

THE BLUE RIVER TRILOGY - BOOK 2



Raydee

MELANIE JAYNE

KAYDEE

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AUTHOR NOTES

I live on a farm and grew up in a small town. I understand what it means for the entire town to know your business.

I hope you fall in love with Kaydee and Bo. We all deserve good things, including to be loved.

While writing this book, I listened to the following songs often:

Strong Enough by Sheryl Crow

When Will I Be Loved by Linda Ronstadt

Two Out of Three Ain't Bad by Meatloaf

True Colors by Cyndi Lauper

Thinking Out Loud by Ed Sheeran

CHAPTER ONE

“YOU DIDN’T NEED TO WALK WITH ME.” I PAUSED AT THE bottom of the steps that lead from the backdoor of my brother’s house—the farmhouse where the three Blue kids grew up.

Bo’s smile seemed bright under the outside lights and the full moon. “Maybe I’m curious to see your place...?”

How was it that he was even more handsome when he grinned? This man had “good guy” stamped on his forehead. He was a war veteran, a doctor, and had just spent hours playing with my daughter. He was a freakin’ saint.

He fell into step beside me.

Being with one of the hottest, single guys around didn’t make me nervous. I’d *noticed* Bo the first time I’d seen him two years ago, playing softball with my younger brother, Thaddeus. He looked like a Viking god—tall, strong, with golden-blond hair that was just a touch too long and killer blue eyes. It didn’t take long for news to spread that a new doctor would be running the E.R. at the hospital, and he’d been engaged for four years.

I’d filed him in the “look but don’t touch” category. Some women tested him and flirted wildly, but if Bo had taken one of the ladies who seemed to congregate wherever he was to bed, nobody talked

I would know. I was the owner of a beauty salon in Sharpstown. We were gossip central for women from the age of twenty to seventy.

It had been huge news when he and his long-distance fiancée had broken up. Every unattached woman, and a few that weren't, wanted an appointment to refresh their color or get a new style. As far as I knew, Bo had not joined Thad in the singles scene, burning through the women who made themselves available.

Or maybe he was better at running under the radar? He'd been in the Army, so perhaps he'd learned how to be covert.

Something my little brother did not do. Thad was making his way through every willing woman in five counties. He had that easy-going smile and charm. He'd been captivating females since he'd turned thirteen.

The quiet that surrounded us on the ten-minute walk was making me jumpy. "See? Grey set up lights on the path, so we won't trip." I pointed out the solar-powered lights.

He chuckled, then put his arm around my shoulders and pulled me close.

The move was so smooth that we didn't even break stride.

"My grandma always told me to make sure the pretty girl gets home safely."

My breath caught. *He thinks I'm pretty?* I pushed the thought out of my head. If my failed marriage to Wade Roberts was anything to go by, I had proven that I have horrible taste in men. "The trailer isn't fancy. So don't get your hopes up."

His chuckle was low. "We'll see."

The illuminated white trailer, or manufactured home as the salesman had called it, came into view. When Wade and I split, our daughter Haven was a couple of weeks old. I'd been a new mother with a beautiful baby girl and a broken heart. I'd moved back into the farmhouse with Grey, my older brother. I needed my family.

Haven and I had stayed with Grey until she was three. I'd looked at apartments in town. When Grey offered to move a trailer onto the farm, I'd had to acknowledge that I needed my big brother's help, so I'd said yes.

Bo paused and stared at my place. “This is a little more than a trailer.”

I slid from under his arm and fished my key out of my pocket. “We like it.” What else could I say? This wasn’t my dream home. I’d always wanted to be married with kids. I’d wanted the white picket fence and the minivan. However, I made do with landscaping along the front and added a large wooden porch that bracketed the front door.

I walked up the three steps, and as I stuck the key in the lock, I glanced over my shoulder. “Want the tour or a drink?” I almost giggled at how easily the invitation left my lips.

“Both?” He followed me inside.

After we took off our jackets, I gave him the tour. “And that took all of a minute and a half.” We finished in the kitchen. I opened the refrigerator door and took stock of the beverage situation. Because it was Thanksgiving, and although I wasn’t sleeping at Grey’s, I did plan on eating there, so I didn’t have much in my fridge.

“You’ve made it a home. That’s important for you both.” He leaned his arms on the counter.

“You might’ve heard that Wade and I...um, things got ugly between us.” I held up a can of Coke and a beer that I think was left over from the summer.

He took the Coke, and I grabbed a glass and filled it with water. He followed me to the living area, which held two loveseats and a TV that was too big for the space, but it had been a hand-me-down from Thad, so I hadn’t complained.

“I’ve heard a few things,” he murmured.

The last thing I wanted to discuss was my ex or the ugly end to our marriage. “It was very nice of you to agree to go riding with Haven tomorrow.”

My daughter had a huge crush on Bo, and he was very kind and attentive to her.

“She cracks me up. Sometimes, I don’t have a clue what she’s saying, and then she drops some excellent information.”

He relaxed back into the loveseat.

“She’s spent a lot of time around adults, so she doesn’t have qualms about talking your ear off.” I kicked off my shoes and pulled my knees up to my chest as I nestled my back into the corner of my loveseat.

He held my gaze. “You should know this about me; I try very hard not to put myself in situations I don’t want to be in.”

My heart started pounding in my chest. I nodded because I wasn’t sure what to say.

“I saw all the boxes,” he said, tilting toward the stack near the kitchen table. “How’s the wedding planning going?”

Phew. This was a subject I could spend hours talking about. “I think we’re ready. The next thing is to do the actual decorating. Lindsay, one of the owners of The White Barn, said we could start on the Monday before the wedding, and I’d rather be done early than pushing up against the deadline.”

He studied me. “You’re having fun with this.”

I grinned. “I am. I mean, it doesn’t hurt that it’s my best friend who’s been in love with Grey since we were in third grade.” I dropped my feet to the floor. “I’m happy for them. They are so in love, and I know...” Suddenly, my eyes started to burn with unshed tears. I let out a ragged breath. “They are meant to be together.” I dipped my chin while trying to get my emotions under control.

“Kaydee,” Bo said, his voice quiet and gentle.

I didn’t look up.

“I’m happy for Grey and Ellis, and I love that you are, too.”

I nodded slowly.

“That’s what I want,” he continued in that gentle tone. “It didn’t work with Sydney...hadn’t been working for a while. It took time for us to figure it out.”

“I held on too long.” I surprised myself by admitting that. I sounded so sure. “I started working with a therapist, and

although Wade was and continues to be an ass, I can admit that I allowed some of the treatment he gave Haven and me.”

His jaw tightened. “It’s his loss. You’re a smart woman who’s also a great mother. He threw that away. That’s on him.” Bo’s gentle tone was gone. “Did you ever wonder if it was because you made it look so easy that he felt insecure?”

“What?” I started to shake my head at that idea, then I stopped. “I think he liked that he had me, that I wore his ring. He certainly liked that my family was well-respected.”

He arched an eyebrow. “But then the tough work started. Every day wasn’t sunshine and roses, and he had to carry his weight.”

I tilted my head as I considered his words. “It took too long for me to figure out that he didn’t want me anymore, but he also doesn’t want anybody else to have me.” Just the other night, Grey and Ellis had barged in and taken my daughter home with them. Scared, Havs had called them because Wade and I had been fighting. I’d spent the rest of the night and the next day rethinking everything.

Bo shook his head. “Haven told me that her daddy doesn’t like to spend time with her because she’s a girl.”

I pressed my hand to my heart. “I hate that she feels that way.”

“He wouldn’t have said that, would he....to her?”

“A part of me hopes not, but Wade isn’t always careful with his words.” I frowned because it hurt my heart that she’d told Bo that and not me.

“I’m going to step up.”

I looked at him in surprise. “What does that mean?”

“Haven and I...we get along.” He held up his hand in a stop sign. “I know she has Thad and Grey, but if it’s okay with you, she will also have me.”

“Bo...” I sighed. “I know your job requires a lot of time,” I began. “She knows which weekends are her dad’s and when he can’t make it.” I frowned. “It hurts her.”

“I won’t lie. My job is demanding.” He ran a hand through his hair. “One thing I learned from what I had or didn’t have with Sydney is that I need to make time for me. And now, that means your daughter and you.”

I chewed on my bottom lip for a moment. “Grey and Ellis will be busy adjusting to married life, and Thad loves Havs, but he doesn’t live by a schedule, so if you want to hang out. I think that would be great.” My cheeks heated with a blush. This would mean that Bo would be around Haven and me. Did he like me a little?

Gah! I needed to stop thinking like that. I was a single mother who sucked at love. I’d tried for my happily ever after and failed.

“Good. Then it’s a deal.”

CHAPTER TWO

DID I MOVE TOO FAST?

Our conversation had flowed so easily to this point that it had seemed natural to state my plans, my intentions toward Haven, and the luscious Kaydee Blue. However, I didn't want to overstay my welcome or make the skittish woman nervous. "It's getting late." I got to my feet and carried my can to the kitchen.

"Leave it on the counter," she called behind me.

I nodded and headed to the front door. "Are you going to make it to breakfast?"

"Hmph," she grunted with a grin. "I'm not sure what time it will happen. Grey will be up and out by five. Ellis will sleep in, but not as long as Thad. Havs is too hard to predict." She shrugged.

"So, it might be me and Havs?" I put on my jacket.

"Although she can toast a slice of bread, I'll caution you about letting my daughter make your breakfast unless you like your jelly about half an inch thick."

"Noted."

"I'll be over after eight. I have some things to go over with Ellis for the reception, and then I'll help decorate." She suddenly turned shy, not meeting my gaze.

I wanted to kiss her, but something stopped me. "I'll see you tomorrow." I opened the front door.

“Count on it.”

I waited to hear her lock the door after me.

On my walk back to the farmhouse, I replayed everything from our time alone. I appreciated Kaydee’s beauty and her fire. I’d seen a flash of her temper a time or two when she dealt with her brothers, but she never turned it on her daughter.

They were a package deal. If I became involved with the mother, I would be in Haven’s life. Luckily for me, the little girl seemed to be comfortable in my presence.

The problem would be the ex-husband, Wade Roberts. The high school football coach had strung together several successful seasons and was a first-class jerk. He had openly cheated on Kaydee while she’d carried his child. Thad had mentioned that Wade would blow off his weekends with his daughter during football season and whenever there was something that he’d rather do.

I brushed my boots on the doormat before entering the Blues’ kitchen. I closed the door quietly behind me, hung my jacket on the peg, then turned the corner into the kitchen.

“He’s back early,” Thad observed. He and Grey were sitting at the table; each had a beer in front of them.

“What’s going on?” They appeared relaxed, but there was a hum of energy in the room.

“Grab a drink and join us,” Grey invited.

I chose a bottle of water and took the chair opposite Grey. “Kaydee said she’d be back around eight in the morning.”

Grey nodded once but said nothing more.

I sipped my water while waiting for one of the brothers to speak.

It was no surprise that Thad broke the silence. “Here’s the deal.” He put his bottle on the table. “Wade fucked with her head.”

Grey cleared his throat. “We noticed that there seemed to be an interest on your part for the girls.”

I liked and respected Grey. At seventeen, he'd taken over running the farm and raising his siblings. He was well-respected in our community, but he was also not a man you wanted as an enemy. "Would that be a problem?" I finally asked.

Thad opened his mouth to respond, but it took only a sharp look from Grey for him to shut his mouth.

Grey met my gaze. "I sincerely hope not."

I waited because I was sure there would be more.

"I wasn't thrilled when she decided to do her student teaching here, but she missed home," Grey began his story. "Wade swept her off her feet with flowers and nice dinners. He made sure they were seen everywhere together."

"He love-bombed her before that was a thing," Thad added.

"I thought he was too much for her." Grey gave a one-shoulder shrug, ignoring Thad's interruption. "Too much, too fast, too smooth. She was so wrapped up in him that I knew if I said anything against him, she'd never believe it."

"I thought he was a jerk," Thad said with a grunt.

I wanted to chuckle at the younger brother who'd burned through women with his good looks and charm. "Now, he's your competition for all the pretty ladies."

"I didn't like the guy, but if he'd been good to my sister, well..." Thad looked away. "I would've learned to deal with it."

"Without Wade, there wouldn't be Haven," Grey added. "I can't stand the guy, but I love my niece."

I smiled. "She's something else." I enjoyed the little girl. She turned so serious when she thought she needed to teach me something. Her brown eyes seemed to darken, and her voice always turned a little bossy.

"I don't need to tell you they're a package deal," Grey said.

“Actually, it’s a bigger package because we come with them.” Thad lifted his chin a little.

I let out a long breath. “I understand your concern and appreciate that you’re here to let me know that you care about your sister and niece. I already know that. I’ve seen it.” I paused and let that sink in. “If you’re asking if I’m interested in your sister, the answer is yes.”

Thad started to lean in, and I cut him off, raising a finger before he could speak. I wanted the brothers to know where I stood. “I don’t think Kaydee has figured it out yet, and I’m okay with going slow. After everything she’s gone through... she deserves to be handled with care.”

Grey’s shoulders relaxed.

“We both have failed relationships, so I can’t make any promises about our future.” A few weeks ago, Sydney had drunk-dialed me and listed everything she thought I’d done wrong when we’d been together. I still had a lot to unpack. “I like Kaydee. I respect that she’s a mother and owns a business. Her time is limited, as is her attention. Haven comes first, and I support that.”

“Wade’s going to fuck with her when he figures out what’s happening,” Thad warned.

“I’m sure he’s going to try. That’s why I want to build a solid foundation. Kaydee and Haven need to know they can count on me.”

“Trust is important. Especially to Kaydee after all the lies, he told her,” Grey added.

“That means you have to be where you say you’re going, and with your job, you’ve got to make time to check in with them,” Thad said, his tone clipped.

“She’s going to try your patience,” Grey added with affection in his tone. “She used to be so carefree, but he took that from her.”

“Or she feels like she can’t be that way because she has to be a reliable parent,” I said, adding my thoughts.

“And you can’t put yourself in a position where it might look like you’re flirting or doing more with another woman,” Thad added. “He cheated on her publicly, and people couldn’t wait to tell her all about it.”

“I’m going to say this to you only once,” Grey said, leaning forward, his tone steady and serious. “Be honest with her. Sometimes, things don’t work out, and nobody is to blame. If it doesn’t work between you two, tell her and end it.” He pushed his chair back. “I’ve got to get to bed.”

Thad’s grin was mischievous. “It’s two hours past his bedtime.”

“We all can’t live the playboy life,” I teased my friend.

Thad gave me a look that said, “True.” He leaned back in his chair and balanced it on two legs. “Grey is the mature one who’ll be civil. I’ll tell you that if you purposely hurt my sister or my niece, I will kick your ass.”

He could try. “I get it.” I focused on my tone, so I didn’t sound defensive or combative. “Kaydee is something very special.”

“Damn right, she is.” Thad righted his chair, got up, and headed up the back stairs.

The brothers left me with cleanup, which seemed like a very family-like thing to do.

I was standing at the kitchen sink, drying while Ellis washed the last of the breakfast dishes.

“When *can* we go riding?” Haven had been talking non-stop about our plans for the day.

“Baby, I told you that it’s going to warm up after lunch,” Kaydee patiently explained for the third time. “You don’t want Shamus to get cold or Bo, do you?” She tried to keep the giggle out of her voice.

“Shamus won’t care,” Haven declared. “And Bo can get a blanket.”

“That’s a very good idea,” I told my seven-year-old friend. “I promised your Aunt Ellis that I’d help with bringing down the boxes of decorations from the attic. I know that you want to help, so let’s plan on one-thirty.” I glanced at the clock. It looked like the kind that hung on my classroom’s walls while I was growing up.

“Okay.” Haven nodded. “But don’t forget.”

I dried my hands on a clean towel, then walked to where she was sitting. Dropping to my knees beside her chair, I took her hand in mine. “I won’t forget. I promise, Havs.”

She held my gaze as she chewed on her bottom lip. “I know, Bo.”

She trusted me. It took everything inside of me to keep from glancing at her mother.

“Now that that’s settled...” Ellis dried her hands. “I think we can use the front parlor for the staging area.”

“Not to be confused with the foyer where all the stuff is waiting for the wedding,” Kaydee teased,

Thad got up from the table. “I’ll grab some shoes and meet you at the door to the attic.” He took off.

“Will he know what you want?” I asked the ladies.

“Who knows?” Kaydee grinned. “Start with the boxes closest to the door. I think there are five or six. That will keep us busy today.”

“I didn’t want to do too much,” Ellis told me. “But Grey reminded me that it would be our first Christmas, so...this might get crazy.”

Her smile was filled with so much joy that I wanted to volunteer to carry every box down by myself.

“Let’s get started.” I headed up the back stairs while the ladies headed to the parlor.

CHAPTER THREE

“GREY WILL MAKE SURE THEY’RE GOOD,” ELLIS SAID AS I watched Haven reach for Bo’s hand to lead him toward the barn where her pony and two horses were housed.

I sighed and turned to face my best friend and soon-to-be sister-in-law. “Coffee?” I pointed toward the maker.

“Water.”

I grabbed two bottles from the fridge and joined her at the large kitchen table. “He’s really good with her.”

“Yeah?” Ellis unscrewed the cap to her bottle. “How’s he with you?”

I felt my eyes widen in surprise. “What?”

Ellis didn’t meet my gaze. “I mean, he’s around a lot, and I just wondered if you liked it?”

I felt my body tense, and suddenly, I couldn’t form a coherent sentence. “Well, sure. I mean, he’s nice and everything.”

Ellis didn’t pounce on my weak response.

I labored to change subjects. “Do you want to go through more boxes or deal with wedding stuff?”

“I want a nap.” She gave me a tiny smile. “But let’s deal with the wedding details first.”

I pulled my planner and clipboard from my tote that was decorated in Ellis’ wedding colors. “I’ve updated the responses, and next week, I’ll check in with the florist.”

“Kaydee, Dora isn’t going to mess up the order. You’re going to drive her nuts.” Ellis shook her head at me.

Feeling a little defensive, I say, “Flowers are sensitive, and it only takes one bad storm to ruin everything. I want to make sure she’s keeping up with her distributor.”

“Honey, everything is going to be fine. You’ve worked hard to make this everything Grey and I could’ve asked for.”

” I’m happy that you and my big brother are getting your happily ever after. You two deserve it.” My voice cracked before I could finish.

“I appreciate—no, we appreciate everything you’ve done for us.” Ellis smiled at me. “We all deserve to be happy.”

I looked down at the edge of the table. I thought so once.

“You know you and Haven deserve more,” Ellis told me quietly.

“I know.” I still didn’t look at my friend.

“Do you really? Or are you just agreeing so I’ll shut up?” she asked, amusement in her gentle tone.

I sipped my water, stalling. “The other night...” I had to clear my throat and begin again. “All that happened...it put things in perspective.”

“That wasn’t fun for any of us,” Ellis said quietly.

It was supposed to have been Wade’s weekend with Haven. He’d shown up three hours late and hadn’t called. We’d argued. I admit that I’d screamed like a banshee. Once I’d started, I couldn’t stop. He made me feel so angry, so humiliated, and so dumb.

Haven had gotten scared when she heard Wade throw a book I’d been reading at the framed photos on the shelves in our living room. She’d hidden in my bedroom and called Grey.

He and Ellis had rushed over, and although I’d understood their concern, it had made me even more angry that they learned how bad things were. They’d taken Haven home with them to give me some time alone.

I'd barely slept that night. Around two, I'd bundled up, made a cup of coffee, and went out to sit on our porch. While staring at the star-filled sky, I'd told myself some truths. One was that Wade had overwhelmed a twenty-two-year-old girl with his full attention. I'd had no choice but to be caught up in his courtship. However, it had all been a show. I'd been a trophy to him, another collectible like the plaques naming him Coach of the Year that lined his office wall.

I had no idea what marriage entailed. The day-to-day balance that goes on when you're tied to another. I hadn't minded that he'd expected me to do all the cleaning and cooking, plus work and take classes toward my master's degree. The candlelit dinners I'd pictured we'd share as we talked about our days never happened. In fact, the romance stopped as soon as we'd gotten back from our honeymoon.

I'd made allowances. He had a stressful job. Football was important to our town and high school, so the extra hours he'd put in had been building good things for our future. I'd become lonely. Sometimes, I'd complain about his inattention. I could even admit to doing things to gain his attention. Everyone kept telling me how great Wade was and how lucky I was to be his wife. I'd felt lost.

It took a while for the rumors to make their way to me. Wade had been seen at the local bar, entertaining a group of ladies. Another person told me that her sister had seen him slow dancing with a woman.

When I'd confronted him, he'd denied the stories, and I'd wanted to believe him. Then my so-called "friends" started sending me photographic proof. He hadn't been able to deny that. I'd threatened to leave, and I could still kick myself for not following through. But I'd listened to his bullshit promises.

We'd started looking into building our dream house and trying for a baby. He'd cut back on work and spent more time at home with me.

He'd lasted for three months—long enough for me to see the plus sign on the stick. The town kept the news quiet that

Wade once again acted like he didn't have a wife. A pregnant wife who'd done everything in her power to be the ideal spouse. I'd been seven months pregnant when the truth, all of it, hit me square in the face. The day a woman named Rochelle had shown up on our doorstep announcing that she, too, was pregnant with Wade's baby.

I had to give Rochelle a lot of credit. She moved to Kansas with the baby and was hopefully living her best life. I'm still here with Haven, having to deal with Wade.

"I'm done being the nice guy," I announced. Feeling proud that my voice sounded confident. "I'm going to make an appointment with my lawyer to discuss the status of things."

Ellis studied me for a long moment. "Good for you."

I shrugged. "I tried."

Ellis gave a mini-eye roll. "Kaydee, you more than tried. You've bent so far that I'm scared you're going to break."

"I always wanted to be married, have kids, bake cookies."

"Then put that dick in your rearview mirror and start working toward what you want," Ellis said, reaching across the table to squeeze my fist.

"It's not like I can order a good man from Amazon." I tried to smile, and it wasn't that hard.

"How about this plan?" She paused to wait for my nod. "You sit back and see who comes to you."

"I'm not sure I'm the best judge." I squeezed my eyes closed for a minute because it hurt to admit that.

"Then lean on Grey and me. We won't let you fall."

"I'll try." I tried to sound like it was a good idea.

"Let us deal with Wade for a while. We can do the pick-ups and drop-offs. Give you some distance from him. Have your attorney tell him about the change. If he needs to talk to you, make it through your attorney or through Grey."

"He'll hate that." A thought that had me smiling.

“Good.” Ellis’s answering smile was pure evil.

CHAPTER FOUR

“AND HE WASN’T SCARED AT ALL,” HAVEN FINISHED THE story of our ride and gave me a huge grin.

“You’re a good teacher,” I complimented her.

“What’s on the agenda for tomorrow, Ellie Belle?” Thad asked.

“The porch and front of the house. I have photos of what I want to do.” Ellis had a Christmas binder where she’d stored ideas.

“How long is this gonna take?” Grey gave his fiancée a slight grin.

“Well, if it’s all hands-on deck...maybe a couple of hours.”

“I can help, Aunt Ellis,” Havs said.

“If Havs is in, then so am I,” I told those gathered around the table.

“How many ladders?” Thad asked.

“Everybody, text me photos of your insurance cards,” Kaydee added with a chuckle. “You know, just in case.”

“Hey, doctor sitting right here.” I pointed to my chest. “I think we’ll be fine.”

“Tomorrow’s your day off. You’re not working on your day off,” Kaydee said.

“Yay, he can stay,” Haven said.

“That’s right, beautiful. Yay.” Thad pumped his fist in the air.

“You all are crazy,” Ellis announced. “Tell them, Bo.” She turned to me.

I held up my hands. “Can’t. You heard the rule. Can’t do any doctoring on my day off.” I grinned at Kaydee and Ellis. “I’m here for the Blue family fun.”

The approving look in Kaydee’s eyes made my heart beat a little faster.

“Are you heading home?” I followed Kaydee to the kitchen.

“Yeah.” She continued moving to the coat hooks by the back door.

“Want some company?”

“Okay.” This time her voice was a little breathy.

I pulled on my jacket. “Ready?”

She unlocked the door and stepped outside.

I pulled the door closed behind me, taking a moment to appreciate the cold, clear night.

“I’m not going to try to talk you out of this.” She flashed a small smile before heading toward the path to her place.

I thanked Grey or whoever had created the path so that it was wide enough for two to walk side by side. I loved being out here. It was so quiet it felt like we were the only people on the planet.

Our hands brushed a time or two; on the third time, I took her hand in mine. At the steps leading to her door, I let go.

She dug for her keys in her pocket, then fumbled, almost dropping them. “Crap.”

“Give ’em here.” I held out my hand.

She did with a quiet chuckle.

I unlocked her door and followed her inside, not waiting for an invitation. Her house phone was ringing, and the answering machine picked up the call.

She unzipped her jacket and was hanging it up when a man's voice thundered.

“Just great. It's after ten, and the world's best mom is out with my daughter. Typical Kaydee shit.”

Kaydee's body went on full alert, facing the kitchen. She started to move, but I wrapped my arms around her, stopping her.

I wanted to hear what Wade had to say.

“Bo...” she whispered as she jerked against my hold.

“Shhh.”

“If it's not too much trouble,” Wade said snidely, “I'd like to get my kid on Sunday. You can drop her off any time after one,” he continued. “I'll let you know when we're done. I'm sure you can miss another boring dinner with your family for your daughter.”

Kaydee's body vibrated against my hold. An angry sound left her throat as he ended the call.

“What a dick,” I growled.

Her body relaxed a little as she stepped out of my hold. “I'm sorry you had to hear that.” She was looking everywhere but at me.

I followed her into the kitchen. “How old is that answering machine?” I changed topics to try to calm her down.

“Ellis found it buried in a drawer in Grey's office, and Haven loved it. We don't get a lot of calls on the landline except from her father.” She shrugged.

“What if Haven had heard him talk like that to you?” I asked quietly.

She hit a button on the machine and deleted the message. “Haven called Wade before dinner to tell him about her day. So, he knew she was spending the night at the house.”

Wade was a dick and a sneak. “I don’t know how you do it.”

The look she gave me was one of total confusion. Her eyebrows were drawn together. “What?”

“Deal with him, this.” I pointed to the machine. “I’ve never heard of a confrontation, or you say anything halfway sarcastic about him.”

One side of her mouth tipped upward. “I’m starting to rethink my strategy.”

I slowly raised my eyebrow.

She started to pace. “It’s no secret I left my teaching job because I was tired of hearing about Wade. It was either the high praise for his coaching or the pity-filled looks because I couldn’t keep him from cheating.”

I stayed silent. My dad hadn’t taught me much except the lesson that when my grandmother started a rant, I should shut up and keep out of the way.

“When everything happened...” She paused and glanced at me to see if I was paying attention. “I moved out with Haven, who was only two weeks and three days old. Six months later, Wade filed for divorce. I’d made the decision that I would treat him with respect in public. He was Haven’s father, and I would have to deal with him for many years.”

I nodded, encouraging her to continue.

She threw up her hands. “And do you know what that’s got me? Phone calls like that, texts where he tells me I’m stupid and a horrible mother.” She paused and ran her hand through her ponytail. “That call, that was Wade being reasonably civil.” She tried to laugh, but it sounded strained.

“I’m pretty sure that Thad is still awake watching porn or sexting with a woman. We could hunt Wade down and rough him up a little.” I tilted my head a little as I flashed a closed-lip smile.

That made her giggle. “I honestly don’t know why Thad hasn’t kicked his ass. He’s threatened it often enough.”

“I’d worry more about Grey,” I shared. “I don’t think he’d give a warning. He’d take care of it and go right back to whatever he was doing.”

She let out a sigh. “Yep. That’s totally Grey.”

“You going to be okay to sleep?”

“Yeah, like I said, that was him being civil.” Again, Kaydee avoided my gaze.

“Will you let him see Haven on Sunday?” I didn’t like that I had a twelve-hour shift starting at noon that day.

“First, I’ll talk to Haven. It’s not his weekend. If she wants to see him, then I’ll have Grey call him to work out the details. I’ve decided to take a little vacation from dealing directly with Wade.”

“Did that call upset you that much?”

She shook her head slowly. “I have a note on my calendar to call my attorney on Monday. There needs to be some changes to our custody agreement, and I’m not going to waste my time trying to work with Wade.”

“If you need me to write a statement about what I heard, I will,” I offered.

“I was saving to take Havs to Walt Disney World, but in the long run, making things run smoother with her dad will help us all.” She squared her shoulders.

“The hard part of adulting is being responsible when you only want to have fun.” I walked to Kaydee and pulled her into my arms, hugging her.

She rested her cheek against my chest. “Thanks.”

I let go of her. “Hope it helps.”

“You’re a good guy, Bo.” She rested her hand on my elbow for a minute.

“Sweet dreams, Kaydee.” I headed to her door.

“Take your arthritis medicine because Ellis will run us all ragged tomorrow,” she warned.

“Noted.” I paused at the door. “I’m not going down your steps ’til I hear you lock up.”

“Yes, Grey.” She gave me a cheeky grin. “Oops, I mean Bo.”

I laughed as I heard her use her deadbolt.

Wade was going to be a problem.

Luckily, I was good at finding solutions.

Later, lying in bed, I bought a book to help tourists plan trips to Walt Disney World.

CHAPTER FIVE

KAYDEE

I WAS SITTING ACROSS FROM ELLIS AT THE KITCHEN TABLE, making more notes about the seating chart for their wedding. “We still have fifteen that haven’t replied.”

“Then they can stand around in the back.” Ellis didn’t look up from her tablet.

“They’re locals, so how about we let two days pass before we start pulling chairs?”

Ellis wrinkled her nose. “I guess I can always have Thad call and see if they forgot to respond.”

“It would give him something to do.” My brother had been instrumental in securing the wedding location. Plus, he’d claimed he wanted to help.

“I can message him the names.”

“I’ll do it. I have all the info.” I pulled up the messaging tab and started typing.

“So...Bo?” she asked innocently.

Don’t look at her. Don’t look at her. I concentrated on the laptop’s screen. “What about him?” I asked nonchalantly.

“What’s going on with you and him?”

I made sure that I didn’t answer too quickly. “What are you talking about?”

She placed her tablet on the table and gave me a long look. “Something’s up.”

“Why do you think that?”

“Because he didn’t spill your secret.” She sat tall in her chair and raised her eyebrows as if she was very proud of herself.

I finished my message to Thad, cut and pasted the information, and gave him a deadline before I looked at my best friend. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Okay, we can play it cool for now.” Ellis sighed loudly. “Bo didn’t tell us about overhearing Wade’s call.”

“Oh...that.” I gave a slight shrug as if it wasn’t anything.

“You should tell Bo what happened and give him praise for keeping your business quiet.” Again, she gave me a smug look. “Or you can let Thad share the story, and who knows how he’ll embellish it.”

Dammit, she was right. “I guess I should.” When I’d asked Grey if he would coordinate getting Havs to Wade, I assumed he had heard about Wade’s call. He hadn’t known anything about it, which had made me have to go into greater detail, so now, everybody was pissed at Wade.

“You make it sound like it’s a real chore.” She rolled her eyes at me.

I leaned back in my chair. I wasn’t sure what, or if anything, was happening between Bo and me, and I didn’t want my family to be too curious. “I figured that he’d tell you all. He was pissed when he heard Wade’s call.”

“I’m mad, and I don’t know everything he said. I don’t like that he thinks he can treat you like that. You’re a great mom. Haven’s a happy kid who is awesome. That isn’t because of Wade; that’s all you.” Ellis ended with a slight growl.

“I’m going to see Ms. Robb tomorrow morning before work,” I shared quietly.

“Do you want me to go with you?” Ellis offered. “I won’t interfere, but I could take notes and remind you of stuff in case you forget.”

I started to decline, but I changed my mind. “Are you sure you can only speak if needed?”

She rolled her eyes again, then grinned. “No, because Wade makes me so mad. However, I would only interrupt if I thought you were going too easy on the jerk,” she promised.

“Okay. I’ll pick you up at nine.” I gave her a genuine smile. It was nice having her back in town. We’d called each other often when she’d lived in Houston, but it hadn’t been the same.

“So, about Bo...” Ellis tipped her chin downward and wagged her eyebrows.

“Stop.” I drew out the word.

“Just listen for a sec,” she said quickly. “He’s a nice guy. He’s single. You’re single. Haven adores him, and he seems cool with her.”

Suddenly, the kitchen felt twenty degrees warmer. My back broke out in a nervous sweat. “Don’t.”

“I’m just sayin’. There’s nothing wrong with you all hanging out.” She shrugged innocently.

“We have a wedding to get through,” I reminded her. “Plus, Christmas and Haven will expect extra attention over the school break, and you and Grey will be on your honeymoon.” I shook my head. “I don’t have time.”

“That’s bullshit, and you know it,” Ellis stated in a clipped manner. “I know that man hurt you, and you need to rebuild some self-esteem. The Kaydee Blue I knew was always the first to laugh and have fun. I miss her.”

“That’s not fair,” I started, but she cut me off with a wave.

“You’re right. It’s not fair. He took that away from you and us.” She leaned closer. “Your brothers worry, and so do I.” She pointed her index finger at me. “Put what happened behind you. You were young and dumb.”

“I wasn’t that dumb,” I defended myself.

Ellis's look told me she disagreed. "He wanted you, and who wouldn't have been dazzled? I get it. But Wade's a dick, and even though you aren't together, he's still a dick to you. I wish you would stop thinking that since you agreed to marry him, you must endure his crap. You don't. Accept that he isn't going to be responsible when it comes to Haven, and he isn't respectful toward you. You can't make him change when he doesn't want to."

"I do know that." I didn't like it. It broke my heart for my daughter.

"Good." She nodded once. "And remember, I'm right here to remind you, and I'm doing it much more nicely than your brothers would."

Ellis spoke the truth.

I cleared my throat before speaking. "I'm glad you came back."

She giggled and grinned. "Yeah, me too."

Haven was usually good about bedtime. She liked school, and by eight o'clock, she was usually sleepy. It must've been that she was excited about the school's Holiday Show the next evening. We had to lay out her dress and shoes. Then she told me in great detail how she wanted Carley to fix her hair at the salon. After listening to her sing the three songs her class would perform, she finally gave in to sleep.

I shut the door to my bedroom and lit a few candles in my bedroom to help me relax. I changed into my oversized thermal shirt and old cotton shorts and plumped my pillows behind my back. Then I began to stare at my cell phone.

Five minutes passed, and I was still looking at the dumb thing. "Just do it," I quoted the Nike saying. "There was a time when you would've called any guy who caught your attention."

Okay. Here goes...

Kaydee: Hey Bo. Hope this isn't a bad time. I don't want to interrupt if you're saving a life.

Bo: The only life I'm saving is my own because I was starving, and now I'm halfway through a pizza.

I felt my shoulders relax. This wasn't so hard.

Kaydee: What kind?

Bo: Pepperoni with extra sauce and cheese.

Kaydee: Long day?

Bo: They can all be long. Today wasn't that bad, except a heart attack came in when I was going to grab some dinner.

Kaydee: After my adrenaline kicks in, I'm never hungry.

Bo: And that's why I'm finally eating.

Kaydee: I wanted to thank you for not telling my family about what you heard when Wade called.

Bo: ...

I gripped the phone tightly as I stared at those damn dots. When it vibrated in my hand with an incoming call, I dropped it in surprise. I scrambled to pick it up and brushed my finger over the screen. Then I tried to swallow so my throat wouldn't feel so dry. "Hey, Bo."

"I thought it would be easier to talk instead of text."

I agreed. "Anyway, it was nice of you."

"Did you blurt it out at the table?"

"No. When I asked Grey if he'd call Wade to make arrangements, they found out. Thad overheard and started peppering me with questions."

"Ah," his chuckle was deep, "you should never give up extra information. You should make them work for it."

"Next time, wise one, I will." I was smiling at the phone.

"It wasn't my news to tell, Kaydee," he said softly.

“I appreciate it.” That meant he’d respected me and my boundaries.

“But that doesn’t mean that if I see Wade, I won’t tell him what I think,” Bo continued.

“Please don’t.” I rushed to explain, “I’m going to the attorney tomorrow. Wade’s not going to like that. It will only add more fuel if you say something to him.”

He let out a long sigh. “I don’t like that he thinks the way he talks to you is okay, but I do hear you. I won’t say anything.”

“Thank you.” I meant that.

“Now, tell me what my girl, Haven, has been up to.”

His girl?

I decided that I liked how much he enjoyed my kid. “Tomorrow night is the elementary school’s Holiday Show. She’s so excited. I think it’s because she has a new dress to wear. So, that’s what’s foremost on her mind.”

“What time?”

“What?”

“The show tomorrow night. What time does it start?”

“Seven.”

“I don’t get off until six. Save me a seat, and I’ll meet you there.”

What was happening?

“You want to come to the show?” I asked slowly.

“Sure do. Kaydee. Everybody needs a little more holiday spirit.” He added an overly exaggerated sigh.

Warmth bloomed inside my chest. “Haven will be so happy.”

“Don’t tell her. I mean...sometimes, shit comes up, and I can’t leave,” he explained. “I love what I do, but sometimes, it sucks. You need to understand that.”

“I do.”

“What I mean is, this is my life. I miss events. I don’t want to, but it’s a part of the job. Some people can’t accept it, and it causes problems. I want to be honest with you about my life.”

My heart started to pound. “I hear you, Bo. I do understand. What you do is important.”

“I’ll see you tomorrow night.”

“Night, Bo.”

“Night, Sunshine.”

I tapped the end button and shook my head. “Sunshine?”

I stood in my bathroom brushing my hair. I’d gone back to my natural honey-blonde earlier in the fall, and I liked it.

“Mommy, you look pretty.”

“Thanks, baby.” I put down my brush and took a step back to take in a larger view. I was wearing black pants with a wider leg and an ice-blue, silky blouse that was double-breasted. It was a little dressy for an elementary school event, but why not dress up during the holidays?

“*We* look pretty.” Haven was sitting on the closed lid of the toilet, watching as I freshened my makeup.

“Ready for some perfume?” I asked her.

“*Yeeesss*.” She trotted out of the bathroom, and I followed her to my low chest of drawers, where I kept my bottles of fragrances.

“Which one should we wear?” I didn’t remember my mom spending much time with me alone. The one memory I did have was when she dressed up, I would watch her put on her lipstick, and she would let me pick out her perfume. Then she’d share a little with me.

Havs touched each bottle, being careful not to tip any over. “This one, Mommy.”

“Boucheron, nice choice.” My daughter had expensive taste in fragrances. She avoided my simple splashes and always chose designer scents. “Are you ready?”

She leaned forward a little, anticipating what was going to happen.

I pressed down on the nozzle once. “Go.”

She ran through the fragrance shower, then stopped and sniffed her forearms. “Mmmmm.”

I did the same but only walked forward two steps. After replacing the bottle on the bureau, I said, “Get your coat. We’re ready to go.”

CHAPTER SIX

I MADE IT TO THE ELEMENTARY AUDITORIUM WITH TEN MINUTES to spare. “Hey.” I stopped by the aisle seat that Kaydee had saved for me.

She picked up her purse. “You made it.”

I shrugged out of my leather jacket and took my seat. “Is she excited?”

“Very,” she said, smiling at me.

I leaned forward a little and greeted the rest of the Blue family. Ellis was seated next to Kaydee with Grey and Thad.

When it was time for the second grade to perform, Kaydee pulled her phone from the pocket of her purse.

I leaned close and whispered in her ear, noticing that she smelled very nice. “Enjoy the show, Mom. I’ll take the video.”

The surprised smile she gave me that turned quickly to one of gratitude made my cock twitch.

I bent over and walked down the aisle to get closer to the stage along with about ten other parents. I made sure that I held my phone steady while I recorded Haven and her class perform.

When I returned to my seat, I sent the video to Kaydee and then stowed my phone.

The man sitting in front of Kaydee was tall, and she leaned to the left and right, trying to see around him.

It only seemed natural for me to wrap my arm along the back of her chair so that she could lean closer to me to see better.

I tried to concentrate on the class singing the carol, but the floral scent Kaydee wore kept drawing my attention back to her.

When the lights came back on, Kaydee said, “I hope you weren’t bored.”

“I enjoyed it. Haven looked like she was having a blast.” I didn’t lie. I could see myself doing this often. It felt natural, not like a job.

“Want to come with me to her classroom to pick her up?” Kaydee asked quietly.

“Sure.” I got to my feet and motioned for Kaydee to lead the way.

“We’ll be out in the hall,” Ellis told us.

I followed Kaydee as we wove through the different groups. Some harried parents were trying to hurry their families home, while others were leaning against the hallway walls chatting.

We slowed outside a classroom with a giant Santa hat on the door. Haven was standing in a far corner of the room, talking with a group. She looked up, and a huge smile spread over her face. “Bo! You came!” She ran to me and wrapped her arms around my hips. “Did you see me?”

I rested my palm against the back of her head. “I did. I even got a video.”

“You did?” She looked up at me with a look that took my breath away.

“Let’s get your coat. Grey says there’s ice cream at his house.” Kaydee pointed toward the closet at the back of the room.

“Okay, Mommy.” Haven rushed to the back of the classroom.

Kaydee grinned at me. “My daughter, like me, can be bribed by ice cream.”

“Good to know.” I filed that nugget of information away.

It took a few moments to get Haven into her coat, and she insisted on holding my hand as we left her classroom.

As we made our way down the hallway, I rested my hand along the small of Kaydee’s back. We said hellos and good nights as we headed to the exit doors.

There waited, the rest of the family.

Haven was adorable as she enjoyed the attention of her aunt and uncles. She was polite, giving many thank yous.

Despite the interested stares, I didn’t remove my hand from Kaydee’s back, and she didn’t step away.

“Ready for some ice cream?” Ellis asked.

“Yesss!” Haven cheered.

Our group turned toward the doors when Wade stepped in front of us. “Isn’t this sweet?” he asked in a too-loud voice.

Kaydee’s body stiffened, and Haven continued to hold my hand and leaned into my leg.

“Aren’t you going to say hello to your dad?” Wade was still speaking loudly.

It seemed like the entire hallway had quieted.

Haven wrapped her arms around my thigh and said shyly. “Hi.”

I rested my hand on her shoulder protectively since she didn’t want to go to him.

“I, uh, didn’t see you.” Kaydee’s voice sounded strained.

“Jill sent a photo of you all. So, I thought I’d come over and remind my daughter who her father is.” Wade rocked up on his toes.

“Have you been drinking?” Thad asked quietly. “You’re making a scene.”

“None of your business.” Wade gave Thad an angry scowl.

“We were leaving. It’s getting late.” Kaydee started to take a step forward, but Wade cut her off.

Hell no. I kept my hand on Haven, but we moved up with her mother.

“Bro, you don’t want to start this,” Wade told me.

“First, I’m not your bro; secondly, it’s a school night.” I didn’t raise my voice. I kept my expression and my voice calm.

Wade sneered. “She’s not your kid, and I don’t have to listen to you.”

Grey came forward. “Wade, you don’t want to do this here in front of Haven and others.”

Wade’s laugh was ugly.

Luckily, a woman approached. “There you are. I was looking for you.” She cut through our group and gripped his arm possessively.

Wade looked at the woman’s hand gripping his arm. “Hey, Jill. I thought I’d stop in.”

“Come on over and say hi to the others.” She led Wade away.

“Ice cream at the farm,” Grey announced quickly, although a muscle jumped along the edge of his jaw.

We wasted no time exiting the building.

“Bo, are you coming for ice cream?” Haven was still sticking close to me.

“If that’s what you want, Princess.” I glanced at Kaydee. “I’ll walk you to your car.”

“Thanks.”

Haven had eaten about four bites of her sundae before climbing onto Kaydee’s lap and falling asleep. She was now

on the sofa in the family room.

“What the hell was that?” Ellis asked. “I mean, why would he act like that at a little kids’ event?”

Kaydee kept her gaze on her empty bowl.

“He’d been drinking. I could smell the beer on him,” Thad muttered.

“Word will spread. A teacher can’t show up and behave like that at a school event.” Grey scowled as he crossed his arms over his chest.

“You’ll tell us if he calls you, right?” Ellis asked.

“I’m sure he’ll call,” Kaydee said in a small voice, not raising her head.

I turned to her. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to cause...”

Kaydee cut me off. “Don’t.” She shook her head and met my gaze. “You saw how happy Haven was that you came. This isn’t anybody’s fault that’s sitting at this table, and the only person who should apologize is Wade.”

I saw Thad give Grey a long look.

“He’s going to cause more problems,” Ellis proclaimed.

“He has no say in what you do with your life, Kaydee,” Thad stated, not hiding his anger. “You’re a single adult, and so are you.” He looked at me. “If you like spending time with each other, then I think it’s great. Haven likes you, and that makes it even better.” He pushed his bowl to the side. “Wade only came tonight to make a scene. He doesn’t want you, but he hates the idea that you’re happy.”

“Thad,” Ellis said quietly.

“What?” He looked around the table. “I’m not telling a secret.” He again looked at us. “We’ve kept our mouths shut for you.” He pointed at Kaydee. “You asked us to stay out of it, and we have.” He then looked at Grey and then to me. “But I say, it stops now. If he’s an ass, then we call him on it. Kaydee, you don’t take any more shit from him. He’s had so

many chances to be a daddy to that little girl, and he's blown every damn one."

Ellis asked uneasily, "Kaydee?"

"Ellis was there, so she knows all this, but I haven't had a chance to tell you what I discussed with my attorney." She cleared her throat. "I'm going to formally request that we revisit the custody agreement. Ms. Robb did the math, and Wade only took Haven for a night five times since last January. He kept her for a weekend once." She looked at me. "He's supposed to have her one weekend a month. He fought for that. If he wanted more, I'd probably let him have her if she wanted to go."

I had little respect for the guy before, but now, I had zero. "How can he not want to spend time with her?"

"Well, I'm asking that he have her only once every six weeks. That will be easier for Haven and me," Kaydee said. "He'll fight me."

"Because he's a jerk," Ellis added under her breath.

"I say, bring it on," Grey told the table. "Numbers don't lie. Football season doesn't last twelve months a year." Grey's eyes flashed. "You know we've got your back."

"Don't give him an inch, sis," Thad told her. "I know you want what's best for Haven."

Kaydee didn't frown but said nothing.

Thad continued, "Having her dad constantly let her down isn't good for her. She's got others who can step up. She won't lack for men to guide her."

Kaydee stared at her younger brother for a few moments. "I don't tell you often enough, but I love you."

He shrugged. "Well, I am very loveable."

"So, say half the women in the county," Ellis quipped.

CHAPTER SEVEN

“I’M LEAVING MY HOUSE NOW.” I ENDED THE CALL WITH Lindsay Rittenhour, who along with her husband, Paul, owned The White Barn, where the wedding was being held.

The last weeks had been a whirlwind between fittings for our dresses and making sure everything would be perfect. I was having fun, but all the coordination was tiring. I’d hired another stylist to work at the salon. Except for the initial territorial scraps, the women were working well together.

It seemed like everyone needed appointments before the new year. I wasn’t complaining because the more work the stylists booked and completed, the faster my investment was paid back.

I kept our household budget lean on purpose because when Haven and I had had to move in with Grey when my marriage had ended, I’d had almost no money. I would never be in that position again. My savings account now had a healthy balance. Sure, it was tough sometimes, making decisions for the long-term when Haven wanted something now. If Grey or Thad knew that I’d shopped at resale stores in Cincinnati because I’d needed a new dress for the rehearsal dinner, they would have given me the cash.

I didn’t want to be taken care of financially by those I loved. I could provide for my daughter. Wade’s support money went into an account for Haven’s schooling. She could use it to pay for college or additional training, and then when she turned twenty-five, she could have whatever was left.

My daughter would grow up learning that nothing made you feel better about yourself than knowing you'd done an honest day's work. The rest of the family spoiled her, but they also saw that she helped when needed. It was the way Grey had treated Ellis and me growing up. She'd spent a great deal of time at our farm.

I sent Thad a quick text, reminding him that he needed to pick Haven up from school. Then I grabbed my bag and headed to my SUV.

"Four days... Can you believe that it's almost here?" Lindsay was practically dancing in place.

I looked around the large room at the White Barn. The tables were in place. We'd counted the table linens again to make sure there were enough.

"My sister, Tara, is flying in tomorrow, giving us another set of hands." Lindsay was looking at her clipboard.

"I'm sure she's excited to see your dream come to fruition." I was looking at my notes, making more notes.

"She probably wants to know when she'll get her first payment." Lindsay frowned, then looked up. "Oops. I didn't mean to say that out loud."

"Say what?" I teased. "I know what it's like having a business arrangement with family. There's always that little jagged edge you need to avoid in case anybody thinks you're criticizing or whining."

"That's why I like you." Lindsay's body relaxed. "You do understand."

"What time do you want to start tomorrow?" Lindsay and her husband wanted the wedding to be a success. It was their first event.

"I told the others to be here at one. Does that still work for you?"

"We'll do the trees and finish the other decorations." I made a note on my phone to set an alarm so I wouldn't be late.

“On Friday, I figure the rehearsal won’t take long. I’ve blocked out two hours only because I imagine people will want to look around.” Lindsay made a note on her clipboard.

“If Grey or Ellis want any changes, that gives us time after the rehearsal.” We were to begin at two. Thad had invited us to dinner at the Country Club at six. He’d decided that would be his gift to the couple. Then Ellis was spending the night with Haven and me at my trailer. I’d have ice cream and a bottle of Kahlua handy in case the adults needed a treat before bed.

“Paul checks the weather every hour, and there’s no snow in the forecast.” Lindsay puffed out her cheeks and let out a breath.

“You didn’t tell him that we decided to put out a call for the farmers to use their tractors to clear the roads?” I asked, surprised.

“No.” She shook her head. “I was worried that he or his dad would want to decorate ours with lights.”

I chuckled, “True.” I looked around the room with the light blue and white fairy lights covering the exposed beams and the gorgeous, oversized wreaths hanging over the doors. “This is going to put your business on the map. I can see many people calling you next Monday to reserve time for parties.”

“We appreciate everything you’ve done. The idea of showing the decorating in progress on social media was genius. I’ve gotten calls from people in Indy and Louisville looking for something rustic.”

That made me happy. “And if they need hair or makeup, I know you’ll send them to the salon.”

“And if they’re interested in starting a business out here, I’ll give them Thad’s name.”

“After we get Grey and Ellis married, I’m going to need a vacation.” I pushed my notes into my oversized purse.

“You have Christmas and New Years to get through. Then you can rest,” Lindsay reminded me.

“Okay.” I scrunched my nose. “I guess I’ll have to wait until mid-January or February. Maybe Haven and I will go to that lodge with the indoor waterpark.”

Lindsay followed me to the door. “I don’t know how relaxing that would be...”

“Giving my kid what she wants sometimes allows me some quiet time,” I said.

“You’re a good mom.”

“I try.”

As I drove back to town to check in at the salon, I tried not to think about Wade’s latest call.

“You are such a bitch,” he’d blasted in his voicemail. “I got your bullshit letter from your attorney, and I can’t wait to tell everybody how you’re trying to cut me out of my kid’s life.”

I’d been expecting the call and his rage. Still, it was jarring hearing the anger and the bitter words.

“Everybody’s going to know what a cunt you are. Then let’s see how the high and mighty Kaydee Blue likes it when everybody hates her.”

I had worked hard not to worry about what others thought about me. As long as my family and Bo knew I was doing what was best for my daughter and me, I didn’t care.

“What?” I gasped aloud. Where had Bo’s name come from?

Nice try, my inner voice chided. I’d spent too much time thinking about the doctor.

“He’s just being nice.” Saying the words out loud didn’t make me believe them more. It was refreshing to be around a man who worked with me instead of against me. Being with Bo was easy.

My cell rang, and it was like I’d conjured him. The screen on my dashboard announced, *Bo Calling*. I pressed the button on my steering wheel. “Hey, Doc.”

“How’s it going, Sunshine?”

I loved that he’d given me a nickname. “I’m on my way back to town from the Barn. The decorating is coming along.”

“I checked and made sure everybody knows I’m out from Friday to Monday.”

“That was on my list for tomorrow. Thanks.”

“I’m off until noon tomorrow. Is there anything I can do to help? I know your schedule is crazy.”

He was such a nice guy. “Havs is with Thad. I need to check in at the salon and then pick her up.”

“Did you remember to eat?”

“I’ll grab something after Havs goes to sleep.”

“I can bring you dinner.”

“Bo, that’s very sweet, but you don’t have to.” Plus, I probably looked like hell. I’d been on the go since early morning.

“I want to. How’s pasta sound?”

“Like heaven.” I sighed. “Don’t come by until I get Havs settled, or she’ll get too excited and be up half the night.”

“How about nine?”

“Perfect.” That might even give me time to freshen up.

“See you then.”

CHAPTER EIGHT

I SENT A TEXT TELLING KAYDEE I WAS AT HER DOOR.

Locks snicked, and then the door swung open. “Hey.”

“Hey, yourself.” Okay, smooth, I was not.

“That bag smells amazing.” She reached for the carrier bag holding our dinner.

“I even brought wine.” I followed her into her trailer.

“You are a god.”

I chuckled. She sounded like she’d had a rough day. She was now wearing a pair of faded sweats and a long sleeve T-shirt; both hugged her curves. Her long hair was pulled up in a messy bun.

She began to pull out plates and cutlery as I unloaded the bag of containers. Then I started opening cabinets, searching for two wine glasses.

I gave up my search. “Wine glasses?”

“Funny story.” She crossed her eyes. “I thought I’d set the dishwasher to run while I was out.”

“Understood.” I shook my head at her and grabbed two coffee mugs that were hanging from the bottom of the cabinet next to the coffeemaker.

When we were seated at her small table, she held up her mug. “Classy, right?”

I clicked my mug against hers. I was thinking of other adjectives like beautiful and sexy as hell. “Was Haven sleepy?”

“Uncle Thad kept her busy the entire time.” She took a sip of her wine. “I’ll need to thank him for that.”

“He’s told me he loves hanging with her,” I shared.

“I’d like to say it’s because I have a cool kid, but I think Thad uses her as a chick magnet.” Kaydee dug into her pasta.

“I think he does okay without Haven.” I took a bite of my breadstick.

“Someday, he’ll fall, and I hope she ignores him.” Kaydee scrunched her nose, looking adorable.

“And you’ll sit back and laugh.” I shook my head at her.

“I won’t be the only one.” She picked up her breadstick and used it to punctuate her words. “Ellis and Grey will be enjoying the show right along with me.”

“I like that you’re all so close.”

“I’m lucky. My family has always been behind me. I didn’t like it when Ellis went to Texas. I understood her reasons, but I missed her.”

“And now, she’s going to be your sister.”

“How’s your speech coming?” she said, changing topics.

“Haven’t written a word,” I admitted.

Her eyes flashed. “Bo! We decided you’d do the speech with the toast because I can’t trust Thad not to say something embarrassing.”

“Relax, Sunshine.” I pointed to my head. “I’m working on it. When I make time, I’ll write it down. It will be fine.”

She didn’t frown, but she also wasn’t smiling. “You’re sure?”

“I won’t let you down.”

She leaned back in her chair and slid a little lower. “I want everything to be perfect for them.”

“I know.” I nodded slowly. “And Ellis and Grey know also.”

“Grey did so much for us when we were kids,” she said. “He was always there for me. I don’t think I’ll ever be able to pay him back.”

“I’m not sure that he expects you to.” I waited for her reaction. When she didn’t argue, I went on. “I’m not your brother, but I help people.”

“You save lives,” she said emphatically.

“We both have a calling to take care of people. It’s a part of who we are.” I tried to explain why I worked so hard. “It fulfills something in us to know that we can help others. To make a difference.”

Her eyebrows drew together. “I never thought about it that way.”

I didn’t say anymore. I wanted to give her time to grab onto the idea.

“Grey said that he always wanted to farm,” she said, frowning. “Maybe not to be in charge so young, but he felt a responsibility to maintain our land.” She started to chew on her full bottom lip.

“He’s the guy everybody turns to when they have a problem,” I reminded her.

“Sometimes, I like hanging with him because he makes me feel like everything is going to be all right.” She gave me a shy smile.

“That probably means the world to him.”

She looked away. “I hope.”

We continued eating, and I refilled her mug.

“What makes you happy?” She asked softly.

I had my mug halfway to my lips when I paused. “If you’d asked me that a year ago, I would have said work. I was making plans to transfer out east.”

“To be with your fiancée.”

“Sydney, my ex,” I told her. “The funny thing is, the more I started researching and making plans, the less I wanted to leave here.”

“Sharpstown is a nice place.”

“I found that I wanted to do more stuff around here. Spend time with my friends. Get to know others...better.”

“Others?” she whispered.

I kept my voice low. “What do you think I’m doing here, Sunshine?”

Her eyes widened. “Bo,” she whispered my name.

I wanted to lay this out before she panicked and heard none of my words. “We’ll go slow. I’ll handle you and Havs with care.”

“Me?” her voice rasped.

“Damn right, you.” I smiled at her. Glad to finally get it off my chest.

She continued to watch me, blinking from time to time.

“We’ll be good, Kaydee.” I pushed my chair back and started clearing the table. “Sit. Drink your wine.”

I loaded her dishwasher and made sure that it started. “I need to go.”

“Thank you for dinner.” She followed me to the door.

I pulled on my jacket.

“I can’t tell Havs that you were here.” She grinned mischievously.

“I’ll take the secret to my grave.” I drew a cross over my heart.

“Just be prepared for Friday and Saturday. She’ll be so excited, which usually means she’ll be loud with lots of pulling on your arm.”

“Consider me warned. It’ll be fine. I can help with her and anything else you need.”

“Why do you have to be so nice?” she asked quietly.

I pulled her into my arms. “Because you deserve it.”

She didn’t push against me. Instead, her arms encircled my waist.

I gave her time to move away as I lowered my head until my lips met hers.

God, she tasted like sunshine, just as I had imagined.

I don’t know how long our moment lasted before I slowly lifted my head. “I’ll check in with you tomorrow.”

“Okay.” She smiled as I watched her lift her hand to her lips.

I opened her front door, and after I walked out onto her porch, I turned. “I’m serious about this, Kaydee.”

“I know, Bo.”

“Lock up, Sunshine.” I waited until I heard her close the door and throw her locks. Then I jogged to my SUV, truly happy for the first time in years.

Bo: This place has been insane since I got here. What’s wrong with people?

Kaydee: I heard Dan Marshall fell off a ladder adding more lights to his garage.

Bo: I gave him one of my stern lectures about the dangers of ladders.

Kaydee: Did you use your disappointed face?

Bo: I used the same face that my grandma used with me.

Kaydee: Haven told me that a boy in her class threw up on the lunch table, which caused three others to puke.

Bo: Sympathetic pukers. It’s a thing.

Kaydee: My day hasn't been as exciting as yours or my kid's. The trees are decorated at The Barn. I left Lindsay and her three helpers to decorate the tables with the centerpieces. Then I spent an hour trying to fix a scheduling snafu at the salon.

Bo: Glad I left the rest of the wine at your place.

Kaydee: Carley needs to learn that it takes her two hours to do a cut and color. She keeps putting them down for ninety minutes and then runs late. Really late.

Bo: Thanks for the reminder. I need to get a trim.

Kaydee: Don't.

Bo: I have time tomorrow morning.

Kaydee: I'll meet you at the barbershop. I don't want Ed to take off too much. He tends to do that because he doesn't want anyone to feel like he overcharged.

Bo: How do you know this stuff?????

Kaydee: Two brothers. Ask Thad about the unfortunate haircut before his prom.

Bo: I don't want to hear the guy cry.

Kaydee: Give me an hour's notice, and I'll meet you at Ed's.

Bo: How about after? I'll take you to breakfast.

Kaydee: Can I say - depends? Right now, it works, but you never know what will pop up.

Bo: Gotcha. I'll text you tomorrow and set a time. Sleep well, Sunshine.

Kaydee: Night, Bo.

CHAPTER NINE

KAYDEE

“NOT THAT MUCH,” I SAY AS ED LIFTS HIS SCISSORS TO TRIM the top of Bo’s hair.

“I think I can handle this, Kaydee. I heard you the last three times,” Ed grumbled.

I returned to my chair, but I kept a close eye on the barber until he finished.

“Thanks, Ed.” Bo paid the man and then led me from the shop. “You were right. He was going to go too short.”

I covered up my surprise when he grasped my hand as we walked down Main Street, heading to The Diner. “See. I know what I’m talking about when it comes to Ed.”

He squeezed my hand. “I saw you checking your phone. Is everything okay?”

“Right now, yes. Later, Ellis, Havs, and I are getting our nails done. Then I need to decide if she’s going to school tomorrow until lunch or if I should keep her out all day.”

He opened the door for me, then told Gwen, who had worked there for years, that it would be two for breakfast.

After we took our seats and removed our jackets, he said, “Keep her out all day. She won’t be able to concentrate and might get into trouble because she’s so excited. If you want me to swing by early and keep her occupied, I can.”

I let out a breath and opened the menu, although it hadn’t changed in my lifetime. “How late do you work tonight?”

“I’ll be home by one.”

“Would ten be too early?” It would help if I didn’t have Haven underfoot until the rehearsal.

He grinned. “Sunshine, nine would work.”

God. He had no idea how much it helped to have somebody to keep Havs occupied. It was great to be able to admit that, sometimes, it was hard to juggle a seven-year-old and all my other responsibilities. “How about you show up between nine and ten, and we’ll go from there?”

“Sounds good.”

Sheena was filing Ellis’s nails while Haven was choosing her polish color.

“I like this one, Mommy.” She pointed to a neon green.

“That’s awesome.” I nodded.

“Remember, you told me that we had to choose pale colors,” Ellis said from across the small rectangular room.

Haven’s eyes went wide. “I forgot.”

“It’s easy to do with all the pretty colors,” I told her while hoping Ellis’s gentle reminder would refocus Haven.

“You pick first,” Haven ordered.

“Okay.” I reached for a pale pink. “I think this is the one for me.”

“What’s it called?”

I turned the glass bottle over. “Ballet slippers.”

She giggled. “That’s a funny name.”

I smiled. “Now, it’s your turn.”

“I want to be like you, Mommy.”

My heart melted. I loved my kid. She could drive me crazy, but she was awesome. “We are going to be beautiful.”

My phone buzzed with an incoming text.

“Sheena, can you do Haven next? Uncle Thad is going to take her to an early dinner.”

“Sure thing, boss.”

And an hour later, Haven was with Thad, and my nails were drying.

“Where to next?” Ellis asked.

“We can go to dinner, but I need to deal with a couple of things here before I leave.”

“I’ve got nothing but time.” She gave me a cheeky grin as she opened a gossip magazine.

After my nails were dry, Ellis followed me into my tiny office. “This will take about twenty minutes. I want to look at the schedules.”

“I feel like Carley will miss out by taking the time to do our hair.”

“She volunteered to come to my place, and Grey gave me an envelope to cover her time with a nice tip.” I didn’t even look up from my computer screen. “It will be faster at my place. If we meet her here, there will be interruptions.”

“When you get married, I’ll handle everything for you.”

I jerked my head to my right to look at my friend. “That’s just crazy talk.”

She tilted her head a little to the left. “Is it?”

Dammit, I felt my cheeks heat. “Yes. It is.”

“That’s not what I heard.” She gave me a superior look, looking down her nose at me. “Grey mentioned that he saw Bo’s SUV in your driveway the other night. *Late* the other night.”

“What was he doing out?” I asked, attempting to change the subject.

“Cattleman’s Club,” she answered quickly. “Now, back to Bo.”

“Can we please not do this?”

“Why’s that Kaydee Blue?” She spoke in her singsong voice.

I leaned back in my chair, which let out a slight screech as I pressed backward. “Because it’s new, and I don’t know what’s going on,” I said honestly.

“Ahhh. You’re enjoying the anticipation of wondering what he’s going to do next.”

“I can’t do casual.” I let out a sigh. “This matters because Haven adores him, and you all like him. We need to move slowly because so much could get wrecked.”

“Or it might be simple, and you fall in love with a good guy your family likes.”

I sat up and turned back to the computer screen. It still stung a little. Wade had never gotten along with my brothers. He’d either been too loud and braggy or pouted because I wanted to be around them.

“You don’t have to get defensive,” Ellis said quietly.

I couldn’t let go of the memories. I used to coach Wade on our drive out to the farm, trying to prepare him for my family.

Wade would sneer, “I’ll be around the great Greyson Blue, who everybody respects. Then when you add in Thad, who seems to get anything he wants. You just don’t get it.” He’d come very close to whining.

Then I’d rush to try to soothe his feelings. “Everybody knows who you are and what you are doing with the team. I don’t know why you have to challenge them over every little thing.” I’d constantly been ready to spring into action to smooth ruffled feathers. Most of the time, they were due to Wade’s poor behavior.

“You don’t get it because you idolize them, too,” he’d accused.

That had been an argument that I could never win. I wouldn’t apologize for thinking that my brothers were terrific. Plus, they loved me. I’d never doubted that.

Ellis was still watching me as I did the ugly walk down memory lane. She knew me so well. She could probably read my thoughts.

“I like Bo,” I said slowly. “I mean, who wouldn’t? He fits, you know?”

“I’ve noticed,” she said.

“I promise I’ll talk to you more when I know.” I looked away for a second. “When I’m sure.”

“Deal.”

That’s why I loved Ellis. She could back off at times, even when I knew she wanted to push.

I finished my work and closed my computer. “But the guy can kiss.”

Ellis let out a little, excited scream. “He looks like he’d be a good kisser.”

I smiled at her silliness.

“God, I hope he’s good at other things, too. You know... for you.”

I stood. “Let’s go eat and not talk about this.”

“Ha. Like that’s going to happen.”

CHAPTER TEN

I TOOK A DEEP BREATH, HELD IT FOR A COUNT OF FIVE, AND then exhaled. The violinist started to play more loudly, the signal that the ladies were making their way down the aisle to us.

This part should be easy. Easy compared to the last twenty minutes where I'd had to talk both Blue brothers out of beating up a guest.

I had no idea what Annette Billings was thinking. Inviting Wade to be her date to the wedding was idiotic. I only knew that Kaydee would be furious if Grey or Thad messed up their suits or faces getting into a fight.

I hoped that Paul Rittenhour had handled things. He was to warn Wade that there would be no problems today.

Paul was an inch taller than me and carried more meat on his large frame. He could do some damage if he chose to. The day needed to go off without a hitch, so hopefully, his warning would keep Wade from causing discord.

The brothers had sent me to the room that the ladies were using to dress to warn and update Kaydee and Ellis.

Luckily, they hadn't killed the messenger. I'd hated the way Kaydee's smile had disappeared.

"I promise it's handled." I kept my voice down because Haven was in the connecting room putting on her dress under the watchful eye of the woman from the store. I told the bride, "Paul will take care of things."

“I don’t understand why she’d ask him and why’d he come,” Ellis said as her hands played nervously with the tie on her pale blue silk robe.

Kaydee paced. “He’ll claim it’s because he wants to see Haven.”

I hoped that was his reason and not to fuck with Kaydee. The guy was an idiot to ignore Haven. She was hilarious and so bright. When she grinned at me, my heart felt like it had expanded three times its normal size.

Kaydee’s pacing was interrupted when the dress store woman knocked on the door before it opened. “I’m ready for whichever of you wants to go next.” She stepped back into the dressing room.

“I’ll go,” Ellis had volunteered.

Kaydee motioned for me to follow her into the hallway. “I don’t want to worry Ellis, but Wade will do something shitty. I just know it.”

“What do you want me to do?”

“When it happens, can you grab Haven and get her out of the way?”

I’d wanted to stay and have Kaydee’s back.

“It would mean everything to me if you could see to Havs. I don’t want my daughter to witness any of the ugliness.”

Somehow, she’d read that in my expression and rephrased her request so I couldn’t refuse. I looked into her eyes for a few beats. “Then, I’ll take care of it.”

Sighing her relief, she took my hand and held it. “Thanks.”

“Would it wreck your makeup if I kissed you?”

“Just don’t touch my hair, or Carley will have a kitten.”

“Lips only.” I’d kissed her. It was too short, but I’d known she needed to finish getting ready.

Now, my attention turned to the back of the large room that was decorated to look like a winter wonderland.

Kaydee started toward us. She looked like a snow princess. Her hair had been left long and fell in loose waves. The front was pulled back with sparkly clips. Her dress had a somewhat full skirt made from a silver metallic material with a light blue lace three-quarters coat over it. It was feminine and sexy at the same time.

I smiled at her as she approached.

She was so damn pretty.

Havs followed her. She wore a dress made from the same silver material, and she had a light blue ribbon at her waist and another matching one in her hair.

During dinner last night, she'd decided that she was too old to be a flower girl, and before mother and daughter argued, Ellis had said, "Cool, you can be a bridesmaid."

Kaydee had been concerned because Haven wouldn't carry a bouquet, but Ellis handled the issue with aplomb. "Here's the deal, Havs; if you don't want to do the flower petals, then you won't have any flowers to hold."

Haven hadn't cared. And it didn't matter. Somebody had found a battery-operated candle and added some blue and silver ribbons for Havs. She smiled the entire way down the aisle, neither walking too fast nor too slow. She was perfect.

The attendees all stood and turned toward the back of the room.

Ellis had worked so hard to make her gait as smooth as possible. She'd bitched about wearing ugly shoes, but she wanted to walk on her own to Grey, her destiny, without her cane.

She looked regal in her light blue dress covered by white lace. However, the expression on her face as she made her way to Grey's side said nothing would stop her. She wanted to be tied to Grey for eternity.

Clearing his throat, the senior judge for the county began to read from a brown leather book.

The ceremony was over in a few minutes, and as Grey kissed his bride, Thad let out a loud “Woot.”

Others joined in the cheering.

I glanced at Kaydee; she was wiping tears of joy from her cheeks.

Haven was jumping up and down, enjoying the moment.

Thad leaned close to me. “I’ve got the kid; you take my sister.”

He crossed in front of the happy couple, who were still embracing and sharing whispers, to take Hav’s elbow and start down the aisle.

I followed and took Kaydee’s hand instead of her elbow. “You look so damn beautiful.”

“We all are damn gorgeous.” She grinned up at me.

I threw my head back and laughed along with her.

Dinner had been eaten, and when Lindsay gave me the sign, I moved to the microphone at the end of the deejay’s setup.

He turned down the music he’d played in the background throughout the meal.

Flipping the switch, I lifted the microphone. “I’ve been to my fair share of weddings, but I think you’ll all agree that this has been one of the best.”

The audience cheered in agreement.

“We all know the story about Ellis and Grey. Their lives have been entangled since they were young. They have so much shared history, which has given their love a solid foundation.” I paused and looked at the couple.

Grey had his arm around Ellis’ chair, which he had pulled close to his.

Her forehead was resting against his.

“When I’m around them, I can feel their love and respect for one another.” I lifted my champagne glass. “Please join me in wishing this special couple many years of happiness.” Looking again at the couple, I said, “May your memory of this moment help when there are rough times. I wish your story to continue. Please fill the pages of life’s book with sweet moments, long kisses, and many smiles. To Grey and Ellis.” I lifted my glass higher and then took a sip.

I turned off the mic, returned it to the deejay, and headed back to my seat.

“That was beautiful.” Kaydee leaned into my side.

I couldn’t help myself as I nuzzled her cheek. “Meant every word.”

She giggled.

“And I didn’t say anything embarrassing.” I pulled away so that I could give her a serious look. “I was a much better choice than Thad.”

“Absolutely.” She looked down the table at her brother, who was making her daughter laugh.

After the cutting of the cake, the deejay played music for the first dance. Grey and Ellis spent a minute alone on the floor before the guests were invited to join them.

I led Kaydee to the dance floor, and Thad and Havs followed us.

“I have the prettiest partner in the world,” Thad told us as we walked onto the floor.

“Me, too.” I wrapped my arm around Kaydee’s waist and took her other hand to hold it over my heart as we began to dance. “Definitely.”

She relaxed against me. “You’re good at this.”

“Grandma made me take lessons,” I shared. “She said a man who can dance would always be popular.”

“She was a wise woman.”

“She would’ve loved you and Havs,” I said. “God, the mischief those two would’ve gotten into.” I chuckled at the thought.

“I like it when you tell me things like that...share your stories.”

I wanted to make stories of our own with this woman and her daughter.

The song ended too soon, and Haven pulled on the hem of my jacket. “My turn.”

I let go of Kaydee as she gave me a look filled with promise. “Okay, Havs. Hop on,” I told her.

“What?” She looked up at me, grinning.

I fucking loved that she trusted me. “Put your feet on top of mine. That way, we can move easier.”

She did, and we started to move in a box step. “More, Bo.”

I smiled down at my partner. “You got it.”

I didn’t ask Ellis to dance. I knew that all her dances would belong to Grey if she felt up to it.

I kept Haven busy with two more dances and then had Kaydee in my arms again.

“Everybody seems to be having a good time.” She was looking over my shoulder.

“Especially Grey and Ellis. I’ve never seen your brother smile so much.”

“I want that for him. He’s the most serious of us, but I love that she can make him laugh.”

“You did a great job planning all of this. Everybody is saying it’s the best wedding they’ve ever been to.”

“I saw Lindsay in the bathroom, and she’s already been asked about having four more events here.” Kaydee smiled proudly.

“You are amazing,” I told her before I kissed her.

“Well, isn’t this cozy? You two are making out while your daughter runs wild.”

Kaydee’s body went stiff in my arms.

I didn’t let her go as I turned to face Wade, who was standing just off the dance floor.

“Haven is with Ellis and Grey,” Kaydee told him calmly. “She’s not out in the parking lot alone.”

I caught sight of Haven as she talked with Grey and Ellis, who were sitting at a round table. “I’m not letting you cut in.” I tightened my arms around Kaydee.

He sneered at us. “I don’t want her.”

I looked down at Kaydee. “Okay then.” I started to turn us away from him.

“Are you sleeping with him?” Wade raised his voice loud enough so that a few couples around us paused and watched. “Do you sleep with him with our daughter in the room next door?”

Thad appeared at Wade’s side. “Time for you to go.”

Wade took a few steps away from Thad and onto the floor.

“It’s none of your business,” Kaydee told Wade. “And you’re making a scene.”

I released her from my arms.

“Of course, it’s my business if you’re whoring around,” Wade said, raising his voice even louder.

“That is so rich coming from you, who had a different woman every week while I was pregnant.”

I stepped closer to Wade. “You are way out of line and need to go.”

Thad reached for Wade’s arm as Wade stepped up to me.

“Make me.”

I could smell the beer on his breath. “This isn’t the way to do things.”

“And who are you to tell me how to handle shit?” Wade tried to move closer still, but Paul looped his arms around Wade’s middle.

“Enough,” Paul said, turning Wade around. With Thad on the other side, they walked Wade toward the exit.

“That was fun,” I told Kaydee as I pulled her back into my arms.

She wouldn’t meet my gaze.

“Sunshine,” I said, my voice soft.

She turned her attention back to me.

“Don’t give them more of a show. Keep dancing.” I started to move, wanting to erase the tears in her eyes.

Her body trembled. “I hate this,” she whispered.

I positioned us so that I could see Haven.

Grey had her sitting on his knee with her back toward us.

“Havs didn’t see anything,” I said next to her ear. “And that’s what’s most important.”

Kaydee nodded twice.

“You will call your lawyer on Monday and tell her what he did,” I instructed. “He’s not going to call you those names, Kaydee. I won’t have it.”

She rolled her eyes. “He’s the one who cheated repeatedly, and he calls me a whore?” She tried to laugh, but it sounded forced.

“Nobody thinks that about you.”

She frowned. “He isn’t going to stop.”

“I know his words hurt you, and you’re worried that Haven will hear them, but they don’t matter to me.”

“We are a lot to take on,” she warned quietly.

My chuckle rumbled deep in my chest. “It’s such a chore having a beautiful woman in my arms who happens to have a sweet daughter.”

She studied me until the end of the song. “You really mean that, don’t you?”

“I do.” Yeah, I liked the sound of those two words. I could only hope that Kaydee could be convinced to give us a chance.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

KAYDEE

“EVEN MY HAIR IS TIRED.” I FLIPPED A HANDFUL OVER MY shoulder as I talked on the phone to Carley.

“But you looked amazing. Some of my best work ever,” she said, laughing.

“I think everything turned out perfectly.” I forced myself to ignore the memory of Wade’s outburst.

“I’ll let you rest. I just wanted to check in.”

“See you tomorrow.” I ended the call. Tonight, would be an early night because the salon was booked solid from nine to nine tomorrow, and I needed to be there to help control the chaos.

“Mommy, I want to do another wedding. Can you get married?” Haven was sitting on the floor coloring.

We’d slept in and had doughnuts for breakfast. She was watching me, expecting an answer. “I don’t have any plans right now.”

“You’d be real pretty, and I could get a new dress.” She went back to coloring.

I stretched my legs out in front of me and wiggled my toes. My phone rang again. It seemed everybody wanted to check in and rehash the event.

Haven was taking a nap in her room, which gave me time to finish wrapping presents. Usually, I was finished with

Christmas shopping by early December, with all the gifts wrapped by the tenth. That way, I could put the packages under the tree in Grey's house and focus on the parties.

This year, I was behind. Plus, I'd wasted too much time trying to find gifts for Bo. Tomorrow night, I would take Haven to the mall so she could shop for him. It had seemed natural to invite him to be with my family. He fit in without any of us having to adjust.

I knew he liked me. It had taken a few days for me to accept that. I'd already named all the reasons why a relationship with him was a mistake: I was still bruised from my time with Wade, I had a daughter who was my priority, and Wade was trying to make me miserable.

However, Bo seemed to take everything about our relationship in stride. He patiently answered all of Haven's questions when she went on one of her "why" kicks. He'd also stood up for me last night but then let it go, seeing to my well-being instead of his ego, which was a remarkable change for me.

I glanced at the mirror hanging over my bureau and noticed I looked happy. In fact, I felt serene. For too long, I'd been faking it. I'd never wanted anybody but those I trusted most to see how badly Wade's actions and words hurt me. I'd become a bit like a robot. I made myself go out in public and act as if I was fine. When the gossipers had shared the latest story with me, I'd always shrugged it off. It wasn't until Ellis returned that I realized I'd only been surviving.

I'd been holding onto that tiny bit of hope that since Wade had never settled down with any of his conquests, we might be able to put our marriage back together.

I rolled my eyes at myself.

Now, I couldn't believe I had been so stupid. Why would I want a man who repeatedly hurt and humiliated me? I didn't want that for myself, but I couldn't allow my daughter to believe that was normal. No way did I want her to think that when she was grown, she had to put up with that kind of behavior from her partner.

I'd told my therapist last week that I'd beat myself up for four hours about how dumb I'd been, and then I'd forgiven myself. Honestly, I thought I'd got a little high off the relief. I'd finally stopped hoping Wade would come to his senses and love me, and I'd accepted that he couldn't give me what I deserved.

I liked that Bo knew today's Kaydee. I wasn't that girl who thought love cured everything. I now knew that you could love and still hurt someone. That a healthy relationship took both parties making compromises. I was also learning the power of using the word "no." I couldn't be all things to all people.

My phone buzzed, and I saw that it was Bo. "Hi."

"Tell me why I'm so tired."

I snickered. "You're the doctor. You should be able to make a diagnosis."

"We must be getting old because I slept until noon, and I could manage a nap if I relaxed."

"Haven is napping."

"Smart girl. Hell, she's probably smarter than all of us."

I loved it when he said nice things about my kid. "I'm trying not to look at my list for tomorrow. I can't believe that Wednesday is Christmas Eve."

"I hope you're all fine with gift bags because this man doesn't wrap."

"You didn't have to get us gifts," I rushed to tell him.

"I know how you Blues feel about Christmas. Remember, I was there for the hours of decorating."

"Okay, I admit that we can go a little crazy." I smiled at my phone.

"I was hoping I could stop by. I have some ideas for Havs, and I'd like your thoughts."

I took a deep breath and let it out before responding. "I have a pot of chili cooking. Do you want to come for an early dinner?"

“I don’t know,” he said, his tone deepening. “I’m particular about my chili.”

“I use beans, and there will be some elbow macaroni in it because Havs calls them smiles.”

“Smiles. I like that. I was going to ask if you use beef, venison, or is it vegetarian?”

“There is no Bambi consumption in this house,” I told him sternly. “Beef.”

“Then tell me what I can bring.”

“Something sweet.”

“Sunshine, there’s nothing sweeter than you and your daughter.”

God, this man. I shook my head at his silliness. “Next time she has a meltdown, I’ll drop her off at your place.”

“We all have those times. You two don’t have to be perfect for me. I know I’m not.”

“I’ll have to look harder because I’ve seen no faults so far,” I shared.

“There are plenty, so don’t be surprised.”

“That makes me happy,” I said softly. Then I replayed what I’d just said and corrected myself. “I don’t mean it like that.” I rushed to qualify, “What I mean is...”

“Sunshine, I know what you mean, and it’s fine.” His tone was calm, and I could picture him wearing that little smile.

“We’ll eat around five.”

“See you then.”

I looked down at my bed for a moment, then let out a loud sigh. I needed to jump in the shower and change. I’d do light makeup because I didn’t want to look overdone but still look like I was making an effort.

The three of us were sitting around my small four-top table. Bo was on his second helping, and I was trying to keep Haven focused so that she ate more than Goldfish crackers.

“I want to eat dinner at your house tomorrow night, Bo,” Haven announced.

“Baby, Bo works an early shift tomorrow. He won’t want to have to deal with us,” I said quickly.

She turned to look at him and gave him a pouty face. “Don’t you want to see us?”

He gave her the sweetest smile, and my heart skipped a beat. “I always want to see my two girls.” His gaze darted to me, and he gave me a wink. “I know tomorrow is your last day of school before the break, and your mom has to work at the salon. I’ll already be at the hospital when you wake up tomorrow morning.”

Haven’s mouth opened in surprise.

“So, we’re all having a busy day,” he told her.

“Remember, we have plans to go shopping tomorrow after school,” I gave a gentle reminder.

She turned to him. “I need to get your present.”

He widened his eyes. “For me?”

“Yes,” she told him earnestly. “I want it to be special.”

And my heart melted.

“How about we have dinner at my place on Tuesday night?” Bo asked.

“Yay,” Haven yelled.

“Shh, inside voice.” I tapped her forearm to get her attention.

“Nothing fancy. I’ll order pizza?”

“I love pizza,” Haven said with a flirty smile.

He could have named any food, and she’d say she loved it.

“How late are you working on Tuesday?” he asked me.

“Havs and I are taking our gifts to Grey’s in the morning. Then I’m to drop her at the Chamber, and Thad is watching her until I get done at the salon around five-ish.”

“Why don’t we invite Thad, too?” Bo offered.

I smiled at him. “Worried that he won’t eat?”

“Something like that,” he said mysteriously.

It was probably more like he didn’t think I’d like stopping by Thad’s to collect Haven and not be able to invite him.

“I like pepperoni,” Haven told him.

“Me, too.” He tapped the tip of her nose.

“Will you read me a story tonight?”

Bo looked at me as if asking for permission.

“Havs, Bo might not want to stay until you go to sleep.” I offered him an out if he wanted it.

“I’ll go to sleep soon. I promise.” She looked at Bo with a widening, hopeful smile.

I knew when I was beaten. “Okay. Go brush your teeth and put on your PJs.”

Haven took her bowl to the sink and skipped to her bedroom.

“She’ll try to stretch it out,” I warned.

“If I can’t out-manuever a seven-year-old, then I need to be put down.”

“She’s pretty cunning when it comes to getting what she wants.”

He waggled his eyebrows. “So am I.”

CHAPTER TWELVE

WE WERE ALL SITTING IN MY LIVING ROOM. THAD IN THE recliner, Haven on the floor by the coffee table, Kaydee and I sprawled on my sofa. Three pizzas had been demolished, and now we were letting our full stomachs rest.

“Miss Haven and I got everything we needed,” Thad said. “I had some last-minute shopping.”

“What time should I show up, or do I need to call Ellis?” I asked.

“I’m going to head to the farm after lunch. I’m supposed to meet somebody for lunch.” Thad tried to look innocent.

“Is this a female somebody?” Kaydee asked.

“Yes, but it has to do with work.” He still didn’t look at Kaydee or me.

“I saw you talking to Tara at the reception,” Kaydee said, narrowing her eyes. “What was that about?”

“I wanted to tell her Lindsay and Paul were doing a good job.” Thad finally looked at us. “She’s an ice queen.” He crossed his arms over his chest. “Brr.” He faked shivers.

Kaydee rolled her eyes at her brother. “Did you hit on her?”

“I was just being friendly.” Thad didn’t look happy. His lips were a straight line.

“You can’t hit on every female who crosses your path. She was there to see how Lindsay and Paul were managing

things.” Kaydee shook her head at her brother.

“I ran into her on my way to the dressing room. I thought it would be rude if I didn’t stop and talk,” he said, sounding slightly defensive.

“Thaddeus...” Kaydee let out a sigh of frustration. “There’s a difference between chatting about the weather and asking her back to your place for a drink.”

“I was thinking more of a moment in the dressing room,” he said, trying to suppress a grin.

Kaydee shook her head. “I hope she throat-punched you.”

“You aren’t supposed to punch people,” Haven said in a serious tone. “That is very wrong.”

“That’s right, baby,” Thad cooed.

“When you grow up, if you have to deal with men like your uncle, you can punch them.” Kaydee was giving Thad a mean glare.

I pushed up from my seat and began gathering the pizza boxes. “No punching before Christmas,” I said, trying to refocus the siblings.

“How late do you work tomorrow, Bo?” Thad asked.

“I’m off for the next three days.” I returned and grabbed more trash and plates.

“We dropped our presents earlier, and I don’t think I need to go into the salon tomorrow. Two appointments canceled, so the ladies are only working in the morning,” Kaydee said.

“I’m going to sleep ’til noon,” Haven announced loudly.

“Hey,” Kaydee said softly, “remember, you don’t need to yell.”

“I know.” Kaydee lay on her tummy. “I get excited, and that’s when I yell.”

I chuckled.

Thad stood. “I’m going to cut out.”

Kaydee stood and hugged her brother. “Thanks for your help.”

“We had fun.” He looked down at Haven. “Aren’t you going to hug me?”

Haven slowly got to her feet, the corners of her mouth dipping downward. “I want to stay at your house, Uncle Thad.”

“You spent the afternoon with him, baby.” Kaydee moved to her daughter.

“I don’t want him to be lonely.” Haven moved to Thad’s side and hugged him.

He pulled on her ponytail. “I’m going to be okay. Who’s going to keep your mom company if you come home with me?”

“Mom has Bo,” Haven said as she looked up at her uncle.

“She does, does she?” Thad’s gaze traveled from his sister to me.

“Haven, I have ice cream in my freezer. I picked it up special for you,” I told her.

Thad gently loosened Haven’s arms. “You need to stay and eat Bo’s ice cream.”

She looked down. “Okay.”

After Thad had left, Kaydee suggested that we all have a bowl of ice cream.

“We need this to be an early night,” she told me as she spooned the special holiday peppermint into her mouth.

I still had several items to organize and stuff into gift bags. Plus, I needed to choose clothes since I’d be staying at the farm with the Blues. “Do you need me to stop by your place on my way to the farm?”

“No. I think I can take everything in one trip,” Kaydee said.

“Are you spending the night at your place or Grey’s?”

“I’ll stay at Grey’s because there’s no tellin’ what time Miss Haven will wake up.”

“Good to know.” I was excited to spend the holiday with Kaydee and her family.

“Make sure that you pack your ugliest sweater,” Kaydee ordered.

I chuckled. “I got the e-mail from Ellis.”

“We’ll wear them for the photo and maybe dinner, but then you can change,” Kaydee said, wrinkling her nose.

“I’m just along for the ride,” I told her.

“I’m glad you’re coming.”

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

I PARKED MY SUV AND TURNED TO HAVEN. “CAN YOU PULL your suitcase?”

“Yes.” The little girl was practically vibrating with excitement.

I planned to get inside, unpack, and see what needed doing. Hopefully, Haven would be so excited she’d run herself ragged and nap. It was that, or she’d be difficult by dinnertime. “Let’s go.” I tried to sound like a cheerleader.

Ellis was standing at the back door. “Do you need help?”

“Nope.” I handed Haven her *Frozen* themed suitcase, then grabbed my large tote and the other small canvas tote that held all the last-minute things we might need. “I know. We only live a few minutes away, yet we packed for a week.”

“We all need to change clothes like twelve times.” Ellis widened her eyes, and we giggled.

We took off our jackets and hung them on the hooks by the door.

“Haven, we have a surprise for you,” Ellis said, grinning.

“A surprise?” She looked from Ellis to me.

“Yeah. Grey’s upstairs. Let’s go find him.” Ellis held out her hand for my daughter to take.

“Be careful, Auntie Ellis. I don’t want you to get hurt if I go too fast,” Haven cautioned. My kid could be a handful, but deep down, she was very caring.

I followed them as we made our way to the steps. “How about I carry your suitcase up the stairs?”

“Okay.” Haven turned to Ellis. “You hold on, and I’ll walk behind you. That way, if you fall, I’ll catch you.”

“Thank you, Miss Havs.” Ellis met my gaze, and I knew we were both touched by my daughter’s words.

Grey met us at the top of the stairs. “There’s my favorite girl.”

Haven giggled. “I’m not your favorite, Uncle Grey. Ellis is.”

He took Haven’s hand and frowned dramatically. “You’re right.” Then he grinned. “Then you’re my second most favorite.”

“Hey, what about me?” I teased.

“We like you because you carry the bags,” he teased.

My room was to the left. When Haven and I had moved in after my marriage imploded, she’d stayed in the room with me. As she’d grown, so had her beds.

“Grey and I have done some rearranging,” Ellis said, then turned to Haven. “Since you are seven and so grown up, we wondered if you might like this room.” They headed to the right and opened the first door.

Haven slowly entered the room, then turned in a complete circle. “It’s beautiful,” she whispered.

It was perfect for my daughter. The walls were white with lavender trim. The closet door was a deeper purple. The bed had a matching purple comforter with a design that looked like swirls. It was perfect.

“The only bad news,” Grey said, “is you have to share the bathroom with Bo.”

“I do?” Haven was still studying her new room.

“Now, let’s look at your mom’s room.” Ellis turned to leave the room.

My room? “This is a surprise.” I’d known what they were doing for Haven, but not this.

“A good kind,” Grey said.

Ellis stopped outside my door. “Go on.”

I opened the door and entered the room that had always been mine. Ellis had spent so much time here that we’d had twin beds with matching bedspreads. Now, my room had a fresh coat of paint. The walls were a pale gray, and I’d been given a bigger bed.

“It’s a queen.” Ellis pointed to the bed.

It had a thick comforter that was teal with a gray border.

“And we upgraded your shower.” Grey pointed to my small bathroom. “New sprayer.”

“New towels and everything.” Ellis was looking at me expectantly.

My chest tightened at their thoughtfulness. “This is too much. I love it.”

“Well, don’t tell Thad,” Grey smirked. “We didn’t do anything to his room.”

“That’s because you like me better,” I teased.

“For now.” Grey was grinning. It was our family joke. Thad and I adored Grey and wanted to be his favorite.

“Thank you.” Tears filled my eyes.

Ellis must have noticed because she rested her hands on Haven’s shoulders. “How about I help you unpack, and you can help me eat some cookies.”

“Cookies!” Haven ran from my room as Ellis followed her more slowly.

“This is too much,” I repeated to my older brother.

“We wanted to do it. Besides, Haven is old enough for her own room. Ellis had fun picking everything out.”

“You just got married. You two should be doing...stuff.” I couldn’t say “having sex” to Grey.

“We are doing plenty of that *stuff*,” he blushed a little, “but we wanted to do this for you. I know it’s been a rough year, and I wanted you to know that we love you.”

I hugged him. “You are the best.”

“So are you, darlin’.”

We sat in the family room after having a snack of cookies and milk or coffee. Christmas music played in the background. Thad and Bo had arrived, and Haven had helped place their presents under the tree.

“In about twenty minutes, we should change into our ugly sweaters.” Ellis was looking at her phone.

“Please tell me that you don’t have a schedule written down,” Thad teased.

“It’s not set in stone.” She gave us a sheepish look. “But since the Christmas Eve Service was moved to nine, we need to eat dinner early enough that we won’t be rushed.”

Bo leaned closer to me and asked quietly, “Does Haven go to the service?”

“She’ll want to.” I turned to face him. “Hopefully, she’ll fall asleep on the way home and sleep through the night.”

He nodded.

I smiled. “It’s my favorite time to go to church. We sing Christmas hymns, and it’s all done by candlelight.”

“It’s a family tradition,” he said, nodding his understanding.

“I guess it is.” I tried to think of a time we hadn’t attended. “The candlelight thing only started a few years ago. When I was a kid, we did a live nativity.”

“With animals?” Bo asked.

“It was pure chaos,” Thad said, chuckling.

“For some dumb reason, the people who led the live creatures didn’t have any experience with animals.” Grey

shook his head.

“That’s incredible,” Bo said, smiling.

“I loved the craziness of it all,” I said.

“You didn’t have to help round up the sheep that got loose,” Grey muttered.

Ellis turned to Haven. “Before we leave for church, can you help me pick out cookies for Santa? When we get back, I’ll put them out for him.”

“And water, Aunt Ellis. He needs to drink water,” Haven added.

“Don’t want Santa to get dehydrated,” Thad chimed in, trying not to laugh.

“If he drinks at every house, where does he go to the bathroom?” Bo asked, his expression innocent.

Haven looked from me to Grey. “He can use the bathroom, right?”

“Well, sure,” Grey said.

Haven looked at me. “Maybe I should write him a note?”

“I think that’s a great idea,” I said. One of the things I had not anticipated about being a mother was how often I had to fight to keep a straight face. Kids were funny, but there were times when you couldn’t give in to giggles.

Ellis got up and held out her hand to Haven. “Let’s go to Grey’s office. He’s got paper and pens in there.”

Grey’s gaze followed his wife. “I don’t know why she calls it my office when she spends more time there than I do.” He shook his head while wearing a serene smile.

I loved seeing him like this. Happy, settled, and sure. He had what he wanted.

“After Havs goes to bed, do the elves do their thing?” Bo asked.

I nodded. “We usually have a drink and relax a little to make sure she stays asleep, and then we get to work.”

“We mostly get in each other’s way because you don’t need so many helping, but nobody wants to miss out,” Thad added.

I was lucky that Grey and Thad adored my daughter.

“Maybe Santa will bring more presents to little girls and boys next year.” Thad looked at the tree.

I looked at Grey.

Then I felt gazes on me. I mouthed to Thad, *What?*

“You know.” Then he gave me a wide grin.

I shook my head. “I’m going to go check on something in the kitchen.” I quickly escaped. I didn’t want to discuss what was going on between Bo and me with my brothers. And I especially didn’t want Thad to make jokes about it.

I opened the refrigerator and stared at the full shelves while trying to calm my nerves. We were too new. I was surprised that Haven hadn’t said a word when Bo had kissed me goodbye last night. She’d acted like it was perfectly natural. I didn’t know what was going on. The only thing I did know was that I liked the way Bo looked at me and spoke to me. He made me feel cherished.

“Letting all the cold air out?” Bo asked in a quiet voice.

“I forgot what I was looking for.” I closed the door and gave him a sheepish look.

“Thad’s being the little brother who wants to irritate his sister.” Bo stepped closer to me and pulled me into his arms.

“You’d think I’d be used to it. He’s been that way my whole life.” I liked the way this felt. I ran my hands over his chest, which was solid and warm.

“I told him to stop.”

“You did?” Most people just let Thad be Thad.

“Yeah.”

I smiled and snuggled against him. “Thanks.”

“Here’s the deal, Sunshine. I don’t like it when people upset you. I don’t care if they are teasing. If it upsets you, I will do everything possible to stop it.”

I felt my chest tighten, and it was hard to breathe. After I swallowed the rock in my throat, I whispered, “Do you mean that?”

“I’m going to teach you that you won’t have to ask things like that. I’ll show you the kind of man I am. You’ll see that I’ll protect you, and when I can’t, I’ll do everything I can to cushion your fall.”

“Bo…” That sounded like he was talking long-term.

“We have a lot to discuss, and it’ll take time, I get that.”

I thought my heart was going to pound through my chest. So many emotions swirled inside me. “You really mean this?” I wanted it to be true.

“I do. I wouldn’t be this way with you and not be sincere. I respect and like your brothers too much to lie to them, but more importantly, I wouldn’t fake something or mislead Haven.”

I melted against him. Haven and I were a package deal. “I like how you treat us.”

He smiled. “Good.”

“I like you.”

“Even better.” He kissed me.

I didn’t know how much time had passed. I was too wrapped up in all things Bo.

Suddenly, Haven yelled, “Bo and Mom are kissin’!”

We broke apart, and my cheeks heated. “Oops.” I rolled my eyes.

“She’ll get used to us.” Bo loosened his hold.

“And hopefully, stop announcing what we’re doing.” I turned to walk back to the family room. Once there, I gave my busybody daughter a smile. “Did you finish your note?”

She nodded. “Yes.”

“Then let’s get changed. You know Uncle Thad will make us take about a hundred photos.” I motioned for her to head upstairs.

“Is it too much to ask that everybody look at the camera?” Thad bitched in the background.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

I WAS HAVING A GREAT TIME BECAUSE THE BLUE FAMILY WAS crazy. We wore hideous Christmas sweaters. Grey won with a sweater featuring a cow dressed as Santa. When you pressed its nose, it said, “Moo-rry Cow-mas.”

Kaydee hadn't exaggerated. Thad made us pose for many photos. I didn't mind because we had to stand close, and I could wrap my arms around her. My favorite shot had the three men sitting on the bottom steps with Ellis on Grey's lap, Haven on Thad's, and Kaydee on mine. It all felt so natural.

During the Christmas service, Haven sat on my left and Kaydee on my right. Kaydee had pressed her keys in my hand, and we'd ridden together. Between “Silent Night” and “Away in the Manger,” Havs had climbed onto my lap and fallen asleep. I loved holding her in my arms as we quietly said our goodnights to friends and then, with Kaydee's help, loaded her into her booster seat and strapped her in the SUV.

We didn't talk on the ride back to the farm. I held Kaydee's hand, and that was enough.

She led the way to the back door. “Is she getting heavy?”

“No.”

She unlocked and opened the door, then followed us inside, closing it behind us.

“I'll take her upstairs, then come back and get rid of my coat,” I whispered so I wouldn't wake up the sleeping girl.

Kaydee nodded and followed me upstairs.

I gently placed Haven on her bed.

She stirred. “Mommy?”

“Let’s get you ready for bed.” Kaydee smoothly slid Haven’s coat off.

“Give me your coats, and I’ll go downstairs.” I held out my hand for Kaydee’s.

She slid her navy wool from her shoulders and handed it to me. “I’ll be down in a few minutes.” She smiled at me.

“Night, Bo,” Haven murmured sleepily.

“Night, sweetie.” I dropped a kiss on top of her head.

With the girls’ coats draped over my arm, I closed the door.

The others were sitting around the kitchen table.

“Did she wake up?” Ellis asked.

“Long enough to tell me goodnight,” I said as I hung up our coats.

“Grab yourself a beer or whatever,” Grey said as I neared the refrigerator.

I grabbed a beer and joined them at the table.

“Tomorrow morning will be loud.” Grey sat next to Ellis with his arm resting on the back of her chair. “Haven will screech so loud you’ll think your ears will bleed. Kaydee will try to quiet her, which only makes Haven rev higher, and that makes Kaydee frustrated.”

“We don’t mind. I mean, Christmas is for kids. We want her to have fun,” Thad explained.

Grey took over. “Wade has complained that Haven is too loud at times. Kaydee is very aware because he uses it to criticize her parenting.”

“I don’t like how he talks to her. He pokes at her, and I can tell it hurts her.” Heat rose to my cheeks, and I made sure not to speak too loudly.

Ellis sighed and looked at the counter where the bottle of wine was sitting.

“I’ll get it,” Thad said.

Ellis’s lips tightened. “Growing up, we talked about not having mothers actively participating in our lives. We made promises that we’d take good care of our kids. We’d make sure that our kids would never feel like they were missing out.” Ellis thanked Thad with a nod when he refilled her glass. “For the marriage to end, that already messed with her dream. Then to hear that her daughter isn’t behaving makes her feel like she’s not a good mom.”

“But she’s a great mom,” I said.

“We know *that*,” Ellis said slowly. “But Wade knows it’s a way to hurt her, and for a man who wanted her so badly, he enjoys hurting her.”

“I’m glad I missed his little show at the reception,” Grey growled.

“I thought you were going to punch him,” Thad told me.

“I wanted to.” I let out a sigh. “Truth be told, I still want to.” I shrugged, not feeling ashamed of my feelings. “But I knew that would upset Kaydee by making more of a scene. Plus, I didn’t want Haven to see any of it.”

“Wade’s going to be a problem for you both,” Thad said, his expression darkening.

“Know that, too.” Wade was a bully. I didn’t like it. At some point, I was going to have to put a stop to his disrespect.

Grey held up his hand suddenly.

“Did anybody pour me a glass?” Kaydee asked as she entered the room. She’d changed into soft red flannel pants and a black T-shirt.

“Grab a glass, and I’ll pour,” Thad told her.

After Kaydee sat back in her chair and took a sip, she said, “She’s out. I don’t think a marching band would wake her.”

“We were preparing Bo for tomorrow morning,” Grey said, then looked at me to tell me silently our previous conversation was at an end.

Kaydee turned to me. “Did they tell you my kid can hit a note that I swear makes the dogs howl?”

“I’ve been warned.” I rested my hand on her thigh.

“The plan is that we should get up by eight,” Ellis began, then gave her husband a smirk. “Well, Grey will get up like usual.”

“Do you need any help?” I offered.

He shook his head. “Nah. I’ll start the coffee when I get back from chores.” He glanced at Ellis. “And the oven.”

“You are so good,” his new bride told him. “We’ll open gifts, and there will be juice, coffee, tea, and doughnuts to snack on.”

“There are two breakfast casseroles to bake, with hash browns and biscuits, for after,” Kaydee continued.

“Then we nap or play with our new toys,” Thad said, grinning.

“Dinner will be at four,” Grey added.

“We usually dress up a little,” Kaydee warned. “Not ties or suits, but we change out of our pajamas.”

I’d packed a sweater and a pair of khakis. So, cool.

“Then we watch some classic Christmas movies.” Thad leaned back in his chair, looking content.

“It’s basically eating and relaxing,” Grey summed up.

“Unless you’re on kitchen duty,” Ellis said.

“Babe, just say the word, and you’ll have all the help you can handle.” Grey pulled Ellis’s chair closer to his.

“The gifts from Santa are in their bedroom.” Kaydee motioned with her wine glass toward Grey and Ellis. “What still needs to be put together?”

“Everything is ready,” Grey told us. “We just need to put the gifts under the tree.”

“I’ll take care of the cookies and milk for Santa,” Ellis volunteered.

“Plus, Haven’s note,” Kaydee reminded.

“I always move our stockings because Santa will want a clear path,” Thad said with a solemn nod, although his eyes twinkled.

“Ready?” Grey asked.

Everybody got up and went to work.

I felt like I was in the way while the Blues set up Santa’s presents. I chuckled when Thad and Grey got into a whispered argument about where to place the dollhouse. They both loved their niece and wanted her Christmas to be special.

Everybody had gone to their rooms except for Kaydee and me.

“Want another beer?” she asked.

“Are you having more wine?”

“Don’t tell my secret, but I like to sit with the lights off and enjoy the tree and the fireplace. It’s pretty, and in a few hours, it’s going to be crazy.”

That sounded like heaven to me. “You sit, and I’ll get our drinks.” I liked the idea of enjoying the quiet.

She curled her legs under her on the sofa’s middle cushion.

After I poured the wine, I handed her a glass and sat next to her. A few moments later, she leaned against me. “Nice, isn’t it?”

“Very.” I wrapped my arm around her.

“You’re making it too easy,” she murmured.

“Too easy for what?”

“To fall for you, Bo.”

I paused before I said anything. I wanted to make sure I said the right thing.

“Was I being too honest?” She watched my expression closely.

“I want your honesty.” I let out a breath. “I want to say the right thing. I feel like I should have some romantic speech.”

That made her smile. “There was a time when I would’ve expected that.” She turned serious. “I have so much emotional baggage...” She looked away. “I wish I didn’t, but I can’t forget everything he’s done.”

“I’d love to tell you that I know how to do this.” I shrugged one shoulder. “Sydney and I only lived in the same city for six months twice. Our relationship was mostly conducted through voicemails and emails.”

“But you saw one another. I know you went back east to visit.”

“We visited one another over the years. We took two vacations to Jamaica.”

“Jamaica sounds amazing,” Kaydee teased.

“We were both busy, and even though we claimed to be in a relationship, we had separate lives.”

“In a way, you’re like Grey. Your job demands a lot of time and focus. Your schedule can get crazy and isn’t always under your control. I get that.”

I appreciated that she understood my job, and maybe by growing up with Grey, she would find the demands easier to handle.

“I’m sure it was hard tending to your relationship when you worked twelve or more hours and were tired. She was hours away and probably felt the same, so she wasn’t going to be furious if you didn’t call or kept the conversation short.”

“I’ll admit that I didn’t always do my part.”

“Are you truly done with that relationship?” She turned her body sideways to face me.

“Sunshine, we were done a year ago. Neither of us gave enough of a shit to call it.” I frowned at how stupid I was. “I didn’t have to do anything much, so I let it continue longer than it should have.”

She dropped her eyes.

“And I could kick myself because I could have been spending that time with you.”

She lifted her chin and stared at me. “That long?”

“Kaydee, you’ve been on my radar for three years,” I admitted. “The first time I saw you was during the Fourth of July Celebration. I’d just run into Thad, and he introduced us. You wore a short jean skirt, and I couldn’t keep my eyes off your legs. You were teasing your brother, and I thought you were so cute.”

“Grey had Haven. I didn’t really know what to do with myself.” She blushed a little. “But I remember meeting you.”

That made me happy. “I know that Wade pursued you hard and wasn’t careful with your feelings.”

She rolled her eyes. “Is that a polite way of saying he nailed any willing female he could?”

“He disrespected you and your marriage. You were carrying his baby, and he chose to be out instead of with you.”

“I wish I could tell you that knowing everybody saw or heard how he acted didn’t hurt, but it still does.” She cleared her throat. “I was a good wife. I *loved* him. He made so many promises, and he broke every one of them.”

“I can tell you over and over that I’m not Wade. Until I show you and prove it, it will hang over me...over us.”

“I don’t like admitting that, but it’s true.” She flipped her hair over her shoulder. “I wish it wasn’t.”

“Sunshine, we didn’t just drop from the sky. I’ve never wanted a woman like I want you. I like Haven, but I don’t know anything about being around a little girl. I’m used to working, sleeping, and goofing off when I have downtime.”

She nodded and didn't say anything else.

I knew this was my chance. She was in her childhood home, surrounded by family. She felt safe. "This is what I want, Kaydee. I want to marry you and give you and Havs everything you deserve. I can't imagine my life without you both."

Her eyes widened.

I didn't give her time to argue. "I know we need time to get to know each other to make sure this is right, but I'm not waiting too long."

She nodded once slowly.

"At some point, we'll have to sit down with Wade and discuss me being a part of Haven's life." I held up my hand to hold off her response. "Haven and I will have a relationship. I'm not going to try to push Wade out as her father, but if that little girl wants to turn to me for advice or guidance, I'll be there for her."

Tears filled Kaydee's eyes. "I love how much you think about Haven."

"If you're willing, I'd like to have more kids." I waited for her answer.

She wiped away a tear. "I wanted four. That has always been my dream."

"We'll need a bigger place," I said softly.

"Yeah."

I leaned closer to her and kissed her. I only pulled back a little. "I want it all with you."

We continued kissing, making out on her brother's sofa.

"You've been very honest about what you want," Kaydee said softly, almost shyly, when we pulled apart.

I wondered if I'd said too much.

"I'm going to do the same."

"Okay." I waited and wondered what she would say.

“I want you.”

That surprised me. I felt my smile slowly grow. “Here? Now?”

“Come to my room.” She stood.

I got to my feet and picked up my empty bottle and her glass. “I’ll get rid of these and meet you upstairs.”

“Don’t make me wait, Bo.”

“I won’t.” Not a chance.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

KAYDEE

I HOPED HE'D HURRY BECAUSE I WASN'T SURE HOW LONG IT would be before I started to tell myself why this was a terrible idea. I left the door open to my bedroom, turned on the dim light on my nightstand, and walked to the closet. I didn't have any sexy nightgowns.

I heard Bo climbing the steps. My acute hearing was a superpower I'd developed after Haven was born. I wondered where I should stand. I'd never had sex with a guy in this house.

"Hey." Bo filled the doorway.

"Come on in, and you'd better lock the door."

He did as I said. "I grabbed my shorts and some condoms." He placed the items on top of my bureau.

Another thing I hadn't thought about. "I'm not on birth control."

"I got tested a month ago, and I'm clean." He walked to me and took my hand.

"I, uh, I haven't done any of that." I felt like an idiot. "But I haven't been with anyone."

He pulled me into his arms. "That doesn't surprise me, baby."

"I hope that I don't disappoint you." I couldn't look at him.

"Kaydee, don't." His arms tightened around me for a moment.

I felt so overwhelmed. “Maybe this is a bad idea?” I took a step backward, out of his arms.

He let me go, although I could tell he didn’t want to. “Let’s talk about this a minute.”

God, that would be worse. I started to shake my head.

“Sunshine.” Bo walked to the foot of my bed and sat down. “If you don’t want to do this, it’s okay. But tell me what’s going on in your head.”

I sat beside him and let out a long sigh. “I feel stupid.”

“Am I doing something to make you feel that way?”

He was such a good guy. “No.” I wet my lips. “I didn’t plan on inviting you to do this.” I looked away, feeling my cheeks heat. “I don’t have any birth control. I haven’t waxed. I don’t even know if I remember how to have sex.” My voice became shriller with each admission.

“I love that you want me enough to invite me to your bed.” Bo took my hand in his. “I could tell that it was a spur-of-the-moment decision. I have condoms because...” He flashed that mischievous smile that told me he’d get away with shit. “Because I was hopeful.” He shrugged.

“You’re trying to make me feel better,” I accused.

“I’m being honest.” He paused. “I doubt that you can forget how to have sex. And as far as waxing... I have no problem with you being natural.”

I looked down at our joined hands. “This is going to be weird talking about stuff with you,” I mumbled.

He gave me a tiny eye roll. “Babe, I’m a doctor.”

“You probably won’t have any problem seeing my box of tampons or understanding if I have cramps.”

“It’s natural. I’ll even buy your tampons if that’s what you need.”

Wade wanted me to keep my tampons hidden in my side of the clothes closet. He’d accused me of pretending that I had painful cramps for attention.

Bo was so different.

“I can go back to my room, Kaydee, or I can stay here. I’m good with either.”

My shoulders slumped. “I spoiled everything, didn’t I?”

“Not at all.” He shook his head. “You told me what was going on, and that’s how we build trust.”

“I feel like I should apologize,” I said, my voice shaking.

“Never apologize for telling me what you want or don’t want. I never want you to feel uncomfortable with me, and definitely not about sex.”

I knew he was being honest. “I don’t even have any sexy lingerie,” I warned him.

“We’ve got time for that. It gives me more to look forward to.”

“Do you have to be so perfect?” I drew a deep breath, got to my feet, and started to pull the comforter down.

“I’m far from it. You’re going to get pissed at me, and I’ll do things that annoy you. I have a habit of leaving my dirty socks wherever I take them off.”

“I want you to stay,” I told him softly.

He grabbed his shorts and tilted his head toward the bathroom. “I’m going to change.”

I liked that he didn’t make a big deal about my decision.

Ten minutes later, Bo was resting on the nightstand side of the bed. I washed my face and brushed my teeth. I wore a huge thermal shirt that hung mid-thigh and a pair of lace panties.

I climbed onto the bed and rolled to my side, facing Bo. “Hey.”

His mouth curved. “Hey, yourself.”

I liked the look of him in my bed. I liked his bare chest. There had been glimpses while he’d changed shirts after a softball game, but now I could stare all I wanted.

“Kiss me, Kaydee.” He wrapped his arm around me and pulled my body closer to his.

I did.

Soon, our hands were exploring each other’s bodies. He pushed up my shirt, exposing my breasts, and then his mouth did amazing things to my nipples—nipping, sucking, and blowing air on the tight peaks.

My hands traced the muscles of his back and traveled to grip his round, firm ass.

His hand slid under the elastic waist of my panties, and his finger entered me slowly.

“Oh, God,” I moaned as he filled me.

“So wet for me,” he said, his voice rough before he kissed me deeply.

I loved the way he touched me. He knew to lightly brush my clit as he added another finger, stretching me.

I had to pull away from his lips as I needed more air. “Bo,” I cried.

“Say my name when you come, Sunshine.” His fingers were doing amazing things.

It felt like fire was spreading through my body, and my muscles were tense. A sound escaped my throat that I’d never heard before. I tried to form his name, but I don’t know if I did; I came so hard.

Bo was resting on his elbow when I opened my eyes, watching me. “Good?”

“Yeah,” I said, thrilled that I could form a word. I’d never come like that. I liked sex, but Wade wasn’t a patient lover. When I needed something extra, he’d rarely given that to me.

“I love to watch you come.”

My body felt boneless, and I knew I had a dopey smile on my face. “Oh, yeah?”

His chuckle was low, and I found it sexy. “Time for sleep.”

I sat up, pulled my shirt down, and adjusted my panties. “You’re in charge of the light.”

“I feel like you’ve assigned me a job for eternity.” He stretched and turned off the lamp. “I can set my alarm, so Havs doesn’t find me here.”

“She’ll be so focused on getting to her gifts that she might not notice.” I loved that he considered my feelings on how to handle my daughter. “I think it might be better for us to act like nothing is different. She’ll take it in stride if we don’t treat this like a big deal.”

“I’ll do whatever you want.”

“Parenting doesn’t come with a handbook. Haven is still young enough she doesn’t question everything I do or say.”

“She’s smart and sweet. You’ve done an outstanding job with her.”

“Grey and Thad helped me.” I snuggled down a little. “I sleep on my other side.”

“Get comfortable, baby.” He rolled onto his side and pulled me back, so we were spooning. “This means we’re a couple, Kaydee.” He gave me a squeeze. “I want to be clear. We are together.”

I rested my arm on his and gripped his wrist. “Best Christmas ever, and it’s only half over.”

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

I WAS UP BEFORE KAYDEE AND, SURPRISINGLY, HAVEN.

While sleeping, we changed positions. I was on my back with Kaydee curled into my side and her arm around me. “Sunshine,” I said softly.

“Hmm.” She burrowed closer.

“Merry Christmas, Kaydee.” I ran my hand down her spine.

“What?” She looked up at me with barely open eyes.

“I’m going to get up and go back to my room.”

“What time is it?” She started to sit up.

I looked at my watch. “Six-forty.”

“Let’s go downstairs. We can wait for Haven while we get coffee.”

“I’ll meet you back here in a few.” I climbed out of bed and slowly opened the door, checking the hallway.

Kaydee slipped into her bathroom.

I crept to the hall bathroom. When I finished, I went into my room and put on my pajamas and thick socks. I left the door open as I exited my room, and Kaydee met me at the top of the steps.

She, too, had left her door open.

I took her hand as we started down the wide stairway.

She began to giggle.

“Shh.” I tried to caution her, but I started laughing at her cute giggle.

Grey had turned on the various Christmas lights. When we made it to the kitchen, he was sitting at the table, looking at his tablet with a red mug in front of him. “Good morning.”

“Merry Christmas,” I greeted him.

“More coffee?” Kaydee went to the coffee pot.

“Sure.” He moved his mug to the edge of the table.

When we had our mugs filled, we joined Grey at the table.

“Haven still asleep?” he asked as he powered down his tablet.

“I didn’t look. I figure that when she gets up, we’ll hear her.” Kaydee stretched her legs under the table so that her feet touched mine.

“I hope she knocks on Thad’s door because he can sleep in ’til noon.” Grey wore a hint of a smile.

“Everything okay out in the barns?” I asked.

Grey nodded. “All’s good.”

“Why isn’t Haven up? Ellis said from the doorway. “I was shocked when I looked at the clock.” She walked straight to her husband, who had pushed back his chair.

“It won’t be long.” Grey pulled Ellis onto his lap.

“Coffee?” I asked Ellis.

“Please.” She gave me a huge smile. “With vanilla creamer.”

I poured the last of the coffee into a mug.

“I’ll make a new pot,” I said.

Kaydee had joined me at the counter. I squeezed her hip as I walked around her on my way to the creamer.

Before Kaydee could return to her seat, there was the sound of feet running in the upstairs hallway.

“Mommy. Mommy, did Santa come?” Haven yelled as she started down the steps.

We all grabbed our mugs and headed into the hallway.

I watched as Haven ran into the living room in a red nightgown.

“He did. He did,” she yelled.

Grey pulled out his phone. “You up?” Ending the call, he said, “Thad will be down.”

“Mommy, look.” Haven ran back to grab Kaydee’s hand and waved at the presents piled high beneath the tree. “Look at what Santa did.”

“Wow,” Kaydee said, her eyes widening.

Haven ran to the dollhouse and dropped to her knees. She looked over her shoulder with her mouth hanging open in surprise. She was so damn cute.

“Where do you want us to sit, Havs?” Ellis asked.

Haven slowly got up and directed us to our places. I was thrilled that she wanted me to sit beside Kaydee.

At last, Thad joined us. “What’s going on, Miss Haven?” He leaned over a little to get on her level. “It’s after seven. This must be a new record.”

She laughed. “You’re silly, Uncle Thad.”

“Do you want me to help you hand out gifts?” he asked.

Haven twisted her torso from left to right two times. “No. I want Bo.”

Thad looked at me. “You’re up, bud.”

“You’ll have to tell me what to do.” I left my place on the sofa and walked to her.

“You read the tag, and I’ll deliver the present.”

“That I can do.” I went to my knees and crawled closer to the tree.

When we finished dispensing gifts, I sat back on my heels. “That was more work than I expected.”

Haven took my hand. “Now, go back to mommy.”

I think that was when I fell in love with this little girl.

“Thad topped off your coffee and brought you a doughnut.” Kaydee pointed to a spot on the table to my right.

“Thanks.” I held up the glazed pastry and took a bite.

“We don’t do each person open a package so everybody can watch. It’s a free for all,” Kaydee leaned close to tell me quietly.

I chuckled around the bite of doughnut.

Haven stood wriggling in place. “Time to open our presents!”

I tried to pay attention when somebody opened my gift to them, but I couldn’t keep up. Especially when Haven kept yelling for me to look at what she got.

After Kaydee pulled out the cashmere robe that matched her eyes that I’d given her, she leaned toward me. “Doc, this is too much.”

I wrapped my arm around her and pulled her closer. “Never too much for my girls.”

“It’s so beautiful.” She rubbed the fabric between her fingers. “You know I’ll probably get a stain on it the first time I wear it.”

“You’ll be beautiful in it, stains or no stains.” I kissed her lips.

“Mommy,” Haven yelled.

Kaydee turned toward her daughter, “What did you just open?”

“Bo got me a book about ponies.” She waved the book in the air.

“There’s more in the bag, Havs,” I told her with a grin.

She turned the gift bag upside down and dumped out the rest of her present. She tore the tissue away and held up a top. "It has a pony on it."

I'd called Ellis as I stood in the middle of the department store's girls' department. Thankfully, Ellis spoke "man-with-no-experience-shopping-for-a-kid" language.

"Are these pants?" Haven waved the leggings in the air.

"Let me see." Kaydee held out her hands.

"I have a whole pony outfit!" Haven announced to the room as she pulled out a matching cowboy hat.

"Good job, Bo," Kaydee whispered to me.

"Thanks." I had one gift left to open, and I knew it had to be from Kaydee. I lifted the box and shook it to see if there was a rattle. There was none.

I unwrapped the box and took off the top. After I pushed back the green tissue, I knew what my gift was. "This is perfect." I pulled out the winter weather compression, long-sleeve top. Then I saw the matching pants.

"You mentioned when we were putting up the lights out front that you wanted to get back into running," Kaydee said shyly. "I thought these might help."

"They're perfect." I was touched that she'd remembered.

"I'll also warn you that she," she tilted her head toward Haven, "might want you to go riding with her, and the winter wind, even if it's light, will cut through you."

"So, you're telling me I'm going to spend more time with you and Havs." I grinned.

"And Buttercup." She giggled.

Haven jumped to her feet. "I love everything. Thank you everybody." She twisted her hands in her nightgown. "Now, I'm going to play."

"Grey and I are going to finish making breakfast," Ellis announced.

“I guess that leaves us on clean-up.” Thad looked pointedly at Kaydee and me.

I spread my hands. “Where do you need me?”

“I’ll get the trash bags.” Thad left us.

“Don’t worry about getting everything around her pile of loot.” Kaydee leaned into my side again.

“No making out until we get this cleaned up.” Thad returned carrying trash bags.

“You’re no fun.” Kaydee stuck her tongue out at her brother.

The Blue family ate well. I never walked away from their table hungry. “Want me to help with the dishes?” I asked Ellis.

“I never turn down help.” She pushed up from the table.

“Bo and I will clear the table. You start the water.” Grey assigned our tasks.

Kaydee put the leftovers into plastic containers while Ellis loaded the dishwasher or stacked pans by the sink.

Thad returned, opened a drawer, and dug around in it. “Need a small Phillips screwdriver.”

“It’s in there, somewhere,” Grey told him.

“I hate it when they screw in the battery pack.” Thad closed the drawer.

“Did you find it?” Grey asked.

“Yes.” He held up the tool. “Are the batteries still in your office?”

“In the plastic bag on the sofa,” Ellis called out.

“Well, you know where to find me.” He rolled his eyes and left us.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

THE REST OF CHRISTMAS DAY PASSED SMOOTHLY. WE watched movies, played with Haven, and ate. Later that night, Bo joined me in bed and gave me another orgasm.

Today, he had to work from noon until midnight. He followed me to my place with the rest of Haven's gifts.

"I wish Bo could stay," my daughter said as I pulled into my driveway.

"He has to take care of people who get hurt or sick," I said, hoping she wouldn't hang onto him as he tried to leave.

"He could come here when he's done."

I'd learned that Haven had an uncanny ability sometimes to say what I was thinking. "I guess we could ask him..." I didn't know if it was a good idea or not.

"It'll be late. Can you stay up and let him in?"

"Hey," I glanced at her in my rearview mirror. "Are you the gown-up, or am I?"

That made her laugh, and I didn't think I'd ever get tired of hearing that sound. I parked and started the process of getting out of my SUV and then getting Haven out.

When she was free, she ran to Bo and hugged his waist. "You should come back tonight."

"Honey, it will be too late."

"I know, but I'll miss you in the morning." When she looked up at him, I knew he wouldn't be able to refuse those

pleading doe eyes. “We could eat breakfast together.”

He looked at me and smiled. I gave him a tiny nod. “Well, okay then, Miss Haven. I’ll see you at breakfast.” He pulled on her ponytail. “Are you going to help me unload?”

“Yes,” she yelled.

With Bo’s help, unloading was much faster. “Text me when you’re on your way tonight,” I said as I walked Bo out to his SUV.

He glanced at his watch. “I’ll need to swing by my place after I get off. It might be really late, Sunshine.”

“Won’t matter. She’s going to fall asleep early. I’ll still be up.”

Bo wagged his eyebrows. “Your kid likes me.”

I wrinkled my nose at his silliness. “She’s going to Wade on New Year’s Eve, so prepare for her to want you around when she returns.”

“When do you get her back?”

“Sunday after dinner.”

He cocked one eyebrow. “I work until eight on New Year’s Eve, and then I’m off for two days.”

“That was the worst hint ever.” Rolling my eyes at him before I continued, “I expect better from you, doc.” I smiled in case he thought I was serious.

He placed his hands on my waist. “How about this? Want to spend New Year’s Eve with me, Ms. Blue?”

“Sure.”

He kissed me again and got into his SUV. I stood on my steps until I couldn’t see his vehicle anymore. Some people might think things were developing too quickly. To me, it felt right. I liked that he got along with my family and that he and Haven seemed to enjoy being around one another.

Letting out a loud sigh, I went back inside to supervise the unpacking of the toys and other gifts.

I'd started our second load of laundry and cleaned our two bathrooms with Haven's help. Ellis texted that she and Grey were on the road for their honeymoon.

I understood the lure of spending a week in a luxury cabin, but I would have chosen a beach in December. "Do you think Bo would like to go to the beach?"

Haven scooted her chair closer to the kitchen table. "I like the beach, so yeah."

My daughter liked to go on trips. I'd constantly reminded Ellis and Grey that if they'd talked about their honeymoon in front of her, she would want to go.

I got her a glass of milk while I chose water. "Ready to write the thank you notes?"

"Yes."

We'd picked out fold-over cards in different shades of purple. I'd hoped the bright color would keep Haven focused on the task.

"Do you want me to write the note, and you can copy it?"

She twisted her lips and closed one eye as if she was thinking very hard. "Uh-huh."

I kept it very simple. Three sentences.

"Can I add stickers?" she asked.

"You sure can."

I hoped it was a good sign that we'd complete the task without tears. "What do you want for dinner?"

"Bacon."

She never ceased to amaze and entertain me with what came out of her mouth.

"How about we save the bacon for breakfast with Bo?"

"And pancakes."

"Do you want to help me make a menu?"

“Can I put a sticker on it?”

“I don’t see why not?” I grabbed the pad of paper I kept on the counter for lists. “You know that my mom—your grandma—died when I was fourteen.”

“It is very sad.” She frowned dramatically.

“She used to write thank you notes with me.”

“Is that why you do it with me?”

“Yes, plus it’s polite.” I smiled at the memories. “She was sick for a long time. When she felt good enough to sit at the kitchen table, we’d talk and laugh. She’d ask me about school and boys. She’d tell me about growing up and funny stories about life on the farm.”

“Like we do.”

“That’s right, and maybe one day, you’ll do the same with your kids.” I started the heading on top of the menu: Breakfast.

“I know what I want for Christmas next year.”

“So soon? Wow.” I drew out the word.

“I want a brother. No, I want two brothers like you have.”

I grinned. “Then you’d have to share your toys.”

“My toys are too big for babies, Mommy.” She giggled at having to correct me.

“For breakfast, I have pancakes and bacon.” I looked up for her next idea.

“Bo likes you.”

I did my best not to show my surprise at her statement. “He’s a nice man.”

“Do you like it when he kisses you? Aunt Ellis always giggles when Uncle Grey kisses her, and then they disappear. Will you do that? I know a bunch of good hiding places.”

“Um...” Lordy, I didn’t know where to start. “I like Bo. I like spending time with him. Would it be okay with you if he was around more?”

She tilted her head to the left and gave me a serious look. “My bed’s too small. He’ll need to sleep with you.”

I choked and had to take a few sips of my water. “He might sleep with me or on the sofa. How about we give him the choice?”

“I think he’ll choose your bed. That way, you can tell secrets before you go to sleep.”

“Getting back to breakfast.” I managed not to laugh, but I had to smile. Haven had it all figured out. Again, I was reminded that my daughter saw everything. She just didn’t put the information together correctly.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

I SMELLED BACON BEFORE I OPENED MY EYES. I WAS WARM and relaxed. Then my brain kicked on, and I remembered I wasn't in my apartment.

I slowly stretched as I reviewed what had happened when I'd gotten to Kaydee's last night.

"Are you hungry? Havs and I ran to the grocery store after dinner last night."

"I'm good." I dropped my duffle bag on her bed.

Her eyes narrowed. "When's the last time you ate, and what was it?"

"I had a protein bar around seven."

She shook her head. "I'm making you a sandwich."

I followed her to the kitchen. "Thanks." I liked that she wanted to take care of me.

She added kettle chips and a fruit cup to the plate.

"This is too much." I took the first bite of the turkey sandwich.

"You said it was busy, and I know you rarely get to sit down and eat a full meal while you're on shift."

"That happens most of the time."

She glanced away, then met my gaze again. "Havs and I had an interesting talk earlier. She decided on the menu for

breakfast, so now you know why there will be cupcakes for dessert.”

“I’ve always wondered why we couldn’t have dessert after that meal.” I grinned.

“Maybe she’ll start a trend?”

I chuckled. “She’s so smart. Some of the stuff she says makes me laugh while I’m also blown away.”

“She likes you and wants you to spend time with us.”

“I’m all for that.”

“She also told me that you should sleep in my bed.”

That made me bark with laughter while Kaydee blushed.

Her lips formed a prim line before stretching into a smile. “She said we could share secrets.”

“We sure can,” I said with a sly tone. There were many ways to communicate.

“Want to tell me about your day?” She was mirroring my position, leaning one hip against the counter.

“We had two come in from Oak Tree Village. They’re short-staffed and try to keep up with everybody, but...”

“You think they aren’t giving people good care?”

“Without knowing the patients, I’m only guessing. Some people won’t tell you a thing until they’re hurting and in bad shape.”

“My mom wasn’t like that.” She frowned. “She shared every complaint. She was *too sick* to raise us.”

“That had to be rough.” Thad had talked about how after their dad died, their mother got sick. The doctor hadn’t been able to explain it. Grey thought she’d given up.

Kaydee sighed. “I’m still mad about it. Which is dumb because it was years ago.” She looked away.

“I can see why you would be angry. I think all three of you are. Grey had to change his plans and run the farm. Your mom could’ve at least managed parenting, but she didn’t.”

“I’ve always thought she chose to give up. She didn’t want to deal with us, so she made Grey do it.”

“Grey stepped up when your mother chose not to. You and Ellis helped with Thad. You all did your best, and from everything I’ve learned, it worked out.”

“Do you think we all have mommy issues?” She crossed her arms across her chest.

“No.” He slowly shook his head. “I think you’re all very aware of the responsibility you have to your kid or future kids.”

Her posture relaxed. “Grey was great. Did you know that he took Ellis and me bra shopping?”

I snorted my laugh. “That I would have loved to see.”

“The sales lady was from our church, and she led him to the far edge of the department and sat him in a chair.” She grinned. “But he stayed while we tried them on. When we got older, he also made sure we understood that we could say no. He promised to always listen to us and be on our side.” She pushed her hair behind her ear. “I’m lucky. If I make a mistake, Grey and Thad will forgive me.”

“I like your family. I respect your brothers, but I also think of them as friends.”

She flashed a shy smile as she looked at me from under her eyelashes. “They like you, too.”

“Would they like me with you?”

“I think so.” Her eyes widened. “I like me with you.”

I took a step closer to her. “Good to know.” Then I took another one until I pulled her into my arms. “I want your family to like us together.”

“Treat us right, and they will.”

“I’m not the kind of man who would step out on you, Sunshine.” I held her gaze.

“No. I think you’re the type that would break up with me very gently.”

“Let’s not plan our ending before we even get to the good stuff,” I said, trying to keep my tone light.

She looked down at her feet, which were covered in turquoise and green striped socks. “I was thinking...”

“Tell me.” I gave her a light squeeze. I hoped one day she wouldn’t be shy about sharing her thoughts.

“Maybe we could wait until New Year’s Eve to do everything?”

“Because Havs will be with her dad?”

“Am I being stupid?” She began to chew on her bottom lip.

“Nope. I wanted to punch Wade for making this vibrant woman so timid. “I will never tell you that your honesty is stupid.”

“I’m worried that...” She shrugged and then met my gaze. “I don’t want to be worried that Haven might hear us or that she might need me while we are...”

“Shhh. I get it. And I’m fine with it.”

She studied me for a long moment. “Thanks.”

I kissed her.

Once we were in bed, Kaydee snuggled against my side, facing me. “Are we going to share secrets?”

Her bathroom had a nightlight, and I could barely make out her expression. “You go first.” I’d need to listen to her voice for more clues.

“Crap.” She sighed and then told me, “I don’t miss teaching.”

“That would surprise a lot of people.”

“I miss talking about books and trying to show kids how a phrase can impact your life.” She pulled her leg up and rested her knee on my thigh. “I don’t miss the meetings and the bullshit. Plus, I don’t miss hearing about Wade.”

“I imagine you were a damn good teacher, but if parts weren’t fulfilling or were making you unhappy, then good for you for getting out of it.”

“The salon is making money.”

“Why wouldn’t it?”

“It didn’t, at first. There were expenses. We had to update the plumbing, and I insisted on new chairs and sinks. I thought it would take about three years to earn back the money I invested, but it won’t be that long if things keep on like they are.”

“That’s great, honey. It’s even more impressive since you’re learning as you go.”

“I can’t say that I love the salon. The opportunity came up when I was wondering how I could endure another year of listening to how wonderful Wade was. I try to help, but I don’t want to do hair or nails.”

“So, askin’ for a pedicure is out?”

“Oh my God. Feet are so creepy.” She laughed.

“Do what you want to do, Kaydee. You have people behind you to help you.”

“I was thinking about becoming a librarian,” she said quietly.

“You mentioned you liked discussing books. So, that sounds like a good fit.”

“I’d have to go back to school.”

“What’s stopping you?”

“I guess I’m a little scared. I mean, it’s been a while since I was in college.”

“Do your research, find out what kind of schooling you’ll need, and which places offer it.”

“If I went back to school, I would still manage the salon, so my time... Well, I’d be busy.”

“We’d figure it out. Haven is getting older, and she’ll want more responsibility. She’ll need you, but in different ways.”

“What about you?”

“I’m supposed to be on three days, then off two, and work two and be off three. However, it doesn’t always go like that. I like working in the E.R. It keeps my skills sharp, and I’m on the front line. My intervention can save a life.”

“I know you do important work. I’m asking if my being busy will interfere with us?”

“It might from time to time.” I wasn’t going to lie. “But that’s the way life is. I’ll have to bow out of plans sometimes, and you probably will also.”

“Hmm.” She didn’t sound like she liked my answer.

“Look, I can say that I’ll try not to get upset if things fall through. But saying that, if you’ve goofed off all day watching movies with me and then can’t go to dinner because you need to write a paper - I’ll be irritated.”

“Just like if you put off cutting the grass until it rains on your day off, I’ll be pissed.”

I smiled because those didn’t seem like big problems, but I knew she needed someplace to start figuring out how we would make this work. “I hope we’d try to be smart about our time but also trust that the other is doing the same.” Plus, I could afford to pay somebody to cut my grass.

“You seem to have a clear picture of what you want.”

“I’ve had time to decide what I don’t want. I do know that I want you and your daughter in my life.”

“We can be a handful,” she warned.

I chuckled. “Looking forward to that.”

“Idiot,” she mumbled and rolled onto her other side. “Night, Bo.”

“Night, Sunshine.”

CHAPTER NINETEEN

KAYDEE

I WAS JUMPY. I HAD HAVEN READY FOR THAD TO PICK UP before noon; luckily, Wade met him on time. I'd done some accounting for the salon to finish the year's accounts and then focused on getting everything ready for tonight.

The trailer was clean. I'd had time for a bubble bath. Dinner was ready, and I was trying to decide what to do for the next twenty minutes before Bo arrived.

My cell vibrated, announcing BO CALLING.

"Hey, Doc," I greeted him.

"Kaydee."

He usually called me Sunshine. "Is everything okay?"

"It's been a rough shift." He sounded down.

"I'm sorry."

"I'm thinking that I won't be good company tonight."

No. "Bo," I paused and made sure my tone was soft but not weak. "You don't have to be good company. You don't have to talk. You can eat, zone out, and go to sleep."

"I'm sorry about this."

"I didn't go to medical school, but I know chocolate cream pie can make people feel better. I have a pie in the fridge."

"Sunshine, you didn't have to go to all that trouble."

"It's already made. Grab your stuff, get in your SUV, and drive out here. I promise it will be okay."

He sighed loudly. “Thanks.”

“I’ll see you in a few.” I ended the call.

This would be our first time dealing with Bo having a rough day. I wanted to show him that I could handle him when things were easy and fun and when they weren’t.

During my marriage, I was embarrassed to admit that I’d reacted to disappointment like a brat. I became defensive, waiting for Wade to hurt me. I would scream and cry. I couldn’t listen because I hated how he made me feel. If I were loud and emotional, it would drown out Wade’s cruel words.

Now, I understood that we have shitty days. It didn’t mean my partner loved me less. It might have nothing to do with me. Yes, the world didn’t revolve around Kaydee Blue! We all needed a little grace sometimes.

I put my phone on the coffee table and began to light the candles around the room. We’d taken the tree down yesterday, but I’d left the garlands around the windows and door frames.

We’d relax by candles and holiday lights.

I heard the gravel crunch in my drive and rushed to the door.

“Thanks for understanding,” he said, carrying a leather duffle bag.

I noted how tired he looked. “Take off your jacket, and I’ll put your bag in the bedroom.” I reached for the bag.

Bo didn’t let go. “I need to take a shower.”

I dropped my hold on the bag.

“If you don’t mind?”

I liked that he’d rushed to get out here. “It’s fine. In fact, if you want to soak in a bubble bath, that can be arranged.”

He let out a low chuckle as he followed me to my bedroom. “I want to wash today away.”

“Use whatever you need. There are fresh towels on the rack.”

He reached for my hand and pulled me closer. “Thanks, Kaydee,” he murmured, then kissed me.

“For what?” My lips pressed against his again.

“For being you.” He pulled me closer, so our bodies were touching from chest to thigh. “Sweet.” Another kiss. “Understanding.” A longer kiss with tongue.

I unwound my arms from his neck. “Get cleaned up. I’ll finish dinner.”

He took off his jacket. “What are we having besides pie?”

“Get your shower, and you can find out.” I winked and then left the bedroom.

“Sunshine, you went to so much trouble for me. It was awesome.” Bo was sitting back, relaxed in his chair.

“I wanted to. With Haven, our meals are more pasta and sauce or macaroni and hamburgers. I don’t get to make what I call ‘grown-up food’ very often.”

“I’m stuffed.”

“We can have pie later.” I started to clear the table.

“Let me help.” He gathered his plate.

“Why don’t you grab another beer, pour another glass of red for me, and go relax on the sofa.”

“Am I in your way?” He grinned.

“Nope. Tomorrow, you can do dish duty.”

“Deal.”

My kitchen didn’t have much room for two adults to work. I figured he’d been on his feet all day, so he should try to relax. It only took a few minutes to clean up, load the dishwasher, and put the leftovers in the fridge.

“Now.” I sat at the other end of the sofa and turned, swinging my legs onto the cushion between us, pressing my toes into his thigh. “Do you want to talk about your day, or

would you rather watch a movie, listen to music, or sit quietly?”

“There was a two-car crash on the interstate. It was bad.” He took a drink from his bottle.

I tucked my toes under his thigh, telling him silently that I was here for him.

“In med school, you learn to deal with death, or you consider dermatology.” He looked at me. “That’s med school humor, or what passes for it.”

“You aren’t popping pimples, so I know that you succeeded, but I can also see that it takes a toll on you.”

“It was a nine-year-old girl.”

“No.” I leaned toward him.

“The family had been to the grandparents for Christmas. They were driving back to Illinois, and the other car started to come over into their lane, overcorrected, and lost control.”

I went to my knees beside him. “That is horrible.”

“The girl...she’d unstrapped because she wanted a cookie.” He closed his eyes and leaned his head back to rest on the cushion.

I moved next to him, taking his hand in both of mine, sending him strength and compassion.

“I knew there wasn’t much hope when they brought her in,” he whispered.

“But you tried,” I said it as a statement, not a question.

“She didn’t make it.” He pulled me onto his lap and held me. “I kept thinking about how much fun I’d had with Havs. How it all can end in a second.”

“That’s why we have to live. We’ve got to enjoy every second.”

We didn’t talk for a while. He held me in his lap while I stroked his hair, comforting him.

“Let’s go to bed,” I said softly.

“You don’t want to wait up until midnight?”

“You are exhausted. We can poke the other if we wake up in the night.” I scooted off his thighs and got to my feet.

“And eat some pie.”

I grasped his hand and pulled him down the hall.

CHAPTER TWENTY

I FELT KAYDEE STRETCH BESIDE ME AND THEN ROLL TO FACE me.

“Are you awake?” she whispered.

“Uh-huh.”

“Happy New Year, honey.” She kissed me.

My cock stirred as her tongue pressed against my lips. I pulled her closer and took control of the kiss.

She made a sweet sound deep in her throat as my hands went under the sexy little nightie, she'd put on last night.

I'd been tired but not comatose when we'd readied for bed. Now, I wanted to run my palms over her silk-covered curves.

I wanted all of her.

Her hands were mapping the muscles of my back, then swept down to my ass.

“I want you.”

“Good,” she said against my lips.

I pushed the gown up over her breasts, and she sat up and pulled it off over her head. My hands were on her breasts before her back touched the mattress again. “You have great tits.”

She giggled as my mouth pulled on her nipple.

I plumped her breasts and sucked on her hard nipples.

Kaydee's hands pushed my shorts down, freeing my cock. She gripped it and pumped it once, twice.

"You keep that up, and this won't last long," I warned her.

"Now, Bo."

I pushed up and stretched to reach the nightstand where I'd placed the foil packets after my shower.

Her hand traced designs on my ribs as I rolled on the latex.

I repositioned, leaning over her. I wanted to give her time to change her mind because once my cock was inside her, she would be mine forever.

She spread her legs, welcoming me.

Christ, she was so wet.

"Bo..."

The way she said my name made my heart pound harder. "Put me in, baby."

Once my cock was in position, she squeezed me, and I pushed into her until I was balls deep.

Next time, I'd take her with more finesse, I silently promised.

She wrapped a leg around my thigh.

"You're so tight." I closed my eyes, wanting to remember how this felt.

She made an impatient sound and dug her nails into my shoulder.

"This is going to be fast and hard," I warned.

Her response was to squeeze her innermost muscles.

I pulled back and then pushed in. Again and again. I'd never get enough of this, her. I found her clit and lightly ran the pad of my finger over it.

Her body arched. "Bo."

"Come for me, Sunshine." I wanted her to go first.

“So close,” she panted.

I touched her clit again, and her body tensed against mine, her channel clenched around me, and I exploded.

I helped her come down, feathering light kisses along her jaw and cheeks.

She smiled. “Happy New Year.”

I slowly withdrew from her body and fell to her side. “It’s going to be a great year.” I took her hand and held it over my heart.

I was getting ready to get up to deal with the condom when she rolled to her side and said, “I want pie. Do you want pie?”

“Sure.”

She got up and headed to the bathroom. When she exited, she was wearing the robe I’d given her.

I dealt with the condom, pulled on my shorts, and found her cutting slices of pie in the kitchen.

She grinned at me. “Or we could eat it out of the tin?”

“We aren’t savages,” I teased.

“Get the forks.”

We ate the pie in the kitchen. Kaydee sat on the counter, her long legs exposed by the robe, while my plate sat next to her. From time to time, I ran my hand down her leg.

When she finished, I took the plate and fork from her hands and put them in the sink. “That hit the spot.”

“Now, what do you want to do?” She seemed wide awake.

“Let’s go back to bed and figure it out.” I sounded like I was teasing, but I wanted her again.

“I like the way you think.”

It felt like I’d just closed my eyes when the pounding sounded. I sat up automatically, ready to defend.

Kaydee was pushing back the covers. “What?” She grabbed her robe while I pulled on my shorts, then followed her to the living room.

When we neared the front door, I grabbed her forearm to force her to stop.

“Bo.” She looked toward the door and back at me, clearly pissed that I was delaying her.

Whoever was on the other side was beating on the door so hard that I swear the trailer shook.

“I’ll handle this.” I walked in front of her, blocking her. I undid the locks and slowly opened the door.

Wade dropped his fist and opened his mouth in surprise.

“Wha...?” Kaydee had followed me and was looking around my side.

“Well, isn’t this just great?” Wade placed his hands on his hips. “Your kid has been crying all morning, and you’re too busy fucking around to pick up your phone.”

“Step back.” I blocked Kaydee because I needed to deal with this jerk. I advanced, forcing him to move backward and to the side of the porch. I saw that Haven was in the backseat of Wade’s jacked-up dually truck.

Her eyes were wide, watching us.

“Sunshine, grab some shoes, then get Havs. I’ll see to this.”

Wade started to speak, but I held up my finger. “Let’s get Havs settled before we talk.”

Kaydee opened the storm door and stomped out with her head down, letting me know she wasn’t happy with my bossing or the situation.

Too damn bad. The girls were mine. I’d claimed her last night, and Wade needed to learn respect.

Kaydee returned, holding Haven’s hand and her little suitcase.

“Hi, Bo.” Haven waved her hand at me and paused to smile.

“Hi, darlin’.” She was too cute.

“Let’s go inside, baby.” Kaydee opened the storm door and followed her daughter inside, shooting us an evil look.

I counted to five and then said, “Kaydee and I are together.”

“Yeah, anybody can see you’re fucking her.” He flashed a shitty grin. “Don’t worry, I don’t want her.”

I stepped into his personal space. “I’m going to tell you this one time how things are going to go.”

His eyes narrowed, and his fists curled. “Step back.”

I didn’t. I was bigger than the guy, plus I trained in hand-to-hand combat in the Army. “New rules, Wade.”

“Oh, the big important doctor is going to tell me how it’s going to go?”

I knew that Wade was a bully and all talk as far as I could tell, so I stated firmly, “You will speak about and talk to Kaydee, the mother of your daughter, with respect. If you can’t do that. Then, don’t make any noise.”

His eyes narrowed, but he kept his mouth shut.

“You will treat our relationship with respect.”

“Or what? You gonna get her brothers to kick my ass?”

This guy was a tool. “I don’t need others fighting my battles. If you earn it, I’ll be the one to handle your beat down.”

He sneered but kept his mouth shut.

“I’m going to be with them from now on. I suggest you take this warning seriously.”

He looked away and made a “humph” sound.

I heard the door open behind me and felt Kaydee’s hand on my lower back. “It’s cold out here, Bo.”

“Won’t be much longer.” I moved a step back, closer to her.

“What happened?” Kaydee looked at Wade. “You’re supposed to have her until Sunday.”

“She woke up crying. She wanted to go home. She’s been pissy the whole time. I guess we know where she gets that, don’t we?” He gave Kaydee a shitty look.

“Wade,” I cautioned him, “what’d I say?”

His frown deepened. “I can’t do anything with her when she’s like this.”

“Wade, it’s been a while since you had her overnight; she needs time to get used to you and your place,” Kaydee told him patiently.

He let out another loud exhale. “She wants to be with you, so here she is. Happy Fucking New Year.” He turned to leave.

“Wade.” Kaydee stepped forward to cut him off, and I went with her. “Let her spend some time here today, and I think she’ll go to you tonight for the rest of your weekend.”

He shook his head. “Nope. She made her choice.” He looked at me. “You’re welcome to them.”

Kaydee’s voice got a little louder. “She’s seven. She likes to be where she’s comfortable.”

“You’ve convinced her that’s with you.” He started down the steps. When he got to his truck, he opened the door and gave his parting shot. “Good luck with them, Doc. You’re going to need it. Hope she doesn’t suck the life out of you like she tried to do me.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

KAYDEE

“HE’S SUCH A DICK,” I MUTTERED, KEEPING MY VOICE DOWN as I turned and looked toward the door. “He doesn’t understand that she needs time to get used to a different place. If he kept to the schedule, she’d be fine with him.”

“Wade has proved again that he’s an ass. Let’s go check on our girl.”

I followed Bo into my trailer.

“I’ll grab a shirt.” He veered off into my room.

I peeked into Haven’s room.

She’d climbed on her bed and was hugging her giant unicorn pillow.

This wasn’t going to be fun. I turned and headed to my room to put on more clothes and met Bo in the doorway.

“How is she?” he whispered.

“She’s in her room with her back to the door.”

“I’ll wait for you before we talk to her.”

I pulled on a pair of yoga pants and a hoodie that I’d “borrowed” from Thad last year.

Bo led me down the hall and knocked on the doorframe to Haven’s room. “Can we come in?” he asked.

“If you want.” She flopped across her bed on her belly.

“Rough morning, huh?” He sat at the foot of the bed.

I watched from the doorway, curious about how he'd handle her and how Haven would react to him.

"Daddy's mad at me. I wrecked his plans." She didn't look up as she shared in a monotone.

I gave Bo a nod, encouraging him to continue, not wanting to turn over all my parental duties, and yet, it would be nice to share some of the load. Sometimes, I felt very alone and lost in trying to be a good parent.

"Did he tell you that?" Bo softened his voice, but I could hear the tinge of anger in his words.

"Nope." She kicked her leg so her heel touched her butt, then dropped to the bed five times. "I listened at the door when he talked to one of his girlfriends on the phone."

He nodded. "I see."

Wade wasn't careful, and Haven, being seven, had heard more than she should.

She rolled onto her side and looked at me. "I know that was wrong. I'm not supposed to sneak around and listen, but his phone kept going off." She refocused on Bo. "I was trying to tell him about what we did on Christmas."

"And he took the call," Bo said, keeping her on topic.

"Right in the middle." She frowned. "He told me to go to my room while he talked to one of his girlfriends for a long time. I think she wanted to come over, but he said no, 'because my brat's here.'"

Fuck him. I wanted Wade to come back so I could punch him in his smart mouth.

Bo leaned closer and smoothed her hair out of her face. "If somebody said that about me, it would hurt my feelings."

"He doesn't like me very much." She looked up at Bo. "I can't do fun things."

"You've done plenty of fun things with me." He paused for a long moment and didn't tell her that her impression was

wrong. “We’ve gone for rides. You taught me about taking care of Buttercup. We played games the other night.”

I loved Bo. I loved how he treated my kid and showed her that she mattered to him, which was everything to me.

“I wanted to come home,” she said quietly. “I didn’t like it there.”

“I understand.” He continued, “I don’t like your dad hurting your feelings.”

She watched him as if trying to figure out if he was telling the truth.

Which pissed me off because Wade lied to her often enough that she now doubted Bo.

He continued in that soft voice. “Sometimes, grownups can be dumb. We say things we don’t mean.”

“He gets too busy to see me.”

“Then he’s missing out.” Bo nodded twice to add emphasis to what he’d said.

Haven studied Bo for a long moment and then whispered, “Do you like playing with me?”

“I do.”

She nodded slowly, then sat up and launched her body into Bo’s arms.

Yeah. I was a total goner. “Who’s hungry?” I asked from the doorway before I did something impulsive like hug them both or burst into tears.

He grinned at Haven. “I’m starving, but do you think your mom has enough food for us? I eat a lot.” He widened his eyes dramatically at Haven and then at me.

“Come on, you hungry hippos.” I tried to hide my laugh as I headed to the kitchen.

My daughter held Bo’s hand, claiming him in her way as they followed.

Haven was trying to find her red scarf.

Bo would learn that we went through this at least once a week when my daughter couldn't find what she wanted to wear and ran around in a tizzy.

"Did you look in my SUV?" I asked her.

After brunch, I'd showered. When I'd walked to my closet, I'd noticed that Bo left one of his sweatshirts on the bed. I understood that if I wore any man-sized clothes, they should be his.

"I checked." She was hopping from one foot to the other.

"Well then," I leaned against the kitchen counter, "I guess you can decide on another scarf, or you'll need to keep looking."

"I want the red one," she whined.

"I can help," Bo offered.

I wanted to smirk. He'd learn in time.

"I'll check the closet." He headed to the coat closet that was beside my front door.

"You'd better check your room," I told her.

"Found it! Or I found *a* red scarf," he said, holding it up.

Haven ran to Bo, and he wrapped it around her neck. "Thank you, thank you, thank you."

"Are we ready now?" I asked.

"Yes," Haven told us loudly.

"Remember to take extra treats." I checked them both out to see if they were dressed warmly enough. "It's the day they turn a year older."

"Are we going to sing to them?" Bo grinned as he asked.

"Yes." Haven was louder and now smiling.

I tried not to laugh at their antics. "I think singing to the horses and your pony is what they deserve."

"And the carrots," Bo added.

“And the sugar,” Haven chimed.

We headed out on the path to Grey’s barn. One of Grey’s workers was seeing to the livestock while he and Ellis were away. I wasn’t checking up on their work, but I knew that when I texted my brother later today, he would appreciate my coming by.

“How old is Buttercup?” Bo asked Haven, who was holding his hand.

“Seven, like me.”

“And the others?”

“Shamus is nine, and Daisy is really old.” Haven sounded so serious.

“Then she should have extra sugar,” he said, sounding just as serious.

“Yes!” Haven yelled, knowing that it was okay to do so outside.

Because it was sunny with little wind, the horses were in the paddock. When Buttercup saw us approach, she trotted toward us.

“Happy Birthday.” Haven ran to the fence.

The horses joined her.

Haven climbed the fence and sat on the top rail.

Bo and I stood on either side of her.

I pulled the treats from my pockets and reminded her, “Flat palm.” I handed her the carrots and then the sugar cubes.

Haven talked to Buttercup while we watched.

Bo leaned toward me and asked quietly, “Do you need to check the house?”

“Nope.”

Haven finished dispensing the treats and climbed down from the fence. She was already running down the path back to my place.

“What are we doing for the rest of the day?”

“Well, I’d planned on spending it in bed with you.” I grinned. “Or watching football.”

“God, you are perfect.” He pulled me in for a one-arm hug.

“Right now, I figure you can watch football, and Havs and I will make cookies.”

“What kind?” His eyes sparkled.

“The good kind.” I hip bumped him, liking how it was between us.

When I’d fallen for Wade, I worried that I always needed to be perfect. It was exhausting. I’d worn makeup on days we’d lazed around the house and always felt like I should be cleaning or planning a delicious meal. With Bo, I could be tired or stressed. He didn’t expect me to be perfect.

He leaned close and whispered in my ear. “Think she’ll go to bed early?”

I giggled like a teenager and blushed. “I think we all will.”

“But we aren’t sleeping.” He squeezed my waist.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

IN THE PAST MONTH, I'D PRACTICALLY MOVED IN WITH THE girls. They didn't seem to find my work schedule that daunting. When I had a day off, I picked Haven up from school, and we had an adventure.

I admit that I'd read about doing this on a website that offered advice to those in relationships with a single parent. I liked spending time with Haven. Sure, she had her moments, but who didn't? When she ran to me to say goodnight and gave me a snuggle at bedtime, my heart almost burst with happiness.

Kaydee put Haven on the bus this morning while I remained in bed, waiting for her to return.

After a late breakfast, we discussed how we would spend the rest of the day.

"Do you need to get anything from your place?" Kaydee had taken the day off to spend with me.

"Sunshine, I think almost all of my clothes are here or in the dirty clothes hamper in my closet."

"We should go get them. We can do laundry here."

I chuckled. "Laundry, that sounds like a great way to spend our day off."

She gave me that sly grin that made my cock twitch. She looked away while smiling. "I bet I could make it fun."

"Naked laundry, Ms. Blue?"

“Maybe.” She rolled her eyes at me.

“How about this? We swing by my place, and then if you think of anything we need, hit the grocery.”

“I’m picking up Haven at six from Destiny’s, so it would be better if we went later.”

My phone was face down on the table and began vibrating. I turned it over and saw the caller’s name. “Why is she calling?”

Kaydee tilted her head to inquire silently.

“It’s Sydney.” Frowning, I tapped the screen. “Sydney?”

“You do exist.” She then snorted at her comment.

“What’s up?” I wanted to get to the reason she was calling.

Kaydee stood and reached for her plate to start clearing the table.

I grasped her wrist and pulled her onto my lap. I wanted her to hear the conversation so she would have no concerns about my ex. I tapped the speaker button.

“I saw that there’s a conference in Indianapolis in a few weeks, and I thought I could check up on you. Are you still in that podunk town?”

Kaydee relaxed against my body.

“I’m still here, and I’m with somebody.” I was proud that I could tell her that.

There was a pause, and then Sydney continued, “Well, uh, good for you. Is it someone you work with?”

“No, I don’t work with Kaydee.”

“Are you happy?”

“I am, very much.”

Kaydee turned her head sharply to look at me. Then she slowly smiled as if she was accepting my answer as truthful.

“If that’s what you want, then I guess I should be happy for you.” Sydney didn’t hide the hesitancy in her voice.

“I’m very happy with Kaydee and her daughter.”

“She has a kid? Bo, are you nuts? Is this bitch trying to force a kid on you?”

Kaydee tensed, and my arm around her waist tightened.

“It’s not like that, Sydney. Not at all.” I told her firmly. “I pursued her. I’m the lucky one.”

“Really?”

“If we speak again, don’t use that word or any like it regarding my girls.”

“Bo, I was surprised.”

“I wish you the best.” I hung up.

“That was interesting,” Kaydee said quietly.

“I don’t know why she called.” I placed my phone on the table.

“She called because she’s coming to Indy and wants to hook up.”

“We aren’t together.”

“I think she was testing the water to see if you were still interested.”

“I’m not.” I needed Kaydee to believe that.

“Yeah, I think she got that.” She widened her eyes. “She seemed surprised you were with a woman with a kid.”

I wet my lips before I explained. “Sydney cares about her career. It comes first, and there’s room for little else. When she told me she wasn’t having kids, I knew she wouldn’t change her mind.” I frowned. “I respect that she was honest, but she left no room for discussion. She decided for us, and that was that.”

“And you wanted other things?”

“As time went on,” I admitted. “We weren’t making moves to be together. I started to want something different.”

Her eyebrows drew together.

“I want a home and a partner. I wanted to be part of a unit. To be able to laze over breakfast or send frantic texts about picking up something because we’ve run out.” I glanced at Kaydee. “Sydney wanted to stay in Boston, and I like it here. I like that everybody knows one another. I can run the E.R. like I want without having to answer to multiple layers of management. She was never going to compromise for me,” I finished weakly.

“You’d have had to give up what you worked for to be with her,” Kaydee summarized efficiently. “And what you wanted.”

“I found that I didn’t love her enough to do that. I didn’t really like the woman she’d become.”

“I’m sorry you had to go through that. I know what it’s like to find that the future you thought you were getting was one your partner didn’t want.”

“Now, I have better.”

“You’re sure?”

“I am, Kaydee. I wouldn’t be here with you if I weren’t one hundred percent sure.”

“It’s a lot warmer than I thought it would be.” Kaydee and I were walking over to Grey’s house.

I pulled my phone from my pocket. “It’s sixty degrees.”

“That’s crazy for February.” She smiled. “Where’s the snow?”

“It’ll come next week.” I swung our entwined hands as we walked the graveled path.

She turned her face toward the sun. “I love it out here.”

“I can see why.” I wondered where she would want to live. Her trailer was too small for us. We could build or buy one of the old beauties in town and renovate it.

“I love it that you like it out here. How easily you fit in with us.” She gave me a small smile. “We aren’t everybody’s

cup of tea.”

“The Blues are a good kind of crazy.”

She paused to look at me.

I wanted to tell her that I loved her, but she started walking again before I could.

“Should we stop by the house?” I asked as we neared Grey’s house and barns.

“Grey’s at some county ag meeting, and Ellis is with Thad at the Chamber of Commerce.”

“So, we’re alone?”

“Sure.” She wrinkled her nose. “We only have Buttercup, two horses, a bunch of goats, possibly a hand or two, and a few cows. But besides them, we’re on our own.”

“Next time, I’ll be more specific.” I grinned at her silliness.

“Wanna see the hayloft?” she suddenly asked.

“Okay,” I said a little tentatively.

“Ellis and I spent hours up there.”

Now, I was intrigued.

“Lead the way.”

I followed her up the ladder made of wooden planks nailed to a thick wooden beam.

She led me to the far side of the space. Bales of straw had been stacked eight feet high. Two tarps were resting in the corner, covering something.

“Been bringing your beaus up here, Sunshine?” I teased.

She pulled the tarp back. “Nope. I brought Haven up here.” She grabbed a wool blanket and shook it out. “Looks okay.”

I nodded. The windows looked like they could be opened and let in plenty of light. This space was perfect for Ellis and Kaydee when they were kids to escape to.

Kaydee pulled a bale from the front of the stack and placed the blanket over it. “Instant seat.”

I sat on the bale and pulled Kaydee onto my lap so that she was facing me, straddling my thighs.

“You should know that I’m a nice girl. I did not bring you up here to make out.” She wrapped her arms around my neck.

“I think you are *very* nice.” I kissed her hard. Possessively.

She wrapped her legs around my waist as I pulled her closer. “This is nice.”

“I’m in love with you,” I blurted.

She tensed and pushed away a little to see my face.

“I didn’t mean to say it like that,” I told her quickly. “I wanted to do it at a romantic moment.”

“Well, I think this is romantic.” She smiled a little. “I mean, you and me, all alone up here.”

I told myself not to be disappointed that she didn’t return the words.

Her fingernails lightly combed through the hair on the back of my head. “You know...Wade really messed me up.”

I pulled her body a little closer to mine, signaling that I was a safe person for her to share these thoughts with.

“He made me feel stupid and like I wasn’t worthy of love. It still hurts when he comments about me not being a good mother.” She didn’t look away.

“I hate that he put you through that. You aren’t stupid, and you have many people who love you. Wade is a messed-up jerk. He couldn’t make it work with you, so he tries to make you miserable.” I couldn’t keep the anger from my tone. “Haven is amazing, and that’s because you have given her a life where she is loved and nurtured.”

Her expressive eyes filled with tears. “I don’t want to mess this up with you.”

“We’re fine. Better than fine, Sunshine. I want this. No...” I looked around because I was going all in, and my heart was pounding. “I want to get married. To have more kids and dogs, and a pick-up schedule hanging on the fridge so that we know where everybody needs to be.”

I could feel her breasts press against my chest with every breath she took. “You want that with me?” She seemed to be in a daze.

“With you and Haven. Yes.”

She started to giggle, and that turned into a deep laugh.

I held her and watched, unsure of her reaction.

“I say yes to all of that.” She threw her head back and laughed in pure joy. “Haven will agree. She loves you.”

That made me happy.

She sobered. “I do love you.”

Relief swept through me. “Good. Then we’re on the same page.”

“I didn’t want to fall in love with you.”

“Why not?”

“Because if I failed again, it would tear my daughter apart.”

“We won’t fail,” I told her confidently.

“How can you know that?”

“I know because we don’t want to fail. We’ll talk, Kaydee. You’ll tell me what you’re thinking, and I’ll do the same, so we’re clear on what’s going on.”

“From the start at Thanksgiving, I knew that I’d fall for you. You’ve been there for us.”

“You have your family,” I reminded her.

“It’s different with you.” She chewed on her bottom lip for a few moments. “They defend me because I’m their sister. You chose to because you care about me.”

“I get what you are saying.” I ran my hand up and down her spine slowly to comfort her.

“And you love my kid. You don’t try to temper or hide it, which makes me love you more.”

I tilted back my head and lowered my eyelids to give her a sexy look. “Why don’t you show me?”

“There was a time when I wanted to be a cowgirl.” She ran the tip of her nose down my throat.

“Then ride me.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

KAYDEE

THE REST OF THE DAY PASSED QUICKLY. MAYBE IT WAS because Bo and I knew where we stood with one another. When we got to his place, I told him to clear out his clothes and bring them to the trailer.

I knew that Haven and I wanted him with us.

He hadn't even blinked, just grabbed a suitcase and began to fill it up.

We'd go back another day to get the rest of his things.

I heard him step into the hallway and walk to our room. "She's asleep." He pulled his sweatshirt over his head and dropped it in the dirty clothes hamper.

"You don't have to stay with her until she's out." I'd told him this repeatedly.

He kicked off his jeans, and I admired his body. "I like to hear about her day. She tells me about her friends and what they have to say."

It finally occurred to me. "You're building a bond."

"I can't be here every night to tuck her in, so when I can, I want to use that time wisely." He headed into the bathroom.

I once again thanked my lucky stars for him.

He opened the door and joined me in bed, wearing a pair of navy knit shorts that hung low on his hips.

"Today was nice." I let him settle under the covers, and then I scooted closer to him.

“It was, but we need to talk.”

I fought off that tickle of dread that spread down my spine.
“About what?”

“I know that we talked about our future.”

I nodded.

“I’m going to propose to you soon. I don’t want to wait a long time to be married, Sunshine. Does that work for you?”

“Are you thinking of going to the courthouse?”

“No. We aren’t slinking in the side door to quickly sign some papers. I want to claim you in front of our friends and your family.”

“Planning weddings takes time, Bo,” I told him slowly.

“Do you think you can plan quickly?” One side of his mouth tipped upward.

“I believe I can.” While helping with Ellis and Grey’s wedding, I couldn’t help but think about what I’d want if I ever had another chance.

“And we’re taking Haven to Disney,” he said.

“We are?” She would lose her mind over this.

“You and I can go to a nice hotel with room service and one of those spa tubs for two for a few nights, then head to Florida with Havs.”

My eyes filled with tears, and I had to clear my throat.
“Sounds good, Bo.”

“Then why are you crying?” He wiped the tears from my cheeks.

“Because I want us to be like this always. I love you so much.”

“We will.”

I loved that he was so sure.

Three days later, I was sitting at Grey's kitchen table. Ellis and I were having lunch, and my brother joined us.

"So...anything to report?" Ellis looked at my left hand.

"Don't you need to do exercises for something?" I teased as I prepared for them to ask me questions.

"Nope." She stuck her tongue out at me. "Spill. You're happy. Everybody can see that."

"Things are good." I shrugged. When Wade and I had dated, I'd never shut up. I wanted to talk about Bo and me, but I also didn't want to jinx everything by talking about us.

"It looks good on you," Grey told me. "Happiness, I mean."

"I know that it was hard for you...to put up with Haven and me when I left Wade," I said, a little overcome with their support. My voice shook with emotion.

"Nope." He shook his head. "This is your home, and you and Havs are always welcome."

Ellis nodded her head in agreement.

"I didn't grasp what being married meant. I thought since we were in love that everything would come easily."

"You were twenty-two," Ellis said.

"Now, with Bo, I know more."

"I like him," Ellis said. "I like him with you. Plus, he's crazy about Havs."

"He fits with you and us." Grey lifted his mug of coffee to his lips. "Wade never tried to fit in."

"Did you welcome him?" Ellis asked.

"We tried." Grey looked at me as if to see what I thought.

"You did." I crossed my leg over my other knee. "I think Wade was intimidated by your reputation. I get why he might have had a problem with you...but with Thad? I was always confused why they didn't get along."

“I think it was because Thad could see through him,” Grey continued.

Ellis shrugged. “We always underestimate Thad, but he is perceptive. He was right about Wade and Margot.”

“Maybe I should ask him what he thinks about Bo and me?”

“He saw it before any of us. On Thanksgiving, after the meal,” Grey said.

“Christ, he won’t ever let us forget it.” Ellis chuckled.

“Don’t worry. His time is coming,” I muttered.

“I hope so, but I’m not going to count on it,” Grey told me.

“Bo’s going to propose.” The words burst from my lips.

“He is?” Ellis spoke a little louder. “When? How?”

Grey placed his hand on her arm. “I’m sure Bo has a plan. He has from the start.”

I stared at my older brother. The man who had basically raised me. “You’re okay with this...Bo and me?”

He nodded. “Absolutely.”

“Do you think he’ll come to Grey and ask for your hand?” Ellis was looking between us.

“I expect that,” Grey announced. “He’ll probably talk to Thad, too.”

“Hey, what about me? I don’t want to be left out.” Ellis’s smile was wide, and I knew she was truly happy for me.

“He wants a wedding, but he doesn’t want to give me much time to plan.”

“I’ll help,” Ellis said, “and you already have ideas. Heck, you planned the hell out of our wedding.”

“Tell me what you need, and I’ll do it.” Grey stood. “Got to make some calls.” He kissed his wife’s cheek, then shocked me by doing the same to mine.

Three weeks had passed, and still no proposal. The harder I tried not to think about it, the more I did. It wasn't easy to constantly be ready. Honestly, at times, it made me testy.

I noticed Bo watching me several times, and I swear he wore a smug grin.

Haven's Spring Break was in three short weeks. We'd been dealing with a string of wet days, very little sun, and sleet. I was tired of wet boots and jackets. I should check to see if I could afford any deals on beach getaways.

Ellis had invited the family over for chili and games. Thad had been a terrible loser when we were kids, and we'd usually fought. Hopefully, as adults, we would behave.

We gathered in the family room, which Ellis had swapped out the sectional for three sofas. She'd also added large pillows that you could sit on or lean against on the floor.

"What are we playing?" Thad asked.

"Charades," Ellis said. "I thought that would work for all ages."

"Havs, if you have any problem reading the card, just ask me," Thad said, ruffling my daughter's hair.

"Actually, I meant you." Ellis grinned at Thad.

"Hey." He leaned forward and rested his hands on his knees. "I know you two women cheat."

"We do not," I said in mock affront.

Ellis went over the rules and had Bo choose our names out of a hat to make up the two teams.

Weirdly, it was guys against girls.

"Hands in the center," I ordered Ellis and Haven. "Now, on the count of three, shout 'girl power.'"

With our hands covering each other's, I counted, "One, two, three."

"Girl power," we shouted.

"You're goin' down," Thad sneered.

Ellis sniffed. "Please." Then she rolled her eyes dramatically. "Just remember not to cry this time."

"Yeah!" Haven joined in.

We were neck and neck with the score tied at seven.

In her excitement, Haven gave the other side a clue.

"Hey." I widened my eyes at her. "Don't help them."

She giggled. "But it's fun."

"What do you guys think? Let her pick again?" Ellis asked.

They agreed.

She pulled another card out of the hat, then frowned as she read it.

Uh oh. If she couldn't read the words, what would she do?

"Bo, come help me," she said, turning to look at him pleadingly.

He looked to Ellis. "Need a Judge's ruling."

"Sure, as long as you read the right words on the card." Ellis shook her finger at Bo.

"Yeesh, you're treating me like Thad." Bo got to his feet and stepped in front of Haven. He read the card and whispered to her.

She shook her head.

He whispered some more.

There was more head shaking.

Bo let out a sigh and turned to us. "We have a problem."

"Both of you deal with it so we can move on," Thad muttered.

Bo turned to Ellis, "Can we make this one a freebie?"

"Okay." Ellis rolled her eyes. "This is a free for all. Everybody can shout out answers."

We cheered.

There was more whispering between Haven and Bo; they were so cute together. I glanced at Grey, and he was grinning at them, too.

I'd worried he might be upset that Bo had entered our lives and Haven adored him. Grey had proved once again that he was the world's most awesome brother.

Haven started walking back and forth in front of Bo.

"Supermodel," Thad yelled.

"Waiting?" Ellis offered.

I had no idea.

"Next," Grey told them.

Bo whispered to Haven, and she then pretended to eat.

"Lunch?" Grey guessed.

"No," Havs giggled.

"Dinner?" I tried.

"*No.*" She stamped her foot.

I reached for her because I didn't want her to throw a fit. She must be getting tired.

Bo walked to her. "Okay. I have a better idea."

Haven looked up at him.

"Stand by your mom, and I'll try, okay?"

She moved closer to me, and I put my arm around her. "Okay, Bo."

He was like the kid whisperer.

"Ready?" Bo asked.

"Last try," Ellis announced.

Bo nodded, turned his back to us for a second, and then faced us again. Suddenly, he went down on one knee in front of Haven and me. In his hand, he held two rings. "Kaydee and Miss Haven, will you marry me? Make us a family? I love you both so much."

It was like my brain wouldn't make my mouth work. I know it opened and closed.

“Sunshine?” He was watching me closely.

I started to nod quickly. I dropped to my knees, facing him.

“Can you speak?” he asked with a gentle smile.

“Y...yes. Yes, Bo. I'll marry you.”

He looked at Haven, who was right beside me. “And you, Miss Haven, can I join your family?”

“Yes!” She threw herself at Bo.

He caught her before she toppled him over, and I filled his other arm. Then he kissed me. I hoped somebody took a video or at least a photo of us.

“Havs, you'll knock him over.” Grey was pulling her backward.

“This is for you.” Bo held out a little ring toward my daughter.

She immediately put it on.

He turned to me. “Yours is a little bigger.”

“That's cause mommy is bigger than me,” Haven told us.

Bo slid the platinum engagement ring on my left ring finger.

Yeesh, you could see the diamond sparkle from space. “I love it.” I looked into his eyes. “But not more than I love you.”

He kissed me again.

“They do that a lot,” Haven told everyone.

“Who wants ice cream?” Ellis asked, fully taking over the hostessing duties for our family.

“I do,” Haven told her.

We got to our feet.

Haven took Bo's hand and asked, “Can I call you daddy now that we're getting married?”

It seemed like everything stopped.

“There are a lot of possibilities, baby. Why don’t we talk about that tomorrow?” Bo smoothly told her.

“I can make a list.”

My laugh was more of a snort because she sounded so much like Ellis.

“Of course, you can,” Ellis lightly pulled her ponytail. “Lists are fun.”

As we followed Ellis to the kitchen, I thought I heard Thad say, “Nobody thinks that.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

KAYDEE WAS RESTING WITH HER HEAD ON MY SHOULDER AND her arm across my middle.

“I didn’t know what to say to Haven,” I admitted.

“About calling you, daddy?” She sounded sated, which pleased me.

“Yeah. I didn’t put her up to that.”

“I know.”

“But I can’t help but notice that Wade hasn’t seen her or called since he dropped her off on New Year’s Day.”

“We’re supposed to meet with an arbitrator selected by the judge who’ll help us agree to a different schedule.” She settled on her pillow, still facing me. “I think you should come if you can. Now that we are getting married, you should hear what’s being said.”

“I’ll be there.”

She smiled her thanks. “He wanted a boy and mentioned it all the time. When we learned we were having a girl, he still hoped for a boy. She wasn’t a difficult baby, yet he didn’t try to bond with her.”

“Some guys are terrified of babies. They worry they’ll break them or not know what they need.” I disliked Wade, but I wanted to give him the benefit of the doubt.

“I’ll give you that.” She gave me a slight side-eye. “But, even when she was older, he missed his days. They aren’t

close. I think she feels like he doesn't love her." She ended with a frown. "He doesn't show her he cares about her, not like you, Grey, and Thad do."

"That proves he's a huge dumbass." I didn't hide my anger. "I mean it. He had you both and threw you away. You gave him a great kid. Havs is awesome. He might know football, but he doesn't know shit about women."

She gave me a sweet smile.

"How do you want to play this 'daddy' thing?"

She started to chew on her bottom lip. "How do you feel about it?"

"I knew this would come up. I didn't expect it to happen tonight." I cleared my throat because I needed to pick my words carefully. "I love your daughter. I know Wade made her with you, but if he isn't active in her life, I sure as hell will be." I waited for Kaydee's response.

"A reschedule here, and there can be excused, but this has been too long." She wanted what was best for Haven, and her father should be in her life.

"I don't know how Wade thinks. I believe you should tell your attorney that we're engaged and everything that has gone on."

"Wade is going to hear about our engagement. Who knows what he'll do." She looked anxious.

"We have no control over him. He's responsible for his choices and his actions." I took her hand in mine. "I promise you, Kaydee, that I will always treat Haven like my own. If he wants to walk away, I'll adopt Haven in a heartbeat." I was serious.

Her hand gripped mine tightly. "I'm not sure if I should want him to give up or to stay involved and continue being a dick." She shook her head and let out a loud sigh. "He makes everything so difficult."

"It looks like it's Wade's decision to step up or bow out."

She sat up and pounded on her pillow before returning to her sleeping position. “You do know that you’re awesome, right?”

“No more than you are, Sunshine.”

Kaydee and I sat in her attorney’s office. The woman’s desk was covered in legal pads, files, and books. She was swamped and maybe a little scattered. Her reading glasses were low on her nose, and I thought she only had one earring.

“So, you’re engaged.” She repeated the news we’d shared as if we might deny it.

“Haven’s so happy,” Kaydee told her.

“Dr. Holloway, how do you get along with Haven?” Ms. Robb asked.

“I love her. She makes me laugh. We talk every night that I’m home before she goes to sleep.”

“You’re living together?” she asked Kaydee.

“Yes.”

“Is Mr. Riggs aware of your relationship?”

Kaydee answered, “He knows that we’re together. I’m sure that word has reached him about our engagement.” She uncrossed her long legs. “I have no problem with telling him, answering any questions that he might have, but since he’s not following the visitation schedule or calling to check in with Haven...I don’t feel like I have to make the effort to tell him about our engagement or that I asked Bo to move in.”

“How is Haven handling her father’s absence?”

“When he dropped her off early on New Year’s Day, he was angry with her, and I think she was with him. She hasn’t asked to call him and doesn’t seem upset that they aren’t spending their weekends together,” Kaydee said.

“Sometimes, she makes remarks about making me do girl things,” I told the attorney. “I don’t mind playing school or painting our nails. I tell her that I feel lucky to spend time with

her. She's funny and very kind. She loves her animals, and I enjoy learning from her."

"It sounds like she's a fortunate little girl," Ms. Robb observed.

"Haven always asks about Bo's schedule. She doesn't like it if he's late getting back. We've explained that he's caring for a patient and can't pack up and leave when the clock strikes six." Kaydee gave a hopeless shrug. "But she's seven and used to Wade not showing when he should."

"Trust takes time to grow, and I think the best way to help her is to communicate." Ms. Robb made a note on her legal pad.

"I didn't realize that she worries so much," I told Kaydee. "Do you?"

She shook her head slowly back and forth. "You aren't sneaky. You're too straightforward to be. You'd fail horribly at lying to me."

I appreciated that she saw me that way and that she didn't wonder.

"May I ask, what are your plans?" Ms. Robb held her pen over her pad. "Marriage? Cohabitate during a long engagement?"

"We're getting married," I told her. "Soon."

"That is another reason why we need this settled. We need Wade to decide what he wants. Is he going to be an active part of Haven's life? Can he commit to showing up when he's supposed to? Haven deserves stability."

Ms. Robb gave Kaydee a long look. "I can't tell you what the outcome will be. Most likely, the arbitrator will press both sides to come to a new, workable schedule for visitation." She held up her finger to tell us to wait to make our remarks. "I think that you're right. He needs to spend time with his daughter so that she'll feel comfortable in his presence." She glanced at Kaydee. "Skipping his weekends without any contact is wrong."

I didn't try to hide my frown. "If I were in his position, I would make myself available for my child."

Her dark eyes focused on me. "When one of the parties becomes seriously involved with another, there's usually a hiccup or two. I would advise you, Dr. Holloway, not to engage or confront Mr. Riggs."

I nodded. I wouldn't, although I wanted to kick the fool in the ass.

"I know that it's difficult; waiting always is. But we need to allow the system to do its job." Ms. Robb watched for my reaction.

I nodded slowly.

Kaydee didn't look happy. Her lips were firmly together.

"I do have a question," I said, then waited for the attorney to finish jotting on her pad. "What if Wade doesn't appear? What if his attorney doesn't either?" I felt like the guy had checked out. I didn't want that because it would hurt my girls, but my gut said it had already happened.

"I'll place a call on Friday, reminding Maury, his attorney, of the meeting. If Mr. Riggs doesn't attend, I can ask that our wishes be granted. I doubt that Maury would have the power to agree, so he can only object on behalf of his client and take the information back to Mr. Riggs. If neither does, we go for it all, but I bet Maury will file emergency motions to stop everything."

I knew that Kaydee didn't like the sound of that because she leaned forward in her chair. "You know he'll play the system," she said softly. "He's done it before."

"I'll bring that up and offer the records." Ms. Robb didn't seem fazed by Kaydee's frustration. "Perhaps, this time, our arbitrator won't be so forgiving."

"If I understand all that's been said today," I kept my tone even, giving Kaydee time to tamp down her frustration, "to get what is best for Haven, we'll have to be patient. That doesn't mean we'll stand for being trifled with, but we aren't going in with guns blazing." I flashed a slight smile at the attorney.

She returned it. “I won’t tell you that you must come, but it wouldn’t hurt. Wear a suit, tie’s optional. Your job is to be solid. You support Kaydee. Keep your mouth shut unless there’s a question directed toward you, and only talk if I give you the go-ahead.”

“Got it.” I liked her. Under the rumpled blouse was a barracuda.

“I don’t want to throw this in Wade’s face, but Haven has asked if she can call Bo ‘daddy.’” Kaydee gave her attorney a challenging look.

Ms. Robb made a “pump the brakes” gesture with her hand, moving it up and down. “Mr. Riggs isn’t going to like that.” She tapped her fingers on the desk three times. “What did you say?” She looked at me.

“I didn’t say anything. I think that’s Kaydee’s decision.”

“Her aunt suggested ice cream, and Haven dropped it.” Kaydee let out a loud sigh. “Wade isn’t active in her life, and Bo is. I understand why she would want to. When we have kids, I can’t tell her that she can’t when another of ours can.”

“She’s...” Ms. Robb consulted her notes. “Haven is seven. She’s old enough to understand some things and still innocent enough not to fully appreciate the power of the word ‘daddy.’”

Kaydee leaned to the side to pick up her purse. “I want to know that if Wade is going to be an active parent, he’s going to do what he’s agreed to and if he’s not. Knowing that sooner rather than later would be best for all of us.”

“I’ll call if I learn anything. Otherwise, be there thirty minutes early.” Ms. Robb ended the meeting by looking at the door.

We didn’t make small talk as we walked to my SUV. I opened the door for Kaydee and then got in. “I like her.”

“She remembers everything.” Kaydee pulled the elastic band from her hair and shook it free. “She might look like a hot mess, but she’s a good one to have on your side.”

“What’s Wade’s attorney like?”

She looked upward and shook her head. “What’s the word? Sycophant?”

I was familiar with the word.

“He’s a huge football fan, and his nephews played, or maybe one still plays for Wade. The way he talks about Wade’s work, you’d think he was curing a disease. He smiles a lot and isn’t averse to making snide asides.”

“What do you want to do now?” I had the day off. It might be nice to do something to get our minds off this.

“I don’t know.” She looked out the windshield. “I always leave here feeling irritated.”

“How about this? We grab some lunch and then talk about our living situation?” I offered.

“The trailer was supposed to be temporary. I wanted my own space, but I wasn’t sure where I was going or what I wanted to do.”

“We’re going to need more room.”

“I know. I don’t want to talk about it in public. People might listen in.”

I understood her concern. “You don’t like to talk about money publicly, and I agree.”

Her posture relaxed. “Growing up, everybody thought we were rich. Grey’s the one who built what we have. I wouldn’t have much if it weren’t for him and how he manages the farm.”

“The Army paid my school loans. I’ve lived small, Kaydee. I’m not loaded, but we won’t be hurting.” I started the SUV.

“Let’s get lunch to go and head home. I feel like we’ll need to make notes.”

I liked the sound of that.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

“I CAN CALL GREY TO SEE IF HE HAS TIME TO TALK.” WE’D come to an agreement. The trailer was too small. There was nothing for sale that fit what we wanted. The houses were either too new with no personality or too old and uncared for.

Bo wanted space. He liked the idea that we’d have privacy.

I’d discovered that I liked living near Grey and Ellis.

“I’m good with that if you are.” He was balanced on the kitchen chair’s two legs.

“Are you sure that this idea is okay with you? I know you want to give us everything, but I don’t want you to regret this.” I flipped my phone over and tapped the screen.

“I like your family, Sunshine. I like that you’re attached to the land. You have roots.” He met my gaze, and I detected no untruths. “We can see what Grey thinks, then start talking about what we want and find a builder.”

“Sounds like it’s going to be a bunch of work,” I grumbled, only half-joking.

“How about this? We won’t move forward with the house until we get back from our honeymoon,” he suggested.

One thing that I loved about being with Bo was that we made decisions together. If it was important to him, I didn’t fight him just because I could. He respected me and knew when I cared about something and when I didn’t. Wade always had to be the boss. He wanted to be consulted on everything.

At times, I'd felt like he was my parent, and I needed his permission.

My call to Grey was short. He told us to come over and stay for dinner. Ellis and Thad would pick Haven up from school and bring her back.

"What's with the smile?" Bo wrapped his arms around my waist.

I was slipping on my shoes. "I like the idea of us going to Grey's or his family coming to our place for dinner."

"It seems so adult." He pulled me close.

"We are adults." I went up on my tiptoes and kissed him.

Grey was waiting in the kitchen for us. "Thirsty?" He pointed to the coffee pot.

"No thanks." Bo helped me off with my jacket and then his.

"I'll take a cup." I brought up the rear of our group as we headed to Grey's office.

"This is different." I paused in the doorway.

"Ellis needs her space. I knew she was tired of sharing the one desk." My brother shrugged.

The room now had cream walls. Two desks were pushed together, facing one another in the middle of the space in front of the large windows. At one end of the room was a sofa; the other held shelves filled with books and keepsakes.

"I like it." I loved seeing Ellis's changes to the house that still felt like home but better.

"Grab a seat and tell me what's going on," Grey said. He might have finished his work for the day, but that didn't mean he wasted time.

Bo and I sat in front of the desks, causing Grey to have to turn in his chair.

"We were talking about where we would live," I began. "The trailer has worked, but for three..."

“It’s not a permanent home,” Grey finished the thought.

Bo continued, “We want space. A home office, a family room, bedrooms for Haven and us, plus when we have more.”

Grey smiled at that. He’d been hands-on with Haven from the day I’d brought her here. “Off the top of my head, I can’t think of any place that would mark all of your boxes.”

I glanced at Bo and then continued. “We looked, and the one that came close needs a lot of work, and it’s in town. Haven would miss the animals.”

“You want to build out here.” Grey surmised instantly why we were here.

“I know we’d have to run it by Thad, but we wanted your thoughts.”

He leaned back with a satisfied grin. “You know, I always hoped that you and Thad would want to stay close.” He looked at Bo. “Not too close, but near enough that if we needed something, somebody would be nearby.”

“I was thinking five acres.” Bo tossed out our idea. “I know that building can be a pain.”

Grey looked at me. “There are four plots.” He glanced at Bo. “Ten acres each, set up for residential.”

“How long have you known this?” I asked.

Grey dug around in a drawer to his right. “Fifteen years.”

“But you didn’t say anything when I was with Wade,” I cried.

“Honey, Wade didn’t want anything from us. He made that clear when he swooped in and whisked you away.”

I couldn’t argue. Just because I didn’t like the truth, I could recognize it.

“Show us what you have,” Bo got us refocused and stood to look at the map Grey was unfolding.

We studied the map.

I pointed to one plot. “I don’t want to be on a corner.”

“Mark that one off,” Bo told Grey.

“I like this one.” Bo pointed to the property directly behind Grey’s house but a mile away.

“Can we have a path?” I asked my brother with a smile.

“One an ATV or UTV could handle?” Grey offered.

“Sold.” I grinned.

“Are you sure?” Bo asked me.

“It felt right the moment you pointed it out,” I said. I then asked Grey, “What comes next?”

“Run it by Thad. We’ll get George to draw up the paperwork.” Grey started to fold the map.

“I’ll need the bank information,” Bo told Grey.

“Why?” I asked.

“To buy the land,” Bo said.

I shook my head. “No.”

Grey talked over me. “You misunderstand. Each of us gets a plot. Otherwise, we farm it.”

“So, this is Kaydee’s?” Bo asked slowly.

“It will be a transfer from the trust.” Grey shoved the map into the drawer. “I’m not sure what the tax implications will be.” He looked at us. “You’ll need to talk to your accountant.”

“The land will stay in Kaydee’s name,” Bo decided.

I looked at him in surprise. “But it’s for us.”

“Sunshine, it’s a part of your family’s farm,” he said.

I tried to use my senses to determine if he was angry or sincere.

Bo turned to my brother. “Grey, as the head of the Blue Family, you’ll need to hear this, too. I’ve got no problem with Kaydee being successful. I want her dreams to come true. If the land comes from Kaydee, then the pool and fancy patio will come from me.” Bo grinned, then winked at me.

“A pool?” I always wanted a pool. As kids, we’d played in the drainage ditch that swelled after a hard rain.

“The kids will love it. You and I can take late-night swims.” He thought he needed to convince me.

Grey grinned. “Sounds like the Sunday cookouts will move to your place.”

“I’m good with all of that.” I pushed up from my chair, took two steps, and sat on Bo’s lap. After wrapping my arms around him. “We’re getting a house.”

“We are getting it all, Sunshine.” His lips brushed mine.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

WE HEARD THE BEEPING NOISE, SIGNIFYING A VEHICLE IN THE Grey's driveway. A few moments after, "Mommy" sounded as Haven ran into the family room.

Kaydee stood and met her daughter halfway into the room. "How was your day?"

Haven wrapped her arms around her mother and grinned. "We had brownies at lunch."

"Then it was an excellent day," Kaydee said, smiling.

Haven let go of her mother and ran to Grey. "Uncle Grey, Uncle Thad says he's going to cook dinner." She looked up at him, her large eyes silently pleading. "He burns stuff."

Grey wrapped his hand around the little girl's shoulders and pulled her in for a quick hug. "Thanks for the heads up. I'll keep an eye on him."

"Good." She let go of Grey and turned to me. "Bo, I need a hug. I had to think a lot today."

"Then get over here so I can hug you." I opened my arms and tried not to laugh.

She jumped onto the sofa beside me and wrapped herself around me.

"Was today an art or music day?"

"Music," she yelled.

"Inside voice," Kaydee reminded.

Grey left us, probably to find Ellis.

“What are you doing here?” Haven asked.

I glanced at Kaydee. I’d let her decide how much to tell her daughter.

“We were talking about where we’re going to live,” Kaydee told her.

“Not here,” Haven said decisively.

“No.” I shook my head.

“There’s not enough room for us all of the time.” Haven blew me away sometimes with her well thought out observations.

Kaydee returned to her seat on the sofa on the other side of me. “What do you think about getting a new house?”

Haven stared at her mom.

“You’d have your own room and plenty of yard to play outside,” I added.

“And a pool.” Kaydee didn’t forget. “Bo thinks we should have a pool.”

Haven began to chew on her bottom lip. She looked so much like her mom at that moment. “You wouldn’t make Buttercup come with us, would you?”

I hadn’t considered her pony.

Haven let out a long breath. “She’d miss her friends in Uncle Grey’s barn.”

“We won’t be far,” I promised her. “You can see Buttercup every day.”

“Okay.” She hugged me again.

I wrapped my other arm around Kaydee, loving how it felt to have my girls in my arms.

Haven started to squirm, so I let her go. “Can I see it?”

“No, honey, it has to be built,” I said.

“But you can help us design it,” Kaydee told her. “You can pick the colors for your room.”

“That sounds like a lot of work. Can’t you pay somebody to do it?” She scrunched her nose, just like her mom.

I couldn’t cover my laugh. Haven cracked me up.

“Who’s going to help me make dinner?” Thad stood in the doorway.

“I guess that means me.” Kaydee kissed my cheek and got up to follow Thad.

“Should we go see Buttercup?” I asked, giving her shoulder a squeeze.

“I have a question,” she said, her expression turning serious.

“Okay. What’s your question?” I enjoyed these moments with her. I never knew what was going to come out of her mouth.

“When are we getting married?”

Where to begin so that she’d understand?

“I want to be a family. I want you to be my daddy,” she said, ending with a whine.

I loved this kid so much. “Havs,” I softened my tone, “we are a family, and I’m always going to be here for you.”

“I want it to happen now, so everybody will know.”

I drew a deep breath. “How about this? Can we talk to your mom when we get home?”

She looked downward. “Oh-kay.” She was disappointed.

“Havs.” I waited until she met my gaze. “I want us to be a family, too.”

“I love you, Bo.” She threw herself against my chest, and I held her tight for a long moment, savoring the experience.

“Let’s go see Buttercup.” My voice sounded rough. I needed to do something before I choked up.

Thad didn't burn the chicken breasts. Kaydee and Ellis added the extras: macaroni and cheese and salad.

We finished eating, and I made a move to start clearing the plates.

"Hold off on that a minute, Bo," Grey said, using his big brother voice, full of authority.

We all turned to him.

He took his wife's hand.

Ellis was seated to his right. She smiled sweetly at him.

"We wanted to wait a little bit before saying anything." Grey didn't get to continue.

"You're pregnant," Kaydee said, staring at Ellis.

"I knew it." Thad raised his fist in the air like a victor.

"How did you know?" Ellis asked.

Thad glanced at his sister as if to ask, *Do you want to tell them?*

She gave him an eye roll and an indulgent grin.

Thad chuckled as he turned to his brother. "You look like you could take on the world." He pointed at Ellis. "And you have been sipping ginger ale all day. I remember what that means."

"What does that mean?" Haven asked.

Ellis grinned. "My tummy's been queasy." She widened her eyes and frowned dramatically. "Ginger ale helps settle my tummy."

"I want a girl," Haven said. "Then I can share my toys."

"That is very nice," Ellis told Haven. "How about this, honey? I won't have the baby until you start third grade."

"That's a long time away." Haven's eyes widened as if she was making plans. "It would be better if you had it when I get out of second grade. That way, we can play all summer."

I looked down at my lap because I wanted to laugh at Haven's plan.

"Maybe next time we should check with you and your calendar," Grey teased.

Haven pursed her lips and tilted her head to the right. "That's okay. I've got a lot to do. We're getting married, and I'm going to build a house."

"Sounds like we're all going to be very busy." Thad smiled. "Lots of good things for the Blues."

"So true." Grey lifted Ellis's hand to his lips.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

KAYDEE

ON THE DRIVE BACK TO THE TRAILER, BO SAID. “HAVEN AND I want to talk about the wedding.”

Haven jumped right in. “I want us to get married now.”

“I’ve been thinking...” I paused because I wasn’t sure how long Haven would stay interested.

Bo turned his head slightly toward me.

“I don’t want a big event. I know you want a ceremony, but I want to keep it small.”

“Then, we’ll keep it small. The Blues and the ladies from the salon?”

“And your friends...”

He shrugged. “I’ll have to invite a few people from the hospital and a handful of others.”

I drew a deep breath. “Then how about we get married outside in Grey’s backyard?”

“Sounds good. When?” Bo was on board. He’d get married in my kitchen tonight if we could.

“What about the weekend after school lets out? That way, it would all work out if we wanted to get away.”

He pulled into our driveway, and as soon as he parked, he whipped out his phone. “May twenty-third.”

“Does that work for you?”

“It works for me,” Haven told us.

“I’ll put in my time off request tomorrow.” He leaned closer and kissed me. “Thanks, Sunshine.”

Later in bed, Bo asked, “Did you get any ideas tonight?”

Sex with Bo scrambled my brain. He could probably solve calculus problems when I could barely string words together. “About?”

“Having another baby.”

“I want more kids.” I knew that Bo did.

“I don’t want you to feel like you have too much to deal with.”

I let out a relieved breath. “Could we hold off until Wade’s shit gets settled, we have the wedding, and we settle on a builder?”

“That’s fair.” He kissed my forehead. “You know you’ll need to tell me what I need to do to help with the wedding.”

“We’re keeping it small, so that will help. Ellis swears she’ll be involved, but she’s got a lot going on.”

“How does this sound? I’ll make the travel plans. You won’t have to do anything but pack.”

“That sounds nice.” I smiled.

“I’ll get started tomorrow.”

I had every confidence he would.

“Thad suggested we talk to Miles Grigsby about the new house.”

“He’s got a good reputation, but he might be too busy,” I cautioned.

“We’re doing okay, Sunshine. I’m fine with it if we need to keep living here for a while.”

I ran my hand over his belly. Bo was always willing to work with me.

“I’ll call him tomorrow and set up a meeting.”

“And I’ll clear the wedding date with Grey and Ellis. I know it won’t be a problem.”

“I’m happy for them. I know they wanted to get pregnant.”

“Grey was good helping me with Havs when she was little. I mean, he raised Ellis, Thad, and me. I know he’ll be an amazing dad.”

“I like that I can go to him for advice.” Bo’s voice rumbled.

“You’re great with Havs. She loves you.” I squeezed his side. “She trusts you.”

“I love her, and I feel so honored every time she wants to talk with me.”

My eyes filled with tears, and I was having trouble breathing. “I knew I wouldn’t have to raise her alone because of Grey and Thad.” My throat burned as I swallowed so I could go on. “But when I see how she turns to you as if you’ve been with us from the start, it means so much to me. The way you accept her. It’s a relief.” I jerked and shook my head. “That’s too weak of a word. It makes things easier for me because I don’t have to worry. You love us.”

He pulled me closer. “I promised you, Kaydee. It’s you and Havs who own my heart and soul. When we add to our family, nothing will change. I’ll love us all.”

I slid onto his chest. “I don’t know how I got so lucky, but you are the best, Bo.”

“Sunshine, it’s me who won the lottery. I’ve got the two best girls in the world.”

“It’s going to be fine.” Bo rested his hand on my thigh to calm the bouncing hidden by the conference room table.

Ms. Robb was sitting on my other side. She was digging in one of the three brown file folders she’d brought.

Mr. Anderson, who was to arbitrate our case, looked at his watch again.

Wade wasn't here, and neither was his attorney. The meeting was to have begun fifteen minutes ago.

"I talked to Mr. Riggs's counsel last Friday afternoon," Ms. Robb told the man sitting at the head of the table. "Do you want me to call him?"

"No. That won't be necessary." Mr. Anderson did not look pleased that we'd been left waiting. "When I reviewed the file, I noted a history of missed court dates." He waved his hand in the air. "Claims of no service or forgetting to put it on the calendar." He paused. "In my experience, perhaps it could happen once. However, by my count, this will be the ninth time."

"My client and her fiancé have jobs. They had to arrange their schedules to make this meeting." Ms. Robb lowered her chin to look over the top of her reading glasses.

"Noted." Mr. Anderson acted as if he was going to go on when the door opened.

"I apologize." Wade's attorney rushed in.

Wade was not with him.

Mr. Anderson waited until Maury, Mr. Tennent, was seated. "We seem to be missing your client, Mr. Tennent."

Maury leaned forward in his chair across from us. "I've been doing family law for a long time. This is a first for me." He frowned. "Mr. Riggs called my office when I was leaving to come here."

"I hope there's a point to this story," Mr. Anderson warned the attorney.

"I'll make it quick. Mr. Riggs has accepted a new position in Texas."

I sat back in my chair. Texas. How could Wade spend time with Haven if he was so far away?

Mr. Tennent spoke to me. "High school football is very important in Texas. This could lead to a college position for Wade."

“I’m sure he’s celebrating the good news,” Ms. Robb didn’t hide the snark in her tone. “However, I don’t see how moving many states away will benefit his daughter.”

“This is why I’m so late. I did my duty to my client.” Mr. Tennent told Mr. Anderson. “To be honest, I told him he was a fool, and I don’t like this at all.” He frowned, and I believed him.

“Go on,” Mr. Anderson prompted.

Bo’s big body tensed beside me as he reached for my hand.

I held on tight, needing his strength.

“I’ve been instructed to file a motion to terminate his parental rights concerning...” He consulted his notes. “Haven Ellis Riggs.”

A sound was torn from my chest. It hurt to hear that.

Bo wrapped his arm around my shoulders. He pulled me close and whispered into my ear. “Stay strong, Sunshine.”

Mr. Tennent continued, “I’ve never heard of a good man doing something like this.” He glanced at Bo and me. “I guess he figures that you’ve moved on, and so can he.”

“Now, hold on...” Ms. Robb started.

“Okay. Everybody quiet,” Mr. Anderson ordered as he looked around the table. “This is unexpected, and by your expressions, a shock.”

I pulled away from Bo. *That motherfucker.* I knew that Wade seemed to enjoy hurting me. He’d done it over and over, but this... I couldn’t believe he was going to do it.

“I will have to consult with my client,” Ms. Robb announced.

“Of course.” Mr. Anderson’s cheeks had reddened, and he was gripping his pen tightly. He didn’t like surprises. He recovered and turned to Mr. Tennent. “Consult with your client again before filing that motion, Mr. Tennant. Word will spread around here, and if he ever comes back, the town might be so welcoming.”

“That’s what I told him, but he’s already on the road to Texas.” Maury’s hand straightened his tie. It shook a little, and he glanced at me. “I know things haven’t always been easy between you two, but you’ve always wanted him to have a relationship with his daughter. I want to go on the record saying that. Ms. Blue isn’t the reason for my client’s decision. This is him being selfish and not thinking of his daughter or the Sharpsville team.”

We walked with Ms. Robb back to her office. I was having trouble focusing. Luckily, I had Bo, and he somehow got me there.

She closed the door behind us. “Well, that was a shock. I thought I’d seen everything, but that man takes the prize.” She sat heavily in her chair.

“When he brought Haven back on New Year’s Day, he said that Bo had us now, and he was welcome to us. I thought... I thought he was mad and just saying it to hurt me.” I sat down.

“He was worked up because Haven didn’t want to stay with him,” Bo added.

“He’s always been selfish.” Her reading glasses were hanging from a chain around her neck. “I know it’s not professional to gossip, but the whole town knows all he’s done to you and Haven.”

I didn’t even feel embarrassed by her words. “Bo was with me that morning. I don’t think Wade believed that we were that serious.”

“I want you to take a week to think about this.” She’d gone back into attorney mode. “You can object.”

“What would happen if she did?” Bo asked.

“Nothing good.” Ms. Robb didn’t look happy. “There will be a hearing where you can state why you disagree. How it would hurt you financially and Haven, mentally and emotionally.” She wet her lips. “If the judge ruled against

Wade, it won't make him change into a good father. In fact, it might make things worse."

"She's seven," I reminded her. "She won't understand."

"But she knows I'm here," Bo said, sounding confident. "I'll adopt her."

"I don't know how badly this will hurt her," I admitted.

"We'll set her up with a therapist," Bo told us. "Somebody with experience with things like this. That way, Havs will have help understanding and confirmation that we love her."

Ms. Robb looked at me. "You know, you've got a good one there." She smiled at Bo.

"I know." I took a moment to remember that Bo would be beside me. "Haven calls it 'our wedding.' She loves him."

"We're going to be a family," Bo said, his voice firm. "She wants that and trusts that it's going to happen."

"Maybe we aren't giving her enough credit." Ms. Robb raised her eyebrows. "Kids sometimes sense the lack of connection."

"Bo and Havs are tight." Bo won't let her down. I needed to remember that.

"This is going to work out, Sunshine." Bo took my hand and squeezed.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

EVEN WHILE EXITING KAYDEE'S LIFE, WADE CONTINUED TO BE a jerk. He told any and all that he "had to get out of town." Leading people to believe there were threats, hinting I was behind it.

He continued the narrative. Four days after the meeting with the arbitrator, his attorney filed the motion. He alluded to worries about his safety and several other reasons that were all about how this would make his life easier. He claimed that he hadn't been able to bond with Haven because he'd never had a chance to spend extended time with her.

Ms. Robb immediately filed a motion to have the case sealed.

The way gossip spread in this town, I was sure that somebody at the courthouse would leak the pertinent points of the filings.

Kaydee did not object to Wade's motion. She called a family meeting and discussed it. Ellis and Thad didn't like that Wade wouldn't be financially responsible for Haven. Grey argued for letting the motion go through and good riddance.

His thoughts were that if Wade didn't want to be a father, then keeping up the visitation schedule was a farce. Every time he missed a visit, it hurt Haven. He also stated that for years he'd watched Wade play with Kaydee's emotions, and if it could be halted, he was all for it.

Our walk home was a silent one.

I let her mull over what her family had said. She and her brothers had been a unit for many years. I knew what they, especially Grey said, carried a lot of weight.

Haven was spending the night with a friend, so it was just the two of us.

When we got back to the trailer, I poured a glass of wine for her and grabbed a beer.

She curled up in the corner of the sofa. “Thanks,” she said as she took the glass from my hand.

I sat at the other end. “Thoughts?”

“I need to say some things, but I’m worried you’ll think I’m questioning your actions or moral code.”

“Sometimes, things have to be said that might help us but could hurt or anger the other along the way.” Early in my training, I learned that being questioned about my decisions didn’t necessarily mean someone thought I was wrong. It was more about understanding the process of how I came to that particular conclusion.

She frowned. “I don’t want to fight.”

Now, we were getting to the real issue. “I don’t believe that a disagreement is an all-or-nothing fight. We aren’t going to agree all the time, Sunshine. If you disagree with me, I won’t decide that I don’t love you or that we’re on the outs.”

She pulled her knees to her chest and watched me.

“I want to hear what you have to say. It matters, Kaydee,” I told her softly.

She stretched and placed her glass on the coffee table. “I’m not going to object to the motion or fight Wade.” She sighed loudly. “If he doesn’t want to parent Haven, then it’s his loss.”

“She’s a great kid,” I said without offering an opinion. I didn’t think she was through talking.

“But I am angry. I’m angry because he gets to walk away. He’s caused so many problems, and he doesn’t have to clean up his mess.”

“I agree.”

“You do?” She seemed surprised.

“He hurt you and embarrassed you. He made promises to love you and Haven, and he rejected you both. He wasn’t careful with your hearts.”

Her eyes were wide, but she slowly nodded her head.

“A good mother will take a lot, but you don’t hurt her kid.”

This time the nodding was faster.

“You had to muzzle your brothers for years. You kept your mouth shut when I’m sure you wanted to scream your list of complaints in the middle of town or at half-time of a football game.”

She gave me a tiny smile.

“And now, the asshole gets to leave town while firing up the gossip. Did your brothers and I force him out? Did you threaten him with something so big that he had to go?” I named some of the stories that I’d heard.

“You weren’t my second choice,” she blurted and immediately looked uneasy. Her foot tapped on the cushion.

“I know you loved him very much.”

“I was a kid. It was the kind of big love a young woman dreams about.” She pushed her hair behind her shoulders. “I’m not a girl anymore. I’m a woman and a mother. I started with you with my eyes wide open. I know you aren’t perfect, but you are considerate. I’m not perfect.” She let out a slight snort. “But I want to be a good person, a good mom, and a good partner. I know that I love you, Bo. I love the quiet times and all the little things you do for us.”

“I never questioned it, Sunshine.”

“People already are.”

“People aren’t living this with us,” I told her. “We have love, but we also have a partnership. We’ve dealt with things by talking about them, planning for them.”

Her mouth twisted and then stretched into a small smile. “It’s romantic, but it’s also practical.”

“We’re being realistic.” I matched her grin with one of my own. “Like we are full-fledged adults.”

She sighed. “I don’t want to make the same mistakes I did with Wade.”

“I won’t cheat on you, Kaydee.”

“I know that.”

I believed her. “Do you think Dr. Brashear is helping?”

She nodded. “I wish Haven had a longer attention span during their calls.”

The evening after we’d learned of Wade’s intentions, I’d made some calls. Through a med school friend, we were in touch with Lesa Brashear. She was a psychologist who worked with children of divorce.

“We were lucky that she would meet with us.”

I’d called the doctor and begged for her help. She was able to help with the transition of Wade leaving Haven’s life and my being here. My description of Haven being aware that her father was unreliable and that I was the opposite intrigued her.

“She knows Havs is seven going on eight. Focusing for thirty minutes can be hard.”

Kaydee stretched her legs out in front of her, seemingly more relaxed. “I can’t tell what Havs thinks about the sessions. She doesn’t complain when it’s time.”

“I think that’s a good sign.” Haven usually lets us know her thoughts.

“I hope the judge decides that Wade has to pay for this doctor.” Her eyes narrowed a little.

The judge had set a hearing regarding Wade’s motion even with no objections filed. Kaydee, through her attorney, asked that Wade be financially responsible for Haven’s counseling for twenty-four months.

He, of course, objected.

I thought the judge would have much to say to Wade if he showed up. “I hope that when this ends, it ends, Kaydee.”

She looked tense. The line between her eyebrows appeared, and her jaw tightened.

“Then you can put your marriage and Wade in the past, and we can focus on our future.”

“True.” She relaxed a little. The hardness left her face. “Did I tell you that Ellis threatened to order a balloon arch for the wedding?”

“Why would she do that?” Kaydee wanted a low-key wedding, and a balloon arch did not match the theme.

“She’s mad that Thad is hosting the reception dinner.”

“Hormones?” I asked, hiding a smile. Anytime the very even-tempered Ellis got frustrated or upset, we blamed pregnancy hormones, which pissed her off more.

“I told her that trying to coordinate a small catered dinner was expensive and a lot of work. When Thad offered to host it at the country club, I had to take him up on it. Besides, all-you-can-eat prime rib and shrimp cocktail is not something I’m going to pass on.”

She made me laugh. “Let’s stick Thad with a huge bill.”

“That’s what I’m saying,” She poked me with her sock-clad foot. “But Ellis didn’t want to be outdone by Thad. She and Grey want to pay for the decorations and flowers.”

“What’d you say?”

“I agreed.” She grinned. “So far, we’re only paying for my dress, Hav’s dress, your suit, the rings, and the license.”

“Grey told me that he’s covering the judge.”

“When did he tell you that?”

“It was after we told them about Wade’s motion. He met me at the hospital for lunch.”

“Is that all he talked about?”

“He wanted to see how you were holding up.” I’d tell her the entire conversation if she wanted to know.

She rolled her eyes. “He’s always going to watch over me.”

“I think I fall into that category, too. Grey told me not to listen to the gossip.”

“Yep, you are officially in the family.” She poked me again.

I grabbed her foot and pulled it into my lap, which made her giggle as she slid down the sofa.

She turned serious. “He’d want to know if there was a believable rumor about Thad having a baby.”

“I think Thad is more careful than you all give him credit for.” I’d been out a few times with the guy.

“At least he keeps with the appropriate age group. He isn’t out chasing eighteen-year-olds.” She shrugged.

“That was a worry?”

“It’s Thad. He lost his virginity to a cheerleader who was a senior when he was fourteen. Who knows what he’ll do?”

“He’s more responsible than you know.”

“He’ll always be my little brother.” She chuckled. “He’s great with Havs, and Ellis says he’s good at his job. But there’s a part of me that will always think of him as the little boy who hid my underpants and tried to follow Ellis and me to listen to our secrets.”

“He’s doing fine. He’s the guy that makes everything look easy. I know he cares about his family and his town. Before I met you and Grey, he told me that he had the best family.”

“I love him. Nobody can say anything bad about him, or I’ll punch their lights out.”

“Toughie.”

“Only when it comes to my family.” She smirked.

“How about going to bed and getting dirty?”

“You have the best ideas.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

KAYDEE

I HAD THE WINDOWS OPEN. IT WAS A PERFECT DAY IN MAY; not too warm and not chilly. Bo picked Haven up from school. They were going shopping. For what? I had no clue. They'd promised to be home before dinner.

We were getting married in ten days. Everything was ready. Ellis and I had asked Lindsay Rittenhour to help with the decorations. She was becoming a good friend. She called me often to consult on decorating ideas for her family's party barn business.

I heard a car in my driveway. Glancing at the clock in the corner of my laptop, I noted it was too early for Bo and Haven to be home unless there was a problem. Curious, I walked to my front door.

A white sedan parked, and a trim blonde woman got out and slowly looked around.

"Can I help you?" I asked, stepping onto my porch.

"I'm looking for Kaydee Blue."

I shielded my eyes against the sun. "You've found her."

The blonde closed the sedan's door and headed my way. She wore a silk blouse in mint green, fashionably wide-legged navy pants, and heels.

"You're Sydney." I recognized her from the photos that I'd seen. Heck, I'd encouraged Bo to add his mementos to our various shelves, and there was a photo of them in a group on an outing.

“You recognize me?” There was a hitch in her approach, but she recovered gracefully.

“Bo’s showed me photos.” I refused to be intimidated by this unexpected visit. “Please, come in.” I held the door open for her. “Would you like something to drink?”

“No, thank you.” She looked around my home.

It was probably her first time being in a trailer. I was sure she’d see the grape juice stain that I couldn’t get out of the carpet on the far side of the coffee table. I went on the offensive. “What can I do for you?”

“I know this is rude.” She tried to look contrite, but her natural confidence made it appear fake.

“Please, have a seat.” I might have been caught off guard, but Grey had taught me good manners.

“There was a seminar in Indianapolis. I delayed my flight until tomorrow and drove out here.” She crossed her legs, and I noticed her pump had a red sole.

“Did you come to see Bo?”

“Not exactly.”

I watched her as I waited for more information.

“I wanted to find out about you.”

“Me?” Suddenly, I was happy that I’d put on a little makeup this morning.

“I wanted to see the woman Bo chose.”

“I can’t fault your honesty.” She had huge lady-balls to come right to my door.

“You’re quite famous in town. Everybody seems to know you or about you.”

“I grew up here.” I didn’t know how I felt about her asking questions about me.

“Don’t worry.” She waved her hand nonchalantly. “You’re well-liked, not like your ex. Apparently, he was a bad husband

and father who recently proved to be a disloyal football coach.”

“But?” I raised my eyebrows a little dramatically.

“I wanted to see if they were right.” She gave a one-shoulder shrug. “You sounded too good to be real. I need to be sure.”

“I don’t know if I’m in the mood to be questioned,” I said, meeting her gaze squarely.

She gave a light chuckle. “That’s fair.” She uncrossed her legs and placed her palms on her thighs. “I wanted to make sure that Bo wasn’t making a mistake.”

“I see.” I made myself stay still. I couldn’t fidget or show my nervousness in her presence.

“No. I don’t think you do, and it’s my fault.” She relaxed her posture a little. “I care about Bo.”

I didn’t like the sound of that. “You do know we’re getting married next weekend, right?” I challenged her.

“I’m making a mess of this.” She tried to smile. “I’m not sure that we were ever in love. We respected each other’s work, had common interests, and played hard when we had time off. We were compatible friends, but we weren’t in love.”

I did understand what she was trying to say. She cared about her friend and wanted to make sure he was in a good place, thinking clearly, and no longer in love with her.

“I love Bo.” I held my hand up to stave off anything she might want to interject. “I’ve been married, and it was a disaster. I know how much effort it takes to make a marriage work. Bo and I are a solid unit. I respect him and his job. He knows that family is important to me. He loves my kid, and she thinks there’s no one better. We’re good for each other. He makes me a better person, and I think Haven and I make him a better man.”

“I’m glad he’s found this, and I hope it’s true.”

“It is.” I didn’t sound defensive, just sure. I believed every word I said.

I heard the gravel crunch. “That’ll be Bo and my daughter.”

Sydney glanced toward the door. “He won’t like me being here.”

“He’ll understand when you explain.” I got up, and she followed me to the door.

We watched Bo help Haven out of the backseat. Then he gathered the bags stowed in the back.

Haven waited for him and held his hand as they walked toward us.

“Sydney, this is a surprise.” He spoke to her, but his eyes were on me.

I smiled at him to show that things were fine. “What did you buy?”

“S’prises,” Haven yelled.

“Havs, we’re going to stow them in your room, so your mom won’t get nosey.” Bo gave me a quick kiss and motioned for us to go back inside.

“How about I help Haven with the bags, and you catch up with Sydney?” I held out my hands for the bags.

“No peeking,” Haven cautioned.

“I promise I’ll behave.”

Bo turned over the bags.

I followed Haven to her room and closed the door.

“Who’s that lady?”

I handed Haven two bags, and she put them in her closet. “She’s an old friend of Bo’s.”

“She didn’t smile.” My daughter took the rest of the bags from me.

“She’s a doctor like Bo. She’s very serious.”

“I have a secret.” She wrapped her lips over her teeth, and her eyes sparkled with mischief.

“Yeah?”

“When Bo saw her standing beside you, he said a bad word.”

Haven missed very little. “She didn’t call to say she was coming by.”

“I don’t want any surprises like that. I want the kind where you say, ‘yay.’”

“Me too, baby.” I sat on the edge of her bed. “Want to change clothes?” My daughter played hard at recess. She didn’t worry about getting dirty, although she was girly. Her clothes were a bit grungy now.

“Okay.”

I was running out of stalling tactics, and Haven sensed something was happening in the living room. I knew she would burst in on Bo and his ex very soon.

“Sunshine,” Bo called.

“Coming,” I said, moving toward the door with Haven close on my heels.

“Sydney wanted to say goodbye.” They were both standing by the front door.

“Are you heading back to Indy?” I stood beside Bo. I wasn’t so close that I was rubbing it in that I was with him, but I wanted to make it clear we were together.

“Yes.” She glanced at her watch. “I have dinner plans.”

I didn’t quite believe her. “I’m glad I met you, Sydney.” I held out my hand.

She stepped forward and took mine solidly. “Thank you for understanding.”

I knew what she meant, and no more needed to be said.

We followed her out, and she turned to us as she opened her car door. “Be happy, Bo.”

“You too, Syd.”

Together, we watched her drive away.

“That was fun.” I opened the door for us to go back inside.

We’d decided on hamburgers on the grill and salad. While I was making the patties, Bo was leaning against the counter, drinking a beer.

“So, she just pulled up?” he asked.

“Yup.” I rolled the ground chuck into a ball and then flattened it with the palm of my hand.

“I’m sorry.”

I looked at him and paused my work. “No reason to be. You didn’t know she was coming. I don’t even think she knew she was coming.”

“She was worried.”

“She caught me off guard, but I think it says a lot of good things about her and the kind of man you are. That she would make the trip to check on us.”

He took two steps closer and wrapped his arms around my waist. “Baby, you are the only woman I know who wouldn’t be pissed as hell that my ex showed up to check you out.”

I made sure that I didn’t touch him with my greasy hands. “Sydney wasn’t cuddly, but she was polite.”

“Whatever you said, it registered with her. She’s impressed.”

I showed my surprise. “That’s nice to know.”

“She’s happy for me.”

“You deserve good things, Doc.”

“Maybe we can make it an early night and enjoy those good things?” His hand cupped my butt.

“Sounds like a good plan.”

CHAPTER THIRTY

KAYDEE WAS RIDING MY COCK, AND I HAD MY BACK RESTING against the headboard, lifting my hips to meet her thrusts. “God, you feel so good.”

“I need more,” she panted.

I lifted her and rolled her onto her back. I pulled her right leg up to wrap around my hip, and she followed with her left.

I quickened the pace with short strokes and could see she was close. She wore that look. Her cheeks were bright pink, and her eyes squeezed shut. Yeah, she was almost there.

The sounds she was making made me press harder, go deeper. I fucking loved that Kaydee was open when it came to sex with me. I asked, and she gave.

“God, Bo!” She ran her nails down my back as her inner muscles gripped my cock.

I lasted maybe three more thrusts and came hard.

“I swear every time I’m in you, it’s the best,” I said when I could speak.

“We are good together.”

Pulling away a little, I considered her words.

She ran a fingertip along the bridge of my nose. “You’re easy to live with, deal with.”

I’d never seen myself like that, not with my crazy schedule. “I am?”

Kaydee didn't answer quickly. Her gaze swept over my face. "Well, yeah. You mostly go with the flow."

"Sunshine, I either go to work at the ass-crack of dawn or get home after midnight."

"I don't mind the early mornings; it helps me get stuff done." She gave me a tiny smile. "You don't mind that I go to sleep before you get home on the late nights. It's not a big deal."

I heard the truth in her statements. "You really mean that."

"Bo, you save lives. I wouldn't want my doctor to worry about the time, rushing to get me to the place where he could hand me off to someone else. That's not you, and this town is lucky that you're not like that."

Suddenly, I felt calmer than I ever had before. Maybe I had a deep-seated worry that my schedule would eventually put Kaydee off.

"We're good, babe." She turned to me and rested her knee on my thigh and her hand on my belly.

"I'm sorry about Sydney today. That must have been weird."

"She's prettier in person than I expected."

"She's become more sophisticated. I guess living in Boston does that to you."

"She wants what's best for you." Kaydee's eyes were full of love.

"Syd can be snotty at times." I ran my fingers through Kaydee's silky hair.

"Well, she wasn't, or at least wasn't enough that I noticed."

That made me feel better. "She said she'd thought you were too good to be true."

Kaydee frowned. "She asked around about me."

"She stopped in at the Diner, and people started talking after she was overheard asking her waitress about you." I felt

my jaw tense. I didn't like bringing anything negative into Kaydee's world.

"I'm sure everybody loved that. I mean, I've been a hot topic for years." She shook her head slightly. "Then you hook up with me, and Wade leaves town. You look like the hero of the story."

I grinned. "The hero?"

"You can be." She ran her nails lightly over my abs. "We can be anything we want."

"I want to be with you." I pulled her close and kissed her.

"Feels like you might want a little something more." She raised her eyebrows slowly.

"Nothing little down there, Sunshine, and yeah, I want you again."

I turned off my alarm before it could blare.

Kaydee must have felt me get out of bed. "Bo?"

I leaned over her. "Shh. Go back to sleep." I brushed a kiss on her shoulder.

"Wake me up when you get out of the shower." She hadn't opened her eyes throughout the exchange.

Twenty minutes later, I found her in the kitchen. She was flipping an egg over in the pan.

"Breakfast sandwich." She then pointed to the coffeemaker.

I filled my travel mug. "You're spoiling me."

"You need food in your belly to do a good job." She put the finishing touches on my sandwich.

"Thanks." I took the plate from her and sat at the table. "What's on your agenda for the day?"

"Stop in the salon for a couple of hours, and then go to the mall for Haven."

“Do you really think everybody will keep it a secret?” We’d decided not to tell her until the morning that we were due to fly out to Orlando for our vacation.

“I haven’t told anybody but family and Carley at the salon.” She raised one shoulder. “Ellis and Grey might spill to folks, but we’ll be away, so they’ll get to deal.”

“Are you sure you will be okay with being away without Havs for three nights?”

“If Havs was at a friend’s, I might get anxious and want to come home early. But Grey and Ellis will take good care of her, and she loves being with them.” Kaydee sipped her coffee.

I continued eating my sandwich. When I finished, I wiped my mouth and drank more coffee. “I feel like I’m too calm. Shouldn’t I be nervous or running around, looking like I’m out of control.”

She let out a low laugh. “It’s covered. Even Thad finished everything on time, which shocked the hell out of me. I guess it’s because he likes you with me. When I married Wade, it was a war to get him fitted for his tux.”

Thad was the much-loved youngest, and he’d used his good looks and charm to raise hell. “When his time comes, he’ll probably want to plan his wedding.”

“He’d have us all hop a plane to Vegas,” she said with a smirk.

“I don’t know about that.” I thought Thad was biding his time until he found “the one.”

One side of her mouth lifted. “Is that what you all talk about during softball?”

“No.” I chuckled. “We talk about dull stuff like, who didn’t wash their uniform and it stinks or what’s it mean if you have an itch behind your balls.”

“Yuck.” She rolled her eyes at me. “Another myth busted.”

I checked the time, put my plate in the dishwasher, and refilled my travel mug. “Men aren’t that deep, and when you get us in a pack, we only care about food and fucking.”

She placed her mug on the counter. “Tell me why I’m with you again?”

“You took pity on me. You knew I needed the love of two good women to make everything better in my life.”

She wrapped her arms around me and pulled me close. “That might be right, Bo.”

“I’m going to love you forever, Sunshine.” I kissed her goodbye.

EPILOGUE

GREYSON

KAYDEE HAD WORRIED THAT I'D FEEL LEFT OUT DURING THE ceremony. Thad stood up with Bo, and Ellis stood beside Kaydee and Haven.

I was proud that my sister wanted to walk to her man alone. She'd entered the church clinging to my arm for her wedding to Wade. But then, she'd been a girl, idealistic and blinded by the idea that Wade had chosen her. Today, she was a woman, a mother, and she knew what she wanted.

As I watched her walk down the aisle between the chairs set up for the guests, I smiled, delighted with how things had turned out.

She paused beside me.

"What?" I whispered.

"Lean down." She pulled on my arm. "I just wanted to thank you for always being here for me." She kissed my cheek and continued to Bo.

I glanced at my wife as she wiped a tear from her cheek. She looked amazing in a simple sunshine-yellow dress. It brushed her ankles, and there was no mistaking the roundness of her belly. Our son was growing strong, like our love.

Bo reached for Kaydee as she neared, taking her hand with a huge smile. "Beautiful. You look so beautiful."

Kaydee did. Her dress was silky and accentuated her curves. She'd worn her hair long with no veil. She still looked like the girl next door.

If she weren't my sister, I'd say, a sexy girl next door.

Haven moved to Bo's other side and took his hand. She was wearing a yellow dress with a big white bow on her back. Her hair was pulled up into a high ponytail. She reminded me of Kaydee at that age, full of curiosity and fun.

Bo had decided he wanted Haven with them when they took their vows. He always included Havs, and I knew that when they got back from Florida, he was going to begin the process to legally adopt her.

We took our seats as the judge began the ceremony.

If you had told me years ago when I'd figured out that I would have to run the farm and parent my siblings that our lives would have turned out this good, I would've laughed.

I'd been so scared, knowing every decision I made would shape our futures.

I'd finally found love with Ellis. It had taken a while, but it had happened.

Wade had been a mistake, but he'd helped create Havs. Bo was solid, dependable, and loved his girls. Even after all the pain that Wade caused Kaydee, she'd agree it was worth it. Bo was here now to give her what she hadn't known she needed.

That brought me to Thad. I saw signs that he was maturing, but he was in no hurry to settle down. I knew that he thought he was having fun and enjoying life. However, Thad needed to be loved the most of the three of us.

"I now pronounce you a family. Bo, you may kiss your girls." Judge Lessen closed his leather book and took a step back.

Bo pulled Kaydee into his arms and kissed her thoroughly. Then he turned to Haven and lifted her in his arms, letting her rest against his hip as he kissed her cheek.

Thad led the cheers from the guests. Then he hugged the newly joined family.

Ellis looked at me, clearly issuing the invitation, and I immediately joined her in hugging our family.

It was another good day at Blue River Farms.

Hopefully, we will have many more.

The End.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Melanie Jayne doesn't know what she wants to be when and if she ever grows up. She's worked retail, recorded hearings in a Federal Courtroom, worked behind the scenes with security at a casino and currently she is living her dream writing Romance.

She plots and plans from her farm in central Indiana that she shares with her husband and mastiff, Duncan Keith. When she isn't creating she can be found watching sports, searching for the perfect mascara and reading. She also loves questionable TV- Any Real Housewives, The Steve Wilkos Show and Live PD. Plus she is addicted to the TMZ app on her phone.

Melanie loves to meet readers. She attends many conferences and signings. Please take a moment and introduce yourself and tell her what you are reading.

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