s cheating on me, or I’m the homewrecker.”

“Bullshit.”

Sighing, I return my attention to the sink and start placing cutlery and other tools in the water. “I know that. They’re just trying to get under my skin.”

“Well, don’t let them. Leo’s not like that.”

“I know,” I reply, scrubbing on the utensils and placing them in the second sink to rinse.

Garreth is beside me a moment later. "I'm serious, Kal. Leo's a good guy. Not as good-looking and charming as me, but not everyone can be this amazing."

I snort a laugh and shake my head. "You're impossible."

"That's what my wife says," he quips, grinning from ear to ear at the mention of Reagan. "In all seriousness, Leo's one of my best friends. He's had some difficulties in life, but he's working through them, and there's no one I trust more than him."

"I know," I reply a bit hushed. "He told me about Afghanistan."

He seems taken back by my statement. "He did?" Then another wide smile spreads across his lips. "Then that settles it."

"Settles what?"

"He let you in." Stepping closer so no one can overhear our conversation, he adds, "Leo's extremely private about what happened. Even I don't know all the details, but if he shared even part of them with you, that means something. Something big."

I swallow over the lump in my throat. "I haven't heard much from him," I confess, the words flying from my lips before I can stop them. "He had a nightmare and it freaked him out because I saw it. He's pulled back a bit."

"Don't let him. I mean, give him a little slack, but don't let go of the rope completely. You're good for him, Kal. He knows it too, and I'm guessing he's a little confused by his feelings toward you. Since he's been home, he hasn't dated, and even before then, he spent years focusing on his military career. He always wanted to do twenty years but was medically discharged after eighteen. What happened over there really messed with him and still does, but you're the first woman to catch his eye and open up to, and believe me when I say, that means something. Don't give up on him, even if he gives up on himself."

I remember the fear and anguish in his eyes that night and know his demons are something he battles regularly. After hearing Garreth share a little more information, I'm determined to be there for him. To help him slay dragons. To show him just how amazing he really is. To continue to love him, even when he may not love himself.

"Thanks, Garreth."

He nods and squeezes my shoulder in support. "Anytime, Kal. Just make sure I'm chosen as best man in the wedding. He owes me, considering he's done it for me twice."

I chuckle and shake my head. "Don't get too far ahead of yourself."

He finishes stocking the case of beer in front of him before grabbing my attention once more. "As for the other thing, don't think too much about it. First off, I wouldn't put it past the bimbo twins to make up that bullshit about him, but if there's any truth to it, I promise there's a logical explanation. Leo's not a cheater, and he doesn't have a kid. I mean, did you see how uneasy he was holding Evangeline?" he asks with a snicker. "That man doesn't know anything about babies, so he's not hiding a secret family somewhere. Besides, he'd never do anything to jeopardize his relationship with you. He hasn't told me much about it, but we can all see it. It's the real deal. Just from the outside looking in, it's the realest thing he's ever done. Hold on to that."

I nod, willing the tears threatening to spill down my cheeks to stay where they are. The last thing I want is to start crying in front of Garreth, all four owners, and Kellen. "Thank you, Garreth."

"Anytime." Then, he turns back to the task at hand and finishes stocking the beer cooler.

The work is complete in no time, thanks to having seven sets of hands doing it. When I'm told to clock out, I do as instructed and head for the employee break room to grab my

bag. Kellen is not too far behind me and meets me at the back exit. "Ready?" he asks, opening the door.

"Yeah."

We step out into the late spring night, the air holding a hint of chill compared to the warmth inside. He falls in line beside me, clearly walking me to my truck. As we approach, I ask, "Big plans tonight?"

Kellen flashes me that cocky grin I've become accustomed to. "Don't you wanna know."

I roll my eyes. "Actually, I don't. I was just being polite," I sass.

He laughs. "Such a brat. And to answer your question, no plans. Headed home. *Alone.*"

I like Kellen. He's a great guy. Funny, charming, and has a smile that makes women seem to lose their mind. He's a huge flirt, and I'm not sure how much serious dating he does. He's also a good friend. We've been working together since I started here, and even though he's incredibly good-looking, I've only ever thought of him as a friend. Or maybe an annoying little brother. Either way, there's no attraction there, and never has been.

"Hey, have you heard anything about Cameron lately?"

His question catches me off guard. "No, why?"

He shrugs, shoving his hands in his pockets. "I guess she called off a few days this week. I was just curious if everything was all right."

I stare at my friend, trying to get a read on him, but unable to.

Cameron has worked here for more than a year, but last summer had some issues. No one really knows what happened, but I've heard plenty of rumors. Garreth and Reagan seemed to take her under their wings and help get her out of whatever terrible situation she found herself in. Everyone has been pretty quiet about it, including Cameron.

She keeps her nose clean and down, doing her job as best she can. No one has any complaints about her. In fact, everyone loves working with her, myself included.

“I haven’t heard, but if I do hear, I’ll let you know,” I tell him, watching as he somewhat relaxes a bit.

“Yeah. Okay.” He looks up at the night sky. “I heard we’re supposed to have storms tomorrow. Anyway, I’ll let you get on the road. See you soon,” he states, turning and heading for his vehicle.

I climb into my truck and fire it up. Before I fasten my seat belt, I slip my phone from my pocket and check for messages again.

Nothing.

Throwing the gear into reverse, I back out of my spot and make my way to the road. A left out of the parking lot has me heading in the direction of home and before I know it, I’m parking in front of the house, grateful to be home for the night.

I slip inside, my legs tired, even though my mind is anything but. After checking on things downstairs, I head up to my room to get ready for bed. I take a quick shower and slip on Leo’s flannel, the one he left after our first night together. Once I’ve brushed my teeth, I climb into bed and try to get comfortable. Of course, I toss and turn for a while, doing everything I can to find a comfy position. Finally, I realize it’s not my body that’s uncomfortable, but my mind. Reaching for my phone, I pull up the messaging app and fire off a text, despite the hour.

**Me:** Good night, Leo. Love you.

I don’t wait for a reply because I don’t expect one. Instead, I set my phone down and curl against the guest pillow, it still holds his scent, and that’s exactly what I hang on to as I finally drift off to sleep.

# Chapter Twenty-Two

## *Leo*

It's so late by the time I unlock my back door and practically fall through the doorway. Axl is hot on my heels but isn't nearly as rowdy as normal. In fact, he's just as tired and spent as I am. It's well after two in the morning, and we've been going since just before six.

I had every intention of going to Burgers and Brew tonight to see Kallie, but that went to shit when Otto called. He was down with food poisoning and the tow truck was being called. So, I left my plans behind, hoping it was only a slight setback, and went to work. That single call turned into four more, including a recovery an hour away.

Now, it's too late to see her, since the bar has been closed for a couple of hours, and I'm sure she's already home and in bed. I should be there with her, and if it wasn't so damn late—or early as it happens to be—I'd jump in my truck and head over there. But I won't do that now, not at this hour.

My tired legs carry me to my bedroom. I strip out of my dirty clothes, realizing I should take a shower before I climb into bed, but knowing I won't. My body is shutting down on me and I just want to pass the hell out. I can shower and wash bedding tomorrow. Tonight, I just need sleep.

Grabbing my phone, I find a missed message from Kallie. My heart speeds up and lurches in my chest as I realize I didn't hear my phone chime.

**Kallie:** Good night, Leo. Love you.

"Night, beautiful. I promise to do better tomorrow," I whisper aloud, wishing she could hear me. "Love you too."

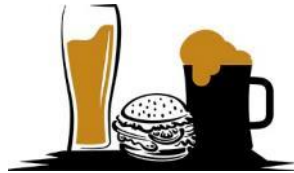
I don't reply, not wanting to wake her up after a long night. God, I want to, but I hold back. The one time I drove through town, the place was packed, so I'm sure she's



exhausted. Tomorrow, I'll go to her. Tomorrow, I'll make everything right again.

I climb into bed, my face shoved into my pillow, as Axl jumps up on the bed. He's big enough now he can get up on my bed and furniture without assistance, even though I still have to help him into the truck. He curls up beside me and sighs, probably falling asleep the moment his tired body hits the bed. He was a trooper tonight, by my side the entire time.

Reaching down, I place my hand on Axl's belly, lightly scratching his soft coat. He moves just enough to lick my hand before getting comfortable once more. Closing my own eyes, I let the dark grab hold and drag me under.



*My legs. They won't move.*

*I thrash and twist, pulling against the invisible restraints.*

*A cry pierces the darkness.*

*It's loud and full of anguish.*

*It's coming from me.*

*I turn to Gomez, blind against the blackness until I can finally see something.*

*Light.*

*And red.*

*So much fucking red.*

*It's blood, and it's everywhere.*

*I'm able to move my arm. It feels like it's weighed down, but somehow, I move it.*

*Reaching for my friend, but he's not my friend. There's so much blood.*

And death.

I reach for my seat belt, the motion agony. I turn to my right and push against the mangled door of the Humvee. Every movement is excruciating, but I have to get out.

I have to get to my friends.

I fall to the ground, reaching blindly for the passenger door. Richie is in there. Amongst the mangled metal and death. I have to get him out.

I'm able to open the door and pull him free. Jon's breathing is labored, but he's breathing. His eyes are unfocused. His face covered in blood.

"Jon? Richie!" I yell, getting right in his face as I apply pressure to the wound in the middle of his chest.

Warmth coats my fingers and creeps up my arms, but I don't look. I just keep applying pressure.

"Jon!"

"You don't have to yell," he mutters, coughing and sputtering, more red falling from his lips.

"Jesus, man," I reply, finally feeling like I can take a deep breath. "Hold still."

He groans as I press down on the wound, his eyes starting to turn glassy. "Leo?" he whispers, looking straight up at the sky. "Do me a favor."

"Anything," I tell him.

"Tell Livie I love her, okay? Tell her I'll always be with her."

My heart stops. The pain in my own body disappears as realization hits me with the force of a sledgehammer to the gut. "No. You tell her yourself."

His eyes tear up as he finally focuses on me. "I wish I could, but I'm gonna need you to do it."

*I blink hard, trying to clear the sudden moisture in my own eyes. "I'll tell her, but you're gonna be just fine. We'll get you to the medic and you'll be able to tell her yourself."*

*He smiles up at me with so much sadness. "You're probably right, but I'm gonna need you to promise me. Promise me you'll watch out for her."*

*Tears fall, mixing with the dirt and the blood. "I promise."*

*Jon takes a deep breath and closes his eyes. "Thanks, man. Thanks for always being there."*

*Then he closes his eyes and dies in my arms.*

*I cry out in anger and pain, my head falling to his chest as I sob. When I open my eyes and look at his face, I gasp.*

*It's not Jon.*

*I'm staring down at a different lifeless face.*

*The most beautiful face I've ever seen.*

*"No!" I bellow, pulling her against my chest.*

*"Kallie!"*

*I startle awake, gasping for air, my throat raw from yelling. It takes several minutes before I'm able to clear those final images from my nightmare out of my mind.*

*A wet nose is nuzzled against my neck as he whimpers. Reaching for him, I wrap my arms around my friend. "I'm sorry, buddy. That was a scary one," I whisper, licking my dry lips and trying to calm the raging thunder in my chest.*

*Axl looks up at me, his eyes full of understanding.*

*"You're a good boy," I tell him, lying back down on my sweat-soaked pillow and letting him snuggle closely against my chest. "Thank you, buddy. I don't know what I'd do without you."*

*It's the absolute truth. While the nightmares are coming less frequently lately, he always has a way of pulling me out of*

them when they happen. It's as if he can sense exactly when I need him most.

With a deep sigh, my heavy eyelids close once more. "Thank you."



"You ready?" I ask, glancing over at the door. Axl is sitting, his tail wagging eagerly.

My phone vibrates in my pocket, but I ignore it. All I can think about is getting to Kallie, to seeing her beautiful face. Part of it is because of the nightmare. I need to see with my own eyes she's okay.

Alive.

And I don't want to do it through text or on the phone. I want to hold her in my arms and breathe in her sweet, clean scent. I want to claim her lips with my own and feel her skin against mine. I need the reassurance she's okay more than I need my next breath right now, which is why we're getting ready to head over to her place on a Sunday morning.

Just as we're stepping out the back door, I hear a vehicle pull in my driveway. My heart starts to pound with excitement as Axl takes off to see who's here. As I round the side of the house, my dad's truck comes into view. An odd feeling washes over me. One laced with disappointment because it's not the woman I hoped it would be, and anxiousness because as glad as I am to see my dad, I just want to go to Kallie.

"Hey," I say as he gets out of the truck, bending down to pet the excited puppy at his feet.

Dad doesn't reply, just gives Axl a little more attention. When he finally stands up, he shoves his hands in his pockets and looks at me. His face. His eyes. There's so much anguish, I have to take a step back.

It's in that moment I know.

I know something is terribly wrong, and whatever he's about to tell me will alter my life forever.

He slowly heads my way, a solemn vibe ebbing from his body as he passes by me and takes a seat on the back steps. With a deep, sad exhale, I join him, sitting directly beside him on my back porch. Axl runs to the grass, picking up a stick and carrying it over to where we sit. He drops down on the concrete and starts gnawing at the wood.

"Thursday morning, when she got out of the shower, she felt weak and had to sit down," he says morosely. "I found her on the floor, and that's when she told me about a lump."

My throat is so thick, it's hard to get words out. "What?"

"I called her doc afterward, and they wanted to see her right away. They sent her for a PET scan. We got the results yesterday morning."

I close my eyes, focusing on moving oxygen in and out of my lungs. It's quite the chore to do, honestly. "How bad?"

He sighs. "Bad, Leo. It's terminal. Brain, bone, and lung."

Silence surrounds me. I can no longer hear the birds in the trees or feel the breeze licking my skin. There's nothing. "How long?" I finally ask, knowing I really don't want to hear the answer.

"Six months. Tops."

Turning to face him, I whisper, "But she can fight it, right? With treatment?"

Now it's Dad's turn to close his eyes and look up at the sky, as if he's letting the warmth wash over him. "She doesn't want to, Leo. She's tired."

"Fuck that!" I yell, jumping up and pacing the broken concrete in front of the steps.

"Leo!" he hollers back, getting right in my face. His eyes are tear-filled and pleading with me to understand. "She's

*tired*, Son. She doesn't want her final days filled with treatments and doctors. She wants to go out on her own terms. At home. With us."

My head is shaking, as if trying to dislodge all the terrible thoughts and images plaguing my mind. "No."

He grabs my arm and stops me, meeting my gaze head-on. "Yes. She's come to terms with this. She's asking we do the same."

I don't know if I can do that. How? "How do I do that?"

He sighs and wraps his arms around me. "I don't know, Son. We do it together. For her."

I'm not sure how long we stand there in my backyard crying and holding each other, but I don't care. Finally, he pulls back and exhales deeply. "I should probably get back home. Mom knew I was coming here to talk to you, and says when you're ready, come by the house."

I want to smile at the fact they know me well enough to understand I'm going to need time to process what I've learned, but I can't. I'm not sure I'll ever be able to smile again. "I will," I reply, shoving my hands in my pockets. I feel so numb.

Numb and alone.

Dad gives me a look. "We can do this together, Leo. I know what day it is, and I'm sorry to drop this on you, today of all days, but it couldn't wait. I don't want to waste the good days. Not when we don't know how many we have left."

I close my eyes and just try to breathe through the horrible pain.

Today.

Three years ago today, my world exploded.

Literally.

I lost my teammates and friends.

And now I find out my mom has cancer again. After beating the odds the first time around, it's still going to take her anyway. Life is so fucking cruel and unfair.

Clearing my throat, I say, "Give me a day or two."

He nods in understanding. "Talk to someone if you need to, Son. Don't let this eat away at you."

*Like it has the last three years.*

He doesn't have to say the words. I can read between the lines.

I nod, unable to speak. He approaches me once more, throws his arms around my shoulders, and draws me into a hug. "I love you, Leo."

My voice is hoarse, but I manage to reply, "Love you too, Dad."

He pulls away and crouches down, petting Axl, before standing back up and walking slowly to his truck. He gives me one final look before climbing into his truck cab and backing out of my driveway.

I don't know how long I just stand here, breathing, my mind reeling. My phone vibrates in my pocket again, but I ignore it. It's been doing that for a while now, but I can't find the gumption to even check to see who it is. Everything in my world is chaos, and if I've learned anything in the last twenty-four hours, it's that this world is a cruel place, filled with pain and sorrow. Even love can't heal the deep wounds we bear in our soul and won't save the ones we hold closest to our hearts.

If it did, my mom wouldn't be dying, and I'd be free to just love Kallie.

My phone vibrates again, and a familiar anger courses through my veins. I blindly pick up the phone as blood swooshes in my ears. "What?" I demand.

I'm met with silence for a moment before I hear her sweet voice. "Leo? Is everything okay?"

I want to throw my phone, to rage at her for calling me when everything in my world is so fucked up. All I see is the darkness surrounding me, dragging me beneath the cold, murky water, and it's in that moment I know how this will end. I know I'll take her down with me if I don't try to save her. From me.

"Leo?"

"I can't do this."

"Do what?" she asks calmly, though I can hear the apprehension in her voice.

"This. Us. I can't do it. I'm sorry, but I need space," I tell her, barely realizing I'm pacing.

"Okay, I get it. You need space," she mutters softly, and I hate the understanding I hear in her voice, because she doesn't understand. She doesn't get what I'm doing and why. She doesn't see how much I really love her, which is why I have to push her away.

"I have to go," I say before disconnecting the call and cutting her out of my life. Too bad there's no easy way to cut her out of my heart too, because she'll live there for as long as I walk this earth. She's the only one to ever own a piece of my heart, let alone the entire thing.

"Come on," I say to Axl, who picks up the stick he's been playing with and trots over to my truck.

I pick him up, tossing the stick back into the yard, and get in. I back out of my driveway, destination unknown. Originally, I was going to Kallie's, but now? That's obviously out of the question. She probably hates me, which is exactly what I deserve.

I head toward the edge of town at a higher rate of speed. Thankfully, there aren't too many cars on the roads, including ones that could—and most definitely would—pull me over. I find the lane I'm looking for easily and jump out to unlock the gate. "Stay," I tell Axl, who obediently remains inside my truck.



Once the gate is unlocked and open, I get back in my truck and drive forward until I reach the familiar clearing amongst the trees. I park the truck and turn off the engine, taking a deep, painful breath. My eyes fill with tears once more as the grief encompasses me. I close them tightly, trying to let the silence soothe my bruised and battered soul, but it's hard. This is one of the few places I've always found peace, but today, with my world shattering around me, it's impossible to find the comfort it usually brings.

Slowly, I climb out of my truck. Axl jumps down, instantly sticking his nose to the ground to check out his surroundings. I walk over to the firepit and think about all the good times we've had here. Mom loves a good fire, always making sure we had the ingredients for s'mores in the fridge in the small outbuilding. She could sit out here for hours, laughing and talking to anyone and everyone. As long as she had someone to share it with, she was always so content. So much joy and love used to be shared in this spot.

Now, it will never be the same.

Not without her.

With a sigh, I turn away from the empty camping area and walk away from my truck. "Come on, Axl."

With my dog at my side, we disappear into the thick timber, carrying my problems and my sorrow like baggage with me as I go.

# Chapter Twenty-Three

## *Kallie*

I stare down at my phone screen, trying to figure out what in the hell just happened. One minute, I'm waking up from a deep sleep, calling Leo to see if everything is all right, and the next he's angrily breaking things off with me because he needs space.

*Space.*

I've heard that one before, and it never ends well.

Placing my phone on the nightstand, I get out of bed and go straight to the shower. Cranking on the hot water, I give it minimal time for the temperature to heat before stripping out of the flannel shirt and slipping under the spray. I reach for my face wash, but my hand pauses halfway there. Water clouds my vision, but it's not from the shower. My tears fall in earnest, unchecked and unafraid.

I don't know how long I stand here, crying, but eventually, the tears slow enough I can wash my hair and body. My limbs feel numb as I climb out and get ready for the day, throwing on a pair of old jeans and a fitted tee to do barn chores before work.

The sky is gray and holds not a hint of sunlight. There's no joy or happiness when you look outside, only a dreary, miserable tone. Just like my heart.

*Fitting.*

I throw my hair up in a messy bun on top of my head and make my way down to the kitchen where Dad is sitting, enjoying a cup of coffee. He watches me over the brim of his mug, as I walk to the pot and pour myself a tall one, tempted to add a little shot of something stronger, like vodka. I settle for my usual creamer.

“Everything okay?”

Spinning around, I plaster on a big, fake smile. “Of course. Good morning,” I reply, taking a scalding sip of my coffee before busying myself with prepping for breakfast. “How about biscuits and gravy?” I ask, pulling a pound of breakfast sausage and tube of refrigerator biscuits from the fridge.

“Looks like it’s going to storm later today.”

I remain where I am, facing the counter, unable to turn around and look at him for fear I’ll break down again. “Looks that way.”

He doesn’t say anything for a few moments, and my hands definitely need something to do. Not to mention, my mind needing to focus on something other than my shattered heart. So, I keep my concentration on browning the sausage, preheating the oven for the biscuits, and measuring out the milk and flour for the gravy.

“Mrs. Wolfe brought over some pie last night. She left you a piece in the fridge.”

I nod, concentrating on my stirring.

Stir, stir, stir.

*Was his nightmare that embarrassing for him? I mean, I know he’s a proud military man, but does he really think so little of me that I’d judge him for something he can’t control?*

“The weather channel was saying it’s supposed to be warm today, which isn’t good for the storm cell moving into the area tonight.”

Again, I nod, placing the biscuits on the pan and slipping them into the oven.

*I gave him space this week but tried to subtly let him know I was here. Was I too pushy? Too persistent when he wanted me to be anything but?*

“I heard lions and monkeys escaped the zoo and are terrorizing downtown Stewart Grove.”

*Why the hell was he so angry earlier? I haven't tried to call him all week, but the moment I do, he blows up at me like I was bothering him.*

“I thought I'd ride my bike to town and take pictures of them playing on the swings.”

Stir, stir, stir.

“Sounds like a good ide—” I spin around and face my dad, his words sinking in. “Wait, what?”

He flashes me a wide grin. “There she is.”

“You don't own a bike,” I counter, a bit flabbergasted by his unusual statement.

“No,” he chuckles as he sips his coffee. “And even if I did, I wouldn't be riding it to town.”

“I'd hope not,” I mumble, feeling a bit ashamed I wasn't paying attention to what he was saying.

“Tell me what's wrong, Kallie girl.” His eyes are full of worry and empathy as he waits me out.

I turn off the burner and slide it across the stovetop before joining him at the table. Tears well in my eyes the moment I sit. “I think Leo broke up with me.”

“You think?” he asks.

“He told me he needed space,” I state with a sad shrug.

Dad gives me a slow nod. “You know, the actions of that man last Sunday don't say *I need space.*”

I try to decide how much to share with him. The last thing I want to do is break Leo's trust by divulging personal information, but then I also think about how close they've also become over the last several weeks, and I really want to talk this out through someone else's perspective.

“Something happened,” I start, noticing the way he sits up in his seat. “Nothing bad,” I quickly add in reassurance. “I mean, he thinks it was bad. He had a nightmare, about his time in the military. He has them often, but it was the first time he had one here. It freaked him out.”

“I can see where that might upset him. A man never wants to appear weak in front of the woman he loves,” Dad replies, setting his coffee down on the table.

“You don’t have to say that to try to make me feel better, Dad.”

He pulls face of shock. “Would I do that?”

I nod. “In junior high. When you told me bangs looked good on me.”

He grins. “You rocked those bangs, Kallie girl. I wasn’t lying to you then, and I’m not lying to you now. I know what a man in love looks like. Leo loves you.”

Confusion just clouds my brain even more. “Then why the break?”

He sighs and reaches for my hand. “Could be a few things, honey. It could be he’s scared of those feelings. It might be he doesn’t know how to deal with the fact you saw his nightmare, something he usually keeps guarded closely. Or maybe there’s something bigger happening with him he’s trying to protect you from.”

“Like what?” I find myself asking.

“I don’t know, Kallie girl. Only he knows the reason.”

With a resounded sigh, I ask, “So what am I supposed to do now?”

“I wish I had the answers. Take some time for you. Make sure he’s who you want in your life, and if you realize he is, then you fight. Fight like hell, Kallie girl, because life is too short to let even one day pass you by without telling those you love how much they mean to you. Leo might be a stubborn man, but he’s not stupid. I have every confidence

he'll realize exactly what he has with you and make it right. If not, well, then I was wrong, and he *is* a fucking idiot."

A bubble of laughter slips from my lips, and I can't help but bring my hand up to cover it. The memory of Leo instructing me not to do that because he loves my laugh hits me hard. I sit here for a bit, trying to wrap my head around my thoughts. I don't have to think too long and hard to know what I want.

Or *who* I want.

Leo.

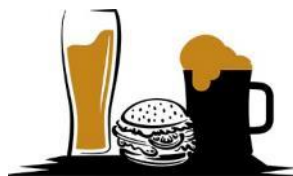
"Your biscuits are burning."

Realization hits me hard. I jump up and open the oven door, only to be greeted by a billow of smoke. I wave my hand frantically, trying to keep the smoke from hitting the detector on the ceiling. The last thing I need is to deal with that too.

Dad gets up and shuffles to the back door, throwing it open and letting some of the clean air in. He approaches me just as I drop my face into my hands and let myself be consumed by the emotions once again. "It's okay, Kallie girl. It'll be all right. I promise. Have faith."

He pulls me into a hug just like he used to do when I was a child, and the gesture brings more comfort than he'll ever know. It's just what I needed this morning.

"Now, what do you say we try this again," he says when he pulls back and gives me a soft smile. "But this time, I'll cook the biscuits."



I pull into the lot behind Burgers and Brew and find a parking spot easily. I grab my small purse and keys and get out of the truck. My legs are already tired, thanks to a long afternoon of taking care of the horses. Bud seemed a little out of sorts today, as if he either sensed my despondent mood or

picked up on the fact his friend, Leo, would probably not be coming out to see him anymore. Either way, he was a little surly and gave me some attitude, which he hasn't done since Leo came into the picture.

I slip inside the back entrance and go to the break room to put away my bag, making sure I have my phone in my pocket...just in case. Not that I expect anyone to reach out to me, but still. I suppose it's more of a *hope* someone will.

I wave at Cameron as she slips into the kitchen and head for the bar. When I reach it, I'm surprised to see Walker. Sundays are one of his days off. "What are you doing here?"

"Working. You?" he quips with a smile.

"Uhh, working. Or at least I thought I was. Am I being fired?" I ask, coming to a standstill.

"What? Hell no. Why would you ask that?" He looks at me with wide, concerned eyes.

I shrug and grab a glass, filling it with ice and water. "Just par for the course," I mutter before taking a quick sip. "I don't usually see you on Sunday."

He throws a towel over his shoulder. "Not usually, but Gareth and I switched so he could go to a family thing with Reagan and the baby this evening. I'll do my inventory and get the order ready tonight, and he'll place it for me tomorrow."

"Oh."

"Max just left a few minutes ago. He said it hasn't been very busy today."

"Sundays are usually slower on this side," I tell him, referring to the bar, even though I'm sure he already knows that. He owns the business.

"Anyway, I'll let you get to it. I'll be around the stockroom and cooler if you need help."

I wave him off and jump right in. There are a couple of drink orders from the restaurant side that filter over to me,

but for the most part, it's not too crazy. Some of the bar customers have me turn on the weather channel, thanks to the impending storm. As they watch, they share their predictions about how much rain we'll get.

"I heard hail, high winds, and at least two inches," one of the patrons says.

"I was hoping no hail. Just put a metal roof on the house. I'd hate to see it damaged," the other adds.

"Ready for another one?" I ask them both, already reaching for bottles of their favorite.

"Sure. Hey, Kallie, you got a storm shelter out at your farm?"

"We do," I confirm, placing two full bottles of beer on the bar. "Have never had to use it though."

"That's good. I remember the tornado that hit in nineteen eighty-eight."

"Nineteen eighty-nine," the first one counters.

"No, nineteen eighty-eight. Ronald Reagan was still president."

"He was president in eighty-nine too."

"Only for twenty days. George Bush was inaugurated on January twentieth, nineteen eighty-nine."

My eyebrows draw together. "How do you even remember that?"

The customer just beams at me with a wide grin. "History buff."

"He gets off on all that conspiracy bullshit on television," his friend grumbles.

"Well, good for you. History is important," I state, taking their cash from the edge of the bar and paying for their two beers. "Holler if you need me," I add, walking down to the opposite end of the bar.



Movement catches out of the corner of my eye, and I turn to see Walker and Jasper having a conversation near the cooler. They both look up at the television and watch the forecast. Walker grabs the remote and turns it up.

“The National Weather Service is advising residents near this area to take cover immediately. Seek shelter by moving to an interior room on the lowest floor of a sturdy building.”

Heading their way, I ask, “What’s going on?”

They both turn to me. “Tornado watch.”

“Look at that sky,” one of the patrons says. “I don’t know if I’ve ever seen it so green.”

We all look at the front window, trying to see around the neon light hanging in the opening. It looks like the sky is about to open up any minute now. Heavy clouds are hanging low in the sky, angry thunder and bolts of lightning streak the sky, seeming to move closer and closer.

“We better head home before this storm really cuts loose,” one of the guys says, throwing cash on the bar and walking toward the door.

“You guys okay to drive?”

“We’re fine. Only had two and didn’t even finish the last one,” they say before stepping out onto the sidewalk and heading for their vehicles.

I pull out my phone and call my dad. I slowly pace as I wait for him to answer, and when he doesn’t, I try again.

“Everything all right?” Walker asks as I disconnect the phone after the second failed call.

“Oh, yeah,” I reply, slipping my phone back in my pocket. “Just trying to check in on my dad.”

“Not answering?”

“No,” I say, absently pulling the device back out of my pocket and checking for messages.

“Guys?” We both turn to Jasper, who’s staring up at the TV screen with wide eyes. “Shit, this is bad.”

The newscast shows grainy cell phone footage of storm damage. “Does that say Edgeville?” Walker asks.

“Yeah.” Edgeville is about twenty miles southwest of Stewart Grove. “It’s headed right for us.”

We watch grainy cell phone footage submitted to the station for only a few seconds before I’m dialing again.

“Go.”

I look up. “No, it’s okay,” I say, trying to ignore the tremble in my hand.

“We’re closing,” Walker announces.

“Yep. This storm looks severe, and I’d rather be home with my family,” Jasper agrees, taking off and heading to the kitchen.

Fortunately, the few customers here at this time are anxious to get home and understanding when asked to head home for their own safety. I have the doors locked moments later as Walker meets me in the middle of the room. “Go. We’ll come in early tomorrow to clean up the mess,” Walker insists, removing the cash register drawer from the bar and the server area in the restaurant, and taking off for the stairs.

“Text me what time to come in,” I offer, even though I’m off Monday.

Jasper and the three others from the kitchen come out as I retrieve my bag from the break room, flipping lights as they go. “Text me when you all get home,” he instructs his staff as they take off for the back entrance. “Go, Kal, before the storm gets here. Walker and I are right behind you.”

I’m already moving toward the door. “Let me know you guys are okay,” I say, taking off out the back.

The wind has picked up, and the sky is an even deeper shade of green. You can feel the moisture hanging in the air as

the low clouds move across the sky. I jump in the truck, barely have time to put my seat belt on, and take off.

There aren't many vehicles on the road at this point, and I'm grateful. I turn on the radio, hoping to hear a weather report. Leaning forward, I gaze up at the sky as the broadcaster comes on.

*"We are under a tornado warning, now until six o'clock. The National Weather Service is tracking a large storm cell heading northeast for Stewart Grove. Seek shelter immediately..."*

I press down a little hard on the gas pedal, anxious to get home. The rain is starting to come down, the wind starting to push the truck around on the road. My heart is beating hard as I flip on the windshield wipers and squint to see through the downpour.

*"We have unconfirmed reports of tornado activity seven miles southwest of Stewart Grove..."*

When I finally see our driveway, I almost miss it thanks to terrible visibility. I stomp on the brakes and turn the wheel before slamming down on the gas once more. I don't stop until I reach the front porch. The moment I open my door to make a beeline for cover, I hear it. The tornado siren is sounding in town. "Oh my God," I whisper, stopping only long enough to shut the driver's door behind me.

Just as my feet hit the old porch floorboards, the door opens. "Dad?"

"Hey, isn't this something?" he asks, looking around me at the storm.

"Come on, we've got to go," I state, stepping inside the front door to grab the flashlight and some jackets from the closet.

"That's the tornado siren," he says when I return to where he's standing.

“It is. The radio is reporting sightings. We’re going to the storm shelter.”

Dad nods and slowly follows me down the ramp. I try to cover his head with the jacket, but the wind doesn’t make it easy. I have the passenger door open and am helping him inside as best I can. It’s not easy getting him in the truck cab, but we somehow manage. By the time I run around to the driver’s side, I’m soaked, but my adrenaline is racing through my body so wildly, I don’t even notice.

We take off, running the truck hard to get back to the tree line where the shelter is hidden. As soon as I stop, I jump out and race to help him out. It’s hard to move against the raging wind and rain, but we make it to the shelter. I flip open the door and turn on the flashlight. “Here, you take this so I can help you down the stairs.”

When we finally reach the bottom, Dad is breathing hard. I can tell it took a lot out of him to go down all those steps, but we had no other choice. There’s nowhere else on our property safer than down here.

Then it hits me...

“Shit! The barn was still open. I’m going to run back up and close the doors. The horses will be freaked out if I don’t,” I say, turning on a few lanterns and handing him the smallest one. “I’ll be right back.”

“I’m not sure that’s wise,” he counters, but I’m already shaking my head.

“Five minutes, tops. Stay down here.”

With the flashlight, I race up the steps, closing the heavy door behind me as I go. I hold my hand up over my face to shield the rain, when all of a sudden, it stops. The wind dies down as I reach the truck. Is it over?

*“Confirmed tornado on the ground. I repeat, we have a confirmed tornado on the ground outside of Stewart Grove. If you are in the path of this storm, take cover immediately. Again, we have a confirmed tornado...”*

The hairs on the back of my neck stand up, and something tells me to get to the barn now. I drive fast, bumping along the path. The barn is in view, the doors wide open. I stop directly in front of them and jump out. The winds begin to howl as dirt whips me in the face. Holding up my hand to shield my eyes, I step inside the barn and grab the door. Even with the rollers, the door is hard to move against the wind, but I'm able to get the first one closed and secure.

The horses are going crazy behind me. I grab the second door and hear the cracking of wood. It's loud and relentless against the raging storm outside. When I glance up, that's when it happens. The ceiling above me opens up, shards of wood flying around me. I scream as a large piece falls. I'm unable to move in time, and when it hits me, pain radiates through my entire body.

I fall to the floor, reaching blindly for something to grip onto. I need to pull myself away from the open doorway. Away from the angry storm. Away from the danger.

That's the last thing I think of as the darkness grabs hold and drags me under.

# Chapter Twenty-Four

## *Leo*

As I stare out at the water, an eerie calm surrounds me. Even though my heart is heavy and the pain so intense it threatens to steal the very air I breathe, there's an overwhelming sense of tranquility in this spot.

It's short lived, however.

The anger wells up inside me once more, raging through my veins. How can this be happening? How can she have cancer again? She spent months undergoing treatments that made her physically ill and mentally exhausted. She fought though. She beat the odds and won. A twenty-percent chance of survival to come out victorious on the other side.

And now?

Now the same fucking disease she battled was going to take her in the end anyway.

This is so damn unfair.

Why her?

Valerie Martinez is the greatest woman, and I'm not saying that because she's my mom. She's simply the best of the best and doesn't deserve to go out like this.

Axl sits up straight, his head snapping to the south. I go completely still, listening. The scuff of a boot on the ground, followed by the snapping of a stick lets me know I'm no longer alone. "How'd you find me?"

"Wasn't that hard. You're incredibly predictable," Garreth states, dropping down to sit on the log beside me. Axl stops in front of him, happily accepting some scratches behind the ears.

Neither of us says anything for a while. He just sits beside me and watches the water. The breeze has started to pick up, the sky turning a darker shade of blue green. “What are you doing here?”

“Your dad called me.”

*Why am I not surprised?*

“How bad is it?”

Keeping my sights focused ahead, I feel Axl nuzzle against my hand. I stroke his soft coat as I reply, “Bad.”

“What’s the plan of attack?”

My heart drops to my stomach once more. It feels like it’s taking up permanent residence there today. “No plan. She doesn’t want to fight it. Treatment won’t change the fact she’s going to fucking die, G.”

He blows out a long breath. “Shit, man. I’m so sorry.”

I nod, still in a complete state of shock. It doesn’t even feel real to say it. “Dad says she wants to be at home. Go out on her terms,” I add numbly.

“I can understand that,” he replies, lowering his head. “Hell, I respect the hell out of it, even if it’s hard to hear and probably even harder to accept.”

“How? How am I supposed to just accept it?” I ask, the plea evident in my voice. “I just need someone to help me understand. Why?”

He sighs. “I wish I knew the answer to that, buddy. Cancer is a ruthless bitch. You know that better than anyone.”

I snort my agreement. “How am I supposed to just accept this?”

He’s quiet for a few moments, and I figure he has no clue how to answer my question. I mean, it’s a legitimate question, but not exactly one that can be answered easily. “I think you have to for her, but understandably, it’ll take a little time. If you were in her shoes and you’d already fought it

once, knowing how grueling it was, would you want to go through all of that again, especially knowing the end result won't change?"

I close my eyes and let his words sink in. As much as I hate to admit it, I'd do the same if I were in her shoes. No way could I fight like hell, knowing it's terminal. I'd want to be home, with my family. I'd want exactly what she's doing. But... she's my mom. How in the hell am I supposed to just sit back and watch her fade away?

"You cherish every moment you have. Because unlike other people, you will have the opportunity to say goodbye. You get days between now and then to spend with her and a chance to create memories with your mom. So, take some time, get yourself together, and give your mom what she wants. Spend her final months with her and your dad. I think it'll be just what you need too."

I stare out at the trees, watching them move as the breeze continues to pick up. There's a storm brewing, most likely bringing heavy rain and dark skies. But after the rain will be sunlight again, and in some weird, cosmic way, that's what I need to focus on.

Garreth's right.

She deserves everything we can give her in her final days on this earth, and the fact I'll get to spend them with her is the greatest gift.

"When'd you get so smart?"

He snorts a laugh. "Are you kidding? I've always been the genius in our group."

"Bullshit," I reply with a low chuckle. "I made the mistake of copying your social studies homework one time. Worst grade I ever got."

He barks out a laugh. "Maybe you should have done your own homework then." He leans into me and bumps my shoulder with his. "You okay?"



“I will be.”

He wraps his arm around my shoulder and squeezes. “You’ve got friends, man. We’re here for you. Lean on us.”

“Thanks,” I mutter, trying to ignore how my heart aches. Sure, it still hurts because of my mom, but that’s not the only reason.

“Where’s Kallie?”

Guilt hits even harder, threatening to completely overcome me. I close my eyes, trying to fight the images I see of Kallie. Her lying in bed, sleeping, with her raven hair fanned out across the pillow. Her infectious laugh and the way her eyes lit up when she talked to customers at work. The way she held me closely, barely seeming fazed at all by my nightmare. The pain in her voice when I told her I needed space. All things I’ll never forget. “I fucked that up.”

He narrows his eyes at me. “Well, un-fuck it up.”

I run my hands through my hair in aggravation. “It’s not that easy. I...wasn’t very nice.”

“Why?”

“I was upset.”

“At her?”

I think back on everything that happened, and not just in the last few days. I think back over the last several weeks, at the fact I fell in love with her. So in love the thought of not having her in my life feels like a far worse fate than death.

“No, not at her. Never at her.” After a few seconds, I ask, “Have you ever said something you shouldn’t have, something you didn’t mean, because you thought it was better for her?”

“No. I’m not an idiot,” he counters, the humor evident in his voice.

I release a deep breath. “I told her I needed space.”

“Why?”

“Because I was reeling from my dad’s visit. Because I was still embarrassed about having a nightmare at her house. Because I felt like I was saving her.”

“From what?”

“From me.”

“Wow, that’s...bullshit.”

“Excuse me?” I ask, afraid I heard him wrong.

He laughs at me. Actually bends forward, holds his stomach, and laughs. At me.

“Dude, that’s the biggest pile of shit I’ve ever heard. You are one of the best guys I’ve ever known. So you’ve had some heavy shit happen in the past. That stuff doesn’t define you. In fact, it makes you stronger, because despite maybe not being one-hundred-percent, you didn’t let it win. You didn’t let the darkness consume you, even though I know it was hard for you to overcome what happened in Afghanistan.”

“I’m still fucked up over it,” I counter.

“But isn’t it better to have someone by your side on the bad days? I mean, don’t get me wrong, I don’t know what it’s like to have PTSD or whatever it was you were diagnosed with post-military, but I can’t get over the fact you have someone who sees your darkness and, for some crazy reason, seems to love you despite it. She’s the light your darkness craves. Don’t push her away because you’re afraid.”

I sit here, watching the water and the trees. Axl runs after a stick and retrieves it, dropping it at my feet like some sort of friendly offering. “I sleep better than I ever have when she’s in my arms.”

Garreth smiles. “Best feeling in the world, isn’t it?”

Nodding, I can’t help but agree. “I still don’t understand what she sees in me.”

He laughs. “You mean besides your sparkling personality and your mediocre good looks?”

My fist flies before he can realize it's coming, connecting with his upper arm. "Fucker," I reply with a chuckle.

"Damn, that's your punch? My grandma can hit harder than that," he teases, even though I know it's bullshit. That was a solid punch. "In all seriousness, Leo, if you love her, don't let her go. Life's too short, as you're well aware of. When you finally find that one person put on this earth for you, don't let pride and fear get in your way. Grab on to your happiness and don't let go."

I glance to the side and grin at my friend. "I'm happy for you. I'm happy you found your happiness."

"And I don't ever plan to let her go."

"Good," I reply, reaching down and petting Axl. "I'm not sure what she sees in you, but Reagan's great, despite that flaw."

"Fuck you," he says with a laugh, glancing up at the weird green sky. "The sky's getting pretty dark," Garreth observes.

"It is," I confirm, the wind starting to blow the trees with more intensity as the clouds roll past the clearing in the trees quickly.

Just as he goes to reply, his cell phone pierces the silence. "Sorry, it's Reagan. Give me one second," he says, lifting the phone to his ear. "Hey." As he listens to his wife, his entire demeanor changes. He's suddenly tense, his body on alert as he stands up from the log. "Okay, I'm on my way home, baby. Stay calm and go to the bathroom. Take Evangeline and wait for me there. I'm coming." A few seconds later he adds, "Love you too."

"Listen, we need to get out of here," he states, shoving his phone in his pocket.

I'm standing instantly. "What's wrong?"

"This storm is nasty. There're reports of tornadic activity near Edgeville, and it's headed this way. I need to get home to

my family.”

“Absolutely. I’m going to check on Mom and Dad,” I say, already following behind him as he heads for the path that’ll lead us back to our vehicles. I whistle for Axl, but he’s already hot on our heels, leading the way until we’re back at the campground where we left our trucks.

As soon as we reach my truck, I throw open the door. I turn to pick up Axl, but he jumps inside, using the floorboard as a spring and leaping onto the seat. He runs over to the passenger side and sits, as if he completely understands the magnitude of what’s happening.

“Text me when you get home and let me know you’re okay,” Garreth hollers, climbing into his own truck.

“Yep! You do the same. Stay safe, G.”

“You too.”

And then he’s gone, tearing out of the short path and flying home to his family.

Retrieving my phone, I pull it out and dial my dad.

“Hello?”

“Hey, are you home?”

“Yeah, we’re in the basement. Storm’s pretty bad. I was just getting ready to call you. They’re saying we could have a tornado.”

“I’m leaving the campground now. I’ll come to you.”

“No,” he quickly insists. “Go home. It’s closer than coming here. They say it’s close, Leo. Get home.”

“All right, if you’re both safe. I’ll check on you later.”

“Message me when you’re there.”

“I will, Dad. I love you both,” I state, stopping outside the gate to secure it. I’m sure it’ll be fine if I were to leave it and come back, but habit has me getting out and securing our property.

Just as I get back inside, the rain starts. The sky takes on a deeper green and gray color. I've never seen it look like that. It's the wildest color combination, but I don't have time to sit around and watch it. The skies have opened up in an angry wave of water and lightning. I turn on the windshield wipers full blast, squinting against the raging storm outside.

I'm not far from town, and even though I know I shouldn't, I reach for my phone. I fumble with the screen and press her name the moment it comes up. Kallie's cell rings, but she doesn't pick up. "Come on, honey. Where are you?" I ask myself, already knowing I'm heading toward the bar instead of home. If she's there, that's where I'll be too.

As I drive down the main street through town, I realize it's deserted. There's not one car anywhere, except parked near the small apartments above the barber and travel agency. I pass by Burgers and Brew, but it's clearly closed down. I should feel relief, knowing she's not there, but the fact I'm not sure where she is at all weighs heavily on me.

Reaching for the phone, I redial her. This time, it goes straight to voicemail. The moment I set my phone down, I hear it. The piercing scream of the tornado siren fills the air with noise and my heart with panic.

"Fuck!" I holler, turning left on Jefferson and pressing down the gas pedal.

My truck jolts forward, racing toward her house. The wind is strong. So fucking strong, I can barely keep it moving in a straight line. In fact, with the tornado siren blaring in the background and the storm rampant around me, I know I should pull over and take cover, but I can't.

All I can think about is getting to Kallie.

I reach the three-way intersection, the one where I found her disabled truck all those weeks ago, and that's when it happens. The rain just seems to...stop. The wind dies. The world around me is suddenly calm. I sit at that stop sign and just look around, relieved that it has blown over so quickly.

Then, I see it.

The small funnel hangs out of the low cloud, picking up debris and tossing it back to the earth. It's not big, but the sight of the twister is terrifying, especially because it's headed straight for Kallie's house.

I stomp on the gas once more, gravel flying, as I race toward her. I'm still a few miles down the road, but I can see the tornado as it rips through the field near where her house sits. Fear grips me so tightly; I can't even tell if I'm breathing. My focus is on getting to her as quickly as possible.

The rain starts again, but at a much slower rhythm than before. I scan the field, looking for the twister and praying it stays away from her house. It's moving toward her tree line and real terror grips my chest.

What if I'm too late?

What if I lose the only woman I'll ever love?

The funnel jumps around before slowly dissipating and disappearing completely. Just as quickly as it started, it's gone. The rain dulls to a light drum against my windshield, and I can't help but wonder if I imagined the entire thing.

When I finally reach her driveway, I fly up the lane, scanning the property for any sign of movement. Axl is sitting up straight, whimpering. I'm about to reach over and pet him when something strange catches my attention. The barn. It looks...

"Holy shit," I mutter, pulling up beside it and noticing the gaping hole in the roof. Not only that, the side appears to be pushed in and one of the doors is off the rollers.

I jump out of my truck the moment it's in Park and make a beeline for the barn entrance. There's debris everywhere, large pieces of the wooden structure lying on the ground and littering around the open space. The horses are neighing, stomping and pushing against their stalls, letting me know they're not happy.

But that's not what grabs my attention.

Bud.

He's standing along the wall, kneeling down on his front elbows in a way I've never seen before. I start to head in his direction, quickly glancing over at his stall to find the wooden gate annihilated. "Bud?" I ask, slowly approaching the horse.

He turns my way, his eyes wide with something that looks like fear. Then, he glances down, and that's when I see her.

Kallie.

"Kal?" I holler, dropping to my knees beside where Bud seems to be holding a protective stance over her. "Kallie?"

Bud stands up and shifts to the side, giving me access to the woman I love. There's blood on her head and she's unconscious, but she's breathing.

*Thank God.*

"Kallie?" I whisper, getting closer to her face. I rip off my shirt and apply pressure to her head wound, willing her to open those beautiful eyes. "Come on, Kallie. Wake up for me, beautiful. Show me those dark blue eyes of yours. Please, angel. I need to see them. I need *you*."

I feel Axl's soft fur brush against my arm as he comes to sit directly beside Kallie's head. I run my fingers across her cheek, brushing hair off her forehead. Axl leans in and licks her cheek before settling against her neck, his chin resting on her shoulder.

"Leo?"

Shocked, I look down into those intoxicating orbs and smile. "I'm right here, baby. Don't move, okay? I think the barn came down on your head."

She closes her eyes. "My head is freaking killing me."

"What happened?" I ask, wanting nothing more than to gather her in my arms and kiss the hell out of her.

“I came here to close up the barn. As I was closing the door, part of the roof collapsed.” Then her eyes widen with fear. “Dad! He’s in the storm shelter!” she hollers before wincing in pain.

“It’s okay, honey. I’m sure he’s fine.”

“Go check on him, Leo.”

“I will, Kal, but first, I have to call the ambulance for you. My phone is in my truck. I need to run back and grab it, okay?”

“Mmm,” she mumbles, turning her head ever so slightly to get closer to Axl.

“Stay still, angel. I’ll be right back.” I place a soft kiss on her forehead and run back to my truck, chastising myself for not grabbing my phone before I got out.

The moment I have it in hand, I dial 911 and give them as much information as I can. They promise to send help as soon as possible, asking me to stay on the line, but I refuse. I just want to get back to Kallie and hold her.

Bending down, I press my lips softly against hers. “I love you, Kallie. I’m sorry I’m such an idiot.”

“S’okay,” she mumbles, closing her eyes.

“No, it’s not, but I promise to do better. I can’t guarantee I won’t be a jerk again, but I promise not to push you away. I need you, Kallie. More than anything. I. Need. You.”

She smiles, cracking open her eyes. “I love you too.”

Sweetest words ever.



# Chapter Twenty-Five

## *Kallie*

My head is killing me.

As I lie here on the cool concrete, wet and in pain, all I can think about is how Leo is here. He appeared, as if out of nowhere, conjured up from my mind. I was dreaming about him, of course, imagining us together, riding horses in the pasture.

Something soft and fuzzy nuzzles my neck and I know it's Axl. I've witnessed him providing comfort to Leo a handful of times, and this moment is no different. He's an amazing companion and seems to understand when he's needed most.

Something else nudges my face. This one startles me, because I wasn't expecting it. I crack open my eyes and find Bud standing directly above me. I stare up at him and see nothing but compassion and worry in those dark brown eyes of his. It's then I realize what happened. I know why Bud's out of his stall. I know what he did.

Slowly, I reach up and pet his nose. "Thank you," I whisper.

Bud leans in to my touch, and for the first time since I moved home, I'm not afraid of him. He might be a big guy with an attitude problem, but I realize now I've been wrong about him all along. He's an incredible animal and I'm so grateful he was here to protect me.

"Bud?"

I close my eyes briefly as Leo continues to hold me. "It's okay," I whisper to him, letting him know the horse is fine. "He saved me."

"What?" Leo asks, checking the wound on top of my head. "This isn't bleeding as much as it was."

“Part of the roof collapsed when I was shutting the door. It knocked me down. I could hear the creaking wood above me but passed out before I could move out of the way.” I open my eyes and glance over at the hovering horse. “Bud broke out of his stall. He dragged me out of the way and stood over me when more pieces of the ceiling fell.”

Leo’s eyes fill with tears as he glances quickly over at the horse. “I’m sorry I wasn’t here.”

I try to shake my head, but it hurts too badly. “No,” I whisper, reaching up and slipping my fingers into the hair at the base of his neck. It’s a little longer than normal, as if he possibly missed a cut recently. “This was not your fault.”

“As good as it feels to have your hand on me, you need to stop moving. The ambulance is on the way.”

“Dad,” I say, my throat suddenly dry. Why am I so tired all of a sudden?

“Garreth’s on his way over to help. He’ll go back to the storm shelter and get your dad. The ambulance won’t leave until we know he’s all right.” He sighs and takes the opportunity to link our fingers together and I just revel in the feel of his skin against mine. “Lie still, Kal. I’ve got you. I’m not going anywhere, okay? I’m sorry for earlier today. I’m sorry for treating you as if you didn’t matter to me, when in fact, you mean more to me than anyone ever has.”

I feel his thumb rub gentle circles across my hand. It’s the most relaxing, comforting touch in the world. “Don’t apologize,” I mutter, keeping my eyes closed and the darkness at bay. I don’t want to pass out again.

“I’ll apologize until I feel you truly understand the magnitude of my sorrow for hurting you. I have so much to share, but now isn’t the time,” he says. Suddenly, I can hear the wailing ambulance quickly approaching.

Everything happens fast after that. My condition is assessed by two paramedics. Leo puts Bud away in one of the empty stalls and checks on the other horses quickly, just to

make sure they don't need attention from the large animal vet. Garreth and others arrive and go to the storm shelter to help my dad.

When I'm strapped to a backboard and lifted onto a gurney, I feel Leo's presence once more. He takes my hand and places a tender kiss on my forehead. "I'm going with you. Garreth and Jameson are with your dad. They say he's fine, and he's insisting he doesn't need an ambulance. They're going to drive him to the hospital to meet us."

"I want him checked out when he gets there," I mumble, angling my head to get closer. As they start to move me toward the waiting ambulance, I hear a whimper. "Put Axl in the house. He'll be all right in there."

"My dad is already on his way out here to get him."

I can't help but smile. "You've been busy."

"I'll do anything and everything to make sure you're happy and safe, Kal."

That's the last thing he says as he's instructed out of the way, and I'm loaded in the ambulance. Keeping my eyes closed because it helps with the pain. I feel Leo's warmth once more as the ambulance moves, his hand wrapped firmly around mine, and believe it or not, everything finally feels right.

There's a warmth I can't describe, an extra presence with me, and I'm not just talking about having Leo here. Though, he's definitely a big piece of the comfort I feel. This is something bigger, something greater, and as I slowly drift off to sleep, I see my mom. She's standing beside Bud, lovingly stroking his soft mane. She offers me that familiar smile, the one I recall often from my childhood.

It's in that moment I know she was with me. She was there, helping Bud get out of his stall and protecting me from further injury.

Like a guardian angel, she continues to watch over me. But more than that, she looks happy and at peace, and there's

no better realization in the world.

My mom is free.



There's a slow beeping noise filling the room, and when I crack open my eyes, I see the faint light from the bathroom door. Turning my head to the side, I find Leo sitting beside my bed, curled up in an incredibly uncomfortable position as he sleeps with his head lying at my side. I can't help but reach over, the IV in my hand moving with me, and gently touch his rough skin.

He jerks awake, his unfocused eyes eventually finding mine. "Hey," he says, sitting up and stretching, his T-shirt riding up, displaying a sliver of toned stomach and sandy blond hair. "Stop it."

I meet his humorous gaze and waggle my eyebrows suggestively. "You're the one who flashed me."

He chuckles low and deep. "I hardly consider an inch of belly to be flashing."

I shrug, bringing my hand up to my dry mouth. "We'll have to agree to disagree then."

"What do you need?" he asks, already moving to the opposite side of my bed to retrieve a glass of water.

"Thank you," I whisper, taking the plastic cup and sipping. "Dad?"

"He went home a little bit ago. My parents offered to stay with him, but he refused. He said he'll be just fine for a few hours tonight. They promised to pick him up in the morning and take him to breakfast before they come here. Axl stayed with him."

"That's sweet of them," I whisper, noticing the pain in my head is now just a dull ache. "I appreciate all their help."

“They’re doing it because they love you, and because they know how much you mean to me,” he states, returning to his chair beside my bed. “How are you feeling?”

“A little better. I can open my eyes without wanting to cry, so that’s something.”

He reaches up and swipes hair off my forehead. “You took quite a blow to the noggin, Kal. You’re incredibly lucky you only suffered a concussion and that laceration.” He runs his fingers gently across the bandage on top of my head.

I decide not to tell him about the vision I had of my mom, at least not right now. I still am not quite sure I believe it and am trying to come to terms with everything that happened the night before.

“You need your rest.”

“I feel like I’ve been sleeping for days,” I reply, even though I know it’s only been a handful of hours. After I was checked out in the ER, I was informed I’d be spending the night in the hospital for observation. I learned two other properties had been damaged by the small tornado, and besides my knock to the head, no other physical injuries were sustained.

Garreth and Jameson helped bring my dad up from the storm shelter. He was shaken up by the fact I didn’t return but was completely unscathed. I still insisted he get checked out, and fortunately, he received a clean bill of health.

“You should still get a little sleep.”

I reach for his hand and bring it to my lips. “I don’t want to sleep. I want to know everything I missed while I was out.”

Leo sighs and leans in, his gray eyes clear and bright for the first time since he found me in the barn. “You haven’t missed much, honey.”

“Well, how about you tell me why you reacted the way you did earlier on the phone,” I suggest, shifting a little in my

bed. Something tells me this conversation is going to be heavy and hard.

“We can table that until you’re feeling better,” he insists.

“Please, Leo,” I whisper. “That’s if you want to tell me.”

“I do,” he quickly insists. “I had planned on telling you everything when I was on my way to your house. Then, I saw that twister headed straight for you, and...” His voice trails off and his eyes fill with so much pain.

I reach up and stroke his stubbled jaw. “I’m okay. I’m right here.”

He sighs loudly and closes his eyes. “Several things happened in about twenty-four hours, but it all started last Monday morning when I had that nightmare. It freaked me out. I felt weak, and worse, you witnessed it.”

“I didn’t care about that.”

“I know. Really, I figured it out, even though I admit, it took me a few days.”

“That’s why you avoided me.”

He drops his head. “Yeah. I just needed time to process it. I still get incredibly angry at what happened to me, even though it’s much better than it was. But I’m not angry at you, and I realize I took some of my pain out on you.” He takes a deep breath. “I’ve already talked to the therapist I used when I was first discharged from the Army. He gave me a referral to someone here, in Stewart Grove. I have an appointment to talk to them on Wednesday morning.”

I can’t help but smile. “I’m proud of you.”

“I don’t deserve it.”

“Yes, you do. You’ve recognized you have some things to work on and are willing to put in the time and effort to get better.”

“For you,” he says, leaning in and kissing my forehead once more. These forehead kisses are quickly becoming one

of my most favorite things in the world.

He takes a deep breath and continues. "Saturday, right before noon, I had a visitor at the shop. I had talked to you earlier and was planning to go have dinner at the bar, but then Olivia showed up out of nowhere."

My breathing hitches in my throat.

"Olivia was married to one of my teammates, Jon. We called him Richie, since his last name was Richman, and I was closest to him out of anyone else in the military. We met in basic and went through the ranks together. Olivia brought her son, Jonathon, with her. I'd never met him before; didn't even know she was pregnant. The realization and her sudden appearance sent me reeling. She showed up the day before the three-year anniversary of his death. We went and had lunch and caught up on some of the things going on in her life. She found out she was pregnant not long before we buried her husband, but I had stayed away from her because of the guilt I carried. It was too hard to see her going through so much pain and suffering when I lived."

"You blamed yourself," I deduce.

"Terribly. Survivor's guilt is what they called it, and it ate me alive."

I cup his cheek, stroking the scratchy stubble with my thumb. "I'm so sorry you've gone through that."

He turns his head and kisses my palm. "You have nothing to be sorry for, but I do appreciate it. Anyway, I've known her for years and she basically called me on it. Told me Jon wouldn't want me to not live my life to the fullest. I was given a gift, a chance to live when the others didn't. The realization hit me hard."

"I bet."

"I came home, determined to see you and tell you how much you mean to me, but the moment I got back to my place, Otto called and needed help. He was down with food poisoning and there was a tow call. That one call turned into

all night long, one after another. By the time I got home and saw your text, I was dead on my feet and basically passed out. I got up the next morning to go to your house, but then—” He stops talking, his eyes filling with unshed tears.

“What?”

“My mom was diagnosed with cancer again.”

I gasp, my hand covering my mouth as I gape up at him. “What? No!”

He closes his eyes and shakes his head. “Brain, bone, and lung. It basically spread everywhere, fast.”

Tears stream down my face. “Oh my God, Leo,” I cry.

He instantly wraps his arms around me, offering me comfort when it should be the other way around. “It’s terminal. They’ve given her six months,” he whispers, letting his own tears fall down his cheeks.

“I don’t know what to say,” I mutter, swiping at the wetness on my cheeks.

“You don’t have to say anything. I was so fucking pissed when my dad left, and that’s when you called. My phone had been vibrating with messages and ringing, I just answered it, not realizing it was you. I reacted out of anger, but it wasn’t you I was angry with, Kal. I was mad at the world, and I took that out on you. I went to our campground property outside of town. I sat there all damn day, trying to understand. That’s when Garreth showed up. He made me see why she chose to die at peace at home instead of trying to prolong the inevitable with treatments. He said I was wasting moments with her, and that realization hit me hard.”

“Then what are you doing here? Go! Be with her!” I cry, practically pushing him off me, unsuccessfully.

He chuckles and doesn’t move. “Today, I’m needed here, with you. I’m not planning to spend every waking hour with my mom, but I will definitely do better about visiting her



from now on. She will get mad at me if I don't live my life, Kallie, and that's you. *You're my life.*"

I reach for him, needing to feel his arms wrapped around me as I cry. I cry for Valerie and the terrible diagnosis she's been given. I cry for Leo, because I know all too well how difficult it is to lose your mother. I cry for Bruno, who will have to watch his wife fade away and won't be able to do anything about it. I cry for everyone who knows her and is enriched just by having her in their lives, like me.

When the tears finally slow, he pulls back and wipes them away. He leans forward, lightly pressing his forehead to mine and his lips against my mouth. "I love you, Kallie. More than I ever thought possible, I love you."

"I love you too," I whisper, reveling in the pressure of his lips and the softness of his tongue as it glides against mine.

"I want you by my side. If you'll let me, I will show you every day how much you mean to me. I promise never to take you for granted, Kallie. I just want to spend the rest of my life loving you."

A small smile cracks across my lips. "That sounded an awful lot like a proposal."

"No, that was just me speaking from the heart. When I propose, you'll know it," he replies with a wink.

"So now what?" I ask, leaning back against the pillows.

"Now, we rest. We'll take it day by day and figure the rest out as it comes," he replies with a yawn.

When he lays his head down against the mattress, I start to move. "Come here," I tell him, sliding over as far as I can to give him space. I lower the top half of the bed so it's flat and wait for him to join me.

"I'm not so sure this is acceptable by hospital standards, but I won't turn down the opportunity to hold you while you sleep." The moment he's snuggled in beside me, he adds, "I've missed this."

“Me too. Let’s never spend a night apart again. Those nights sucked.”

He chuckles. “Fair enough.”

When my eyelids start to close and my body relaxes against his, I whisper, “Thank you for coming to rescue me.”

“Always, Kallie. I will always be there when you need me.”

As I drift back to sleep, I know there’s a smile on my lips. Even amongst the chaos, my world feels right. I know we can get through the hard things. Lord knows, we’ll have plenty of hard stuff to get through in the coming months, but as long as we meet the challenges head-on, together, I know we’ll be okay.

Life is never predictable. It can be downright ugly at times, but it’s how you deal with the ugly that shows your true colors.

Leo has some challenges ahead of him, but he won’t be going through them alone. I’ll be right there, ready to hold him up when he’s down and showing him how amazing he truly is. There was a reason God spared him three years ago in Afghanistan. I plan to spend the rest of my life reminding him that his life has value. Meaning.

He’s worthy of receiving love and joy.

My love.

Because that’s what he’ll have.

All of my love.

Forever.

# Epilogue

## *Leo*

Four months later

I make my way quietly down the stairs, Axl already in the kitchen, waiting. As I round the corner, I find Al sitting at the table, as I do every morning. Axl already greeted him, I'm sure, and is now sitting at the back door, ready to go outside.

"Morning," I mumble, opening the door to let him out.

"Good morning," Al replies, sipping his cup of coffee and eyeing me over the brim of his mug.

I retrieve my own cup and fill it up before turning and propping my hip against the counter. "Sleep well?"

"I did. Axl came down around two and said hello," Kallie's dad says with a big grin on his face.

"Sorry about that." Axl and I have been staying here pretty much since Kallie's accident four months ago. The few times I stayed at my own house were miserable without her beside me, and I hated every minute of it. The next morning, I'd find a text from Kallie telling me to never do that again and to get my ass back to her bed.

A gentleman always does as instructed by the lady he loves.

Al snorts a laugh. "Don't be sorry. I enjoy him lying with me until I fall back asleep. Then, I assume he returns to your room upstairs."

He would be right. Axl always goes down and checks on Al at some point in the night. Once he knows the old man is comfortable and asleep, he returns to my side. Or Kallie's side. He bounces between our bed and the couch, depending on whether or not we've confined him to the couch while Kallie and I enjoy some alone time.

Speaking of, Axl scratches at the back door, letting us know he's ready to come in for breakfast. I open the door and watch as he scurries inside, heading straight to his food bowl. "Have a nice visit with Bud?" I ask, knowing that's exactly where the pup went as soon as he was done going to the bathroom. Every chance he gets, he runs to the barn and says hello to the horses.

I give him a quick pet before filling his food dish and topping off the water. Grabbing my cup of coffee, I join Al at the table before making a quick breakfast before work.

I just take a sip of the hot liquid when he asks, "So? When are you going to ask her?"

I almost spit out what's in my mouth. Instead, it slides down the wrong pipe and floods my lungs. Coughing, it takes several minutes before I'm able to breathe normally once more.

Al seems happy with my near-death experience, smiling from ear to ear. "Cat got your tongue?"

"No," I grumble, coughing one last time. "Just surprised by your bluntness."

"Ha! When has that ever surprised you?" he asks, taking another drink of his coffee.

"Touché." Meeting his gaze, I place my elbows on the table and lean in closer. "To answer your other question, I haven't decided yet."

"But you *are* going to ask her, right?"

"Yes." No hesitation. I don't mention I've had a ring hidden in the closet for nearly two months now. I know without a shadow of a doubt I want to marry her. I just pray she feels the same way.

"She does."

"What?"

“I recognized the look in your eyes. It was the same uncertainty I had in mine right before I asked Pearl to marry me. Don’t fear, my boy. She loves you. I know my daughter. You ask, she’ll say yes.”

My throat is thick as I nod in understanding.

The entire kitchen feels lighter somehow, as if everything heavy has been thrown out the window. It’s a gorgeous September Saturday morning, the sun just starting to rise above the horizon.

“We’re still going to your parents’ house for dinner, right?”

“Yes, sir. As soon as the afternoon chores are completed, we can head over there.”

He nods. “I look forward to seeing your folks. How’s your mom feeling?”

I hang my head slightly and take a deep breath. “Not good. I don’t think she has much time left.”

Al moves, reaching for my hand resting on the table and giving it a squeeze. “Then you take every second you have with her and hold on to it as long as you can.”

It’s hard to breathe when talking about my mom and the fact her time on this earth is almost over. In the last four months, her decline has been steady, her strength fading. She’s slowly losing everything, except that smile. It still lights up her eyes and whatever room she’s in.

I’m going to miss that most of all.

“What do you say I get some breakfast going before I have to head to work?” I ask, trying to redirect my mind as best I can. I’ll still come back to the fact my mom is succumbing to cancer, but it helps me every now and again to switch my focus to something else for a short while.

Right now, it should be making breakfast so Kallie can sleep in.

Instead, it's stuck on removing that ring from the back of the closet and slipping it onto her hand.

It's time to make her mine forever.



## *Kallie*

“Hey, you have time to go with me to the barn?” Leo asks as I’m heading to the house to shower for dinner.

I glance at my wristwatch. I still have time to shower and get ready to go to his parents’ house. Dad is going too, as is Axl. Every time we go—which is often—I wonder if it’ll be the last time I see Valerie. I hate to think like that, but I can’t help it. When we leave, I make sure to give her a long hug, kiss on the cheek, and tell her I love her.

“Yeah, sure,” I tell him, turning around and following him to the barn. The September sun is still high in the sky, it’s warmth very evident, but also a reminder that the cooler days on the horizon.

He takes my hand and escorts me inside. Axl is there, happy to see us approaching, his tail thumping against the gate of Bud’s stall.

“Well, what are you doing, cutie pie?” I ask, bending down to pet the growing pup. He’s almost seventy pounds of happy, healthy dog. I notice something hanging off his collar. Reaching for it, I grasp the small jewelry box. “What’s this?”

Leo smiles, kneeling beside Axl and removing the ties. “Allow me to show you.” Once it’s released, he turns to face me, the box in his hand.

He’s also still on his knee.

My heart rate jumps, my lungs seizing to draw air. All I can do is stand here, wide eyed and full of shock as he flips

open the box. I gasp in shock, my hands covering my mouth as I gaze down at the breathtaking diamond ring. There's a beautiful round diamond in the middle, with a band of smaller diamonds around it.

"Kallie, since I met you in April, nothing has been the same. I feel complete, content, and happy for the first time. You give me peace and the will to live my life to the fullest, for my friends who aren't here, for my mom. You make me a better person just by being you. Every day with you is better than the previous one, and all I want to do is spend the rest of my life with you, loving you, until I'm no longer on this earth. You are my home, Kallie Carpenter." He takes a deep breath and smiles up at me when he asks, "Will you marry me?"

I'm already nodding, sniffing through my tears and giggles as I whisper, "Yes."

He exhales loudly, as if he quite possibly thought I might say no. Silly boy.

Leo slides the ring on my finger, and it's a perfect fit. Then, he's on his feet, fingers slipping into my hair as he kisses me soundly. "I know we haven't talked much about the future. Where we'd live and whatnot, but we can figure that all out as we go. I just want to be with you." He swipes at the tears still lingering on my cheeks.

"I have to help take care of my dad," I start, but don't get a chance to finish.

"I know that. If you're okay with me moving in here, I'd do it in a heartbeat. I don't want you to stress over any of that. I know you're needed here with him, and I'd never try to take you away from that."

I didn't know it was possible to love a person any more than I already do. Leo just gets me. He knows I'm committed to caring for my father for the rest of his life. He knows I won't put him in a home somewhere. My dad deserves to live his best life too, and that means staying home on the horse ranch he named after my mother.

“I’ve been doing some thinking,” I tell him, linking our fingers together as I gaze up at him.

“About?”

“A baby.” When his eyes widen a little, I quickly continue, “I’m not saying now or even soon. I sort of came to terms that it would be difficult for me if I ever wanted to get pregnant, thanks to only having one fallopian tube and all the scar tissue, but now that I’m with you, I can see it. Maybe. Someday. We don’t have to, but it would be something I’d consider down the road.”

A wide smile spreads across his face. “Babe, I’m almost forty years old and have never considered bringing a baby into this world. Until now. Until you. So if you want a baby, I will give you a baby.”

I step into his embrace, wrapping my arms around his waist. “There’s one more thing.”

He chuckles as he draws me closer, resting his arms on my shoulders. “Anything.”

I swallow hard, knowing what I’m about to request could make him incredibly happy or go the opposite way. Straightening my spine, I make sure he can see the sincerity in my eyes, which, of course, brings on more tears, as I say, “I want to get married as soon as possible. I want your mom to be there, a part of our wedding day.”

He seems a little taken aback by my request. Emotions fill his eyes right along with moisture. He swallows hard and closes his eyes. I wait him out, allowing him time to process what I’ve said.

Suddenly, he pulls me tightly against his chest, hugging me so closely, it’s hard to breathe. After a few minutes, he moves, giving us a little space and meeting my eyes. “We don’t have a lot of time, Kallie.”

“I know, and I don’t care. I don’t need the fancy dress and the big church. We can get married at the courthouse. I



just want your mom to be part of it.” I didn’t even realize I was crying again until he kisses away the tears on my face.

“She would love that. *I* would love that.”

“Then it’s settled. Let’s make some calls and see how quickly we can get this pulled together.”

He draws me into his arms once more, sticks his nose in my hair, and just breathes me in. “You are the most incredible woman I’ve ever known.”

“I don’t know about that,” I counter with a chuckle.

“I do.” He places a hard kiss on my forehead. “Come on, let’s go tell your dad the big news. He’s been chomping at the bit for me to make an honest woman out of you.”

“Oh, Lord,” I giggle, taking his hand.

Before we exit the barn, I stop and look around. The roof and damaged side have been fixed, thanks to Walker, Jameson, Isaac, and Jasper. They spent an entire day after the storm, along with Garreth and Leo, fixing the gaping hole and making sure it was safe again. Bud is there, his head sticking out of his stall as he watches us. I swear there’s a smile on the horse’s face. And then there’s Axl, who is faithfully at our side, happily trotting along as we head for the house.

I never envisioned my life this way, but I think that makes it that much sweeter.

Home Sweet Home.

# Another Epilogue

*Leo*

Two weeks later

“You ready?” Garreth asks from the doorway of my old bedroom at my parents’ house.

“Fuck, yes.”

My oldest friend laughs, shaking his head. “I don’t think you’re supposed to say fuck in the presence of God.”

“Probably not,” I concede. “Let’s go.”

I follow behind my dearest friend out to the living room where the rest of our close friends and family are gathered. The room is filled, everyone standing off to the side or in the back of the room. There’s a wooden arch in front of the picture window with fall flowers on it. That’s where the minister awaits to begin the ceremony.

I turn and go to the kitchen where my parents, as well as Al, wait. He turns and gives me a wide smile, reaching out and offering me his hand. “You ready, Son?” Al asks, his eyes shining brightly.

“I think I’ve been ready for this moment my entire life. I just didn’t realize it.”

He smiles proudly, pulling me into a hug before stepping aside.

My dad is next, hugging me just as tightly as Kallie’s father. He has tears in his eyes, and he nods in gratitude. He knows what tonight means, not only to me and Kallie, but to my mom, and because of that reason, he will forever be grateful for this gift we’ve given her.

“Love you, Dad,” I tell him, pulling him into another hug. I don’t tell him that nearly enough.

“Love you too, Leo.”

Then, I turn to face my mom. She’s sitting in a wheelchair, an ivory throw blanket draped across her lap. She looks so frail, but I’ve never seen her look more beautiful. With the help of Kallie, she picked out a stunning taupe dress with beading around the neck and sleeves. It hangs off her in ways it wouldn’t have just a few months ago, a cruel reminder of the hand life dealt her. Her hair is swept up and she’s wearing makeup for the first time in quite a while.

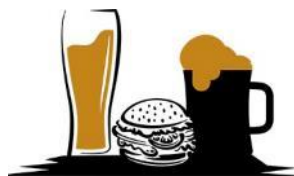
She’s simply beautiful, and I’m so damn happy she’s here with us today.

Mom reaches up and cups my clean-shaven jaw. “Come on, Leo. Let’s get you married.”

With her hand tucked in mine and Dad pushing the chair, we walk into the living room together, side by side. Jameson plays a soft melody on his guitar as we make our way to the arch. I stop, Dad positioning the chair just off to the right, where Mom will have the best view in the house for today’s ceremony. Then, he steps forward, taking her hand and standing proudly at her side.

I bend down and kiss her cheek, wiping away the tears as they fall from her eyes. I hand over the handkerchief from my dress shirt pocket, squeezing her left hand one last time, and take my position at the front of the room.

To await my bride.



*Kallie*

“It’s time.”

I look up to find Reagan standing in the doorway, holding a sleeping Evangeline in her arms. She’s wearing a gorgeous burgundy dress, one we found last week when we

went dress shopping at a beautiful boutique in Edgeville that carried off-the-rack dresses for all occasions.

I was able to find my dress there too. Since I wasn't in the hunt for a specific style of dress—or needing it to be white in color—I was able to find a handful that would have worked for tonight. The one I fell in love with is an ivory gown with a stunning lace overlay. It has a halter-style neck with an open back and a skirt that sways when I walk. I've paired it with a pair of light brown cowboy boots that match Reagan's. Honestly, the thought of wearing heels made me a little sweaty in the armpits, so when she suggested I wear boots, it just seemed right.

“Holy crap, you look amazing. Leo's going to swallow his tongue,” she states with a wide smile on her face.

“You think?” I ask, giving myself one last glance in the full-length mirror.

“I know. He's ready,” she says, handing me a small bouquet of dark red roses and bright yellow sunflowers.

“Then let's go.”

Before I can exit the master bedroom Valerie and Bruno allowed me to use to get ready, my dad appears in the doorway. He covers his mouth with his hand and just stares. “Wow.”

The biggest smile spreads across my face. I can't help but take in the cane he decided to use today. He usually uses his walker, preferring the stability it provides, but opted to use a hand-carved wooden cane to walk me down the aisle.

“You are a vision, Kallie girl. You look so much like your mother.”

Tears fill my eyes and I have to blink hard to keep them at bay. “Don't make me cry.”

“I'm sorry, that's the last thing I want to do today.” He steps forward and pulls something out of his pocket. When he holds it up, I see a stunning ruby hanging from a delicate

silver chain. “I wasn’t sure what to get you for today,” he says, twirling his finger as if asking me to turn around. “May I?”

I nod, my throat too thick with emotions to speak.

“I was looking through your mother’s jewelry box last week and found this,” he informs me, draping the necklace around my neck and securing it closed. “She didn’t have a lot of jewelry, but I remember this necklace. I bought it for her after you were born. The ruby is your birthstone. She wore it for a long time, until the chain broke. I had forgotten about it and sent Leo to town to the jeweler. He was able to fix the chain. I thought that would mean more than just buying a new one.”

I look up, staring straight into the mirror. At the necklace around my neck. At the man who placed it there. Spinning around, I throw my arms around him, not caring if I’m crushing the flower pinned to his dress shirt or the bouquet in my hands. All I want—all I need right now is to hug him.

“This means more to me than you’ll ever know,” I whisper, running my finger along the dark red gem.

“There’s more,” he says, pulling a small box out of his other pocket. When he flips it open, I let the tears fall freely down my face, grateful BJ insisted on using waterproof mascara for my eyes. “These are from Valerie.”

I gasp, my eyes wide with surprise. “What?”

“She wanted you to have them. They were her mother’s. They both wore them at their own weddings,” he says calmly, pulling the two diamond earrings from the box and placing them in my shaking hands. I quickly remove the basic hoops I had put in for today and replace them with the heirlooms. “She has a message for you too, but I think you should wait until later to read it.” He pulls an envelope out of his back pocket and places it on the bed. “Right now, there’s a man waiting for you in the living room. What do you say we put him out of his misery and get this show on the road?”

Nodding, I run my finger across my name written on the basic, white envelope. I recognize her handwriting and know whatever is inside will probably make me cry even more. Probably a good call on my dad's part to wait until later.

I take the envelope and slip it into the pocket of my dress. "Fancy," Dad says with a big smile.

"It was one of the main selling points for this dress," I quip.

I slip my arm through his and allow him to escort me from the room.

I'm overwhelmed the moment I step into the hallway. I've been sequestered in the room since I arrived this morning and left the decorating to the wives of my bosses. They did not disappoint in the least. There are gorgeous fall flowers everywhere, the room lit by the soft glow of lanterns.

Everyone is here. Walker, Mallory, Jameson, Madelyn, Jasper, Lyndee, Isaac, and BJ. Leo's boss, Otto, and his wife, Janice, stand off to the side, both smiling happily. Olivia Richman and her son, Jonathon, are here too. Ever since she visited Leo back in May, we've stayed in contact, meeting up about three months back. Once we told her we were getting married, she insisted she was making the several-hour drive here to be with us on this special day. She brought with her the former girlfriend of one of Leo's other teammates killed in Afghanistan. I've not met Sierra yet, but I'm happy to have her here nonetheless.

As we reach the end of the hallway, my fiancé comes into view for the first time. He's insanely gorgeous in his dark blue jeans and white dress shirt, sleeves rolled up and the top button open. It's exactly how I pictured him today, comfortable and relaxed and with dark boots on his feet.

We slowly make our way forward, stopping before we reach where he's standing. His eyes are on fire. A blaze of love and lust all mixing together in a heady cocktail that makes me a little dizzy. I break eye contact only long enough to glance

down at Valerie, to the woman who has only been in my life a handful of months but will remain in my heart for as long as I live. She may not know it, but she became a mother to me in that short amount of time, and I will forever be grateful for her love and guidance.

Reaching down, I squeeze her hand, bending over and placing a tender kiss on her cheek. She smiles up at me with so much gratitude and adoration, I know I'll never forget this moment.

Finally, my dad guides me a few more steps to where Leo waits patiently. With one last kiss to my cheek, Dad steps back, offering my hand to the man I love. Leo reaches forward, shaking Dad's hand first before taking mine with his own. Together, we step forward and face each other.

He gives me a small smile and mouths, "You're stunning."

I can't help but grin, feeling warmth spread up my neck by his compliment. "You're not so bad yourself," I whisper, not caring that all eyes are on us.

"What do you say, beautiful. Ready to get married?" he murmurs, leaning in and kissing my forehead.

"Oh, I'm ready. Let's do this."

"Dearly beloved..."

# BONUS SCENE

*Leo*

Later that night.

I've been dreaming of this moment since I slid that diamond ring on her finger, just a few short weeks ago. As I carry her over the threshold of our hotel room, all I can think about is getting her naked. Of exploring her body and officially making her mine for the first time as husband and wife.

*My wife.*

After what I experienced in Afghanistan, I was resolved to spending the rest of my life alone, in the misery that accompanied me everywhere I went.

Then I met Kallie, and my life hasn't been the same since.

It's still hard to believe we've only truly known each other about six months, but when you know you have something good, something amazing, you do everything in your power to hold on to it.

She's my amazing.

Every piece of her.

"This place is beautiful," she says as we enter the room, her arms wrapped around my neck.

The bed-and-breakfast we're at isn't too far from home and was a gift from my parents for our wedding night. They even invited Al and Axl to stay with them, knowing it would be a constant worry for Kallie to be away. Plus, it's a comfort to me as well, knowing there's someone else staying with my parents in the event something happens to my mom.

But now isn't the time to think about that...



“You’re beautiful,” I reply, kicking the door closed behind me.

Her eyes light up at the compliment as she sasses, “I’m a sure thing, Mr. Martinez. No need to butter me up.”

I can’t help but snort a laugh as I carry her to the bed. “I was thinking more of lathering you up. Later. In the shower,” I state, leaning in and running my nose along the column of her neck.

“Mmm,” she mutters, turning her head and giving me plenty of access to her soft skin.

“You know, I almost had a heart attack the moment I saw you in this dress, but right now, all I can think about is taking it off.”

“You don’t want to look around at this gorgeous room first?” she asks, her question laced with humor.

Hell no.

I want to make love to my wife.

“Maybe in a bit,” I state without removing my lips from her neck.

She mewls and wiggles against me, her fingers digging at the buttons of my dress shirt. “We should get rid of this.”

“Agreed,” I reply, going up on my knees and making quick work of removing my white button-down. Once it’s gone, I reach for her hand and help her stand beside the bed. Kallie turns around, giving me complete access to the zipper trailing down her lower back.

With my lips grazing across her shoulder blade, I gently tug the zipper, exposing inch after inch of soft flesh. “This dress is going to be the death of me,” I mutter, almost to myself.

She glances back over her shoulder, giving me a saucy grin. “But what a way to go.”

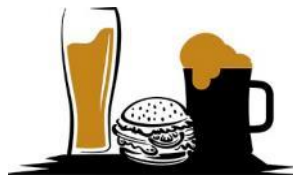
As I slide my hands down her hips, something rustles beneath my thumb, causing me to pause. “What’s that?”

“Oh,” she whispers, reaching into her pocket—I didn’t even realize they made dresses with pockets—and pulls out an envelope. Instantly, I recognize the handwriting on the front. “I forgot about this,” she adds, turning around to face me. Her eyes are already filling with unshed tears as she gazes up at me.

“Open it.”

She swallows hard. “I should wait. We were about to get to the good stuff,” she says lightly, even though I know she’s feeling anything but.

“We can get to that soon. We have all night, love.” Holding her gaze, I reach out and cup her jaw with my hand. “Open it.”



## *Kallie*

My hands are shaking as I pull the lined sheet of paper from the envelope and unfold it. The tears are already pooling in my eyes, threatening to spill down my face at any moment. I take a deep breath, my new husband curled up behind me as he holds me close to his body. I’m so glad he’s here right now in this moment.

*My dearest Kallie,*

*From the moment I officially met you earlier this year, I knew instantly what my son saw in you. You are kind, gentle, and loving, but know when to stand your ground, especially where Leo is concerned. You bring out a side to him I’ve never seen, and for that, I’m eternally grateful.*

Even though I'm writing this before you're actually married, I know you're going to be the most beautiful bride ever, and I can't wait to watch the look on Leo's face when he sees you for the first time. I don't want to miss that moment because it's all any mother wants for their child. Pure joy and love and it's because of you. That's what I see when I look at him now, and I'm certain that's what I'll see the moment he catches sight of you for the first time in your wedding dress.

Our time together will be short, but please know this: I will always love you. Like a mother loves a daughter. I will always smile down on you, watching over you and Leo and the life you're beginning together. While I'm saddened I won't be a part of it the way my husband and your father will be, please know I'll always be there, proudly cheering you on, but I won't be alone. I look forward to meeting your mother in the afterlife. I'm certain she's as lovely as you, and together, we will keep watch over our two precious children.

I don't have much time. My body is giving out quickly, even though my heart is still strong. If it were possible to live by that alone, I'd live forever. When the time comes, Leo is going to need you, as you will him. Lean on each other and your love will help you get through the hard times.

Thank you for loving my boy. If I had my choice of anyone in this world for him, I'd pick you, Kallie. Just like he did.

*Be happy, my beautiful, sweet daughter-in-law.*

*You are loved beyond measure.*

*By those with you on this earth and those looking down from above.*

*All my love until we meet again,*

*Valerie*

I burst into ugly tears as I'm spun around and held firmly against Leo's chest. The paper in my hand forgotten as I grip on to my husband like a lifeline. He holds me while I cry, and I have no idea for how long.

When I finally slow enough to catch my breath, I look up at his tear-streaked face. "This was a terrible idea," I finally say, referring to reading her letter on our wedding night.

Leo chuckles and places a kiss on my forehead. "Maybe, but I think we both needed to read those words," he says softly, running his hand across my cheek.

"Yeah, but it was a bit of a mood killer."

He shrugs. "Maybe not. Every word she wrote was completely true, and to be honest, I find comfort in knowing she's going to be up there with your mom and watching over us."

A few straggling tears seep from my eyes as I press my cheek against his chest, reveling in the feel of his strong heartbeat against my skin.

"Why don't we get you out of this dress, and I'll hold you, my wife."

Slowly and meticulously, he helps me out of my dress, taking his time to drink in every inch of flesh as he exposes it. Even after the emotionally charged minutes since our arrival, my skin prickles with awareness and desire.

It's like this with him.

Every time.

Leo pulls off his boots and tosses them aside before flicking the button on his pants and letting them fall to the floor. Moments later, his boxers are discarded, and he's laying me down on the large bed.

Cradling me in his arms, he rolls me onto my back and hovers above me. He brushes his lips across mine and whispers, "I love you, Mrs. Martinez. More than I ever imagined possible."

Wrapping my arms around his neck and holding him close, I meet his gaze. “And I love you, Mr. Martinez. Thank you for making me the happiest woman on earth.”

The corner of his lips turns upward. “I’d do anything for you.”

“Yeah?” I ask, hitching my legs over his hips. “Well, how about you make love to your wife.”

“Deal, wife. You gotta deal.”

*THE END*

Want more Burgers and Brew Crüe? Book 7 will feature Kellen and Cameron and will release May 2023! Preorder [Too Young To Fall In Love](#) today!

Don't miss a single reveal, release, or sale! Sign up for my newsletter.

<http://www.laceyblackbooks.com/newsletter>

# Books Also by Lacey Black

## [Rivers Edge series](#)

Trust Me, Rivers Edge book 1 (Maddox and Avery) – FREE at all retailers

Fight Me, Rivers Edge book 2 (Jake and Erin)

Expect Me, Rivers Edge book 3 (Travis and Josselyn)

Promise Me: A Novella, Rivers Edge book 3.5 (Jase and Holly)

Protect Me, Rivers Edge book 4 (Nate and Lia)

Boss Me, Rivers Edge book 5 (Will and Carmen)

Trust Us: A Rivers Edge Christmas Novella (Maddox and Avery)

*~ This novella was originally part of the Christmas Miracles Anthology*

BOX SET – contains all 5 novels, 2 novellas, and a BONUS short story

With Me, A Rivers Edge Christmas Novella (Brooklyn and Becker)

## [Bound Together series](#)

Submerged, Bound Together book 1 (Blake and Carly)

Profited, Bound Together book 2 (Reid and Dani)

Entwined, Bound Together book 3 (Luke and Sidney)

## [Summer Sisters series](#)

My Kinda Kisses, Summer Sisters book 1 (Jaime and Ryan)

My Kinda Night, Summer Sisters book 2 (Payton and Dean)

My Kinda Song, Summer Sisters book 3 (Abby and Levi)



My Kinda Mess, Summer Sisters book 4 (Lexi and Linkin)

My Kinda Player, Summer Sisters book 5 (AJ and Sawyer)

My Kinda Player, Summer Sisters book 6 (Meghan and Nick)

My Kinda Wedding, A Summer Sisters Novella book 7 (Meghan and Nick)

### **Rockland Falls series**

Love and Pancakes, Rockland Falls book 1

Love and Lingerie, Rockland Falls book 2

Love and Landscape, Rockland Falls book 3

Love and Neckties, Rockland Falls book 4

### **Standalone**

Music Notes, a sexy contemporary romance standalone

A Place To Call Home, a Memorial Day novella

Exes and Ho Ho Ho's, a sexy contemporary romance standalone novella

Pants on Fire, a sexy contemporary romance standalone

Double Dog Dare You, a new standalone

Grip, A Driven World Novel

Bachelor Swap, A Bachelor Tower Series Novel

Perfect Kiss, Mason Creek Series book 9

Waiting For Love, The Love Vixen Series book 11

Quarterback Keeper, a surprise baby novella

### **Burgers and Brew Crüe Series**

Kickstart My Heart

Don't Go Away Mad

Same Ol' Situation

Wild Side

What's It Gonna Take

Home Sweet Home

[Co-Written with NYT Bestselling Author, Kaylee Ryan](#)

It's Not Over, Fair Lakes book 1

Just Getting Started, Fair Lakes book 2

Can't Get Enough, Fair Lakes book 3

Fair Lakes Box Set

Boy Trouble

Home To You, a second chance novella

Beneath the Fallen Stars

Tell Me A Story

Royal - Writing as Rebel Shaw

Crying Shame - Writing as Rebel Shaw

# Acknowledgments

This series just keeps talking to me, so as long as the storylines keep coming and the readers want more, I'll continue writing in this series!

There are so many to thank during the entire process of publishing this book.

My editing team - Kara Hildebrand, Sandra Shipman, Joanne Thompson, and Karen Hrdlicka. You are truly the best and I'm so grateful to have you by my side! Thank you!!

The book team - Photographer, Wander Aguiar; Model, Josh Larson; Cover Designer, Melissa Gill; Graphics Designer, Gel with Tempting Illustrations; Formatting, Brenda with Formatting Done Wright; and Promotions by Give Me Books. Thank you for making the entire process easy and seamless!

Kaylee Ryan, Holly Collins, Lacey's Ladies, Chasidy Renee, and my ARC team, thank you for listening, for your encouragements, and for your constant support.

To my husband and kids, thank you for helping me live my dream.

To all the bloggers and readers, thank you, thank you, thank you. I hope you enjoy this story as much as I loved writing it.

# About the Author

USA Today Bestselling Author Lacey Black is a Midwestern girl with a passion for reading, writing, and shopping. She carries her e-reader with her everywhere she goes so she never misses an opportunity to read a few pages. Always looking for a happily ever after, Lacey is passionate about contemporary romance novels and enjoys it further when you mix in a little suspense. She resides in a small town in Illinois with her husband, two children, adorable black lab puppy, crazy cat, and three rowdy chickens.

Website: [www.laceyblackbooks.com](http://www.laceyblackbooks.com)

Email: [laceyblackwrites@gmail.com](mailto:laceyblackwrites@gmail.com)

Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/authorlaceyblack>

Instagram: <https://www.instagram.com/laceyblackwrites/>

Bookbub: <https://www.bookbub.com/authors/lacey-black>

Amazon: <https://www.amazon.com/Lacey-Black/e/B00MW2UGZI>

Twitter: <https://twitter.com/AuthLaceyBlack>

Goodreads:

[https://www.goodreads.com/author/show/8414783.Lacey\\_Black](https://www.goodreads.com/author/show/8414783.Lacey_Black)

Sign up for my newsletter so you don't miss a single sale, reveal, or release!

<http://www.laceyblackbooks.com/newsletter>