

KEEPING
his babygirl

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
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KEEPING HIS BABYGIRL


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Three years ago my life changed forever.

I'm looking for a fresh start for me and my son.

A new city, a new life.

It was only supposed to be one night at the club.

One night of surrender and submission to my temporary
daddy.

A single night to reconnect with a part of me I thought was
gone forever.

Then I met him...

Axel Walker.

He takes me to heights I've never known and makes my body
sing. He makes me remember what it's like to be wanted.

But my heart is a fragile thing. I swore I would never love
again. That I would protect what's left of my heart at all costs.

He broke down my walls and gave me a taste of what life
could be like... and I want it...

Can I find the courage to take what he's offering me? Or will I
be lost to my grief forever?

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CHAPTER ONE

Addy

IT'S A BRIGHT, SUNNY DAY. I SHOULD BE IN A GREAT MOOD, but I can't seem to get up the energy for it. The peals of laughter from the children playing draw my attention, and I smile when my eyes land on my little boy. Henry is the one bright spot in my life.

He's why I'm at the park today, even though I'd rather be at home in bed, sinking into my depression. He's the only thing that staves off the grief that overwhelms me. It's been three years since my William was stolen from me by a drunk driver, and I can't seem to move forward. Henry laughs again, and it's a bittersweet sound. William would love these little moments, and I hate that he's not here for them.

William was so excited to be a father. We were on our way to my final doctor's appointment when the accident happened. William was catastrophically injured in the crash and rushed straight to surgery. I had a minor head injury and was tossed into labor from the stress of the accident. It was my worst nightmare.

I cried through the delivery of Henry. William should have been there to hold my hand. He shouldn't have been fighting for his life because of some asshole who decided to day drink then drive.

My parents rushed to the hospital, but I didn't want them. I wanted my husband. If I couldn't have him, I didn't want anybody. A nameless, faceless nurse held my hand as I screamed and cried and brought a squalling baby into the world.

Henry cried and cried as if he knew he was coming into a broken world. I held him in my arms and cried with him. I finally agreed to let my parents come into the room and knew the second that my mom's eyes welled with tears at the sight of me that something wasn't right. A doctor followed my parents into the room, a look of apology written all over his face. I remember screaming for him to get out before he even uttered a word. I remember the nurse taking Henry from my arms and passing him over to my mom. I remember the "I'm sorry, Mrs. Perkins." Then everything is a fog.

I wasn't ready to accept that my partner, my best friend, my husband—my daddy—was gone. How would I ever survive it?

I lived only for Henry.

He was the only reason I got out of bed. The only reason I didn't completely sink into oblivion. Three years later, he's still the reason I get out of bed. My grief hasn't ebbed in the slightest, but my baby boy needs me.

I shake myself from my dark thoughts and look for Henry. I see that he's about to fall before he does. He's too far away for me to rush to his side and prevent the fall, but I'm up off the bench and heading his way to check on him. He jumps up from the ground, tears streaming down his cheeks, and runs right past me to my mom.

"Are you okay, buddy?" I ask, running my hand down his back. He moves away from my touch and clings to my mom all the harder.

It's a slap in the face. My son—my entire life—would rather his grandmother soothe him than his mommy. When did that happen?

"Let me have him," I tell my mom.

"He doesn't want you. Don't upset him more," she says, then starts carrying Henry towards the car.

I follow several steps behind them in shock over what just happened. Henry's cries are nothing but sniffles by the time

we get to the car, but my world has been rocked. Since when would my baby rather be soothed by someone other than me?

Our evening goes on like it usually does. Dinner cooked by my mom, my dad gives Henry a bath, and when I go to tuck him in, I find my mom already reading him his favorite story as he dozes off. Before I can enter the room, my mom gives me a sharp look and a shake of her head. The meaning is clear—don't wake him. I consider ignoring her, but what's best for Henry? Being woke up because I feel desperate for a connection to him or to let him sleep.

With a heavy heart, I turn away. I sequester myself in my bedroom and wonder when it was that I became a spectator in my own life.

William would be so disappointed in me. I'm disappointed in myself. I don't sleep that night or the next my guilt and grief for time lost too much to bear.

IT'S BEEN two weeks since I started waking up to what is happening around me. It's been two weeks of being thwarted at every opportunity I get to be the primary caregiver in my son's life. And it's clear that Henry often favors my parents for things over me. It's painful, and it has to change. My parents have completely taken over and lost in my grief, I let them.

"You look like shit," Pelar says, sitting across from me at the small café table.

"Gee, thanks," I reply drily.

"What's up, buttercup?"

Where do I even start?

"I just realize that I'm letting life pass me by."

Pelar's brow raises, and she suddenly looks very interested in what I have to say. "What made you realize this?"

I outline what happened at the park and all the other little things I've noticed over the last weeks. She nods her head as if

she fully agrees with my assessments.

“Something has to change,” I finally say. “I don’t want Henry growing up with a mom that’s right there but absentee just the same.”

“What are you thinking about doing?”

“Moving out of my parent’s house, for starters. It was never meant to be a permanent move.”

“There is an apartment available next to mine,” she says excitedly.

“No... you misunderstand. I’m thinking about moving out of the city... the state... I don’t know, just somewhere new. A fresh start for Henry and me.”

“That’s the first time in three years you’ve shown any level of excitement for anything,” she says. “Glad to see some spark back in your eyes. I missed you, my friend.”

“I missed me too,” I admit. “Do you think I’m crazy for wanting to move away?”

“I think that it’s a great idea. I’ll miss you like crazy, but I think a fresh start is exactly what you need.”

“If I stay here, I’ll never get out from under my parent’s thumbs,” I rationalize. “Don’t get me wrong, they are obviously great grandparents but right now, Henry and I need time to bond again. We both need a new beginning.”

“So you move somewhere else. Nothing is holding you back.”

The more I think about it, the more it seems like the right path to take. I’m not sure where I’ll go, but I’m excited for the first time in three years, so this can’t be a bad decision.

“You’re right... now I just need to figure out where to go.”

We spend the rest of our coffee date discussing possible places to move everything from the ridiculous—Paris—to the more reasonable Chicago. I’m not sure I’m up for big city life, but I put it on my shortlist anyway.

After Henry is tucked into bed and I'm ensconced in my bedroom, I pull out my computer and start researching the best places to live. Hours later, my eyes are practically crossed from staring at the screen for too long, and I'm no closer to a decision.

"This is harder than I thought it would be," I say to the empty room.

A notification from my email box pops up on the screen, and I absently click it. I'm about to dismiss it as junk mail—it's always junk mail—when I glance at the subject line: Membership enrollment now available for The Playground.

I've heard of The Playground before. Everyone in the daddy/babygirl world has heard of the exclusive club. My cursor blinks over the delete button, but something makes me steer away from it and open the email instead. I read the email twice before I decide to delete it. I'm not ready to reconnect with that side of my life.

I might never be.

William was my daddy, and I can't envision that dynamic with anyone else. It's too painful to even consider. So why do I find myself pulling up a search engine to find out more information about the club? I don't have answers other than the fact that I'm curious about a club special just for daddys and their babygirls.

Somewhere in my research, I end up searching for the city the club is in... apparently there are two. One in Chicago and one in Monett...

I dismiss Chicago, even though I considered it while talking with Pelar. I'm not really keen on big city life. I search for Monett and find myself down a rabbit hole. I look at everything from the local parks and schools to the movie theater and grocery stores. By the time I've clicked through everything that the city has to offer, I'm in love. It's got a small-town feel with big-city conveniences.

The Playground has nothing to do with it—maybe.

My search changes to apartment hunting. I find the perfect building with a nice park just around the corner. Before I can slow down and think about it, I fill out an application to rent the cute little two-bedroom apartment in an old, converted brownstone. I look through the pictures again, a smile on my face because it looks like home.

“I CAN’T BELIEVE you’re doing this,” my mom spits angrily. “What about Henry? You’d rip him from everything he knows and everyone who loves him? How can you be so selfish?”

My dad stands on silently watching as mom rails at me in outrage. He’s not the most boisterous of people, but I thought he’d surely have something to say about the situation. Instead, he just stands there in silence. I want to ask him what he thinks, for his steadfast advice, but now is not the time.

“Mom, I’m doing this for Henry.” She sputters, but I go on... “It’s time for us to stand on our own two feet. Living here wasn’t supposed to be a permanent thing.”

“So rent an apartment here! You don’t have to move halfway across the country,” she argues.

Henry comes into the room, crying and sucking on his thumb—something he only does when upset. My mom instantly stops her tirade and opens her arms for him.

“Look what you’ve done. You’ve upset him,” she accuses.

“I’m not the one yelling, mom. And this is exactly why it’s time for us to move out. I should be comforting him when he’s upset, not you.”

“You’re grieving. You can’t raise him on your own.”

I flinch at her ugly words, but my mom doesn’t look a bit guilty. She seems almost vindicated in her anger.

“I am grieving. I will always grieve the loss of William, but I can’t let it rule my life anymore. Henry must come first. I

realize what a mistake it was to let you swoop in and take over ___”

“How can you be so ungrateful?” she spits.

“I am grateful. I appreciate everything you and dad have done, but it’s time for us to move on.”

“Do you really have to move halfway across the country?”

“If I move across town, would you keep your distance?” I ask. “Be honest with yourself and me.”

The look on her face says it all. No, she would never be able to let go.

“I’ll never be able to stand on my own with you constantly stepping in.”

Her shoulders slump, and she presses a kiss to Henry’s forehead. I smile sadly because this is her version of caving in. Her anger burns hot but cools quickly when she knows she’s beaten.

“And we can’t talk you out of it?” She looks at my quiet father as if asking him to talk sense into me.

“Not this time, mom.”

Everything moves fast after that. I hear back from the landlord—a sweet older man who apparently lives in the bottom floor apartment—who quickly approves my application and expresses his excitement to have a young family living in the house again.

I watch as the last of our boxes are carted onto the moving truck. I chew on my lip, wondering if I should’ve just left those boxes here in my parent’s garage. But no, I don’t want to leave all of my memories of William here to rot. It’s been over three years since he died, and I still haven’t gone through any of his things. Everything was packed up and tucked safely away in the garage for me to deal with when I’m ready.

I don’t know that I’m ready now. In fact, I know I’m not, but maybe soon.

“Are you sure about this, kiddo?” my dad asks. He’s been quiet about the whole thing since my big blow-up with mom.

“Positive, dad. I need to do this.”

He nods, giving me an understanding look. “I know you do. Despite what your mother says, this is the right thing for both you and Henry.”

“Thanks, dad.”

“You can do it. Don’t be afraid. This is what William would have wanted for you.”

Tears fill my eyes. I throw my arms around my dad. He pats my back and pulls away almost awkwardly. He’s not a very touchy-feely kind of guy, but that’s okay. I know how he feels, and that’s the best gift I could’ve asked for.

Mom and Henry join us in the garage. Her eyes are red-rimmed from all the crying she’s done over the last few days. I’d like to say after the initial argument, she let the situation go, but that wouldn’t be accurate. She argued and practically begged me to change my mind multiple times every time ended in her tears, but I wouldn’t be swayed.

I’m doing this.

We are moving to Monett, and we are going to start fresh.

I take Henry from my mom’s arms and give his cheek a raspberry. He giggles, and the sound makes my heart light as a feather.

“Are you ready for an adventure, buddy?” I ask him.

“Yeah!” he says with the enthusiasm only a three-year-old can have.

“Me too.”

CHAPTER TWO

Axel

“OH, COME ON, AXEL,” TESSA COAXES. “YOU’D REALLY LIKE her. Sasha is a real sweetheart. Someone you could finally settle down with, I bet.”

I snort a laugh. “What part of my personality says I am ready to settle down?”

She crosses her arms over her chest and pouts at me. That has me really laughing. Ransom has her spoiled. She pouts a little, and he’s falling over himself to make her happy again.

“That pouty lip might work on Ransom, but I’m immune, darlin’.”

She harrumphs and starts in on me again about settling down. Ever since she and Ransom figured their shit out, she’s been pushing me to do the same. I’m about to tell her to leave it when I see her...

Time seems to slow down—as corny as it sounds, it’s true. She’s not wearing typical clubwear. Instead, she’s dressed in skinny jeans and a ribbed tank top. She could be wearing a burlap sack, and she’d still be the most beautiful creature I’ve ever seen.

Platinum hair and deep blue eyes scan the room like she’s looking for someone. By God, that someone is going to be me.

“Take over. I’m going on break,” I say to Tessa, interrupting whatever she was babbling on about.

I hop the bar and make a b-line for the woman of my dreams.

She perks up a little when she sees me coming towards her but then deflates at something she sees...or doesn't see when she looks me over. That's okay. I won't take her lack of appreciation personally. She doesn't know me... yet.

"Hello, doll. Looking for someone?" I ask.

She blinks those big blue eyes up at me. It looks like she's seconds from flitting away like a bird in the wind, but then she rolls her shoulders back and straightens her spine.

"I'm supposed to meet someone here," she says.

Her voice has my cock twitching in my pants. Jesus, I've never been so affected by someone's voice before. Hell, I don't think I've been as affected by a fucking blow job as those few words from her cupid's bow mouth have affected me. This woman has me by the balls, and I don't even know her name.

"Who is that someone?" I ask, trying to tamp down my jealousy. If I have it my way—and I plan to very much have it my way—she will only be meeting me tonight. Maybe forever.

"What business is it of yours?" she sasses back.

My palm itches to spank her delectable ass.

Now's not the time, Walker, I say to myself.

"I just want to know who my competition is." I give her my most endearing smile.

She just snorts. "Not much competition at this point."

"Why's that?"

"I'm here to meet someone from a dating site," she admits with a blush. "He either completely ghosted me or came and didn't like what he saw."

"Either way, he's an idiot because you're the most beautiful woman in this place," I say, meaning every word and feeling lucky as hell that some asshole ghosted her. That means the playing field is wide open for me.

She looks pointedly around us, then indicates a woman wearing nothing but a bra and ruffly panties. "I don't stack up

against that.”

“You’ve got that backward. She doesn’t stack up against you,” I say, tucking a stray strand of hair behind her ear.

I catch the scent of cherries and can’t help but wonder if it’s the lip gloss on her shiny lips. I want to lean in and kiss them to see if she tastes as good as she smells. Better probably. I bet every inch of her tastes delicious. My cock throbs behind my zipper again, and I have to restrain myself from drawing attention to it by adjusting myself. Wouldn’t want to scare her away.

“Why don’t we have a seat and get to know each other?” I offer when she doesn’t seem to have a reply to my compliment.

She looks around the club again, probably for the douche that ghosted her, then turns her attention back to me. “I don’t even know your name.”

I flash my pearly whites at her and hold my hand out for a shake. “I’m Axel. I work here at The Playground. I’m one of the bartenders. I promise I’m safe. Anyone here will vouch for me.”

“Kinda full of yourself, aren’t you?”

“Nah, I just speak truths always.”

She nods thoughtfully, then places her small hand in mine, giving it a firm shake. “My name’s Addy.”

I turn her hand over and lightly kiss her knuckles, catching the scent of cherries again. Fuck me. She smells divine. I’ll never be able to smell cherries again without getting a hard-on.

“Pleasure to meet you, Addy.”

She slowly pulls her hand away, a dazed look on her face. “Likewise... I think.”

I lead her to one of the many seating areas. She sits on the edge of her seat, stiff as a board. I cover her hands with mine when they start wringing together on her lap.

“It’s okay, doll. I don’t bite. We are just talking.”

The tightness slowly leaves her shoulders. “Sorry. I’ve never done this before.”

“Done what?”

She waves her hands in front of her. “This. All of it. Online dating, which turns out, isn’t as straightforward as it seems. Coming to a sex club to meet a stranger I met online. Talking to strange men at a sex club that I haven’t even spent three weeks getting to know like online...”

“So you’re brand new to the club?” I ask, guiding her away from the whole other man thing.

“I signed up a couple months ago, but this is the first time I’ve been.”

“Why haven’t you come before now?”

She shrugs and glances away. “No reason.”

There is definitely a story there, but I don’t want to push. She’s not ready to open up. I get the feeling she needs a softer touch... to be eased into things. Not my usual M.O., but I can adjust my bull in a china shop approach.

“What is it that you want out of your membership?” I ask instead.

“Well, honestly? I’m just trying to dip my toes back into the lifestyle... I thought online dating would be the easiest choice, then I would meet him here where I know it’s safe. You know how that worked out.” She lets out a little self-deprecating laugh.

“Worked out pretty damn good for me,” I say with a grin. “In fact, I’m feeling so lucky I should buy a lotto ticket.”

She smirks at my teasing. Score one for me. She’s loosening up.

I continue to flirt and tease, getting her to relax more and more with every second. She’s not very talkative, but that’s okay. She’s allowed to be shy. I’m outgoing enough for the two of us.

“Hey, fucker. Get back to work,” Aiden says, sounding grumpier than usual. “I’m not paying you to get your dick wet.”

Addy’s eyes go wide, and she looks like she’s about to jump and run.

“You got it, boss,” I say with a little salute. I quickly stand from my seat, grab her hand, and tug her along with me to the bar. I know I’ll never see her again if I let her get away now.

CHAPTER THREE

Addy

WHAT AM I DOING?

I was just ghosted by a man I've been getting to know for weeks. Hell, it took me weeks to find the courage and confidence to agree to a meetup. Now I'm sitting at the bar of The Playground, flirting with arguably the sexiest man I've ever seen.

A flash of guilt courses through me at that admission. I have to remind myself yet again that it's okay to find a man attractive. William is gone and would want me to be happy. Right now, flirting with Axel is making me very happy.

"What can I get you to drink?" he asks.

"Sparkling water if you have it."

If he's curious why I don't follow the lead of almost everyone else and order an alcoholic beverage, he doesn't express it. I'm thankful for that because I don't want to explain about the accident. I haven't touched a drop of alcohol since William was stolen from me by a drunk driver. Just the thought of drinking makes me nauseous.

"One sparkling water coming right up, doll," he says with a flirtatious wink.

My cheeks heat with a blush at the endearment and the flirting. I don't remember being shy in the past, but I feel it now. There is something about how boldly Axel is flirting that makes me feel out of my depth. I didn't realize dipping my feet back into the dating pool would be so overwhelming.

“Here you go.”

I reach for the glass Axel holds for me and shiver when our fingers meet. His eyes don't leave mine as he slowly releases the glass into my hold. There's all kinds of promise in his gaze. I take a deep drink of the cool liquid, trying to tamp down the heat that's building inside me from just a single touch.

Axel doesn't seem nearly as affected as I am, which is disappointing in some ways and good in others.

He busies himself with other customers for a while—the club's bar area is packed. I should probably go instead of distracting Axel from his work. His boss is obviously a hardass. But I really don't want to leave. A crappy night has taken an interesting turn, and I'm not quite ready to see it end.

“Sorry, doll. It's not usually this crazy around here. We are down a bartender right now.”

“It's okay. I should probably go...” I say even though I don't want to.

Please ask me to stay, I silently beg.

His eyes flash with some unknown emotion. “No, stay. I'm off in another hour.”

“Okay, I'll stay.” I don't put up any kind of fight. Why would I when I'm right where I want to be?

Axel throws me the occasional wink and cocky smile while he deftly pours drinks and chats with a never-ending flow of customers. I didn't realize how popular the club would be. I figured it would be small and quiet due to it being a daddy/babygirl specific place, but I was very wrong.

I sip at my water and people-watch while I wait. There's a wide variety of people surrounding me. Young and older. Some are dressed in leather, others are practically naked, and everything in between. All of them appear to be comfortable in their own skin. I feel underdressed and out of my depth. It's not a good feeling.

“Ready?” Axel asks from beside me.

I jump, practically dropping my half-full glass. Axel catches it with fast hands before it can spill. When did he leave from behind the bar? I must have seriously been in Lalaland to have missed anything about him. I mentally shake myself back to the here and now.

“Ready for what?” I ask. He might’ve asked me to stay until his shift ended, but he didn’t mention what would happen after.

“To get out of here,” he says, his dark eyes twinkling.

Am I ready to get out of here? Does that mean our time together is over? Or does he mean to leave together? Am I prepared for something like that?

No, I don’t think I am. The club is safe. Even though Axel seems sincere and doesn’t give off any creeper vibes, I hardly know him. It would be nuts to leave the safety of the club with anyone, even him.

“You’re busy overthinking things, aren’t you?” he asks knowingly.

It’s scary how well he can read me after just a couple of hours of knowing me.

“Maybe,” I admit.

“I just meant leave the bar, doll. We can either find a nice quiet spot to talk or see if a private room is available.”

A spark of adrenaline courses through me at the idea of us alone in a private room together. I definitely don’t hate the idea. In fact, based on how my body is reacting, I’m excited at the thought of it.

Am I brave enough, though?

The whole point of getting a membership to The Playground was to find a casual play partner. I’m not ready for a deep, meaningful relationship. I don’t know if I’ll ever be ready again. Plus, I have Henry to think about.

I could be casual with Axel... right?

I decide to take the plunge. I came here to meet a man and potentially share a scene tonight. His ghosting me threw a wrench in that plan, but maybe it's for the best because I feel more connected to Axel after a couple of short hours than I did after weeks of talking with the other guy.

"A private room sounds good," I say, feeling proud of myself.

He leans in close and practically purrs his next words in my ear. "Such a brave girl. I'm so proud."

A shiver runs down my spine at both his words and his closeness. Just when I think he might kiss me, he pulls away, placing his hand on my lower back as he leads me toward the private rooms. I can feel his touch like a brand, even through my clothes. I can't imagine what it would feel like on my bare skin.

Am I brave enough or bold enough to find out?

We pause at the entrance to the private rooms, and Axel turns a wolfish grin in my direction, which tells me there is at least one available room. He leads me down the hallway and through a door, then closes it with a decisive click. My heart is pounding in my chest, and I'm starting to wonder what in the heck I'm doing here.

Maybe this is a terrible idea.

"You okay, doll?" he asks, tucking my hair behind my ear. "You know you can leave at any time, right?"

That simple reassurance has me relaxing instantly. He's right. This can be as little or as much as I want it to be. I'm in control here. He may be the daddy dom in this situation, but it's always the submissive's boundaries that are respected first and foremost.

"I know. I'm just nervous."

Axel reaches for my hands and pulls them apart gently. I didn't even realize I was wringing them together—a bad habit I have any time I'm stressed and drifting into anxiety mode.

With a gentle tug, he pulls me into his arms for a hug. At first, I'm stiff in his embrace. How long has it been since I was truly hugged? It's been forever. I didn't realize I was starved for it until this moment. Axel runs his hand down my back in a soothing caress, and I relax into his hold.

I let myself sink into the moment. I wrap my arms around him and just enjoy being held. I'm surrounded by his heat and spicy, masculine scent. I could wallow in his scent. I wonder if he would give me his shirt if I asked. He smells so good.

He gives me a gentle squeeze, then pulls away. "Better?"

"I don't want to let go," I say honestly, even though the truth of it scares the crap out of me.

I'm only looking for something casual, I remind myself. The problem is I don't know if Axel is the casual kind of guy. I know the feelings he's bringing out in me feel like they could lead to something more than casual if I let them. If I can't keep this casual, I need to end it right here and now.

"We can stand here as long as you want. Or we can have a seat and talk."

I nod because sitting and talking is safe. "Let's sit."

I'm about to take my seat when Axel pulls me down onto his lap. I put up a meager fight, but honestly, I don't try very hard to get away.

I'm in so much trouble with this man.

"So tell me about yourself," he casually asks.

Where on earth do I even start?

"What do you want to know?" I ask.

"Everything."

The sincerity he puts into the word and the excitement in his eyes tell me he's not teasing. He's dead serious that he wants to know everything about me.

I'm not anywhere close to ready to tell him everything. Definitely not any of the important things, so I cop out and decide to tell him my favorite color. A nice, safe topic.

“My favorite color is yellow.”

“What else?” he pushes when I don’t immediately tell him more.

“I love potatoes. Any way they come... well, except for potato pancakes. Those are just wrong. What about you?” I ask, trying to turn the conversation around.

“I also love potatoes,” he says with a teasing smile.

I lightly slap his shoulder but find myself smiling. “What is your favorite food?”

“I love a good burger. Now tell me more about you,” he says, not letting me distract him from his goal.

“I don’t know what to tell you,” I say honestly. “I’m not used to people asking me to tell them everything.”

“Okay, how about this, what brought you to The Playground?”

“I told you. I was here to meet someone.”

He shakes his head as if he disagrees with me. “This isn’t a place you just randomly meet up with someone. You have to be a member to even get in the door.”

“You want to know why I became a member?” I ask.

“That’s a good start,” he says, running his warm hand down my back and back up again.

Lord, that feels good. I’d tell him just about anything if he promised not to stop stroking me.

“I joined the club because I want to find someone to potentially play with.”

“Are you new to the scene?” he asks.

Danger, danger! This is getting close to answering questions I absolutely don’t want to answer.

“No. I’ve been in a daddy/babygirl relationship before, but it’s been a while.” There that’s a nice diplomatic response that doesn’t pry into my past with William.

“And you’re looking for another relationship?” he coaxes.

“No,” I answer quickly. “I’m just looking for something casual.”

“I see. Tell me about the man from the internet.”

I shrug. “There’s not much to tell. We’ve been chatting for a few weeks. He’s asked me a few dozen times to meet up, but I wasn’t sure I wanted to meet him. I finally decided he seemed nice enough, so we set up to meet tonight. And you know the rest...”

“Did you come here hoping to scene?”

My cheeks heat in a fiery blush at that question. Do I admit that I had been hoping to? Will he be jealous that I was planning on playing with another man, or will he offer to do a scene with me? And why do both of those options sound so appealing?

“Yes... I think I’m ready for a scene,” I say, my voice barely above a whisper.

Axel cups my cheek and turns my face to his. My eyes fall closed, and I nuzzle against his palm. “Look at me, doll.” I open my eyes and am met with his fiery dark gaze. “Do you want to scene with me?”

Heat runs through my veins at the idea of having his hands on my body. Dominating me... owning me... My panties dampen, and my nipples furl into tight peaks. My body is all in. It’s ready to jump up and down and throw itself at him. My brain still says things like “too much too fast” and “he’s not someone to be casual with.” You know, the stuff that makes perfect sense to the situation.

“Don’t overthink it. Just tell me what you want.”

“I want to scene with you.”

Lust fills his eyes, and that wolfish smile is back. He looks like he just won the biggest prize there ever was. And then his lips are on mine, fierce and possessive. My gasp of surprise is eaten up by his kiss. He swipes his tongue along my lower lip, and I part for him to swoop in.

There is nothing hesitant about his kiss.

He kisses me like he's kissed me a million times in the past. With ownership and possession. I kiss him back with just as much lustful intention. He buries his hands in my hair, tugging at the strands as he tilts my head just how he wants me. I can't control the moan of desire at his dominant hold.

God, it's been so long. I didn't realize how much I missed the loss of control until this moment. I lean into the submissive role letting him control every aspect of the kiss. Our tongues tangle and dance together. Each slick slide has a pulse of desire straight to my pussy. For the first time in I don't know how long, my panties are wet, and my body is lit up with need.

The kiss drags on for minutes... hours... days... I lose track of all time as the world narrows down to Axel and me. I grip his shoulders for balance when I feel as if I might topple right off the face of the earth. My lungs are screaming with the need for oxygen, but I don't want to stop kissing him. I never want to stop.

Axel's lips leave mine, and I whimper, chasing them with my own in an attempt to continue our kiss. With a sexy chuckle, he moves his lips down my jaw and to my neck. Did I think I didn't want to stop kissing for any reason? Because the feel of his lips on my skin is pretty damn fantastic too.

I tilt my head to the side, giving him better access to tease and torment me. He doesn't disappoint. His lips leave a fiery trail everywhere they touch. He lightly nips my neck pulling a moan from deep inside me. With a final swipe of his tongue to soothe the slight sting of his teeth, he pulls away.

"You taste as good as you smell, doll." His voice is a low, seductive purr that sends another shiver of desire through me. "I'm tempted to keep you here forever."

Alarm bells clang in my head at the word forever, but my desire overrules my caution. I can play casually, even with this crazy attraction between us. I push my concerns aside.

"I could be tempted to stay." My words are pure insanity on my part because I know my heart isn't free to be given—the empty husk that it is. But right now, he's tempting me to do all sorts of crazy things.

“It’s late,” he says.

His words blindsides me, drawing me out of the lust fog I’ve been residing in for the last while. Henry’s safe in bed with a reliable babysitter watching over him. I don’t have anywhere to be until much later than now.

“Not too late.”

“It’s after one...”

I shrug. “I don’t have anywhere to be. I don’t want to stop what we started.”

“Mmm... me either, doll,” he says, nipping at my lip before swooping in for a brief but sultry kiss.

“Then why are we stopping?” I ask breathlessly.

“Because what I want to do with you will take longer than the time we have this room for.”

My eyes widen, and my lips pop open. “Oh.”

“Yeah, oh,” he says with a cocky smile. “When we start, I don’t want to be limited by time restraints.”

I nod as if he’s making the most sense ever. What does he want to do with me that will take longer than the two hours we have this room for? Wild ideas run through my mind of everything we could do together. Time restraints suddenly seem like a terrible thing.

“Can you be here at nine tomorrow?” he asks.

Can I? I hate the idea of leaving Henry with a sitter two days in a row, but I’m quickly learning that I need what Axel has to offer worse than I previously thought.

“Yes. I’ll be here.”

“Good girl,” he growls, crushing his lips to mine in a soul-stealing kiss.

CHAPTER FOUR

Axel

I WALK ADDY TO HER CAR AND KISS HER GOODBYE. I MEAN for it to be a quick touching of lips, but I find myself lingering. She melts against my chest, lips parted so her tongue can dance along mine. With a groan, I pull away before I lose control and drag her back into the club. Stopping tonight wasn't easy. My cock is an aching, angry beast behind my zipper. I want nothing more than to back her against her car and fuck her senseless, but that's not what she's asked for.

She wants a scene. A daddy to her babygirl and falling on her like a ravenous beast won't give her that.

"Time to go, doll," I say roughly. I tuck her hair behind her ear, then trail my fingers down her neck. Goosebumps cover her skin as she reacts to my touch.

"I could stay," she says with a little pout, obviously not wanting our time together to end.

"If you don't get your pretty little ass in the car, I'm going to fuck you against it for all to see." My words are both a threat and a promise.

Her eyes dilate, and she licks her lips. The way she's looking at me says she wouldn't be against the idea. I know that's just the lust talking, though.

Besides, I don't want a simple fuck. Yes, me, Axel Walker, flirt and one-night stand king, want more than an uncomplicated night of pleasure. Don't ask me how I know Addy is different from the other women who have come before her. She just is. From my very first glance in her

direction, I knew that once would never be enough. So tonight, I'm sending her home, and tomorrow I will give us both what we need.

I open her car door and guide her into her seat. I lean in and brush my lips over her brow. "Drive safe, doll. Nine o'clock, don't be late."

"What happens if I'm late?"

I give her a feral smile. "I'll take it out on that sexy ass," I growl, my palm itching to spank her delectable bottom.

"That might encourage me to be late," she says breathlessly.

I smirk at her sass. "Oh, I'm going to spank you either way. It's just going to depend on you if it's a funishment or a punishment."

Her blue eyes widen, and she licks her plump bottom lip. "Not sure which one sounds better..."

I tip her chin up and kiss her softly, then pull back. "Funishment ends with my mouth buried in your wet cunt."

Her breath hitches. "I won't be late."

"Good girl. Now drive safe."

"I will."

She gives me a little wave as she drives out of the parking lot. Some unknown feeling squeezes in my chest when she's out of my sight. I immediately want to snatch her back to my chest and not let her go. God, I feel ridiculous. I've never been so taken with a woman before. I hardly know her, and somehow, I know she's perfect for me.

That should scare the shit out of me. I've spent the better part of my adulthood avoiding complicated relationships. I flirt, give them a good time, and then send them on their way. I can't imagine sending Addy away after just one night in her presence.

When her taillights are out of sight, I turn and get into my truck. The drive home is a quick one, and I'm glad for it

because my every thought is centered on one thing—her.

My Addy.

My doll.

AT NINE O’CLOCK on the dot, there is a tentative knock on the door to the private room I reserved for the night. On the other side, Addy stands, her hands clasped in front of her. I’m distracted from her nervousness when I take in what she’s wearing.

If I thought she was a knockout in jeans, she’s a fucking stunner in a tight black dress that hugs her curves like a second skin. Fuck me, she looks good enough to eat.

“Are you going to let me in?” she asks with a slight smile.

She’s definitely not oblivious to how she affects me. That’s fine. I want her to know how badly I want her. I stroked my cock twice last night at the thought of her in the hopes that I’d be able to control myself tonight. Seems like that was a pipe dream because two seconds in her presence, and I’m achingly hard and ready to pounce her like a rabid dog.

I take a step back and tug her into the room with me. I’ve got the door shut and locked with her back to it in seconds. Her lips greet mine hungrily when I crush mine to hers. I bury one hand in her thick hair, and the other squeezes her ass, pulling her boldly against me.

She gasps into my lips and rubs herself against my hard cock. Her fingers lock onto my shoulders, and she clings to me, our lips hungry for each other. We kiss like it’s been years since we’ve seen each other, not hours.

While we were apart, I was able to talk myself out of this crazy attraction. I almost convinced myself that last night was just a fluke. Maybe temporary insanity. But no. Now that she’s here in my hold, I know I was wrong. This is no fluke. There is no denying the way she affects me. The way she kisses me back makes me believe I’m not alone in my feelings.

I finally manage to rip my lips from hers. Her eyes are closed, her lips kiss swollen, and her skin is flushed a beautiful shade of pink. Slowly her eyes flutter open, and a smile curves her lips.

“I could get used to welcomings like that.”

“Then I’ll greet you with a kiss every time.”

She wriggles against me again, and I groan. The friction against my stiff cock is exquisite. “That feels like more than a little kiss,” she teases.

“Nothing little about it, doll,” I growl, rubbing against her so she can feel just how not little it is.

Her eyes flash with untamed lust. Then her small hand is over my jean-clad cock, squeezing me through the material and giving me a teasing stroke. Need unlike any other barrels through me, it takes all of my control to not snap. With a calming breath, I remove her hand and kiss her knuckles.

“I can take care of that for you,” she sweetly offers.

“There will be time for that later. Right now, it’s all about you and what you need.”

“And what is that?” she asks with a disappointed look as if I denied her some great pleasure.

“First of all, we need to go over the rules, then we need to take care of your punishment,” my words are a rough growl, proving that I’m barely hanging on to my control.

“Rules?” she asks with a raised brow. “What kind of rules?”

“Firstly, while we are in this room, you’ll call me ‘daddy.’”

“Will I be your babygirl?” Her voice is barely a whisper, like the idea makes her shy. The bold woman who grabbed my cock is nowhere to be seen.

“Yes, you’ll be my babygirl. Is that okay with you?”

She quickly nods but doesn’t say a word. It’s like now that we’re having a real conversation about what will happen between us, she’s shutting down. That won’t do.

“I need to hear your words, babygirl.”

Desire flashes in her eyes at the term of endearment. Yeah, she likes it.

“That’s okay with me... daddy,” she says hesitantly.

It takes Herculean effort to not fling her down on the bed and fuck her senseless when she calls me that. A lesser man would come in their pants at how the word sounds on her lips.

“Are there other rules?” she asks meekly.

“No coming without permission.”

“That’s not fair,” she says indignantly. “What if I can’t control it?”

“Then you’d be my naughty little girl, and naughty girls get spankings,” I say with promise.

“That doesn’t sound like much of a deterrent.”

I chuckle darkly. “There’s more than one way to punish you, babygirl. And I’d be happy to try them all.”

A shiver runs through her at the promise in my tone.

“I guarantee you won’t like all of them.”

“How do you know?” she asks curiously.

“Because hardly anyone likes being dragged to the edge of orgasm over and over only to be denied time and time again.”

She shudders. “That sounds horrible.”

“Definitely would be more fun for me than you. So what’s rule number two?” I ask.

“No coming without permission.”

“Good girl,” I praise.

“What’s rule number three?” she asks.

“Always be honest with me. If I can’t trust you to be honest, I can’t trust you to tell me if I do something you don’t like. Can you be honest with me?”

She pauses longer than I expected over the question. I figured this would be the easiest rule to follow. It makes me wonder if there is something she's already being dishonest about.

"I'll tell you if you do anything I don't like," she eventually replies.

That's not exactly the response I wanted, but it'll have to do for now.

"If you agree to my rules... strip."

I take two steps back, giving her space to obey or decline.

She reaches for the hem of her dress with zero hesitation and pulls it off over her head. Her blonde hair falls down around her shoulders in a silky wave. I lick my lips as I take her in. She's wearing nothing but black lace.

The bra strains to hold her ample breasts. The pert flesh plumped over the top of the lace in a delicious temptation. My eyes trail down her flat stomach to the barely-there lace panties. My mouth waters at the sight of her. She's absolutely divine. Better than my imagination, and I have a damn good imagination.

Her fingers tangle together in front of her, showing off her anxiousness.

"You're gorgeous, babygirl. Absolute perfection," I say sincerely.

Her cheeks flush a bright pink that trails down her chest, disappearing under her bra. I can't help but wonder if her nipples are the same lovely shade of pink. Her hands stop fidgeting at my compliment, and she stands a little taller.

My girl needs reassurance that she's desirable. That blows my mind because anyone that looks like her should know exactly how beautiful and desirable they are. I'll make it a point to tell her how beautiful I find her every chance I get.

I hold my hand out to her, and she wordlessly comes to me. I cup her cheek and give her a slow tantalizing kiss. I

break away before I can become distracted from the task at hand.

“Time for your spanking, babygirl.” She licks her lips and nods, looking eager. “Panties off.”

She’s quick to push them off her curvy hips. They fall to her ankles, and she kicks them away. “Where do you want me, daddy?”

“Over my knee.”

I could easily just bend her over the bed and give her the spanking, but that is too impersonal for what I want. I want to feel her soft body against me as I paint her pretty pale flesh red. I sit on the edge of the bed and pull her between my knees. She looks down at me curiously. I run my hands from her waist up her back, quickly unclasping her bra. Her breasts bounce free right in front of my face, and I groan. I press a kiss to each pretty pink nipple. She gasps at my touch, thrusting her breasts forward for more attention. As much as I’m tempted, now isn’t the time.

I pull back and pat my knee. “Come on, babygirl.”

She gracefully arranges herself over my lap like we’ve done this a dozen times before. A hint of jealousy courses through me because it’s obvious that she’s done this before. Of course she has. She’s not a novice. I have no right to be jealous. But I am. It’s a foreign feeling.

I push away the jealousy and run my hands over her plump flesh. I have no need to be jealous. I’m the one here with her, not them. And I’m one lucky bastard.

“We will start with ten.” The words are practically snarled as my jealousy shows through in my tone.

“Yes, daddy. Please,” she purrs, wiggling her ass as if to dare me.

I give her ass a light squeeze, then raise my hand and let it fall soundly on her left cheek. She makes a surprised squeal but doesn’t move from position. I spank her right cheek, then admire the twin handprints blooming on her pale skin. My cock aches at the sight.

I spank her twice more in quick succession as punishment for being such a temptation. She makes little whimpering sounds, and her hold on my leg tightens, but she doesn't protest. So I continue. Each time my hand falls, her ass turns a little redder, and my cock aches a little more. I swear one touch from her soft hand, and I'd be blowing like a teenager.

The tenth spank falls, and Addy dances on her feet, showing her discomfort.

"You okay, babygirl?" I run my hand over her heated flesh. Touching and squeezing so that the sting from the spanking is amplified.

"I'm okay, daddy," she says, sounding breathless.

"Can you take ten more?"

She shivers and scissors her legs together. I'm tempted to put my hand between her legs and feel her wetness for myself because even without seeing, I know the spanking turned her on. I smack the back of her thigh, then force her legs apart so she can't get any friction. Her pussy comes into view, and I admire the glistening pink folds.

"Remember rule number two?" I growl.

"No orgasms without permission," she gasps.

"That's right, babygirl. I own your pleasure. All of it."

Then I give into temptation and slick my fingers through her soaked folds. I tease her with light touches. Getting close to her clit, then skating away. I circle her opening and move back toward her clit. She whimpers and moans, wriggling on my lap, seeking more.

Without warning, I pull my fingers away and start her spanking again. She whimpers at the loss of my fingers, then cries out in surprise at the sudden stinging slaps of my hand. Before I took it easy on her. Easing her into the scene. Now lust is riding me hard, and I punish her ass for testing my control.

"Ow!" she cries when my hand cracks down on the back of her sensitive thigh. I spank the other, and she cries out again.

Two more spanks to her already red bottom, and the spanking is over.

She's limp over my lap, panting as she tries to catch her breath. I run my hand over her red ass and give it a firm squeeze. Addy moans. Not out of pain but out of desire. Her pussy is practically dripping with how wet she is.

My control snaps.

I quickly flip her over onto the mattress. She squeals at the sudden movement. Her body bounces once, then she settles onto her back. Her hair a tangle around her head. Her eyes are shining bright with lust. Those full lips of hers are just begging for my kiss. As much as I'd love to kiss her, that's not my goal.

My gaze skates down her body, past her upthrust breasts and their tiny pink nipples, past her adorable belly button, and straight to my goal. Her legs are slightly closed, hiding her pretty pussy from me. That simply won't do at all.

I grip her behind the thighs and drag her to the edge of the bed until her ass is practically hanging off the edge. I fall to my knees, spreading her legs wide. She gasps and grips the bedding as if it'll hold her in place.

"Axel!"

"Who am I?" I growl just inches from her pussy.

"Daddy," she quickly corrects.

"Good girl."

"What are you doing?" she pants, looking down at me with a mixture of lust and fear. That tamps down the wildfire of need that's controlling me.

"I'm going to lick you clean, then dirty you right up again."

"You don't have to," she says, trying to close her knees.

I gently push them wider, spreading her so I can look my fill. "I want to, babygirl." I kiss her thigh, running my tongue

along the smooth skin. She shivers in response. “In fact, the only thing I want right now is your flavor on my tongue.”

The tension ebbs out of her body as she relaxes back onto the bed. “If you’re sure...”

Why use words to respond when I can show her how much I want to taste her instead?

I kiss my way up her thigh to the promised land. A moan escapes me as the first taste of her hits my tongue. Fuck she tastes better than I thought she would. Sweet like candy.

With a low growl, I bury my face in her cunt. Licking and sucking her delicate flesh. Her fingers thread into my hair, and she holds me to her. I look up at her from my spot between her thighs and nearly come at the sight that greets me.

Her head is thrown back in ecstasy, her neck corded as she strains. Her lips are parted as moans fall from them. God, she’s beautiful in her passion. I turn my attention back to the heaven between her thighs and lick her from bottom to top. Her fingers tighten in my hair when I circle her clit with my tongue. I tease the little bundle of nerves until she’s writhing under my touch. Then I move down, thrusting my tongue into the hot well of her cunt.

Addy fists my hair, crying out in pleasure as I tongue fuck her. I moan, her flavor coating my tongue. My cock is a lead pipe in my jeans. Aching to be where my mouth is now. I turn my attention to her clit, and her thighs clamp down around my ears—she’s edging closer and closer to her release.

I wonder if she’ll remember to ask for permission or not. Part of me hopes she doesn’t so I can punish her again...

“Oh God, daddy!” she cries out. “I’m going to come. Please, please, please. Can I come?”

I suck her clit between my lips instead of answering her. She thrashes on the bed, trying to scoot away from my mouth. I grip her thighs and put an arm across her hips, holding her in place so she can’t escape my ministrations.

“Please,” she begs.

“Come,” I command, setting her free to chase her pleasure.

I suck her clit harder, with more intention than before. She screams out my name as her climax rocks through her. I lick her until her climax ebbs. I slowly pull away, kissing her thighs in reverence as I do.

Addy is sprawled on the bed, panting. One hand clutched onto her breast and the other thrown over her brow. She looks like a perfectly disheveled mess. I crawl over her body, pulling her further onto the mattress. Her eyes flutter open as I pull her into my arms.

“Okay?” I ask.

She lets out a breathless laugh. “I think I saw the stars.”

I smile at her, loving how warm and sweet she is in my arms. Instead of settling down for a cuddle, she pushes against my shoulder until I’m flat on my back.

“Your turn, daddy,” she says heatedly.

Before I can muster up a rebuff, she presses her lips to mine and kisses it away. I should push her away and take control of the situation, but I like the new assertive Addy. She knows what she wants and is going after it. When I don’t automatically part my lips for her seeking tongue, she lets out a frustrated little growl. I chuckle and open for her. She dives right in, deepening the kiss.

I slick my tongue along hers, meeting her passion with my own. I run my hands up and down her back, stroking her oh-so-soft skin. While I’m distracted by her kiss and sexy body under my hands, she starts tugging on my belt.

When I try to end the kiss to protest that she doesn’t have to reciprocate, she presses her lips harder to mine. Then those wicked hands of hers are pulling my aching cock free of my jeans.

“Fuck,” I groan against her lips.

She gives me one final kiss, then crawls down the bed until her mouth hovers over my cock. She leans in and gives it a

dainty lick. I shudder at the feel of her hot tongue on me. Jesus, I won't last a fucking minute at this rate.

“Are you going to suck daddy's cock like a good girl?” My question is growled through gritted teeth.

“Yes, daddy,” she purrs, sticking her tongue out to catch the precome dripping from the tip.

“Tease.”

She just smiles as if she's proud of herself. I wrap her hair around my fist and guide her mouth to my cock. “Suck,” I command.

Her lips open, and then I'm in heaven. She lowers her mouth around my length until I hit the back of her throat.

Jesus Christ, there was no lead-up, she just took me straight down her throat, and I'm blown away by the sensation. My hand flexes in her hair as she swallows me down. When her throat constricts around my cock head, I swear my eyes fucking cross. Before I can recover, she's bobbing up and down on my length, her cheeks hollowed with suction.

I've had countless blow jobs in the past, but Addy is sucking me like it's the only thing she wants to do for the rest of her life.

“You better slow down, or I'm going to come,” I warn as the pleasure becomes overwhelming.

Her eyes spark with triumph at my admission, and she doubles down in her efforts to push me over the edge.

“Is that what you want? You want daddy to come in your mouth?”

She makes a garbled noise around my cock that sounds like a yes. That's all it takes for me to lose complete control. I grip her hair tighter and thrust up into her waiting mouth. She gags around my length while she catches the new rhythm I've set. Saliva drips around my cock in a sloppy mess, and her eyes are filled with tears.

She hollows her cheeks, sucking me hard, and I lose all restraint. My cock throbs as my balls draw up tight to my body. My release comes on like a freight train. Addy does her best to swallow me down, but some escapes her lips. Once she's sucked me dry, she pulls off my sated cock and licks her lips clean.

I take her in while I catch my breath. Her hair is a mess from my fingers, and her lips are swollen from my cock. She looks like a siren ready to lure men to their death.

I cup her cheek and pull her down for a kiss. "You okay? I wasn't too rough with you?" I ask, needing to check in after my loss of control. I never intended to be so rough with her.

"I'm fine. It was good," she says, suddenly sounding shy again. "Was it okay for you?"

I can't hold back my bark of laughter. "Doll, if it were any better, you'd have killed me."

CHAPTER FIVE

Addy

YOU'D HAVE KILLED ME... FOUR WORDS SAID IN JEST ARE LIKE ice water down my spine. I quickly get up from the bed, leaving a very confused Axel in my wake. I spin circles looking for my underwear and bra. I'm in a flurry of motion, anxiety riding me hard. Just the idea of losing another person in my life, no matter how little time I've known them, has me in a tailspin.

"Hey, hey, hey. Calm down," Axel says, grabbing me up in his arms and holding me steady. "What's wrong, doll?"

I can't tell him. It sounds ridiculous even to me. I'm overreacting on a major scale. I shake my head and pull away. He hesitates in letting me go but doesn't fight me when I step out of his hold. Now that I'm a little calmer, I'm able to find my clothes and get dressed. Axel watches me with concern. Even though I'm totally embarrassed, I feel better once I'm dressed.

I can't believe I went from one of the hottest scenes of my life to an anxiety attack in like two seconds. That's probably worse than bursting into tears after sex. He probably thinks I'm crazy. Or he thinks I'm freaking out over our scene.

"What's wrong?" he asks. When I don't answer right away, he asks a different question. "Did I do something you didn't like?"

"It's not you. It's me."

Yeah, I just pulled out the most cliché line in history. I refuse to explain why I panicked because, in order to explain,

I'd have to talk about William. I can't talk about him with another man—not now, maybe not ever.

God, this was a mistake. I never should have agreed to a scene with a man that I could easily find myself attached to. My online date was the safe option... this is something totally different.

“That’s a crock of shit. Something happened,” he says, not buying my excuse.

Of course he wouldn't, he's not an idiot, and since he seems like a nice guy and a good dominant, there's no way he'll let me off the hook without a response.

“I'm okay, really. The scene was perfect... you didn't do anything I didn't want.”

“Then why the freakout, doll?”

I close my eyes and take a deep breath, trying to decide how to respond.

“Remember rule number three, babygirl. Honesty always.”

The command in his tone has my inner submissive wanting to obey. After just one scene, I feel obligated to follow his rules. That's a scary realization. I decide on a half-truth even though it makes me feel guilty.

“I didn't expect it to be this way. It's been a long time for me, and it just feels like a lot.” I might've left out the bit about his offhanded remark triggering me, but I disclosed more than I anticipated.

He nods in understanding. “I get it.”

I'm taken off-guard when he pulls me into his arms. His lips lightly brush over my brow as he holds me close. My flight response is strong right now, and I have to fight against it to stay in his arms. I slowly relax into his hold as he runs gentle hands over my back. I close my eyes and wrap my arms around his waist, returning the embrace.

The anxious energy flows out of me, and I suddenly feel silly. “I'm sorry I freaked out on you.”

“No worries, babygirl. It’s my fault. We should’ve talked more about expectations. That’s on me.”

I rest my chin on his chest and look up into his dark, earnest eyes. Guilt is written all over his face. I feel terrible. He has nothing to feel guilty about. It’s my own damage that had me panicking. He did everything just right.

How could he know his simple words would affect me on such a visceral level? Hell, I didn’t even realize something like this would happen.

“It’s not your fault. I just got overwhelmed and didn’t know how to handle it.”

I feel like a dirty liar for giving him half-truth after half-truth, but that’s all I have to offer right now.

Axel cups my cheeks in his hands and kisses me soft and slow. My eyes flutter closed as I return his kiss, proving to both him and myself that I’m really okay. He pulls away, dropping a kiss on my nose before stepping away. I instantly miss his hold.

Casual... this is just a casual encounter, I remind myself.

No attachments.

Then why am I feeling so much?

“It’s getting late,” I say, needing to end our night before it gets even more out of control.

“I don’t want to let you go yet,” he admits.

I don’t want to go either, but I need to before I do something crazy, like convince myself this could be more than casual. I don’t have anything to offer him or anyone. Everything I have to give is for Henry.

“I should go before I turn into a pumpkin,” I tease, trying to lighten the moment.

“I’d take you any way you come,” he says with a smile. “Besides, you’d look good in orange.”

I laugh at that. “Nobody looks good in orange.”

“You’d look good in a potato sack.”

The heated look he gives me has me blushing. I’m always blushing around him.

“Come on, doll. Let’s get you out of here before I’m tempted to get another look at you out of that dress.”

My core tightens in response to his words. I’m tempted to stay and start the night all over again, but my freak out is fresh in my mind, and I don’t want a repeat of that.

Like last night, he walks me to my car and opens my door. Before I can get in, he pulls me in for one more heated kiss. I lose track of time as his tongue pillages and plunders. I’m completely breathless by the time he pulls away. Damn, the man can kiss.

“Give me your number.” It’s a command, not a request.

I should decline. Our time is up, and we both got what we wanted, but I find myself rattling off my number anyways. Casual can be more than one night... right?

“This thing with us is just casual,” I say, wanting to ensure we’re both clear on that fact.

“Just casual,” he agrees after a beat of silence. He says the right words, but the possessive way he’s looking at me says otherwise.

After another goodbye kiss that has my toes curling, he finally lets me get into the car. He closes the door, and I let out a breath I didn’t realize I was holding.

Jesus, that was one intense night. More so than I ever imagined it would be. I just had my first scene in over three years, and it was everything I needed all the way up until my anxiety attack. That I could have done without.

I quietly let myself into my apartment and find Marsha face down on her schoolbooks at the kitchen table. I gently shake her awake.

“Oh crap, did I fall asleep?”

“You did,” I say with a smile. “You work too hard.”

She closes her books and shoves them into her backpack. “Finals are coming up. No matter how much I study, I always feel underprepared.”

“You’re going to ace them, I’m sure.”

She gets up and shoulders her back with a yawn.

“Are you sure you don’t want to stay?” I ask, not liking the thought of her driving while she’s so tired.

“Nah. I’ll be home in a jif. I’m only a few blocks away.”

“If you’re sure...”

“Positive, mom,” she says in a teasing tone.

Marsha has been babysitting Henry for me for the last six months. She’s been invaluable to my little family ever since Henry and I moved. I can’t help but feel grateful to have found her.

“Once a worry wart, always a worry wart,” I counter. “Be safe.”

“Will do. Call me if you need me.”

“Thanks again for tonight. I appreciate you dropping everything at the last minute.”

She laughs. “No worries. My plans consisted of studying, studying, and more studying. Since little man slept the whole time, I was able to keep my hot date with the books.”

A couple minutes later, I see Marsha out, waving as she drives away. I close the door and kick off my heels. Lord, it’s been a long day. I make my way to the bedroom. I should take a shower, but I’m too exhausted, so instead, I change into my pajamas and plug my phone into the charger. Then I practically faceplant into bed.

I’m half asleep when my phone pings. Who the hell would be texting me at two in the morning?

A spike of worry shoots through me because nothing good happens so late at night. I reach for my phone, rationalizing that if anything was wrong, whoever it is would’ve called, not

texted. I unlock my phone and pull up my texts to find one from an unknown number.

Did you make it home safely?

Axel.

Butterflies take up residence in my stomach. I know I gave him my number, but I didn't expect to hear from him so soon... or ever.

Safe and sound

Good. Sleep sweet, doll.

I don't know how to respond to that, so I just set my phone down and tug the covers up over me again.

Sleep sweet.

My imagination conjures up those words in his growly voice and plays them on repeat, heating me up on the inside. I can't believe he texted me already.

What does it mean?

Surely he is just checking in because he feels responsible for my well-being after our scene and my subsequent freakout.

That's got to be it. He's just being a good dominant. With that reassuring thought in my head, I fall into a deep, restful sleep. For the first time in longer than I can remember, the nightmares of the accident don't haunt my dreams. Instead, I dream of dark eyes and heated kisses.

CHAPTER SIX

Addy

MORNING COMES WAY TOO EARLY, LIKE IT ALWAYS DOES WHEN you have a little one. Henry is a morning person—something he definitely got from William because I'm the furthest thing from it. At six o'clock on the dot, Henry clamors up on my bed and on top of me.

“Wake up, mommy!”

I groan because no matter how good my sleep is, waking up is just not my favorite. Still, I muster up a smile for Henry and pull him into my arms, tickling his sides. His laughter warms my heart.

“Morning, little man. Are you hungry?”

“Pancakes!” he says excitedly.

I smile because I knew exactly what he would ask for. Last week, it was scrambled eggs. This week is pancakes... who knows what next week will be.

“Let's go make some pancakes then.”

Henry hops excitedly from the bed and rushes to the kitchen. I follow at a slow shuffle, desperately needing my first hit of caffeine. I find Henry in the kitchen with his head in the fridge, standing up on tiptoe, trying to reach the eggs.

“Whatcha doing, buddy?”

“Helping with pancakes.”

“How about I get the ingredients, and you can pour them?”

“And stir?” he asks, excited by his new task.

“Of course you can stir. You’re the best stirrer around.” I ruffle his hair, then grab all the ingredients needed for his pancakes.

Henry stands on his stepstool, waiting patiently to pour each ingredient into the bowl. Once everything is measured, I hand him the spoon, and he enthusiastically starts stirring. Flour gets everywhere, but the smile on his face makes the mess totally worth it.

While he’s distracted with stirring, I load a pod into the coffee pot and push the button. The intoxicating scent of coffee fills the room, and already I feel myself perking up.

“All done, mommy!” Henry turns to me, and I shake my head at his appearance. He’s got flour on his cheek and half-mixed batter on his shirt.

“Good job, buddy. You’re such a good helper.”

He smiles broadly, proud of himself. I help him clean up in the sink, then send him to the other room to play while I finish making his breakfast. I drink my coffee and flip pancakes while listening to Henry play. Once the table is set and his milk is poured into a spill-free cup... and I have another cup of coffee ready, I head to his room.

He’s sitting in the middle of his floor, pushing trains around the big track we built just yesterday. I stand in the doorway, soaking up the quiet moment. I find myself doing this a lot these days. Taking mental pictures of anything and everything he does. He’s growing so fast, and I don’t want to miss a thing.

Which is why when we moved, I opted to stay home with him. William had a substantial insurance policy that set Henry and me up for life. I could’ve easily found a job and put him in daycare and let someone else have these moments, but that’s not what I want. I have the means to stay home and raise my son on my own, and I don’t feel guilty for using it. William would have wanted it this way. We always talked about me quitting my job and becoming a stay-at-home mom once Henry was born... now I’m following through with that wish.

“Breakfast is ready, buddy.”

Ever the little ball of energy, he jumps up and runs past me to the table. I shake my head at the sight that greets me when I get to the table myself. Henry is standing in his chair, the syrup bottle squeezed between his little hands as he pours it all over his plate and the table.

I quickly grab the bottle from his sticky hands. “I think you’ve got enough, dude.”

He looks at his plate, which is now swimming with syrup, and nods his agreement.

“Bottom in your chair. Time to eat.”

He plops right down and pokes a piece of pancake with his fork. He takes a big bite, eating with gusto and making a big sticky mess of himself. Most parents would probably be annoyed with the mess he’s making but not me. I savor every moment with my son. It wasn’t until we moved to Monett that I realized exactly how much time I missed out on in Henry’s life.

My grief stole lots of special moments with my son, and now I cherish all of them no matter how big or small.

When he’s done eating, I usher him to the bath and clean him up. Once he’s clean and dressed, I leave him with his trains so that I can take a quick shower. I find him right where I left him, pushing trains around the track. He could do that for hours and never tire of it.

“What do you want to do today, buddy?”

“Play at the park!”

“Sounds like fun to me,” I say with a smile. He loves the little park that’s down the block. On any given day, there are half a dozen kids around his age playing, so it’s become a favorite of his. This neighborhood is full of young families. It’s nice. I enjoy chatting with the other moms even though I’m not particularly close with any of them. We mostly talk about the kids and the kind of mischief they’ve gotten into since the last time we spoke.

My phone rings in the other room, and I rush to catch it before it goes to voicemail. I can't help but wonder if it's Axel. I don't know what it means that I'm disappointed when I see that it's Pelar calling, not him.

"Hello," I answer.

"You were supposed to call me yesterday," she accuses.

"Well, hello to you too," I say sarcastically.

"Don't give me that tone. You went on your first date since —" she stumbles over William's name, probably because she doesn't want to upset me.

"Since William," I provide for her. A little stab of grief hits me, but it's manageable now. Before, it would have drowned me. Now it's just a twinge.

"Tell me how it went with internet stud."

I snort a laugh at her nickname for him. Of course, I shared his pictures with her along with every detail imaginable. The guy wasn't bad looking. In fact, he was quite handsome, but he didn't hold a candle to the hotness level of Axel.

"He ghosted me."

"He what?" she screeches.

"Totally ghosted me. I went to the club, and he was a no-show."

"That bastard!" she says indignantly.

"It's fine. I don't even want a casual fling with someone who doesn't have the decency to tell me they changed their mind to my face."

"Wait. Why aren't you more upset about this? You spent weeks talking to this dude before agreeing to meet him..."

Leave it to Pelar to pick up on my mood and lack of upset over something that should have had me calling her immediately to complain about how shitty he was to stand me up.

"I might've met someone at the club," I admit.

“You what?! And you didn’t call me?” she screeches again, making me wince.

“It isn’t a big deal...”

Liar, liar. I’m a big fat liar.

“Bullshit. If it wasn’t a biggie, you would’ve called me. Instead, you avoided me, spill everything.”

I let out a sigh, knowing she’s not going to let this go. “His name is Axel. He’s a bartender at The Playground.”

“Is he hot? Don’t hold back. I need all the deets.”

I shake my head with a laugh. “Yes, he’s hot. Melt your panties hot. With a sexy southern accent.”

“Sounds good so far. Are you planning to see him again?”

“Um... actually... I saw him again last night.”

“Oh my God, Addy! Two nights in a row? Wait, wait, wait. Did you scene with this man after knowing him for just one day?”

“When you say it like that, it sounds like a bad thing,” I say with a frown.

Was it a little impulsive to fall into a scene with him so quickly? Maybe. But it just felt right.

“I mean, it’s just not like you. It took you talking with several potential men online before picking one to get to know. Then you took even longer to agree to meet him...”

“That was different. Online dating is so impersonal. Axel and I just sort of clicked. He seems like a good guy,” I add.

“I’m sure he’s fine. I trust your judgment. You’re not a reckless person... So... you had a scene with a hot southern bartender. How was it?”

I flop back on my bed, replaying the night in my head. I skip over my freakout, not wanting to think about it. “It was great. Just what I needed.”

“Was he good to you?” she presses like the mama bear that she is.

“Yes, he was. If I’m being honest. I didn’t want it to end,” I admit.

“I thought you were only looking for something casual since your focus is on Henry,” she says, reminding me of my purpose.

“It is just casual. It was just one scene. It’s not like I have plans to see him again.”

“Would you scene with him again if he asks?” she presses harder.

Would I? The answer is a resounding yes, but if I admit it out loud, it makes it true, and that’s a scary concept. If I wanted nothing but casual, I wouldn’t be so excited by the thought of another scene with him.

“I don’t know. Maybe.”

“That maybe sounds an awful lot like a yes,” she says.

“I can play with a man more than once and keep things casual.”

“I know. I just don’t want you to lose sight of your priorities.”

“Never. Henry is my top priority. Just because I found a potential play partner doesn’t mean anything has changed,” I say. And I mean it. “The two things are totally separate.”

“I just worry about you. You’re all alone there. I don’t want you clinging onto the first person that shows you attention.”

Is that what this is? Am I infatuated with Axel because I’m lonely? I really think about it and decide that no, that’s not it. I might not have many friends in Monett, but I’m not lonely. In fact, since we moved, I feel stronger than ever. I now know I can stand on my own two feet and thrive.

Henry and I are closer than ever, and life is good. I still miss William every day—I always will—but I’m no longer drowning in my grief. I like Axel just because I do, not because I am clinging to any scrap of attention I’m shown.

“I’m not, Pelar. Seriously, stop worrying so much. I’m doing good. Better than I ever imagined.”

“You just keep saying that and one day it’ll convince me. I can’t help but worry when I can’t just run around the corner and see you.”

“I miss you too, bestie.”

“I’m coming to see you as soon as school lets out for the summer. No arguments,” she says.

“You remind me every time we talk. I look forward to seeing you. I can’t wait for you to see how much Henry has grown. I know it’s only been six months, but I swear he’s grown two inches.”

“I can’t wait. Just a few more months.”

“Mommy, can we go to the park now?” Henry asks from my open doorway.

“In just a minute, buddy.”

“Guess that means our time is up,” Pelar says.

“Yep. I promised him another trip to the park.”

“Sounds like a blast. Keep me posted on your hottie bartender.”

“I will. Love you, girlie.”

“Love you too.”

I’M WATCHING Henry play in the sandbox with another little boy when my phone dings in my pocket. I pull it out, and Axel’s name shows on the notification.

Oh my God, he texted me again!

I quickly open the texting app so I can read what he sent.

Good morning, doll. Sleep well?

I feel a little flash of excitement at the fact that he texted again so soon. That must mean something. What if he really does ask me to play again? Ugh. I'm making too big a deal out of this whole thing. It's just a freakin' text message.

I slept fine.

Good. What are you doing today?

I look over at Henry, still playing with his little friend, and chew my lip, not knowing how to respond. I definitely don't want to mix worlds. Henry is entirely off-limits.

Just hanging out. Doing laundry. Normal Sunday stuff. What about you?

It's not a lie. I put a load in the wash before we left the apartment. And hanging out with Henry is normal everyday stuff. I can totally keep things separate. I can have a casual fling with a hot guy who is damn good at playing my daddy and be Henry's mom.

Waiting around until it's time to go to work.

Sounds like a blast.

And laundry is much better?

Touché.

"What's got you smiling so big over here?" Sandra, one of the moms I chat with asks.

I put my phone back in my pocket and ignore the next ding. I can read it later. "Nothing. Just feeling happy today."

She shakes her head. "You're always happy. I don't know how you do it. If I was a single parent, I would probably go insane. I swear by the time Rod gets home, I'm ready to hand the kids off and hide in the bathroom for a few hours."

I just shrug, not having an answer for her. I never feel that way about Henry. I wonder if my losing William has just skewed my perspective. Either way, I wouldn't change it. I love my life as a single mom. I never anticipated being one. William was my forever love, but he's gone, and now I have to live the life I have.

I let Henry play until he's yawning and obviously ready for his nap.

"See you later," I say to Sandra and the other moms who have gathered around.

I know Henry is tired when he doesn't protest us leaving. Usually he would put up some kind of fight, but he just lays his head on my shoulder and lets me carry him home. We wash up quickly, then I tuck him into bed for his nap.

"Love you, mommy," he says in a sweet sleepy voice.

"I love you too, buddy."

It doesn't take long for him to fall asleep. I leave his room and head toward the laundry room. Time for some chores. I pop an earbud in and pull out my phone to turn on the audiobook I've been listening to, and I see Axel's last text. I can't believe I forgot he texted.

I want to see you again.

A smile spreads across my face. Some of those not-so-casual feelings bubble up to the surface, but I push them away. I'm going to do just what I told Pelar. I'm going to keep it casual. Casual doesn't always mean one and done.

I want to see you too.

The three little dots that show he's responding pop up before I even have a chance to put my phone down. Was he just sitting around waiting for my response? Surely not.

I thought I scared you off.

That makes me smile. Little does he know that not much could dissuade me from seeing him again, not even common sense. Now that I've decided he's a perfect play partner, I want more. We will both have some fun, then part ways amicably when it's over.

No, sorry, I just got busy.

Again, his response is immediate. Good.

When do you want to meet?

Would I sound too eager if I said tonight?

That has me smiling yet again. Would it be wrong of me to ask Marsha to babysit again so soon? Does it make me a bad mom for wanting to go out for the third night in a row? No, I decide. It doesn't. I wouldn't leave until long past Henry's bedtime, and he'll never even know I left.

I chew my bottom lip considering my options. Is it too much too soon to see him again? No, not if this is just a casual fling. And it very much is. Henry is my priority.

Why am I even trying to talk myself out of something I want?

I exit our text thread and pull up Marsha's. I type out a quick message asking if she's free. I turn on my audiobook and focus on housework while waiting for her to respond. I'm folding my second load of laundry when my phone chimes.

Marsha.

Not at all. What time do you need me?

Does ten work for you?

Sure thing. I'll see you then!

Okay. That's it, my night is officially free, and I'm planning on seeing Axel again. I find myself practically humming with excitement at the thought of another scene. I

pull up my text thread with Axel and type out my reply. I read it twice before I hit send.

Would I sound too eager if I agreed?

CHAPTER SEVEN

Axel

ELEVEN O'CLOCK CAN'T COME FAST ENOUGH. ADDY WILL BE at the club waiting for my shift to end at twelve. I can't wait for that because there is a private room with my name on it. My cock stiffens in my jeans at the thought of what might happen between us tonight.

"You're in a good mood tonight," Tessa says from her seat at the bar.

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"You haven't stopped smiling since you got here..."

"I always smile. I'm a happy sort of guy," I counter.

Tessa snorts. "I'll give you that. Can you explain why you've checked your phone no less than a dozen times tonight? And why every time you do, you get a goofy grin on your face?"

She's not wrong about the phone. Addy and I have been texting back and forth for most of the day.

"Does it have something to do with the pretty blonde you've been taking to the private rooms?" she pries.

"How do you know about that?"

She rolls her eyes. "I know everything that happens around here. You know there are no secrets in the club. Besides, your name has been on the reservations list for the last three nights."

"This place is full of gossips," I mutter.

“If it makes you feel any better, I don’t think anyone other than Aiden has noticed...”

“It’s not like I have anything to hide.”

“Good! Then you won’t mind telling me all about her,” Tessa says, clapping her hands together excitedly.

I shake my head. “I don’t think so.”

“I can’t help being curious. It’s totally not like you to play with the same woman more than once. You’re the fun, flirty good-time guy,” she says, not giving up.

I grunt at her observation. She’s not wrong. I don’t make any commitments beyond promising a woman a great scene and orgasms. That’s as far as I’ve ever wanted to take things. Addy is different, though. Once would’ve never been enough for me. In fact, I don’t know if I’ll ever get enough of her.

The thought of casting her aside for her to find another daddy to play with makes me feel violent. She’s made it clear she isn’t looking for a relationship and I’m not even sure how to make a relationship work—I’ve never wanted one before—but I’m ready to learn. I just have to convince her that I’m worth taking a chance on.

“So are you going to tell me about her?” Tessa presses.

“Her name is Addy. We’re just having a bit of fun.” The lie tastes bad on my tongue, but Tessa doesn’t need to know how I feel about Addy.

My phone vibrates in my pocket, and I pull it out, smiling when I see Addy’s name in my notifications.

Running a little late. See you soon.

I type out a quick okay and shove my phone into my pocket.

“Trouble in paradise?” Tessa asks.

I scoff. “No, what makes you think that?”

“You’re frowning for the first time all night.”

Am I? I'll admit I'm disappointed that Addy is running late. I'm looking forward to seeing her. It's barely been twenty-four hours since I had her in my arms, but it's still been too damn long. I've quickly become addicted to her.

I just shrug. "She's running late, is all."

Tessa gives me an incredulous look. "You really like this girl, don't you?"

"Yeah, I really like her," I admit. There's no sense in lying about it.

"Never thought I'd see the day that Axel Walker fell for a woman."

I don't know how to respond to that, so I busy myself with cleaning the bar. It's a slow night, which I usually wouldn't mind, but tonight I need the distraction, and so does Tessa because she just won't let it go. She asks me a barrage of questions that I answer as diplomatically as possible because even though I want Addy for more than a casual relationship, I don't want someone else to know before I even have a conversation with her.

"Leave the man alone," Ransom says, breaking into the conversation.

I was so focused on rearranging the liquor bottles that I didn't even notice he had walked up. Though I'm not surprised he's here. He always pops up wherever Tessa is. She hops up from her stool and jumps into Ransom's arms.

"Are you making a nuisance of yourself?" he asks her.

"I'm just curious about Axel's new girlfriend," she says just as Addy walks up to the bar.

Addy's eyes widen, and some unknown emotion flashes in her eyes. She looks torn between closing the distance between us and bolting. Tessa sees Addy and jumps out of Ransom's arms. She rushes over to Addy and hugs her. Addy stands stock-still, a flabbergasted look on her face. Tessa releases her, then proceeds to drag her to the bar where I'm standing.

“Hi, I’m Tessa, and this big guy is Ransom... He’s my daddy.”

“Uh... I’m Addy,” she replies, still looking confused by the turn of events.

“Axel has told me so much about you.” Tessa touches Addy’s hair with a huge smile on her face. “Wow. You’re even prettier than he said.”

“Uh... thanks?” Addy says, blinking.

She looks like a deer caught in the headlights as Tessa railroads right over her. Thankfully, Ransom comes to the rescue.

“Come on, babygirl. Time to leave.”

“But I want to get to know Addy. It’s been forever since I made a new friend,” she pouts.

Ransom slaps her ass, and she jumps to attention. “Okay, okay. Sheesh!”

Tessa gives Addy another hug. “I can’t wait to get to know you and introduce you to the girls.”

“The girls?” Addy parrots.

“Oh yeah. You’ll love them. They’re great.”

When Tessa makes no move to leave, Ransom grabs her by the waist and tosses her over his shoulder. She pushes up off his back to wave at us.

“You kids have fun!” she shouts, drawing the attention of half the club to Addy and me.

The look on Addy’s face tells me that attention is a negative thing. I scowl at all the people staring our way, and they return to their conversations.

“What the heck just happened?” she asks.

“That is Tessa. She’s a bit over the top.”

“You think?”

I just shrug because what more is there to say about it. Tessa is Tessa. A freaking tornado wreaking havoc wherever

she goes.

“You look incredible,” I say, changing the subject.

And she does. She’s wearing a light pink dress that hugs her breasts, then flares out around her thighs. My mouth waters as I imagine pushing that skirt up and burying my face between her legs.

“She said I’m your girlfriend,” she says in an accusing tone.

Fuck. I had hoped that she either didn’t hear it or was going to brush it off. No such luck.

“I swear I didn’t tell her you’re my girlfriend. In fact, I specifically told her we were just having a bit of fun.”

“Then why would she say that?” she says skeptically.

I shake my head, inwardly cursing Tessa. “Because ever since she and Ransom finally got their shit together, she’s been trying to play matchmaker with everyone.”

Addy doesn’t look convinced but lets it go. She sits at the bar, and I pour her a sparkling water. She gives me a grateful smile, then sips her water. A wave of customers comes, and I have to turn my attention to them.

Go figure that it would be slow all night, then as soon as Addy gets here, it picks up. I apologize, but she just brushes it off, saying it’s okay. Thankfully she seems content to sit and people-watch while I work.

Twenty minutes later, Wade—my replacement—shows up, and I’m free to whisk her away to the private room. As soon as the door closes behind us, I pull her into my arms and crush my lips to hers. She gasps in surprise but quickly catches fire with her own pent-up desire.

Her fingers tug at my hair as I deepen the kiss. She moans into my lips when I grip her ass and pull her tight against my hard cock. She moans again, kissing me harder. Our tongues slick together, dancing erotically with each other. By the time we break apart, we’re both panting to catch our breath.

“I could kiss you forever, babygirl. Your lips are like a taste of heaven.”

She licks her tempting lips as if she’s enjoying the flavor of our kiss too. “I like kissing you too, daddy.”

CHAPTER EIGHT

Addy

AS SOON AS THE DOOR SHUTS TO THE PRIVATE ROOM, AXEL kisses me senseless. While I was waiting at the bar for his shift to end, I ran over the conversation with him and decided we needed to have another talk about expectations. His friend calling me his girlfriend freaked me out a little, but now that we're alone and his lips are on mine, it doesn't feel very important anymore. There will be time to talk later. Right now, all I want to do is kiss him.

We kiss until my lips are tender from his enthusiasm and I still want more. I run my hands over his muscular chest, loving the feel of him under my hands. I didn't get to do much touching last night, and now I realize what a shame that is. The only thing that would make it better is if I were touching his skin.

Once the idea hits me, I can't shake it. I reach for the hem of his shirt and tug it up. He catches the hint and pulls the shirt off, discarding it, then his lips are back on mine. He moans into my lips at the first touch of skin on skin. I love that he loves my touches. It turns me on even more.

I touch every inch of his exposed skin, loving the feel of his hot, hard muscles under my fingertips.

"Fuck, babygirl. I need you," he growls against my lips.

I trail my hands down his stomach to his belt. I quickly unbutton it and then start to work on his jeans. His hands capture mine before I can push his pants down and free his cock.

“What are you doing, babygirl?”

“I’m going to give you what you want,” I say seductively. “Don’t you want that?”

His head falls back with a groan. “Yes, I want you so fucking bad.”

“I’m right here for the taking.” I take a step back and strip off my clothes. He watches in rapt attention as I bare myself to his gaze. I cup my breasts and give him a sultry look. “Take me, daddy.”

Without a second’s hesitation, he grabs me up and tosses me onto the bed. I let out an undignified squeal as I bounce on the mattress. Before I have a chance to catch my breath, he’s on me. His mouth descends to one of my nipples. He licks and sucks the tight bud, and my back arches off the bed at the exquisite pleasure. He switches to my other nipple giving it the same attention as the first.

I fist his hair, holding him to my breasts as he devours them. My eyes fall closed, and I lose myself in the moment. When his hand trails down my stomach towards my pussy I wantonly spread my legs further apart, encouraging his touch. The first swipe of his fingers through my wetness pulls a cry of pleasure from my lips.

He crushes his lips to mine, swallowing my moans of pleasure. I kiss him frantically as his fingers circle my needy clit. My hips come off the bed when he pushes two thick fingers inside me.

“You’re so wet, babygirl. Is all this sweet honey for me?” he growls.

He thrusts his fingers into me again, crooking his fingers inside me so he hits my g-spot with every push and pull of his fingers.

“I asked you a question, babygirl.”

He did?

Oh God, I can’t concentrate on anything but the pleasure he’s pulling from my body. It’s overwhelming my senses.

“Yes... Yessss...” I cry out in response, hoping it’s the answer he’s looking for.

“Good girl,” he praises.

My pussy squeezes down on his fingers at the praise. Lord, I love being his good girl. I could maybe come from just those two little words. Not that I want him to stop what he’s doing to test that theory. It feels too damn good. He pulls his fingers from inside me, and I whimper at the loss, my hips moving to try and seek out his fingers again.

“Please,” I beg. I was so close to the edge, and being denied is almost painful.

Before I can beg, his fingers are on my clit, teasing the sensitive nub until I’m once again mindless from pleasure. He kisses down my neck, licking and sucking his way down to my breasts. He bites down on my nipple, pulling a shocked cry from me. Then he sucks my nipple, and the sharp pain turns to pleasure. Between his fingers on my clit and his mouth on my breasts, I’m quickly racing toward release.

When he roughly pushes his fingers inside me, hitting my g-spot, my climax hits me. I moan as lights flash behind my eyes, the breath stolen from my lungs. My pussy clenches tight around his fingers as he continues to fuck me with them, dragging out my orgasm until I’m a puddle of sated woman on the bed.

Axel makes a tsking sound. “Naughty girl,” he says, drawing me out of my stupor. “You broke rule number two.”

Oh crap.

Rule number two: No orgasms without permission.

My eyes widen, and I wonder what he’ll do now.

“I’m sorry, daddy,” I say, still breathless from my release. I’m sure I don’t sound at all repentant. It’s hard to feel sorry when I’m still riding the high of one of the best climaxes of my life.

“I don’t think you are sorry,” he scolds. “But you will be.”

I squeal when he flips me to my stomach, then pulls me up to my knees. “What are you—” My question is cut off by the first spank to my ass from his unyielding palm.

“Punishing this sexy ass, babygirl,” he says lowly.

I look back at him, finding him kneeling on the bed behind me, his muscular chest on full display. Those sexy muscles flex as he raises his hand then crashes it back onto my ass. I groan at the impact. The punishing hit feels more like pleasure than pain. My wires are crossed, and each spank has my desire rising again.

Axel looks like some kind of sexy god as he administers my punishment. I want more, but I also want to feel him inside me. I know a simple apology will stop the punishment, and we can move on to even better things. The idea of his cock pushing inside me is enough to have an apology falling from my lips.

“I’m sorry!” I cry out when he lays a particularly hard spank on my sit spot. “Please!”

“Please what, babygirl?” he asks, pausing the spanking to swipe his fingers through my wetness. He pushes two inside me slowly. I push back against his fingers, seeking more. He slaps my ass with his free hand, stilling my movements. “Ah, ah, ah... naughty girl. Tell daddy what you need.”

“You,” I gasp. “I need you.”

He gives my ass one more spank, then his weight leaves the bed. “On your back,” he commands.

I don’t hesitate to obey. I settle onto my back and watch as he pushes his jeans and boxers down. His thick cock springs free, and my mouth waters. Fuck me, he’s sexy. My pussy clenches emptily in anticipation of what’s to come.

Axel pulls a condom from his back pocket and rolls it down his length. I’m thankful he thought of it because my brain is focused on only one thing, and that’s not protection. I could easily tell him I am on the pill, but we don’t know each other well enough for that. Not yet.

I swallow thickly when he crawls between my spread legs. The anticipation driving me crazy. He settles down between my legs, his thick cock resting against my pussy. I rock my hips up into him, silently begging for him to push inside me. Instead, he leans in and kisses me. I cling to his shoulders as he steals the very breath from my lungs.

He reaches between us and runs his cock through my folds, teasing my clit over and over. I'm practically losing my mind with need by the time he lines himself up with my opening and slowly pushes inside me.

"Oh God," I groan as he enters me.

He kisses away my cries of pleasure as his cock stretches me. Inch after inch, he pushes inside me. My eyes roll back at the intensity of the moment. I knew it would be good, but I never imagined it would feel so overwhelming.

"Fuck, babygirl," he moans as he bottoms out inside me. "You're so fucking tight."

I don't know if I'm tight or he's just huge, but whatever it is, the fit is perfect, and I want more. I dig my nails into his shoulders and circle my hips, enticing him to move. He pulls out just as slowly as he pushed into me, dragging his length out in a slow glide. He pauses at my entrance, his eyes closed and his head thrown back as if begging for control.

I don't want him to be in control with me. I want him to lose it. I want him to fuck me like he'll lose it if he doesn't because that's what it feels like to me.

"Fuck me, daddy," I beg.

His eyes open, and he looks down at me hungrily. "I don't want to hurt you."

"You won't," I say, reassuring him.

"You'll stop me if it's too much?"

I nod my head quickly, gripping him tighter with my nails. "Yes, daddy. Just fuck me. Please."

Without another hint of hesitation, he plunges into my body with his thickness. My back arches off the bed at the

sudden pleasure. He fucks me hard and fast, driving me to the edge of madness. Each thrust of his cock has his pelvis hitting my clit, adding another layer to the exquisite pleasure he's giving me.

It doesn't take long before I'm teetering on the precipice of release again. It's like Axel knows exactly how to touch me to drive me to the edge. How he can know my body after such a short time, I don't know, but I'm not going to question it. Not now. Maybe not ever.

"I'm going to come," I cry out when he grinds down on my clit.

"Not yet, babygirl. Hold it."

Oh, sweet baby Jesus. How am I supposed to hold back a tidal wave of desire? Every muscle in my body clenches as I try to hold on. He grips my hip, tilting my pelvis so that each thrust has him hitting my g-spot.

"*Ohmygod...* I can't hold it... please," I babble, begging him for permission to come.

"Come, babygirl. Cover my cock with your release," he commands.

My pussy squeezes down on his thrusting cock as my orgasm bursts free. I claw at his sweaty back, needing something to hold onto to keep me grounded. He keeps fucking me straight through my orgasm and into another sharper climax.

"Axel!" I scream out his name repeatedly until my voice is hoarse, and my body is limp from satisfaction.

I'm floating somewhere on cloud nine when he buries himself deep, and his cock kicks inside me as he empties himself into the condom. His moans of pleasure send shivers down my spine. He's so fucking sexy when he comes. Once his release has passed, he slumps on me, barely catching himself on his elbows before he crushes me with his much bigger body. I wrap my arms around him, holding him to me.

"You okay," he asks, panting.

I run my hands down his spine, loving his weight on top of me. He raises up on one arm so he can get a better look at me. Concern etches his features.

“I’m great,” I say with a smile. I grip the back of his neck and pull him down for a kiss to prove I’m okay.

He kisses me soft and sweet. It’s the perfect ending to such an intense scene. A small part of me aches at the thought that this was nothing but a scene between two consenting adults. But it can’t be anything more than that. I have to keep things casual no matter how many big feelings I’m having for Axel.

I feel emptier than ever when he leaves the bed to discard the condom. I sit up on the bed, covering my breasts with my arm. He walks back into the room from the bathroom and gives me a curious look.

“You’re not getting shy on me now, are you?” he teases.

I shrug my shoulders. Now that we are done, I don’t know what to do. I’ve never had sex with anyone casually before. Should I get up and get dressed and go? Should I stay? We haven’t discussed if we will see each other again, but this doesn’t feel like a one-night stand...

“You’re overthinking things again,” he says knowingly.

“Probably,” I admit.

Axel lays back on the bed and tugs me into his arms, holding me tight against his chest. My eyes fall closed when his fingers run soothingly up and down my back. I relax into his hold. My mind spins with questions I don’t think I want to know the answers to. Cuddling doesn’t seem like a very casual thing to do. Especially when it feels so damn intimate. I should get up, get dressed, and say my goodbyes... but it feels so good to be held that I just can’t make myself go.

I clear my mind of all my doubts and let myself enjoy the moment.

CHAPTER NINE

Axel

THE LAST THING I WANT TO DO IS KISS ADDY GOODBYE AFTER the night we just shared. My mind raced while she dozed in my arms. The only thoughts in my head were of how I could get her to agree to a commitment. I'll never be satisfied with only a part of her. The conviction in her tone when she said she was only looking for a casual relationship tells me it won't be easy to convince her otherwise.

My lips linger on hers, drawing the kiss out. She lingers as well, her tongue languidly stroking along mine. I'm the one that finally pulls away even though I don't want to.

"When can I see you again?" I ask, unable to let her leave without locking down our next meeting.

She licks her lips, her gaze locked onto my lips. She wants more kisses, but I want answers.

"I don't know," she finally answers.

"What are you doing Friday?" I push.

"I'm not sure..." she hedges.

I can catch the hint that she doesn't want to commit, but I'm not giving up yet.

"Do you want to see me again?"

Her eyes flash with desire. I know without a doubt that she wants more of what I can give her. I just need to remind her how good it is between us. I pull her into my arms, gripping her ass with one hand and fisting her hair with my other. I tip her head back and nip at her neck, then kiss away the sting.

“You know you want me. Don’t deny yourself,” I growl into her ear. I lightly suck her earlobe as she clings to my shirt. “Say you’ll see me again.”

She gasps when I lick a line down her neck and up to her lips. She whimpers when I hold our lips apart, not giving her the kiss she wants.

“Tell me,” I whisper against her lips.

“Yes,” she says breathlessly.

I reward her with the kiss she craves. She grips my shoulders and deepens the kiss. I quickly turn the tables, taking control of the kiss. I hold her close, pressing my now hard cock against her. She wriggles in my arms, rubbing her body against mine. I bite down on her lower lip in punishment for turning me on when I can’t have her.

She breaks away, panting. Her eyes are bright with arousal, and her lips are kiss swollen. She looks ready to be devoured.

“Time for you to go before I refuse to let you leave,” I say, promise in my tone.

“Probably a good idea,” she says reluctantly.

“Text me when you get home so I know you made it safely.”

“You’re asking for a lot tonight,” she teases.

I help her into the car and give her one more brief kiss before shutting the door. I watch her drive away, hating the feeling of loss that permeates my body. Part of me wants to head back into the club for a stiff drink, but I don’t want to deal with Tessa if she’s still hanging around. I don’t want to answer any more questions about Addy. Not when I have so many of my own.

I’m just locking my front door when my phone dingers with a text.

Home.

Good. Get some sleep, doll.

So bossy.

You know it.

I pour myself a drink and sip the amber liquid, enjoying the smoky flavor. I have a second drink, letting the alcohol calm my thoughts. It doesn't help wipe Addy from my mind though. I fall asleep to thoughts of her, and she's the first thing I think about when I wake up.

I grab my phone and tap out a quick text to her before I can think of a reason not to.

Morning, doll.

When she doesn't reply right away, I decide I should go for a run so I don't drive myself crazy with waiting for her response. I'm just getting out of the shower when I hear my phone ding.

Morning

Did you sleep well?

This time she responds quickly.

I slept great, actually. You?

I slept good too. What are you doing today?

I wait several minutes, but when there's no response, I set my phone aside and head to the kitchen for breakfast. The morning drags on. I check my phone no less than a dozen times. I shake my head at myself for acting like a lovesick puppy.

It's the afternoon before she finally replies.

Just typical Monday things.

That's a nonanswer if there ever was one. I decide not to push because I don't want her convincing herself that I'm a

bad bet.

Monday things don't sound like much fun.

Lol. Adulting is fun. What are you up to?

Nothing much. Waiting to go to work in a bit.

Now that sounds like fun.

It's not bad. I like working at the club.

That's good. It would suck to hate your job.

What about you? Do you like your job?

I ask, trying to sneak out some more details about her and her life. She's been tightlipped about herself... constantly changing conversations back in my direction.

I almost wish I could take the question back when she doesn't reply right away. She's skittish, and I don't want to push her, but at the same time, I'm curious and want to know more about her.

I like what I do.

I barely stop myself from asking the follow-up question of what she does. Instead I decide to go with flirty...

What are you wearing?

Lol. Clothes.

Sounds sexy...

What are you wearing?

I find myself laughing for real at her cheekiness.

Jeans and a t-shirt.

Sexy.

You know it, doll.

CHAPTER TEN

Addy

I SPENT MOST OF THE EVENING TEXTING BACK AND FORTH WITH Axel. He asks me random questions like what's my favorite food or TV show... never anything deep, and for that, I'm grateful. I still feel guilty for not telling him the truth when he asked about what I do for a living. I was truthful in saying that I love what I do... taking care of Henry is my greatest joy.

But I'm guessing stay-at-home mom isn't the kind of job he would be expecting me to blurt out. I try not to feel too guilty about it because I don't owe him anything. We are just having a bit of fun. Our time together is temporary.

And casual. I remind myself.

"Mommy," Henry says, tugging on the bottom of my shirt to get my attention.

I automatically put my phone away and give him my undivided attention. "What is it, buddy?"

"Can we go to the park? I want to play."

"I'm sorry, kiddo. It's too late to go to the park today. It's nearly bedtime."

Henry stomps his little foot and crosses his arms over his chest. "I don't want to go to bed."

He rarely throws a tantrum over anything, so I'm slightly surprised by his outburst.

"How about we watch a cartoon, then we can read a couple books before bed," I say, trying to put an end to the tantrum before it starts.

He thinks about his options for a moment, then nods his head. “Can we watch the trains?”

“You bet, buddy.”

Crisis averted.

I put on his favorite cartoon. I smile when he crawls onto my lap to watch the show. Halfway into the cartoon, he’s asleep, as I knew he would be. I gently carry him to bed and tuck him in. I kiss his forehead and watch him sleep for a while. Sometimes it’s impossible to walk away. With a sigh, I close his door.

Time for mommy to take a bubble bath and do a little self-care.

I’m rubbing lotion on my freshly shaved legs when my phone dings with another text. I don’t even have to look to know it will be Axel.

I open up the text string and see that I’ve missed several texts from him.

It’s dead in here tonight.

I’m bored. Come entertain me.

Then several minutes later...

What are you doing, doll?

I chew on my bottom lip, wondering if I should tell him that I just got out of the bath or not... he did say he wanted to be entertained...

Just got out of the bath. I’m putting on lotion.

The three little dots bounce for a minute, disappear, then bounce again. I smirk, wondering what he’s thinking about. Probably something dirty.

Come here. I’ll rub that lotion on you, babygirl.

Oh you would?

Hell yeah. I'd rub it all over that sexy body of yours.

That makes me giggle. I just bet he would.

And then what?

Then we'd have a repeat of last night.

My core clenches at the memory of him buried deep inside me. Teasing him backfired because now I'm just teasing myself. Part of me wants nothing more than to call Marsha and have her come watch Henry so I can go get another dose of Axel, but I can't.

She's already suspicious about what I've been up to the last three nights. I told her that I was meeting someone I met online, and when she asked how it went when I got home, I told her about him ghosting me. She was angry on my behalf, of course. She didn't question me when I had her babysit Saturday night, but when I got home Sunday, she wanted to know what was up and why I was smiling so big.

I explained about meeting someone at the bar—she doesn't know about The Playground, and I plan to keep it that way—and that we wanted to get to know each other better. She teased me because she could tell by my smile that things went really well.

That's an understatement.

I scold myself for even wanting to see Axel again so soon. Two scenes in a row are already pushing the limits of what can be considered casual. Hell, I shouldn't be texting with him so much. He's going to get the wrong idea. But I can't seem to just ignore him. It's nice having someone interested in me.

I can't help but wonder if he would still be interested if he knew about Henry. I push that thought away because it doesn't matter. The two sides of my life will never intermingle. Instead of replying, I put my phone aside and crawl into bed.

I'm awoken from a deep sleep by my phone ringing.

"ello," I say groggily.

"Doll," Axel says in that sexy southern accent of his. I'm instantly awake at just the sound of his voice.

"Axel, is something wrong?" I ask, looking at the time. It's nearly two in the morning.

"I just got off work. You stopped responding to me... I got worried."

"Sorry. I fell asleep." It's a tiny white lie. I did fall asleep... after deciding to not reply.

"It's okay. I just worried that I came on too strong and scared you off," he says, sounding concerned.

He didn't scare me off. I scared myself off.

"Axel..." I start but can't find the right words to express my feelings.

"You can tell me anything, babygirl."

My whole body reacts to that term of endearment. I close my eyes and flop back on my bed. Maybe he's right that I can tell him anything. Maybe my being a single mom won't scare him off. There is a long list of maybes that I could explore, but I can't. Not if I'm going to keep things between us casual. Not if I'm going to keep my frayed emotions out of it. I'm already teetering too close to the edge of feeling something more for the man.

"We aren't in a relationship, Axel. This thing between us is just casual..." I say, trailing off.

He lets out a heavy sigh on the other end of the phone. I can imagine him running his hands through his hair in frustration that I'm marking the line in the sand between us.

"Just because we are casual doesn't mean we can't be friends too," he says reasonably.

Can I be friends with him and not get my heart involved? I'm barely holding my emotions in check after just two scenes. I never should have had sex with him. It wasn't in my plan

when I decided to try and find someone to scene with again. Orgasms, yes. Sex, no. But when we were in the moment, I couldn't hold back. I wanted Axel in a bad way.

“I suppose that's true.”

“Then let's be friends,” he says, sounding a bit happier.

“So we are what? Friends with benefits?” I ask.

He laughs a little. “I guess so.”

“I've never had a friend with benefits before. I'm not sure I know how to go about it,” I admit.

“Well. We talk and get to know each other, and then I fuck you senseless every chance I get.” My mouth pops open at his boldness. The man sure doesn't mince words. “How does that sound, doll?” he asks.

“It sounds okay, I guess...” I reply, sounding a little breathless.

“You guess? What part aren't you convinced of? Being my friend or letting me fuck that hot wet pussy of yours again? You want that, don't you?”

“I do...”

“You do what, babygirl,” he growls.

“Want you to fuck me.”

“Mmm. Are you getting wet at the thought of my big cock inside you?”

Jesus, he's dirty talking me, and embarrassingly enough, I am getting wet by just his words. Have I ever been so affected by a man before? I instantly feel guilt over comparing Axel to William. It's not fair to the memory of William, nor is it fair to Axel.

I shake myself out of my dark thoughts and back to the moment at hand. And at the moment I'm very horny and hoping to end the call so that I can touch myself. “Yes, I'm wet.”

“Good.”

“Why is that good?” I ask, flabbergasted.

“Because now you want me as bad as I want you.”

“I can just take matters into my own hands.”

“No touching that pussy. Remember rule number two no coming unless you have permission,” he says in an amused voice.

“That’s not fair.”

“Life’s not fair, babygirl. Besides... it’ll just make Friday all the sweeter. I promise,” he says darkly. “I’ll make the wait worth your while.”

My pussy clenches at the thought. I have no doubt that he can make it worth my while. He’s already proven that he’s a beast in the bedroom. I can’t wait to see what it will be like after days of needing each other.

“Okay. I’ll be good.”

“I know you will. Now get some sleep, doll.”

We say our goodbyes, and I put my phone back on the nightstand. Get some sleep. How the heck am I supposed to go back to sleep now? I’m all fired up and ready to go. Finally, I fall into a restless sleep. My dreams all dirty ones of Axel and all the things we could do together.

“YOU SOUND DISTRACTED,” Pelar says.

“Sorry, I didn’t sleep well last night.”

“More nightmares?” she asks, concerned.

Part of me wants to lie and say yes because I know the truth will lead to questions that I don’t have the answers to, but I can’t lie to Pelar. I refuse to worry her. She worries enough about me already.

“No, not nightmares. Axel called me after his shift last night.”

“He’s calling you now? That doesn’t sound very casual...”

I let out a frustrated breath. I know she’s just trying to watch out for me. She doesn’t think I’m ready for a relationship beyond something casual. Until I met Axel, I was one hundred percent on board with that line of thinking. After a week of chatting and texting with him, I’m starting to wonder about that.

“We’re just friends...”

“Addy.”

“What? We are friends.”

“Friends with spankings and orgasms?” she asks.

I chew my bottom lip because I haven’t told her about the whole sex thing yet. Before I even started talking to guys online, we discussed that I wasn’t looking for a sex partner, just a play partner. I don’t want to admit to her that I already broke that little rule I set for myself. I really don’t want to admit that I’m close to breaking the casual rule too.

Talking with Axel every night after his shifts has shown me he’s a great guy. Anyone would be lucky to have him as a boyfriend. He’s perfect boyfriend material and deserves a great woman. And yet he has decided to take less by being my friend and sometimes daddy. I don’t really understand it.

Moreso, I don’t understand my feelings for him.

“Hellllo, Addy,” Pelar says when I’m silent for too long.

“Sorry, I’m here.”

“What’s going on?” she asks.

“Nothing. It’s just that... I don’t know, Pelar. I really like this guy.” I kick myself for my honesty. She’s going to rip me a new one. I just know it.

“What happened to no feelings? No attachments?”

“Maybe I’m just not casual material,” I say, feeling miserable.

“Then break it off before you get too deep. You need to focus on yourself and Henry. You don’t need the stress of a messy relationship right now.”

What she says is reasonable. She’s right. I don’t need a messy relationship right now and what’s happening with my feelings is definitely messy.

“Maybe you’re right...”

“Girl, I’m always right.”

I laugh at that, even though she’s not wrong. She is the levelheaded one between us. She always seems to have the answer and never seems to falter.

We chat for a while longer, and by the time we hang up, I feel my resolve strengthen. When Axel calls me tonight, I won’t answer. Time to cut him off cold turkey. I feel a little guilty about ghosting him, but I know if I hear his voice and give him a chance, he’ll talk me out of it.

I’m lying in bed staring at the ceiling when my phone rings for the first time. I let it ring off to voicemail. It instantly starts ringing again. This time I hit ignore. That’s when the texts start coming in...

You okay, doll?

Why aren’t you answering?

The phone rings again. Again, I hit the ignore button. Another text comes through...

Did I do something wrong?

I want to reply that it’s not him. He didn’t screw up I did. I never should’ve gotten so involved. Being friends after having two intense, mind-blowing scenes was a bad idea. I should’ve kept our relationship solely at the club. I’m the one that made it messy. I’m the one that can’t keep her feelings casual. Especially not now that I really know him and like him.

I silence my phone and hide under my blankets. For the first time in over three years, I cry for a reason other than

William's death, and because I'm crying over another man, I cry over that. I finally fall into a fitful sleep plagued with nightmares of me chasing after something I can never seem to catch. I wake up with a foggy mind that even ten cups of coffee won't penetrate.

Henry bounces onto my bed and plops on top of me.

"Wake up, mommy," he says cheerfully.

I barely manage to force a smile for my son. I can feel the pressure of my depression pushing at me. Something that's been absent since we moved to Monett and started over. The way I feel right now proves I'm right to cut Axel off before I get any deeper. Henry deserves better than this.

"I'm awake, buddy," I say with a more genuine smile. Fake it 'til I make it and all that.

I shuffle to the kitchen to make Henry his breakfast. I sip my coffee while he eats, trying to get my head on straight. He finishes his food and then runs to his room while I clean up. It's our usual routine, but today I want to call him back. At least with him in the room, I'm not alone with my thoughts.

I quickly put the dishes in the dishwasher and decide I need a shower to wash away the sleepless night and maybe some of the dark feelings that are weighing on me like a weighted blanket.

"Hey, buddy. Mommy's going to take a quick shower, okay?"

Henry barely looks up from his trains. "Okay, mommy."

The shower refreshes me a little, but I can still feel the heavy cloud surrounding me. Six months ago, I would have let this feeling drown me. I'd have crawled into bed and let my parents handle everything. I'm not that woman anymore. I'm stronger now. I know what it's like to live again, and I refuse to return to the pathetic creature I became after the accident.

I get dressed and take extra time to blow dry my hair instead of throwing it in a ponytail and letting it air dry like normal. I then decide a little makeup is in order. Once I'm

finished, I feel better... almost human. It's amazing what a little mascara and eyeshadow can do for a girl.

"Mommy, can we watch trains?"

I jump at the sound of Henry's voice. I was so focused on my reflection in the mirror that I didn't hear him walk up. Normally I wouldn't let him watch TV so early in the day, but I could use a little calm today, so trains it is.

"Sure, buddy. Let's watch some trains."

I grab my phone and wince at the three missed calls and ten unread messages. I ignore them all and pull up my reading app, determined to get lost in a book while Henry watches his show. It takes some time, but I finally get into the story. Escaping my own thoughts and feelings in favor of a world full of vampires and werewolves is just what I need.

"I'm hungry," Henry says, crawling into my lap.

I give him a big hug, then tickle his sides. His giggles make me smile my first genuine smile of the day.

"What sounds good to eat?"

"Honey bread!" he says excitedly.

I laugh because he knows that will be a hard no, but he tries anyway. "How about a peanut butter and honey sandwich?"

"Okay!" He jumps off my lap and runs to the kitchen ahead of me.

I make his sandwich and pour him some milk. He dances in his seat as he eats, something he does whenever he really likes what he's eating. I make myself a salad and join him at the table. He makes an absolute mess of his lunch. I just shake my head in amusement as I clean peanut butter from his nose. I kiss the top of his head before he runs off to play, full of energy once more.

I wish I could bottle up a bit of that.

The afternoon passes quickly, and my anxiety spikes as the hours tick away. I should be getting ready to go to the club

soon...

Oh crap, I think to myself and grab my phone to text Marsha. I completely forgot to cancel with her.

Hey girl. Sorry I didn't text earlier. I need to cancel for tonight.

Thankfully she replies with a quick 'okay.'

I put my phone down, determined to ignore it for the rest of the night.

After dinner, it's time for Henry's bath, which is always an ordeal. He splashes and plays until the water is cold.

"Time to get out, buddy."

He pouts but raises his arms for me to pick him up. Once his pajamas are on and he picks two books, we settle down on his bed to read. I don't even make it halfway through the second book before he's fast asleep. I carefully slide out from under him and kiss his forehead. With an exhausted sigh, I close his door.

Even though it's early, I get into my pajamas and wash my face. I crawl into bed and will myself to fall asleep, but sleep doesn't come. I lie awake, staring at the ceiling. I must drift off at some point because I'm jerked awake by my phone ringing. One look at the clock and I know who it is.

I close my eyes and ignore the ringing. As soon as the ringing stops, the texts start. It's last night all over again, except this is worse because I could be in his arms right now, but I'm not. I do my best to ignore my phone. I know that whatever he's saying is just going to hurt. After ghosting him, maybe I deserve the pain.

Before I can talk myself out of it, I grab my phone and look at the texts. They all make me feel like crap, but it's the last one that has my heart clenching in my chest and tears running down my cheeks.

Just let me know you're okay.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Axel

IT'S BEEN THREE DAYS SINCE ADDY STOPPED TAKING MY calls, and I'm going insane. Which is what has led me to this moment where my boss is threatening to punch me.

"Stubborn, asshole," Aiden shouts as he pushes me back out of his office. "I can't give you club members' personal information."

"She's not just some club member," I growl, pushing against him.

"I give fuckall about your personal life. As far as I'm concerned, she's just a club member who deserves her fucking privacy. Now get back to work before I fire your ass."

My shoulders slump, and I give up the fight. I don't even know what the fuck I'm doing anymore.

"Look, man Aiden says, putting his hand on my shoulder. "I know you like this girl, but she obviously isn't feeling the same thing."

I shrug his hand off my shoulder and pace away, dragging my hand through my hair. "That's the thing, we were on the same page, and then bam, nothing. It doesn't make any sense."

Aiden shakes his head and gives me a pitying look. "You need to let it go. If she wants more from you, she'll come to you."

With him being the gatekeeper of her address and her ignoring my calls, there isn't much else I can do. I nod at him

and head back to the bar to sling drinks. My shift can't get over fast enough.

THE DAYS PASS by in a blur. I wake up a week after Addy stopped talking to me and find my fridge is empty and I'm out of coffee. Definitely not a good thing with my mood being so shitty already. Caffeine is the only thing keeping me going.

I had planned on spending my days off locked up in my house, hiding from the world because I'm terrible company right now. Guess I'm going to the grocery store instead.

I'm trying to decide what kind of cereal I want when a small person runs right into my legs, then falls on his butt at my feet.

"Henry, slow down," an exasperated voice calls from around the corner of the aisle.

The little boy looks up at me with wide eyes. I'm about to help him up when she turns the corner pushing a cart full of groceries.

Addy.

My heart stops in my chest at the first sight of her in days. She looks beautiful in just jeans and a t-shirt. When I give her a second look, I notice the dark circles under her eyes. I can't help but wonder if she's not sleeping either.

"Oh buddy, what happened?" she asks, rushing to his side. She picks him up and holds him close. "Are you okay?"

He nods his head. She looks up at me for the first time, her mouth poised to speak, but no words come out. She shakes herself out of her silent stupor. "Sorry about that."

She adjusts the squirming kid in her arms, looking uncomfortable.

"Mommy, I want charms."

She turns her wide-eyed attention towards the little boy—her son. Holy shit, she’s a mother. Is this why she cut me off? Was she worried that I’d freak that she’s got a kid?

Am I freaked about the fact that she’s a mom? I think about it for a second and decide that I’m not freaked by it. In fact, it doesn’t bother me one bit. I never thought about dating a woman with a kid... hell, I never thought about dating anyone before... but Addy having a kid has no bearing on whether or not I want to date her.

“Okay, we will get some. Can you apologize to the nice man for running into him?”

Nice man? What the fuck. Is she really going to pretend that she doesn’t know me? Did I wake up in the fucking Twilight Zone?

“Sorry,” he says, burying his face in Addy’s shoulder.

“It’s okay, little man,” I say.

He squeezes Addy tighter, and she pats his back.

“I should finish shopping. It’s almost nap time.”

Anger, hot and fiery, bubbles up inside me. She’s really going to act like nothing happened between us.

“That’s it? That’s all you have to say after a week of radio silence?”

She closes her eyes and swallows thickly. “Axel, I just... I can’t, okay?”

“No, it’s not okay. I’ve been driving myself crazy with worry, and here you are pretending like nothing has happened,” I growl.

“I’m sorry,” she says sincerely. “I thought it would be easier this way.”

“You thought wrong, doll.”

She opens her mouth to say something but closes it again.

“Just tell me why,” I push.

Her son wriggles in her hold, trying to get down, but she holds on tight like she's using him for a shield. "It's nothing you did," she finally says.

I feel a little relief at knowing it wasn't me that sent her running, but if not me, then why.

"Then what happened? I thought we were on the same page, and everything was going good."

She finally lets her squirming son down and watches as he runs to find his cereal. She hugs herself, keeping herself closed off from me. I hate it.

"Look, I'm just not in a place to start anything. It was a mistake."

I close the scant distance between us and cup her face with my hands. Without a second thought, I crush my lips to hers right there in the middle of the grocery store for God and everyone to see. I lick her bottom lip, and she opens for me. I deepen the kiss, losing myself in the moment.

She comes to her senses and rips her lips away from mine. She steps away, her hand covering her lips as her eyes seek out her son. She seems to relax when she sees he's not paying us any attention.

"You can't tell me we are a mistake."

She shakes her head. "I'm sorry. I can't do this."

"I thought we were going to be friends. Everyone needs friends," I say. I know I'm pushing her, but if I let her walk away now, I'll never see her again.

Her eyes fall closed, and she makes a pained noise. "I can't just be your friend. I don't know how."

Hope blooms in my chest for the first time in a week. She didn't say she couldn't be friends. She said she couldn't just be friends. That means she wants more with me, and she's denying herself for some reason.

"What do you mean, doll?" I ask, not wanting any more misunderstandings between us.

“It means I suck at casual, okay? I can’t do it. It was a mistake to even try.”

“Then fuck casual. We can be more than that. I want more than that.” If there’s a hint of pleading in my tone, I don’t care. I want her, and I’m not leaving here without her.

“Now’s not a good time,” she says, watching her son as he pulls several boxes of cereal off the shelf.

“Because of him?” I ask. I need to get to the bottom of her hesitation.

“Among other things, but yes. Henry has to be my top priority.”

“I’m not asking you to change your priorities. There’s room in your life for both of us. It’s not an all-or-nothing kind of thing.”

She shakes her head. “You don’t want to date someone with the kind of baggage I come with. Just let it go, Axel. Let me go.” Her last words are said in a pleading tone.

I should walk away. Be the bigger man and listen, but I’m not the bigger man right now. I’m a desperate man who will stop at nothing to get his woman back.

“I can’t just walk away. Not now that I found you.” A single tear falls from her eye and trails down her cheek. I quickly swipe it away. “Don’t cry, babygirl.”

She sucks in a breath, and her eyes widen. She’s about to say something when Henry walks between us, his arms laden with cereal boxes.

“Got the cereal, mommy,” he says proudly.

She shakes her head in amusement, taking the boxes from his arms. “Are you sure we need all of these?” she asks him.

“Yep! I got all the good ones.”

Most parents would probably argue and put the cereal back, but Addy just ruffles his hair and adds the boxes to her cart. She obviously has a hard time saying no to her little boy.

A devious thought occurs to me, and before I can talk myself out of it, I'm kneeling down and tapping Henry on the shoulder. He turns to me and gives me a weary look.

"Hey, little man. I was wondering if you and your mommy would like to get some ice cream with me."

His little eyes light up, and he looks up at Addy. "Can we, mommy?"

Her eyes narrow as she looks at me, knowing she's officially been had. "You don't play fair," she says to me.

"All's fair in love and war," I say.

"And this is neither," she replies.

"Says you."

Henry pulls on her shirt, bouncing around, saying 'please' over and over again.

She lets out a frustrated sigh, glaring at me. "Okay, okay. We'll go get ice cream."

"Yay!" Henry says, clapping his hands in excitement.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Addy

WHAT ARE THE ODDS THAT WE'D RUN INTO AXEL ON OUR weekly trip to the grocery store? Pretty good, apparently. When I decided to break things off, I never considered that we would bump into each other outside the club. And, of course, when we do bump into each other, I have Henry with me.

The surprised look on his face when he realized I was a mother was expected. I had hoped he'd understand that I cut him off with good reason and just let it go. That's not Axel though. He's stubborn and thinks he still wants me despite my being a mom. If only he knew about the rest of my baggage.

Maybe if I tell him about William and how I have no more love to give, he'll be scared away and run for the hills. I don't want to talk about the accident or William, though, so that's not an option.

I still can't believe Axel invited Henry and me to get ice cream like it was the best idea ever. He totally played into my mom guilt. I'm both angry at his sneakiness and excited to spend time with him. It's a terrible idea to let Henry spend any time with Axel. The whole point of keeping things casual was to keep the men in my life away from Henry. Now I've been backed into a corner that I can't get out of without upsetting him.

Axel helps me load my groceries into the back of my car while I strap Henry into his car seat. I fiddle with the straps a little longer than necessary, trying to get my bearings. I can do this. We can go have ice cream and talk things out. In the end,

he'll understand that it's for the best that we don't see each other again.

I can do this.

I shut the car door, and Axel is standing there waiting. His arms are crossed over his chest, the muscles in his arms bulging. Lord, he's sexy. Especially when he's eating me up with his eyes. Even though I'm wearing simple jeans and a t-shirt, he's still looking at me like I'm the sexiest thing he's ever seen. It's a heady feeling. A dangerous feeling.

"I'll follow you to the ice cream shop," he says.

Of course he's not going to let me out of his sight. He probably thinks I'm going to run as soon as he does. Honestly, the idea did run through my mind a time or two. But I won't do that. Hiding away obviously didn't do anything but hurt us both. Talking things out is the only other option.

"Okay. See you there..."

It's a quick drive down the block to Sammy's Ice Cream Shop. Too quick. As soon as Axel was out of sight, my anxiety ratcheted up. I've never been in this situation before and have no idea how to proceed. I want to call Pelar and ask her. She always has the answers, but there's no time. It's all on me; I'm obviously not good at making smart decisions.

I sit in my parked car, trying to talk myself into getting out instead of just driving off. I'm considering the benefits of running away when Axel opens my car door. Guess running is off the table. He reaches in and helps me out of the car like a gentleman.

"Thanks," I whisper, unable to find my voice.

I get Henry out of his seat, and he immediately squirms out of my hold. I grab his hand so he doesn't run off into the parking lot.

"Hands, buddy."

He grips my hand tight in his little one and pulls me towards the ice cream shop and the treat he's so excited for. Axel puts his hand on my lower back, and I feel it to my core.

The simple touch has my body waking up again. I side-step out of his reach, but he just follows, resting his hand back on me.

Yeah, he's not catching the hint. This is going to be more complicated than I thought.

He opens the door for us and ushers us inside. Henry pulls from my hold and rushes to the counter. He stands on his tiptoes, trying to see into the case. Before I can reach for him to pick him up so he can see the different flavors, Axel is there lifting him up. My heart catches in my chest at the sight of him holding my son. He picked him up casually like he'd done it a million times, and it was no big deal. Maybe it isn't a big deal to him, but it's a huge deal for me.

Henry has never had a man in his life other than his grandpa. I never intended for Axel and Henry to meet. I'm so outside my comfort zone I don't know what to think. How did a casual scene or two turn into us hanging out together with my son? How did everything get so messy so fast?

"What flavor do you want, little man?" Axel asks Henry.

"Nilla with sprinkles!"

"Vanilla with sprinkles it is, kiddo."

Axel tells the attendant what Henry wants, ordering an ice cream sundae for himself. "What do you want, doll?"

I look at the options. "A chocolate cone, please."

When I move to get my wallet out of my bag, Axel growls and gently pushes me out of the way so he can pay. I want to argue with him, but I also don't want to make a scene. Ice cream in hand, I follow him to a table in a quiet corner of the shop. Henry jumps onto the booth seat and digs into his ice cream with gusto.

I sit next to him and take a lick of my ice cream. The chocolatey flavor hits my tongue, and I make a little hum of pleasure. I might be in an incredibly awkward situation, but the small joy of good ice cream can't be denied.

Axel watches me closely as I eat my cone. I realize belatedly that I should have probably gotten a cup instead. I never realized how much sexual tension can grow between two people just from eating some ice cream.

“We need to talk...” I start even though talking is the last thing I want to do.

“Yes, we do. I want to know why you’re holding back.”

Geez, go right to the heart of the matter, why don’t he.

“I thought I would be able to keep things casual. Just have some fun. Dip my toes back into the lifestyle...” I close my eyes, not able to continue.

I was so naïve to think that about myself. It seemed so innocuous when I was talking to people online. Even meeting someone from the internet felt less complicated. Who knew that meeting someone in person would be so different? I can’t help but wonder if I had met someone other than Axel that night if I’d be in the same position I’m in right now. I don’t think I would. There’s just something about Axel that feels... right. And the fact that it feels right means it’s so wrong.

“Go on,” he says, pushing me to continue. He’s always pushing me for more. I should hate it, but I don’t. I like that he doesn’t let me hide. Which is part of the problem.

“Then I met you and realized it wouldn’t be possible. I’m not built for a casual relationship. That’s why we can’t continue.”

He reaches across the table and grabs my hand before I can pull it away. “I don’t understand why you’re so stuck on things being casual. We started something good, and I want to see it through.”

I look down at our clasped hands. His tanned and strong, mine pale and dainty in his grasp. Such opposites. We’re in different places in our lives. Continuing with him will end in more heartache when he realizes what a mess I am. Not to mention the whole ready-made family situation. Henry and I are a package deal. That’s a lot for any man to handle.

“I don’t think that’s a good idea.”

“I know you’re scared, but you’ll never know if it can work out if you don’t step out of your comfort zone and try. Take a chance on us.” The sincerity in his voice rings through loud and clear. He really does want to try.

I chew on my bottom lip. My heart is thumping hard in my chest at the thought of seeing where things go between us. Can I take a chance? Is it worth the potential heartbreak if things don’t work out later? I just don’t know. And there’s Henry to think about. I don’t want him to get attached only to be upset if Axel disappears from our lives later.

“What about Henry?” I ask, needing to know how he feels about the fact that I have a son.

“What about him?” Axel asks.

“When we started you didn’t sign up to be with a single mother.”

He turns his attention to my ice cream covered son as he considers his response. I wish I could crawl inside his brain and hear his thoughts.

“It’s a surprise since you never mentioned him, but you having a kid isn’t a deal breaker for me.”

I let out a breath I didn’t know I was holding. He wants a relationship with me and he’s okay with Henry. I’m running out of excuses.

“Just go on a date with me. Away from the club. Let’s see if we are compatible in other ways before you find another roadblock for me to break down.” He sounds so reasonable that I find myself nodding in agreement.

“One date...”

“Just one.”

I take a deep, steadying breath. “Okay. One date.”

Henry finishes his ice cream, and I clean him up. “Was that good, buddy?”

“Yep!”

“Can you thank Axel for buying it for you?”

“Thank you,” he says shyly.

“You’re welcome, little man.”

After I get Henry strapped back into his car seat, I find Axel leaning against the side of my car, waiting. I give him a questioning look because I thought he had left already. I let out a little squeal when he pulls me against his chest and kisses the hell out of me. I melt against him, kissing him back with just as much passion. By the time we break apart, I’m completely dazed... and turned on. So freakin’ turned on.

“What was that for?” I ask, gasping for breath.

“I want you to think about that kiss every time you try to talk yourself out of our date tomorrow night.”

“I won’t back out.”

He leans in and gives me a quick kiss. “I know you won’t.”

As soon as I’m in the car, I pull out my phone and text a quick message to Marsha asking if she can babysit tomorrow night. I cross my fingers that she says yes because now that I’ve agreed, I feel both excitement and nerves at the possibilities.

I LOOK at myself in the mirror and decide I hate my outfit. I go back to my closet and dig through my clothes for something else to wear. Marsha should be here any minute, and Axel will be here in thirty minutes to pick me up for our date. I pull out a black dress and hold it up to me, considering.

Ugh. I don’t like it either.

I don’t like anything. I should’ve gone shopping instead of trying to find something in my closet. Not that I had time to go shopping. I’m being ridiculous. Axel saw me yesterday in ratty jeans and a t-shirt with not a lick of makeup on my face, and he still looked at me like I was the sexiest thing he’s ever seen.

I close my closet and take one last look in the mirror. I look fine. My hair hangs down around my shoulders in a smooth sheet, my makeup is on point, and my red dress hugs my curves. I look good. It's just nerves.

My phone dings, and I rush to grab it in case it's Axel. It's not him; it's Marsha.

Hey. I hate doing this at the last minute, but I have to cancel tonight. I think I'm coming down with something and don't want to expose Henry to it.

Disappointment hits me like a mack truck. I didn't realize until this moment how much I was looking forward to this date. I plop down on the edge of my bed, sulking just a little. With a deep sigh, I pick up my phone and dial Axel's number.

"Hey, doll. I'm just pulling in."

My eyes widen, and I check the time. He's early. Crap.

"I was just calling to tell you that the babysitter had to cancel so we have to reschedule our date..."

"Like hell," he growls. "I'm not giving you another day to talk yourself out of seeing me."

"I won't talk myself out of it. I was looking forward to tonight," I admit with a blush. Thank God he can't see me blushing like a schoolgirl.

"Me too, doll. Our night doesn't have to be ruined. We can just stay in. Order pizza and watch a movie."

I chew my lip thinking about Henry. It's not a good idea to have them spend so much time together before I even know if Axel will stay around. It's a risk. I don't have the chance to tell him no before he knocks on my door.

Shit.

I could still send him away. It's not too late to back down from this insanity.

"Open the door, doll." His voice rumbles sexily down the phone line, tempting me.

I find myself walking to the door like a puppet on a string. I'll just open the door and tell him that he needs to go...

The second the door opens my resolve melts away. Axel is standing in the doorway, phone to his ear and flowers in his hand. He's wearing black slacks and a black button-down shirt that's stretched tight over his muscular chest. He looks good enough to eat.

"You going to let me in or stare at me some more?" he asks with a sexy smirk.

I open the door wider for him. To hell with telling him to go away. It might be a bad idea, but apparently, I'm full of bad decisions these days. He hangs up his phone and slides it into his pocket as he steps inside my space for the first time. A little wave of anxiety hits me over what he will think of my place. It's small but perfect for just me and Henry.

Axel reaches up and grabs my phone from my hand. I didn't even realize I was still holding it up to my ear. I was so gobsmacked by his appearance that I forgot all about it. He tosses my phone on the entryway table, then pulls me into his arms. I'm not at all surprised when he crushes his lips to mine in a passionate kiss. He licks at my bottom lip, and I open for him, letting his tongue delve inside to dance with mine.

I lose myself in his arms. All of my doubts fly out the window as he kisses me like he needs me to breathe. I return the kiss with just as much fervor. When he pulls away, I'm reluctant to let him go. I like how I forget all my worries while in his arms. He has a way of erasing all of my troubles. It scares me a little that he has that kind of effect on me, but at the same time, I want more.

I'm just about to pull him down for another kiss when Henry walks into the room carrying his favorite trains. He gives Axel a curious look.

"Hey, buddy. You remember Axel. He's going to hang out with us for a little while tonight."

"Hey, little man."

"Did you bring ice cream?" Henry asks.

I shake my head and realize that a little ice cream is all it would take to win him over. Maybe tonight won't be so bad after all.

"No ice cream, but I thought we could order some pizza."

Henry's eyes light up. "Pizza!" he yells, then runs around the living room in circles like a wild child.

"I take it he likes pizza?" Axel asks, clearly amused.

"You could say that. We don't order takeout often."

"Good, then this will be a treat."

"He's going to think he's getting something special every time you're around. First ice cream and now pizza," I say, trying to put disapproval in my tone.

"Gotta get the kid on my side somehow," he teases.

Axel orders pizza while I change into something more appropriate for a night at home. He gives me a heated look when I walk out of my bedroom in skinny jeans and a tank top. The promise in his eyes speaks of naughty things to come, and I'm totally there for it.

Henry pulls Axel into his bedroom to show him all of his trains. To his credit, Axel sits on the floor and patiently listens as Henry tells him all the names of his favorite trains, then shows him how they work on the track. My heart clenches at seeing my son and him together. And when Axel starts playing with him... my ovaries explode a little.

The pizza arrives, and I pull my guys away from their game. Crap, did I just think of Axel as my guy? Yes, I did.

We eat dinner at the kitchen table, and again, my heart clenches. Everything is going so well that I'm waiting for the other shoe to drop. Waiting for Henry to freak out or for Axel to realize how much work goes into having a kid around and bolt... but it doesn't happen.

After dinner, I give Henry his bath and get ready to tuck him in. When he picks his two favorite books and runs to the other room to hand them to Axel my heart once again clenches in my chest. Axel carries my son into his room and tucks him

into bed, then proceeds to read him his books, making all the appropriate voices as he does. It's the cutest thing I've ever seen.

Henry falls asleep, and we tiptoe out of his room, quietly closing the door. As soon as the door is shut, Axel has me pinned to the wall. His lips find mine, and I let out a little whimpering sound.

“Shh... babygirl. Don't want to wake Henry,” he growls lowly into my ear. He sucks the lobe between his teeth and gives it a little nip. Goosebumps pebble on my skin when he licks the sting away.

I cling to his shoulders as he kisses up and down my neck. I'm a panting mess by the time his lips crash down onto mine again. He cups my breast over my shirt and rubs his thumb over my hardened nipple. I arch into his touch, craving more. I thread my fingers through his hair, kissing him frantically.

“Bedroom?” he growls against my lips.

My lust-filled brain has a moment of hesitation over inviting him to my bed. This was only supposed to be a date to see if we were compatible. We already know we catch fire when we are together physically. He tweaks my nipple and kisses my neck. I don't know if it's a good choice or not, but I want him, and this time I'm not going to deny myself.

Before I can talk myself out of it, I grab his hand and drag him to my bedroom.

“Strip, babygirl.”

My pussy practically drips at the command in his voice. I obey without hesitation. I pull my shirt off, then wiggle my tight pants off. I stand in front of him in nothing but a bright red bra and panties.

“Fuck. Look at you.” I shift on my feet, feeling a little self-conscious at his blatant appreciation of my body. “Don't get shy on me now. Lose the bra and panties.”

“What about you?”

He reaches for the buttons on his shirt and undoes them. His shirt falls to the floor, and he quickly shucks his pants leaving him in nothing but his tight black boxers. I reach behind my back and unclasp my bra. My panties are the next to go, then I'm standing naked in front of the sexiest man I've ever seen.

My breath catches when he picks me up and tosses me on the bed. I bite back my squeal of surprise, not wanting to wake Henry. Axel crawls over me and takes one nipple into his mouth, biting down lightly. I squirm under him as he tortures my nipple with his teeth. When he sucks the tender bud, laving it with his tongue, I moan louder than I should.

“Better be quiet, babygirl,” Axel says, amused.

I nod my head quickly. “Quiet.”

He goes back to teasing my nipples. I chew my bottom lip, biting back all the sounds I desperately want to make. I squirm under Axel when he starts kissing his way down my stomach. He licks my belly button, and I giggle at the ticklish sensation. My giggles are broken by a quiet moan as he spreads my legs wider and takes his first lick of my pussy.

“Oh God,” I gasp.

“Quiet.” He reminds me, then goes about eating my pussy like it's his full-time job.

I cover my mouth with my hand when it becomes obvious that I cannot hold back my moans of pleasure. Especially not when he sucks my clit and thrusts two fingers deep inside me. Quicker than ever before, I'm riding the very edge of orgasm. Just before I tip over that edge, I remember rule number two.

“Can I come?” I gasp. “Please, daddy...”

He looks up at me from between my legs and sucks hard on my clit, his fingers crooking inside me to massage my g-spot. The look in his eyes is a dare. He's driving me higher on purpose, making me hold out until I can't stand it anymore.

“Come, babygirl,” he commands.

Finally, he's set me free. One more lick of my clit, and I'm soaring a million miles above the ground. He doesn't stop until I push at his head to get him to leave my too-sensitive clit alone. With one final lick, he rises from the bed and removes his boxers. His cock springs free, long and hard. I reach for him, but he shakes his head.

"Not yet, babygirl. We need to have a little talk about punishment."

"Punishment?"

Quicker than I thought possible, he has me over his knee. His hand crashes down on my ass in a painful smack. The sound rings through the room, and I hold my breath, wondering if it's enough to wake Henry up. When there isn't a sound from the other room, I relax over Axel's lap.

"Do you know why I'm spanking you?" he asks, sounding disappointed.

My throat constricts because I hate the idea of anyone being disappointed in me. "Why, daddy?" I manage to ask.

"Because you let me worry about you for days on end." His hand falls in steady spans as he speaks. "You aren't allowed to do that again. If there's a problem, you talk to me. Rule number three, always truth between us."

I'm barely holding back tears when he finishes spanking me. It's not that it hurt so much as his words were a punch to the gut. He's right. I never should've ghosted him like I did. I should've told him about my concerns and figured things out from there. Even if I decided to end it with him, he deserved to hear it from me instead of me avoiding him.

He pulls me up on his lap and cups my cheek. "No more hiding from me. Okay, babygirl?"

I wrap my arms around his neck and hold on tight. "Okay, daddy. I won't do it again."

We sit there quietly for a moment. Me with my head on his shoulder, him stroking my back. It doesn't take long for my desire to rise again. I squirm on his lap, feeling his hard cock

against my thigh. I reach between us and give him a firm stroke.

He stands with me in his arms, then gently lays me back on the bed. He picks up his pants and pulls out a condom.

“I’m on the pill.”

His eyes flash with lust. “Are you sure?”

I nod. “I’m clean... you’re clean...”

He drops the condom and crawls on top of me. He kisses me deep and slow. He spreads my legs, and I hook them around his hips, opening myself up for him to settle between my thighs. The heat of his cock on my pussy has me shifting underneath him, seeking friction. I don’t have to wait long. He reaches between us and lines himself up with my entrance. He thrusts into me in a long, slow glide.

I moan at the delicious feeling of being stretched by his thick cock. Once he’s buried inside me, he stays there, kissing me deeply. He pulls out slowly, then thrusts back inside me just as slowly. He sets a maddening pace that has me clawing at his back and begging for more.

I’m delirious with need by the time he hooks my leg over his shoulder and gives me a hard, quick thrust. The new angle has him hitting my g-spot every time. It’s exquisite. My orgasm builds from deep inside, and I just know when it hits, it’s going to wreck me.

“Your pussy feels so fucking good, babygirl. So hot and tight. Tell me, whose pussy is this?”

“Yours, daddy,” I moan, trying to stay quiet but failing miserably.

“That’s right. This is my pussy.” He punctuates each word with a devastating thrust. “Mine. My pussy. My babygirl.”

“Yes, yes, yes!” I cry out, completely forgetting to be quiet.

“Come on my cock, babygirl. I want to feel this pussy squeeze me dry.”

I've never been able to come on command before, but this man owns my body and my orgasms. My pussy tightens around his thrusting cock as my climax claims me. His hand claps down on my mouth as I scream out my orgasm. He fucks me straight through my orgasm, then buries himself deep. I let out a low moan at the feel of his cock throbbing inside me as he fills me with his release.

He collapses on top of me, and I wrap myself around his body. He shifts to move so he's not squishing me, but I don't want him to go. Not yet.

"Stay..." I say into his neck as I grip him tighter.

"I don't want to crush you."

"I like you on top of me like this."

Instead of moving, he kisses me sweetly. When I finally let him up, he goes to the attached bathroom and gets a cloth. He cleans me between my legs, then climbs into bed with me. I cuddle against him loving his arms around me.

Sometime later we both manage to pull on some clothes because sleeping naked with Henry around is just not an option. That would make for one awkward morning. It would probably be wise to send Axel home. Having a sleepover is moving things a little fast, but I don't want him to leave.

So, being the queen of bad decisions, I decide to let him stay and enjoy being wrapped up in his arms as I fall asleep.

I wake up still cuddled in Axel's arms. I remember how good it feels to be held and to wake up beside someone. A twinge of guilt mars my good feelings. I shouldn't feel so much for a man that's not my husband. I push those thoughts away and try to just enjoy the moment.

Axel's breathing is slow and steady. I relax into his hold and drift back to sleep, feeling cherished and loved.

Loved?

It's way too soon for that... but it's possible in the future. For the first time in over three years, I'm looking toward the future and not dwelling on the past.

I JERK awake and look at the clock. It's after seven, and Henry didn't wake me up. My mom instincts have me freaking out for a minute. Then I realize I'm in bed alone. Axel left without saying goodbye. A stab of sadness hits me square in the chest.

I'm ready to have a real pout when I hear laughter from the other room. I hop out of bed and follow the sounds coming from my kitchen. I stand in the doorway, shocked at what I'm seeing. A shirtless Axel is helping a shirtless Henry stir something in an obviously too-small bowl. There is stuff all over the kitchen counter and the floor, and both of my guys.

I look on amused at the mess being made.

"You're up," Axel says with a smile.

I can't hold back my smile. "I am."

"We're making you breakfast, mommy!"

"I see that."

Axel rubs the back of his neck, looking a little uncomfortable. "He wanted to make you pancakes. He didn't tell me he's a little destructacon when it comes to helping."

I throw my head back and laugh. "He's three and a half. What did you expect?"

"Less flour everywhere?"

Henry continues to happily stir the batter, slopping it over the sides of the bowl. "How about you let mommy finish breakfast?"

He considers it for a minute, then shrugs and jumps off the stool. I catch him around the waist before he can run through the house dragging flour everywhere. A quick wipe down with a wet dish towel, and I send him on his way.

I toss the towel to Axel, and he wipes the flour from his chest. He drops the towel on the counter, then I'm in his arms,

and he's kissing me. I wrap my arms around his neck and return the kiss.

"Hi," I say when the kiss ends.

"Hi, doll. Sleep good?"

I nod shyly. "Better than I have in a long time."

"I'm glad."

He leans in for another brief kiss. I let out a contented sigh when he pulls away. I could definitely get used to morning kisses.

"Now, let's make some pancakes before Henry becomes a hangry monster."

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Axel

AFTER BREAKFAST, ADDY SENDS HENRY OFF TO PLAY WHILE we clean up the kitchen. The little minx purposely rubs up against me every time she passes by. My cock throbs behind my zipper, and I want nothing more than to bend her over the counter and fuck her into next week. The sounds of Henry playing in the next room cools my ardor but just barely.

Addy gives the counter one last swipe with her rag, then smiles up at me. “Good as new.”

I take her hand in mine and guide her to the bedroom. A quick peek inside Henry’s room on the way lets me know he’s thoroughly distracted with his toys. I quietly close the door, then spin her around so she’s backed against it.

“What are you doing?” she asks, sounding breathless.

“Kissing you,” I reply, pressing my lips to hers.

Instantly her lips part, and her tongue meets mine. She runs her hands up and down my bare chest, drawing a groan from me. Fuck, her touch feels good. Her hands stray even lower until she’s cupping my stiff cock.

“What are you doing, babygirl?”

She gently pushes me backward, then falls to her knees in front of me. I cup her jaw and tilt her face up so she’s looking right at me. Her beautiful blue eyes are hooded with arousal at the thought of my cock in her mouth.

Jesus, what this woman does to me.

“Can I suck your cock, daddy?” she purrs.

“How could I ever deny you when you ask so sweetly?”

She makes quick work of undoing my pants and pushing them down my thighs so my cock springs free. My girl doesn't hesitate. She grabs me in a tight fist as her mouth encircles my cock. She hollows her cheeks, sucking me hard and fast. My knees nearly buckle at the intense pleasure. I slap my hand on the wall to steady myself, then bury my other hand in her hair.

When I grip her hair tight in my fist, she moans around my cock. The vibration sends a shockwave of pleasure through me. The whole time she sucks me, her eyes never stray from mine. It's a heady sight.

“I'm gonna come, babygirl.”

She hums around my cock, taking me deep and swallowing around me. That's all it takes. My balls draw up tight to my body, and I explode. Addy doesn't back away, she swallows down my release, and when she pulls off my cock, she licks her lips like I just gave her her favorite treat.

She gets to her feet and presses a kiss to my chest. I hold her against me like she's the most precious thing in my world while I catch my breath.

“You okay?” she asks with a teasing smile.

I pinch her ass in reproach. She giggles and dances away from my reach. I watch her ass sway as she walks into her closet. I'm just buttoning my pants when she comes out wearing a flirty dress. From how her nipples press against the material, I know she's not wearing a bra. The thought of her tits unencumbered by the constricting clothing has my cock reacting again already.

“You look amazing, doll.”

She laughs, shaking her head. “I look like I spent the night in bed with a man. My hair is wrecked, and I have a hickey on my neck.”

“Like I said, you look amazing.” I open my arms, and she walks right into them. “I happen to like you looking a little disheveled with my marks all over you.”

She lightly slaps my chest. “You’re such a man.”

“Your man.”

A little look of doubt crosses her features. Before I can ask her what’s wrong, Henry is barreling into the room at top speed.

“Can we watch trains?”

Addy looks at me with the same look of consternation, then turns her attention to Henry.

“Sure thing, buddy.”

“Yay!” He immediately grabs her hand and drags her to the living room.

I find my shirt and finish getting dressed. I glance at my phone screen and growl when I notice the time. I have to leave soon if I’m going to have time to go home and shower before work. The last thing I want to do is leave, but I can’t leave Aiden high and dry on a Saturday.

I find Henry and Addy sitting on the couch while some show with talking trains plays on the TV.

“Watch the trains, Axel,” Henry says, holding his little hand out for me.

Addy smiles when I sit beside her. All traces of whatever was bothering her are nowhere to be seen. I reach for her hand and thread my fingers through hers. She gives my hand a little squeeze. I want to make sure she’s okay but now’s not the time.

We watch two episodes of Henry’s cartoon then he tells Addy he’s hungry.

She gives my hand another squeeze before she stands to make him lunch. I follow her into the kitchen and watch as she puts together a peanut butter and honey sandwich.

“Do you want something?” she asks with another bright smile.

“No thanks, doll. I actually need to go. I have to be at work soon.”

Her smile falls for a second, that look of doubt flickering through her eyes again.

“What’s wrong?” I ask.

She just shrugs. “Nothing’s wrong.”

“Rule number three, babygirl,” I warn.

“I’m just waiting for the other shoe to drop, I guess. For you to figure out all of this is too much for you...” Her eyes well with unshed tears, and her bottom lip trembles.

“Aw, doll, you’re breaking my heart,” I say, then pull her into my arms.

“I’m sorry,” she says with a sniffle. “I’m not used to good things happening, and right now, this all feels too good to be true.”

“I’m not going anywhere unless you ask me to.”

“I’m just scared. This is a lot. We went from casual play partners to friends, to nothing, to whatever we are now.”

“I know you’re scared, babygirl. I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t a little nervous myself. I’ve never had a girlfriend before, and I’m not sure I know how to be a boyfriend,” I admit.

Addy wipes her cheeks dry. “You’re doing a pretty good job so far.”

“Good.” I kiss her softly and then groan when I see the clock. “I have to go.”

“I know,” she says, looking forlorn.

“Don’t look so sad, doll. You’ll see me again soon.”

“I know. I’m being silly.”

Henry picks that moment to interrupt. There are so many things I want to say to reassure him but can’t in front of him.

“I’m hungry,” he whines.

“I know, buddy. We’ll have lunch in just a minute. Axel is getting ready to leave. Can you tell him bye?”

Instead of just a simple bye like I expect, Henry throws his little arms around my legs and hugs me. I put my hand on the back of his head and hold him to me.

“Bye!” he says, disappearing back into the living room.

Addy watches him go with a surprised look on her face. Probably as surprised as I am that he hugged me. She walks me to the front door, and I kiss her goodbye.

“I’ll call you after my shift.”

“Okay,” she says with a smile. “I look forward to it.”

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Addy

IT'S BEEN THREE DAYS SINCE I'VE SEEN AXEL, AND I MISS HIM like crazy. Which is dumb because we've talked on the phone every night after his shifts. It's just not the same. When he's right in front of me, it's easy to forget all the reasons we shouldn't be together. When we are apart, the doubts start creeping in, followed by the guilt of moving on.

Survivors' guilt is what they call it. All I know is without him here, my mind strays to dark places. All I can think about is William being gone and my betrayal since I'm moving on with another man. It might not be rational, but I can't completely ignore my guilt.

My phone rings, and I frown. It's way too early for Axel to be calling. I pick it up and see my mom's picture flash across the screen. Crap. Things have been tense since the move, and every conversation has ended badly. Usually she only calls to video chat with Henry, only giving me cursory greetings... sometimes the random jab at how disappointed she is in how I'm living my life.

It sucks that we've grown so far apart, but I did what was best for Henry and me. I have zero regrets about moving away.

"Hey, mom."

"Addy, how are you?"

She sounds downright cheerful to be speaking to me. That's new...

"I'm okay. How are you and dad?"

“Fine, fine. I just wanted to call and let you know we’ve decided to come for a visit.”

My mouth falls open. I couldn’t be more shocked by her little announcement if the Easter Bunny hopped into my room and took a shit on my floor.

“A visit,” I ask, needing clarification.

“Of course, darling. It’s been six months. That’s plenty of time for you guys to be settled. And we do miss Henry so much. And since you stubbornly refuse to come home, we figured we’d just come to you.”

There’s that little stab of guilt trip I was waiting for. I knew she couldn’t hold it back for long.

“When are you thinking about coming?” I ask even though I don’t really want to know.

I love my parents and appreciate everything they did for Henry and me, but I don’t want my mom steamrolling into my new life and casting judgment all over the place.

“We thought we’d visit for your birthday since it’s right around the corner.”

I have to think about it for a minute. My birthday hasn’t been on my radar for years, but she’s right. It’s only ten days away. Holy hell, where has the time gone?

“That soon?” I ask, hoping I misheard.

“Yep! Already booked a cute little bed and breakfast since I know your place won’t accommodate guests.”

Great. Another little jab at how I’m choosing to live my life. Mom thinks that I’m throwing William’s money away by renting. I can hear her lecture on how buying is so much better. But the problem with that is she wants me to buy a nice little house across town so she can run my life again.

“That sounds lovely,” I lie. “Do you need me to pick you up from the airport?”

“Oh no, dear. We are renting a car. Wouldn’t want to inconvenience you.”

Man, those hits just keep coming. This woman knows all the best ways to guilt trip me, and unfortunately, they all hit home and make me feel like shit.

“It really would be a bother to pick you up.”

“No, no, dear. We’ve got it all handled.”

“If you’re sure.”

“Oh dear, look at the time. It’s getting late. I just wanted to tell you the good news.”

“Definitely some big news,” I say because it being good news is still to be determined. I know Henry will be excited to see them, but it’s questionable on my end based on how my mother treats me.

“See you soon, darling.”

She hangs up before I can even respond. I drop my phone on the bed, feeling like I just went up against a tornado and lost. Well fuck. My parents are coming to visit. I’m still reeling when my phone rings two hours later.

“Hey, doll.”

“Hey, handsome. How was your night?”

“Busier than normal, but good. How was yours?”

I flop onto my back and let out a sigh.

“Ut oh. Something’s up...” he says.

I’ve been waffling back and forth the last two hours on whether I should tell him about my parent’s visit. It’s too soon in our fledgling relationship to bring up parents and family drama. At the same time, I can’t exactly hide the fact that they’ll be here either.

“Tell me what’s wrong, babygirl.”

“It’s nothing, really. Just that my parents are coming to town, and I just found out.”

“And that’s a bad thing?” he asks.

“No, yes, no. Oh, hell, I don’t know. I haven’t seen them since we moved six months ago.”

“Did you leave on bad terms?”

Ugh. Answering that will open up a can of worms that I’m definitely not ready to talk about. Especially not over the phone. Spilling my guts about my deceased husband and how I’m barely over my depression and still in the throes of grief isn’t the easiest thing to do.

“Not really. It’s just complicated.”

Axel chuckles. “Doll, all families are complicated.”

“I guess you’re right.”

“I’m always right,” he says.

“If you say so.”

“Oh, I know so. I’ll prove it to you with my hand on that sexy ass of yours.”

That makes me giggle. “You’re a tease.”

“No teasing here, doll. The next time I see you, I’m going to paint your ass red and then fuck you until you black out.”

My pussy clenches at the promise in his tone.

“You want that, don’t you, babygirl?”

“Yes, daddy,” I say in a hoarse whisper.

“Good girl.”

Were my panties wet before? Those two words have them soaked. I love when he calls me his good girl. I could live for those two words from his lips.

“You could come over...” I say hopefully.

“It’s late, babygirl. You need your sleep. Besides, when I get you alone again, I want you to be able to scream the roof down without scarring Henry for life.”

Oh geez, that sounds good. I definitely want some of that.

“Suddenly, I’m not so tired,” I say.

Axel’s deep chuckle rumbles in my ear. “I know. Just a couple more days.”

“A couple days feels like forever,” I whine.

“I know, doll. I miss you too.”

“At least I’m not alone in this whole missing someone thing.”

“Not alone at all. Get some rest. I’ll talk to you tomorrow.”

“Only if you’re sure you don’t want to come over,” I say, trying again to convince him.

“You know I want to be there...”

“But it’s late,” I interrupt his usual spiel.

“You forgot about the screaming part,” he growls.

“Okay, okay. No more teasing me.”

“Good night, doll. Sleep sweet.”

“You too.”

Despite my argument that I wasn’t tired, I am, in fact, exhausted. I fall asleep as soon as my head hits the pillow.

TONIGHT’S THE NIGHT. Axel is off work, and Marsha is babysitting. I have a date with my daddy in a private room. It’s been a long damn week. One that I’ve spent organizing and purging the whole apartment. You’d be surprised how much can accumulate over half a year.

I pull my hair up on top of my head, determined to finish the last closet today. If I’m being honest with myself, I’ve been avoiding it. I saved it for last because when we moved, I shoved the last few boxes in there and shut the door.

I put Henry down for his nap and try to mentally prepare myself to go through those boxes. I don’t know what’s in them besides that they are from before the accident. Someone—probably my parents—packed up the house that I shared with William, and these are the few things they decided were important enough to keep.

I pull out the three boxes and sit on the floor beside them.

I can do this, I say to myself.

I close my eyes and open the first box. Right on top is the photo album from our wedding. I hug the book to my chest as the first tears fall. I close my eyes and will myself back under control.

I'm strong enough to face this now.

I am.

I set the album aside and start to pull more memories from the boxes. By the time the three boxes are emptied, I've cried all the tears I have left to cry and feel as empty as those boxes. I'm surrounded by my past, and it hurts so bad I can barely breathe.

"Mommy," Henry says from his doorway.

"What is it, buddy?"

"I had an accident," he says, then bursts into tears.

I wipe my own tears from my face and go to my son. I pick him up and carry him to the bathroom.

"It's okay, buddy. Accidents happen. We'll get you cleaned up, then I'll wash the blankets, and it'll be good as new."

"Are you mad?" he asks with a sniffle.

"Never, buddy."

I start the tub and help him out of his wet clothes. By the time he's in the tub with his toys, his tears have long been forgotten, and just like that, he's moved on with his day. I wish it were that easy to move on from everything.

I let Henry play in the bath while I strip his bed and start the wash. I look at the piles of pictures and mementos on my living room floor, feeling overwhelmed by it all. Part of me wants to just box it all up and forget about it, but I'm no longer the woman with her head in the sand. The new me is strong enough to handle this...

Once I have Henry dressed, he asks for some fruit snacks. He stands in the doorway to the living room with his snack and shakes his head.

“You made a mess, mommy.”

“I really did. Want to help me clean it up?”

He comes over to where I’m sitting amongst the mess and plops down on my lap. I cuddle him close for a moment, then start sorting through everything. I fill one of the boxes with things that can be donated and another with garbage. By the time I’m done, I have photo albums, a box full of cards that William gave me over the years, our wedding certificate, and a few other odds and ends.

“Mommy, who’s this?” Henry asks, holding up a picture of a very pregnant me and William.

My fucking heart breaks into a million pieces at his question. I feel like I’ve failed both my son and William. There should’ve been pictures all over the place so I could keep William’s memory alive for Henry, but my selfishness couldn’t handle seeing him. My heartbreak was so all-encompassing that I just couldn’t.

I swallow back my sorrow and shame. It won’t do me any good to hold onto those feelings. It’s time to move forward.

“That’s your daddy,” I tell him.

“I don’t have a daddy,” he says, confused.

“Oh, buddy. Everyone has a daddy.”

“Where is he?”

How do you explain to a three-and-a-half-year-old that his daddy’s dead?

“He’s in heaven.”

“What’s that?”

“It’s where good people go when they die...”

“Like Maisy?” he asks.

Maisy was my parent's dog that died a year ago. I'm surprised he remembers that, but I'm glad he does because it'll make this conversation a little easier.

"Yeah. Like Maisy."

He nods his head like it makes all the sense in the world. Henry starts going through the many photo albums of William and me. I tell him all about the pictures he points out. I swallow back my sadness and humor him as he asks a million questions. I'm completely wrung out when he's finally bored with looking at the pictures.

I send him off to his room to play while I find a home on my shelves for the photo albums and other pictures. Tears track down my face as I tuck William's wedding band into my jewelry box next to my wedding ring.

My phone dings with a text. I wipe away my tears and check it. Axel.

Hey, doll. Can't wait to see you tonight. Don't be late or I'll have to punish you...

I set my phone down without responding. I just don't have it in me. I should cancel tonight. My guilt over trying to look to the future is overwhelming me. It's not fair to him that I'm torn up over my deceased husband.

Looking through everything just proved that I'm not over my grief. I might never be over it. Axel deserves so much more than I can give him. My heart is still broken into little pieces, and I just don't know how much I have to offer.

Henry asks me to play a game, and I welcome the distraction. We play all the way up until dinner time, and I'm thankful for that. He helps me cook, which is another welcome distraction. It's hard to wallow when you've got a smiling, happy kid to spend time with. I'm doing the dinner dishes when there's a knock on the door.

I dry my hands off and answer it. Crap, I forgot to cancel the babysitter. Hell, I haven't even canceled on Axel yet.

"Hey, Addy!" Marsha says, perky as always.

“I’m so sorry, Marsha. I meant to call. I’ve decided not to go out tonight.”

“Why not? You were looking forward to your date.”

I shrug. “I’m just not feeling up to it.”

“What’s wrong, girl?” she asks, concerned.

I swallow thickly, doing my best to hold back the tears that just won’t stop coming. Just when I think I’m all cried out... more tears.

“It’s been a rough day. I went through pictures with Henry of his dad, and I am...” I trail off because I don’t know what I am. A fucking mess, that’s what I am.

She drops her bag to the floor and hugs me. “I can’t imagine how hard that was for you.”

I nod, accepting her hug. I didn’t realize how much I needed a hug from a friend until this moment.

“You shouldn’t cancel your date.”

“Why not?”

“Because Addy. You deserve something for yourself. You’ve been looking forward to this date all week. Don’t let one bad day set you back,” she says, sounding way wiser than the twenty years.

“It feels wrong to go on a date with Axel when I’ve been crying over another man all day.”

She shakes her head. “You’re allowed to grieve. You lost your husband. That’s no small thing, but you’ve come so far. You were a mess when you first moved here, and now look at you. You’re smiling all the time and even dating.”

She’s not wrong. I was a mess when I first moved, and as the months have passed, I’ve dug my way out of my depression and am living life. Maybe she’s right that I should keep my date. Whether I go or stay home, it won’t change my grief. Staying just locks me back in that dark place, and going is a step back into the light.

“You’re right. But look at me, I’m a freaking mess...”

“Nothing that a little makeup can’t fix. Go get ready. I’ll give Henry his bath and get him ready for bed.”

I rush through getting ready, watching the minutes tick away on the clock. If I leave now, I can just barely make it on time. I kiss Henry goodbye and thank Marsha for giving me the kick in the ass I needed.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Axel

MY BREATH CATCHES WHEN I GET MY FIRST GLIMPSE OF ADDY. She's wearing a skintight white dress that hugs her curves almost obscenely. Every man in the club is watching her as she walks towards me. The jealous bastard inside me wants to knock out their teeth, but the other part of me is proud to know that she's all mine.

Let them look. She's here for me and me alone.

As soon as she's within arm's reach, I pull her into my arms and dip her back, kissing the hell out of her for all to see. She lets out a startled sound, wrapping her arms around my neck. Her lips part and I dive in, kissing her like I've been starving for a taste. She's completely breathless by the time I stand her upright.

"Well, hello to you too," she says.

"Everyone is looking at you..."

She looks around and notices that people are looking her way. "I don't know why..."

"Because that dress is obscene, babygirl."

Her bottom lip disappears between her teeth, and she gives me a worried look. "Do you not like it?"

"The problem is I like it too much, and so does every red-blooded man in this place. I had planned on us hanging out at the bar for a little bit and introducing you to some of my friends, but I need you too much."

"I'd like to meet your friends," she says.

I shake my head. “Later.”

I pick her up and throw her over my shoulder. Her skirt raises, and I cover her ass with my hand, not wanting any other fucker to get a look at what’s mine. She squeals and hits my back, telling me to let her down. I slap her ass hard, and she stops protesting. I don’t put her down until we are closed away in our private room.

“Neanderthal,” she says, tugging her dress back into place.

“When it comes to you, I’m a whole lot of things.”

“Like what?” she asks with a smile.

“I’m your daddy, your boyfriend, your man.... Your neanderthal...”

Her smile falls, and a flash of some unknown emotion covers her face. Almost instantly, her smile is back, but that look is still in her eyes. Something is wrong, but she’s trying to hide it from me.

“What’s wrong, babygirl?” I ask, cupping her cheek so she can’t look away from me.

“Nothing. Why do you think somethings wrong?”

“Because I can see it on your face even though you’re trying to hide behind a smile.”

Her smile disappears, and she starts wringing her hands in front of her, a sure sign that something is wrong. “It’s not important,” she says, trying to deflect.

“I’m calling bullshit. Something is bothering you. Is it your parents?” That’s the only thing I can think of that might be upsetting her. She doesn’t seem excited about their upcoming visit.

“It’s not that. It’s really not important... I’m here with you, and I don’t want to ruin our night,” she says, almost pleading with me to let it go.

Like hell, I will.

“You were two minutes late,” I growl.

Her eyes widen. “I didn’t mean to be.”

“But you were. You know what that means don’t you?”

She nods. “You’re going to punish me.”

“You earned a spanking for sure.”

And not just for being late. She’s broken rule number three by holding back on me. Our relationship will never thrive with secrets between us. I need her to know that I’m here for her no matter what. If it takes a spanking over my knee, then that’s what I’ll do.

I sit down on the edge of the bed and pat my knee. She’s back to chewing on her bottom lip and looking repentant as only a babygirl can when she’s about to be spanked. Addy lowers herself over my lap and grips my leg to steady herself. I lift her dress over her ass and push her panties down her thighs.

I rub her ass cheeks, enjoying the feel of her beneath my hand. Her flesh pale and perfect. My cock thickens in my jeans at the thought of it painted red with my handprints. I ignore my lust because this isn’t about me right now. This is about Addy and getting her to open up to me.

“We’ll start with ten.”

She doesn’t even flinch the first time my hand falls on her bottom. By the tenth, she’s squirming over my lap, her ass a pretty shade of pink. I massage her cheeks, rubbing the stinging sensation I know she’s feeling deep into her muscles.

She lets out a groan of pleasure. She enjoyed the spanking even though it hurt... she probably thinks it’s over, and I’m going to fuck her now. She’d be wrong. Her punishment is far from over.

“Why did I spank you?” I ask her.

“Because I was late.”

“That’s right. And now I’m going to spank you for breaking rule number three. Twenty.”

“But—”

Before she can come up with some excuse, I spank her harder than the previous spankings. The first ten were just a warmup. This is her real punishment. I don't hold back. I spank her ass cheeks until they are a bright red, and she's clinging to my leg. Her own legs kick as she squirms to get away. I hook my leg over hers and pin her in place.

"Please! I'm sorry!" she pleads.

I ignore her pleas and continue her spanking, focusing on her sensitive upper thighs. She cries out, and I almost feel bad, but then I remember the purpose of this spanking, and it hardens my resolve. She's hiding from me, and that's not acceptable.

"Five more."

"Oh God, I can't... no more... please, daddy," she begs.

"You can and you will."

I don't drag it out. I give her the last five hard and quick. When the last spank falls, she's limp over my lap, all the fight drained out of her. Exactly what I wanted. What she needs. I lift her up and sit her on my lap. She wriggles as her freshly spanked ass comes in contact with my jeans.

"Are you ready to talk to me now?"

Instead of talking, she bursts into tears.

I hug her against my chest, and she wraps her arms around my neck, clinging to me like I'm the only safe spot in the eye of a storm. And with how she's reacting right now, maybe I am.

"It's okay, babygirl. Just breathe."

She sucks in a hiccuping breath, but her sobbing doesn't slow. I just hold her while she cries, letting her purge all her pent-up feelings. I don't know how long we sit like that, but she finally slumps against me, all cried out.

"Talk to me. Tell me what's eating at your heart."

She sits up and looks at me with red-rimmed eyes. "I don't even know where to start."

I wipe the tear tracks from her cheeks. She rests her cheek against my hand, soaking up the affection.

“Start wherever you want to, babygirl. Just talk to me.”

“When I was pregnant with Henry, I was in a horrible car accident...” she hiccups a little sob. I hate myself a little for making her relive such a painful time in her life, but I know she needs to talk about it. She needs to let it out.

“My husband, William, died...” her eyes fall closed, and silent tears track down her cheeks again. “A drunk driver hit our car while we were on the way to my last doctor’s appointment. William was critically injured. Somehow, I escaped with only a head wound.”

Her hand goes to her forehead, and I see the light pink scar along her hairline that I never noticed before. I grab her hand and kiss her fingertips. Thanking God that he spared her. I could’ve lost her before I ever even knew she was out there in the world. I don’t interrupt her with words, though. Somehow, I know this isn’t the worst of her story.

“The stress from the accident caused me to go into labor... While William was fighting for his life on some operating table, I was delivering our baby by myself.” She swallows thickly, then wipes away more tears. “The doctor came in shortly after Henry was born and ripped my life apart. William died on the table. His injuries were too severe.

“I was in a bad place for a long time. My parents moved Henry and me into their house, and I hid in my grief, letting it consume me.”

“Of course you grieved. You lost your husband.”

She shakes her head. “I lost my husband, my best friend, and my daddy all in one.”

Her hesitation to start anything but a casual relationship is beginning to make more sense by the minute. No wonder she has tried to push me away and keep me at arm’s length. She lost everything when she lost her husband. I can’t imagine how hard it was to lose everything.

“Oh, babygirl.”

“That’s not the worst of it. I lost myself too. I was so consumed by my grief that I sunk into a pit of depression. My parents took over everything, including taking care of Henry. I missed so much of Henry’s life. I’m ashamed of myself for not being stronger for him.”

“You can’t do that to yourself. You were grieving...”

“That’s no excuse, and it’s why I moved to Monett and away from my parents. I needed to stand on my own two feet again. A fresh start.”

“And that’s why you have a rocky relationship with your parents?” I ask.

“My mom was furious that I decided to move. She didn’t see why I wanted to move so far away. She argued that moving into our own house should be enough. But I knew that wouldn’t work. She would’ve just tried to run my life from across town.”

“That was very brave of you. Moving so far away from your support system...”

She just shrugs. “It seemed like the right thing to do. Henry and I are in a good place. He’s healthy and happy.”

“And you?”

She gives me a sad smile. “Honestly, I don’t know what I am.”

“I’ll tell you what I see. I see a beautiful, brave woman who struck out on her own even though she was drowning in sorrow. I see a wonderful mother who would do anything for her son. I see a loving, giving babygirl who is bravely trying to reconnect with that part of herself.”

“You sure do see a lot.”

I lean in and kiss her forehead. “I see everything when it comes to you.”

She doesn’t respond, instead, she lays her head on my shoulder and holds onto me. I hold her right back, willing her to see herself how I see her. Addy falls asleep in my arms, exhausted from her emotional breakdown. I carefully stand

with her and lie down on the bed, wrapping her up in my embrace.

Even in sleep, she clings to me. I stroke her hair as she sleeps and think about everything she disclosed. She's already had one great love in her life and is still grieving the loss. My doubts about if I can be the man she needs come bubbling up to the surface. I'm new to this boyfriend thing and honestly don't know if I'm cut out for it. I'm running on pure instinct right now. I push aside my worries and hold her a little bit tighter.

The night didn't turn out quite like I planned, but I can't say I'm disappointed by it. Addy finally opened up to me and bared her soul to me. I feel closer to her than ever before. Now I just have to make sure I'm worthy of everything she has to offer.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Addy

I WOKE UP IN AXEL'S ARMS FEELING DRAINED AND LAID BARE. All of my walls came down with him, and I don't know how I feel about that. I'd be lying if I said I wasn't a little angry over the situation. He manipulated me to get me to open up. I should feel better knowing there aren't any more secrets between us, but I don't.

I spent hours crying on Axel over William last night, and I feel nothing but guilt over it. He just held me and let me cry and said all the right things to make me feel better about it... but I don't.

Marsha knew that something had gone terribly wrong with our date as soon as I walked in. I blurted out the whole mess, and she just hugged me and let me vent. When I told her I needed to end things with Axel, she told me to wait and just think about it. That I was in a bad place emotionally and shouldn't make any rash decisions until I'd had time to calm down.

Well, it's the next morning, and I am calm. Well, calmer, anyway. My emotions are still all over the place, but I feel like I'm in my right mind again. Not completely overwhelmed like I was last night.

After a sleepless night and a whole lot of thinking, I've decided that I'm not ready for a relationship. I'm still too stuck in my grief over William, and Axel deserves better than someone who is grieving another man. I've been fooling myself all these months that I've been in Monett. I might be

stronger in some ways, but when it comes to William, I'm still just as big of a mess as I always was.

My phone rings, and a spike of anxiety hits me at the thought of it being Axel. I might've made the decision to end it with him, but I'm not ready to do the deed yet. I need more time. I grab my phone and let out a sigh of relief when I see that it's Pelar.

"Hello."

"I heard a rumor that your parents are going on vacation to a quaint little B&B in Monett... Why didn't you tell me they are visiting?"

I let out a sigh at the reminder. I had almost pushed the visit out of my mind. "Ugh. Don't remind me."

"I take it we aren't thrilled about it?"

"You know how my mom has been since I moved. She's impossible. I'm happy that Henry will get to spend some time with them. I know he misses them, but at the same time, I'm dreading it."

"I'm sure she will behave herself for Henry's sake..."

I snort a laugh at that. "She's the queen of passive-aggressive put-downs these days."

"That is true. At least you'll get to see your dad."

"I know. I am looking forward to that. He's been my biggest cheerleader."

"Hey, now. That job is already taken by me," she argues.

"You're both my cheerleaders, and I love you for it."

"I love you too, girl. So tell me what else is going on. Are you still talking with that guy you met at the club?" she asks.

And that's when I burst into tears yet again.

"Holy shit, girl. What the hell?"

"It's nothing," I say between sobs.

"Nothing, my ass. Tell me what happened. Last I heard, you were keeping things low-key and casual..."

Before I can worry about Pelar judging me or telling me she told me so, I blurt out the whole thing. Everything.

“And that’s it,” I finally say, feeling deflated.

“Jesus. You really like this guy.”

“That’s your takeaway? Really?” I ask.

“Don’t get me wrong, the rest of it sucks. I’m sorry that you’re hurting so badly. And we will circle back around to the whole failing Henry nonsense, but you seriously like this Axel guy.”

“I do. He’s so good to me, and Henry likes him too.”

“But you’re going to break it off with him?” she asks sounding perplexed.

“I have to. He deserves so much more than what little I have to offer him. How could I ever be enough for him while grieving William? It’s just not fair to him.” It all sounds totally reasonable when I say it aloud, but then why does my heart ache in a whole new way at the thought of letting him go?

“Shouldn’t that be his decision?”

“Mommy,” Henry calls from the next room, saving me from having to answer that complicated question.

“Henry needs me. I have to go.”

I throw my phone on the counter and head to Henry’s room. “What’s up, buddy?”

“My train broke,” he says with tear-filled eyes.

“Oh no. Let me see.” I take the train from his hands, and sure enough, the wheel is broken. I try to push it back into place, but there’s no hope. It’s beyond saving. “I’m sorry, buddy. I can’t fix it.”

He cries in earnest at that. I pick him up and sit with him on the bed while he cries it out. “We can go to the store and get a new train,” I say, trying to cheer him up.

He sniffles. “We can?”

“We sure can. Let’s get our shoes on and go find a new train.”

Crisis averted. Well, one of them. There is still the minor detail of my breaking it off with Axel to deal with.

Later.

I’ll deal with that one later.

I TUCK Henry into bed for the night and decide it’s time. I can’t put it off any longer. Axel will be off work soon, and I definitely can’t break it off with him on a call. If I hear his voice, he’ll be able to talk me out of it, and that can’t happen.

Axel, I’m sorry, but it’s over between us.

I read the message ten times before I finally hit send. It’s a dick move to break things off with him via text message without telling him why, but I have to do it this way. I’m not strong enough to do it any other way.

Now I just have to hope he doesn’t fight me over it.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Axel

Axel, I'm sorry, but it's over between us.

I READ THE MESSAGE FROM ADDY AGAIN, BUT IT DOESN'T make any more sense than it did the first time. Everything was fine when she left me last night. Finally, her walls were down, and she opened up to me. This doesn't make any sense.

What's going on, babygirl?

I send back wishing like hell I wasn't still on the clock and alone at the bar. I've never thought about quitting my job before, but right now, I'm seriously considering it just so I can go to her.

It's over. You told me you'd stay until I asked you to go, and this is me asking you to let me go.

Her words are a punch to the gut. I remember the conversation in her kitchen. At the time, I never considered she'd ask me to let her go. How am I supposed to do that? She owns my heart. I can't imagine my life without her and Henry in it. I hardly spent any time with the kid, but I already think of him as mine because he comes with Addy, and Addy is everything I want.

I can't just let you go. Don't give up on us, babygirl.

Her reply is slow to come, and when it does, I wish it hadn't because it's like a kick in the balls. Sharp and painful.

There is no us.

I shove my phone back in my pocket, not ready to give up but trapped at the club for another hour until the club closes. As soon as my shift is over, I run out to my truck, determined to see Addy and get to the bottom of this.

It's three in the morning, and I know it's an unreasonable time to show up at her apartment, but I'm not reasonable right now. I feel like I'm fighting for my fucking life, and I'll do anything it takes to change Addy's mind.

Addy answers the door almost immediately. Her eyes are red and puffy from crying. She looks as miserable as I feel. She holds the door half closed, making it clear that she won't let me in.

"What are you doing here?" she asks, accusation in her tone.

"You can't just send a text and break things off. We aren't over."

She hugs her robe closed around her and shakes her head. "It is over, Axel. It never should've started in the first place."

"Bullshit. We are perfect together."

She brushes a stray tear off her cheek. "It'll never work between us. Let's just cut our losses before we get in too deep."

In too deep? I'm fucking drowning in her, and she's dismissing me like it's nothing.

"I'm as deep as it gets, babygirl." I reach for her, and she steps away, avoiding my touch. God, that hurts.

"I am not your babygirl. I'll only ever belong to one man, and he's dead. Just go."

Her words are meant to hurt, and they do but not in the way she meant them to. They hurt because I know it's killing her to say them. She feels as deeply for me as I do her. She's just lying to herself and to me.

“You didn’t die when William did. You deserve to be happy.”

“I was happy until you came into my life,” she throws back at me.

“Were you?” I counter.

“Henry and I are better off on our own. Now go.” She closes the door in my face before I can react. The sound of her lock clicking into place has a finality that makes my heart ache.

“Fuck!” I shout into the empty hallway and punch the wall in the most undignified moment of my life.

“YOU’RE GRUMPIER THAN USUAL,” Tessa says, trying to draw me into a conversation. Again. I’ve growled and snapped at her several times, and she won’t give up. “Does it have something to do with Addy?”

I scowl at her. “Addy and I are over.”

Tessa’s face falls. “Oh no! But you were perfect together.”

“It doesn’t matter. She ended it.”

It’s been several days since Addy closed the door in my face, and I’ve still not come to terms with it. I’ve called her every night after my shift, and she ignores my calls. I’ve texted her, and she ignores those too. The only thing keeping me from returning to her apartment is that I don’t want to upset Henry.

“What did you do?” she accuses.

I shoot her an angry look. “What makes you think it’s something I did?”

“It’s always something the man did.”

“Well, not this time. It’s all on her,” I snap.

Tessa's brow raises at my tone. "So if it wasn't you, what happened?"

I close my eyes and rub my forehead feeling a headache coming on. "She's in a bad place. Her husband died three years ago, and she's still grieving. She doesn't think she can grieve and be with me at the same time."

"That's horrible," Tessa says. "Can't you convince her that it's okay to move on?"

"I tried. She won't hear of it."

"You aren't just giving up, are you?" she asks, shocked.

"I don't know what else to do. She's not taking my calls or answering my texts. I won't go to her apartment again because I don't want to upset her son..."

"There has to be something you can do."

Thankfully Aiden walks up, distracting Tessa from our conversation about actual work. Now that she's the bar manager, she has a lot more responsibilities, and he's giving her a task that will keep her busy for the rest of the day.

"Maybe she'll come to the club..." Tessa says, interrupting Aiden.

"Get off it, Tessa."

"Are you talking about Addy?" Aiden asks.

"Yes," Tessa says at the same time that I say "no."

"Well, she won't be coming to the club anymore. She canceled her membership," Aiden announces like it's nothing.

"She what?" I ask.

"She called and canceled her membership yesterday. I figured you knew since you're seeing her..."

"Oh, she broke up with him," Tessa says before I have a chance to respond.

"That sucks, man. Sorry to hear it."

"It's really sad—" Tessa starts. I clap my hand over her mouth to stop her word vomit.

“Aiden doesn’t care about all the dirty details.”

She mumbles against my hand and wriggles away.

“Okay, okay. I get it. No telling Aiden that Addy is a widow and is in love with you but doesn’t think she deserves it.”

I narrow my eyes at the little shit, and she just shrugs. “He’s your friend. Maybe he has some advice!”

“My advice is to listen to the woman and give her her space. If she wants you, she’ll come to you,” Aiden says.

“Aiden, that’s terrible advice!” Tessa cries in outrage. “He should fight for his love!”

I have to admit... Aiden might be giving me sound advice that I should take, but I like Tessa’s advice better. Hers falls in line with my determination to not give up on her.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Addy

I DRAG MYSELF FROM MY BED AND FORCE MYSELF TO GET IN the shower. It's early... Henry isn't even up yet, but I can't sleep. I haven't slept in days. Not since I shut the door in Axel's face. The look of betrayal and hurt on his face haunts me whenever I close my eyes. I pull on some leggings and a baggy t-shirt. I haven't worn real clothes in days. I just can't find it in me to care.

Henry wakes up a short time later, his usual happy, morning-person self. I paste on a smile and pour him a bowl of cereal. I drink a cup of coffee while he eats, doing my best to chase away the brain fog I've been living in since I sent Axel away.

Did I think it was hard mourning the loss of William? Add in the loss of Axel, and I'm completely lost. How did I fall for him so fast and so hard? Is it because I was vulnerable after being alone for so long? Or is it because Axel really is perfect for me? I might never know the answer to those questions, which makes me sad.

"Can we go to the park?" Henry asks after breakfast.

I instantly want to say no. I want to stay home and wallow in my sadness, but that's the old me. I might be depressed and feel like hiding away from the world, but I can't. Henry deserves better from me. So I paste on a smile and tell him yes.

Thankfully the park is free from any parents I know. I don't think I could handle idle chit-chat today. Not having

familiar people at the park doesn't stop Henry from making friends. He finds a friend everywhere he goes. I sit on the park bench, watching him play with his new friend. Because I'm a masochist, I pull up the text thread between Axel and me and read all the messages he's sent over the last few days again.

He's sent everything from the mundane wishing me a good night's sleep to pleading with me to talk to him. I haven't replied to any of them, even though I've been tempted like crazy.

I close our text thread and open the one from Pelar. She texted me this morning asking if I'm ready for my parent's visit. I had forgotten entirely that they were coming until that moment. They will be here tomorrow, and I'm not prepared for it.

Not really.

I reply to her.

I can't blame you. How are you doing with the whole Axel thing?

I close my eyes and let out a sigh from the very pit of my soul. I knew she would ask, but I have no idea how to respond. I don't want to worry her... at the same time, I don't want to lie.

I'm getting by.

In other words, you're miserable.

Leave it to Pelar to cut right to the chase.

I'm fine. Or at least I will be.

Of course you will be. You're a badass.

I just have to get through this visit first.

I'm crossing my fingers for you...

I put my phone away and go back to watching Henry play. I let him play until he runs up to me, complaining about being hungry. We go home, and I fix him a sandwich with a banana. I should eat, but I have no appetite. Instead, I make another cup of coffee. After lunch, I tuck Henry into bed for his nap.

While he's sleeping, I start cleaning the apartment. I've let it get out of hand, and I don't want to give my mother one more thing to find me lacking in. It's bad enough that I will have to paste on a happy face and pretend I'm in a good place for three days while they are here.

I'm pre-exhausted for the whole thing.

The rest of my day is spent cleaning and entertaining Henry. I collapse into bed a little after ten, but sleep evades me. At some point, I drift off and spend the rest of the night chasing ghosts in my dreams.

“WELL, isn't this place just adorable,” my mom says as she looks around my apartment. “It's a little small for a family though.”

She's been here all of thirty seconds, and she's already throwing barbs my way. This is going to be a loooong three days.

“It's perfect for Henry and me.”

“If you say so, dear. Now, where is my grandson?”

“Henry, buddy. Grandma and grandpa are here,” I call out to him.

He comes running from his room, practically bumping into walls as he rushes to see his grandparents. He doesn't stop until he's crashing into my mother's arms. She picks him up and hugs him close.

“Look how big you are!” she coos at him. “I've missed you so much.”

She peppers his face with kisses and squeezes him tight.

“Don’t suffocate the boy,” my dad tells her.

“Oh, hush. It’s been over six months. I have a lot of hugs to make up for.” She gives me a dirty look over Henry’s shoulder because it’s my fault she’s not seen him. Everything is always my fault these days.

“Hey, dad.”

“Hey, kiddo.”

I’m taken off-guard when he pulls me into a fatherly hug. My dad is not a huggy type. In fact, I can count on two hands how many times he’s hugged me since I became an adult. I don’t question it though because I need the hug.

“You look tired,” he says.

I shrug. “Mom life.”

He shakes his head as if he doesn’t believe me but doesn’t press. Thank God. The last thing I need is to burst into tears over breaking up with my maybe-boyfriend.

Henry wriggles out of my mother’s hold and tugs her toward his bedroom. Probably to show off his trains. Dad and I follow after them. Henry is shoving train after train in his grandma’s hands and she oohs and ahhs over all of them. For what it’s worth, she’s a wonderful grandma to him. She might be shitty towards me right now, but she loves him dearly.

“Pop Pop, look!” Henry says, tugging my dad further into the room so he can look at all his trains too.

I lean on the doorjamb, watching as he excitedly runs around his room, showing them everything he owns.

“You sure have a lot of toys,” my mom says. “Your mom must spoil you. You’ll be rotten in no time.”

She gives me another disapproving look.

“Donna, leave it,” my dad scolds. “You said you’d mind your manners.”

“I’m just saying,” she argues back.

“It’s okay, dad,” I say, trying to defuse the situation. The last thing I want is for my parents to fight over my choices.

He just shakes his head but drops it. My phone dings in my pocket, and I pull it out to check the message. I expect it to be Pelar giving me a pep talk over my parents being here, but it’s not her. It’s Axel.

Hey, doll. I know you won’t respond, but I just wanted to remind you not to let your mom get you down. You’re a great mom.

Tears flood my eyes, and I stagger toward the bathroom before anyone can notice. I turn on the sink to hide the sounds of my tears. I can’t believe he remembered that my parents were coming and that he reached out to support me. My heart aches at the loss of what could have been.

I splash water on my face and dry my tears. Now isn’t the time to break down. My mom will latch onto that like a dog with a bone. I touch up my makeup and take a deep, steadying breath before joining my family back in Henry’s room.

My dad studies me for a moment, and I know he knows I’m not okay. He sees right through the mask I’m wearing. I smile all the brighter, trying to convince him without words that I’m fine.

They stay well past Henry’s bedtime, and by the time they are getting ready to leave, Henry is a little grouch monster and throws a temper tantrum that they are going.

“You’ll see them again in the morning, buddy,” I say, trying to calm him down.

“Why don’t you let him come stay with us tonight. It’ll make him happy,” my mom says.

I shake my head. “No, he needs to sleep in his own bed.”

“You’re just being difficult. Look how upset you’re making him,” she says, raising her voice.

“He’s upset because it’s past his bedtime, and it’s been a big, exciting day for him.”

“He doesn’t want us to leave him. You’re just being selfish.”

“Stop it, Donna. The boy needs to sleep in his own bed just like his mother said.” He emphasizes the word mother, and I couldn’t love him more for it. He’s got my back against her assholery.

“But—” my mom starts.

My dad hushes her with a swipe of his hand. “Leave it.”

He practically shoves her out of the door. I collapse against it for a minute, exhausted. I take a deep breath, then pick up my still tantruming son and carry him to bed. It takes three books and promises of all the fun he’s going to have with his grandparents tomorrow to get him to finally go to sleep.

I take a shower letting the hot water wash away the negative emotions of the day. I feel more like myself when I get out. I dress in my pajamas and crawl into bed, then because I’m a glutton for punishment, I reread Axel’s texts. This time I don’t cry at his thoughtfulness. Instead, I feel bolstered by his words. He’s right. I am a good mom. I just need to remember that.

I moved because it was the right choice for Henry and me. That’s what matters. Nothing my mom says matters. She’s just lashing out because she’s hurt and feeling spiteful.

I wake up the following day to Henry jumping on my bed like usual. I pull him down under the covers with me and tickle his sides. He squeals and wriggles.

“Mommy!”

“I don’t know a mommy. I’m the tickle monster!”

He lets out another squeal as I double down on tickling him. His laughter is a balm to my wounded heart. We get out of bed and rush through our morning routine so we can meet my parents at the zoo for a day full of activities suited for Henry.

“There’s my boy!” my mom says as she takes him out of his car seat.

“Gramma!” Henry shrieks, probably blowing out her eardrum.

“Happy birthday, kiddo,” my dad says.

I had almost forgotten today was the day. I’m thirty-four years old. I should feel one way or another about it, but I’m indifferent. My life derailed three years ago; a birthday doesn’t seem so important after that.

“Thanks, dad.”

We follow behind my mom and Henry as he pulls her toward the entrance to the zoo. We’ve been here twice before, and he loves it. Especially the giraffes. Henry leads the way through the exhibits and keeps up a constant stream of babble about all the animals.

We stop at the café for lunch, and my mom gives me a harsh look when I tell Henry he can only have ice cream or cotton candy, not both. He stomps his foot and pouts, but I just shake my head.

“Just let him have the treat. It’s a special day,” she butts in.

“He doesn’t need so many sweets. He’s already going to be wired from one,” I tell her, not backing down.

“I’ll get it for him if you’re too cheap to.”

“It has nothing to do with money and everything to do with the fact that he doesn’t need it.”

“I want both!” Henry yells at the top of his lungs.

“Henry. That’s enough of that. If you don’t calm down, you won’t get any treats,” I scold.

My mom’s eyes widen, and she sputters. “You can’t talk to him like that! What is wrong with you?”

“What’s wrong with me? What’s wrong with you? He’s throwing a fit because you are arguing with me about it. He would’ve been more than happy with just ice cream or just the cotton candy. You had to stick your nose in and try to undermine me.” By the end of my tirade, I’m practically shouting.

My dad gives me an approving nod behind my mom's back. My mom? Her face is bright red, and she looks like she's going to blow a gasket. When Henry throws himself on the floor, kicking and screaming, I decide I've had enough. I pick my wailing son up off the floor and carry him to the car.

My mom follows hot on my heels. "Where do you think you're going?"

"Home."

"You can't just take him away! We are supposed to go to the toy store..."

I whirl on her and level an angry glare her way. "That was before you decided to ruin a perfectly fine day. Henry is upset and tired. I'm taking him home for a nap."

"And what about us?" she asks, looking back at my dad to try and draw his support to her side.

"You can come over after Henry has had his nap."

I strap a still crying Henry into his car seat and drive away feeling both better and worse than I did before. I stood up to my mom for the first time ever. I didn't let her bulldoze over me, and it felt great. I feel terrible that our altercation ruined Henry's fun day, but I couldn't back down. I'm his mother, and I know what's best for him. She needs to respect that.

Not for the first time, I feel grateful that we live in Monett, and she lives several states away. I couldn't handle this kind of thing every day. Just two more days of dealing with her. I can do it for Henry's sake.

Damn it's going to be a long two days.

He's sound asleep by the time we get home. I carefully carry him to bed and gently lay him down. He whimpers when I put him down, then rolls over and falls right back to sleep.

Thank you, sweet baby Jesus. I need him to take this nap almost as much as he needs to take it.

I look around my already clean apartment for something to do to keep myself busy and come up short. It's spotless from my obsessive cleaning jag two days ago. I plop down on the

couch and open my reading app on my phone. I've barely read a chapter before I nod off. I wake up to Henry tapping my cheek.

"Mommy, wake up."

I let out a wide-mouthed yawn and stretch my body. I'm stiff from falling asleep sitting upright.

"I'm awake, buddy."

"Where's grandma?"

"She'll be here in a little while. Her and Pop Pop are coming for dinner."

He smiles brightly. "Can we watch trains?"

I grab the remote and put on his show. He's watched all the episodes multiple times but never seems to tire of them. Unlike me, who could recite them forward and backward and would rather eat rocks than watch another episode.

Instead of torturing myself by watching his cartoon, I decide to start dinner. I prep the salad, and I'm halfway through putting the lasagna together when my parents show up. My mom instantly latches onto Henry, completely ignoring me. Probably for the best. My dad follows me into the kitchen and watches as I finish putting dinner together.

I pop the pan of pasta in the oven and turn to face my dad. He obviously wants to talk about something. I just don't know if I have the courage to ask him what that something is.

"You did good today with your mom," he says, shocking the crap out of me. "She was out of line, and she knows it. Though we both know she won't apologize."

"I was harsh."

He shakes his head. "She deserved that and more. She's been unkind to you, and it's not fair."

I give him a sad smile. "If there's one thing I've learned in this life, it's that life isn't fair."

"Ain't that the truth, kiddo. Now, do you want to tell me what's bothering you?"

“What makes you think something is bothering me, dad?”

“Because I know you. You’re smiling and acting like everything is fine, but I can see right through that,” he says.

“It’s nothing you need to worry about—”

A brisk knock on my front door cuts off what I was going to say. My mom calls from the other room that she’s got it. I hurry towards the door, but she gets to it first. A young guy hands her a beautiful vase full of yellow roses and I immediately know who they are from.

She sets the flowers on the table and pulls out the card before I can reach for it. “Mom—”

She reads the note, and she looks up at me with shock on her face. “Who’s Axel?”

I jerk the note from her hand and read it.

Happy Birthday, doll. I miss you. xo Axel.

I hold the note to my chest and feel the weight of a thousand missed opportunities crushing me. First, the text and now flowers. He’s slowly chipping away at my resolve.

“None of your business, mom.”

“Like hell, it’s not. You moved my grandson halfway across the country so you could shack up with some man,” she accuses. “How could you? You’re a married woman!”

Her words are like a slap in the face. “William is dead, mom.”

“So you’re a widow! How could you betray William’s memory like this? It’s barely been three years.”

“Donna,” my dad butts in. But my mom is on a real tangent now and refuses to get off her soapbox for anything.

“I can’t believe you would do such a thing. Did you bring this Axel around Henry?”

When I just stand there staring at her, she takes my non-answer as a yes.

“How could you?! You can’t just bring some random man into his life. I never should have let you take Henry.”

That knocks me right out of my stupor. “*Let me take Henry?*”

“Yes, let you. I knew this was a terrible idea. He should be in a stable household.”

“Henry is *my* son,” I say, slapping my chest. “*Mine.*”

“The son you abandoned for the first three years of his life. What would you have done without us there to take care of you both?”

“I didn’t abandon him,” I argue.

“You might as well have.”

Ouch. That’s a stab right in the heart. She just found my biggest button and stomped all over it. The guilt I feel over losing myself to my grief rears its ugly head. She’s right that I wasn’t there for him like I should’ve been. But I was there. And I’m making up for that lost time every minute of every day.

“I didn’t abandon him,” I say again.

“Donna, that’s enough,” my dad says.

“Tom, she’s been shacking up with some man. Bringing him around our Henry!”

“Donna. She’s a grown woman. She’s allowed to date if she wants to. And I trust that she wouldn’t bring anyone around Henry that she didn’t trust implicitly.”

“She’s a widow, for crying out loud! What kind of man would prey on a woman who just lost her husband?”

“Mom, Axel didn’t prey on me. He’s a good man. Besides, none of this matters. I ended it with him already.”

“Then why is he sending you roses?”

“Donna. It isn’t any of your business. Addy is an adult. She can make her own decisions.”

“I don’t know why he sent the flowers. He knows we are over...” I say, my shoulders slumping. My dad lays a strong hand on my shoulder and squeezes it gently. I have to fight back my tears at his show of solidarity.

“So he’s stalking you now. How is this possibly safe for Henry?”

“Oh my God, mom! He isn’t stalking me. He’s just a nice guy that I broke up with because, like you said, I’m a married woman.”

“Addy,” my dad says, looking shocked. “William is gone. You don’t have to live your whole life grieving for him. You deserve happiness.”

“Tom! Don’t encourage her behavior.”

I lose the battle with my tear ducts, and my tears fall freely.

“It’s about damn time that she gets a little encouragement, Donna. You’ve spent the last six months beating her down for moving away and it’s the best thing she could’ve done. It was time for her to move on, and she did that. She’s built a great life here for her and Henry.”

My mom sputters as if she can’t believe my dad just said all that. I’m sort of on team sputter because I’ve never heard my dad say so much all at once. I’ve especially never heard him stand up against my mother so boldly.

“I can’t believe you support this whole thing.”

“You should support her too. I know it’s hard being away from Henry. The kid’s growing like a weed, and he changes every day, but they couldn’t stay with us forever,” my dad says.

My mom, the stubborn woman she is, just crosses her arms over her chest and draws a firm line in the sand. “It’s too soon for them to be on their own. Addy obviously isn’t ready. Look at her. She’s a mess.”

“I am a mess, mom, but I’m better every day. You can’t or won’t see it, but Henry and I are happy here. He’s thriving,

and I'm healing," I say, wiping the last of my tears away. "I don't have any regrets about moving here."

"Henry misses us," she says when her previous argument doesn't seem to be working.

"Of course he does. You're his grandparents."

"I don't understand why you can't live closer. You've proven your point by moving away. Don't you think it's time to come home?"

I close my eyes begging the powers that be for patience. "This whole conversation is why we can't live closer. You don't respect me as a mother and don't think I'm capable of making it on my own. And I *am* home. I love it here. Henry loves it here."

"Donna, it's time you let them go," my dad says. "Let go of the anger and resentment."

"I don't know how to let them go," my mom says, then bursts into tears.

"Mom, I love you, but dad is right. You have to let us do it on our own."

She closes the gap between us and pulls me in for an unexpected hug. "I'm so sorry, Addy. Can you ever forgive me for how I've behaved?"

"I forgive you, mom."

"Why is grandma crying?" Henry asks, interrupting our moment.

"They are happy tears," my mom says, wiping tears from her face.

The timer buzzes in the kitchen.

"Dinner's done," my dad says, clapping his hands together. "Let's eat."

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Axel

TODAY IS ADDY'S BIRTHDAY, AND I HATE THAT I'M NOT THERE to celebrate with her. I know her parents are still in town, so showing up at her place would be a terrible idea. I do the next best thing and send her two dozen yellow roses. Yellow because it's her favorite color. I spend the whole day wondering if she liked the flowers or if she threw them in the trash because she wants nothing to do with me.

I stop myself from calling her a dozen times. I hate every minute of being apart from her. I know I only had her for a short time, but I pictured so much more with her. I've never seen a future with a woman before Addy. Now that I've had a taste of what it can be like, I don't want to give it up.

And then there's Henry.

I have never considered myself particularly paternal. I'm more cool uncle material, but I can totally see a future with Henry in it as well. I want the whole package.

I want Addy, with or without her baggage. I'll take her any way I can get her. I just have to somehow convince her to give us a chance.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Addy

DAYS LATER, MY DAD'S WORDS ARE STILL CIRCLING IN MY head.

“William is gone. You don't have to live your whole life grieving for him. You deserve happiness.”

It feels like a betrayal to let go of my grief. William was my first love... my first everything. How can I just let him go? It doesn't seem fair that I should be allowed to just move on with my life when he's dead and gone.

Shouldn't someone be mourning his loss?

I pick up my phone and call Pelar. She's been texting me for days, and I've been avoiding her.

“It's about damn time that you call me,” she says, sounding pissy.

“Sorry. I've just been going through a lot.”

“I take it your parent's little visit didn't go well.”

I snort a laugh. “It was definitely a rollercoaster.”

“Do tell...”

I start from the beginning and tell her the whole sordid tale. She gasps and grumbles along with me.

“She actually apologized?” Pelar says in a shocked voice.

“Yep. And dad stood up to her.”

“I'm sorry I missed that.”

I laugh. “It was ugly, but the end of their visit was much better. Mom stopped with her little jabs and was actually pleasant towards me.”

“Well, that’s good. And don’t think I’m going to let the whole roses thing go. I can’t believe Axel sent you flowers for your birthday.”

“He definitely doesn’t know how to give up,” I say.

“Remind me why you dumped him again? Because he seems like a pretty good guy from where I’m sitting.”

“Pelar. I’m a fucking mess. I can’t give Axel what he needs. He deserves so much better than a broken-hearted widow with a kid.”

“Addy. That’s not the sum of who you are. Yes, you’re a widow. Yes, losing William broke your heart. Yes, you’re a mom. Those are all true, but you’re also a woman who deserves to be happy. You don’t have to be sad forever just because your husband died.”

“Have you been talking to my dad?” I ask. “Because he said something along those lines.”

“Seriously, Addy. Do you have feelings for Axel?”

“More than I think I should.”

“Then why are you holding yourself back?” she asks.

I run my hand through my messy hair and let out a slow breath. “I’m wracked with guilt every day of my life. Guilt because William is gone, and I’m here. Guilt because Henry will never know his father. Guilt that I moved Henry away from everything he knew. Guilt that I’m falling for another man while I’m still mourning my dead husband.”

“Let go of that guilt. It’s all unfounded. You’ve done absolutely nothing to feel guilty about.”

“I wish it were that easy.”

“Isn’t it, though? You’ve already survived the hard parts.”

She’s not wrong. I have already survived the worst of it. “But what happens if Axel and I don’t work out? What if I

lose him too?"

"Oh, honey. You can't live your life stressing about what-ifs. You know better than most that life can change in a blink. Would you trade the years you had with William away just so you could've avoided the heartbreak of losing him?"

I swallow back my tears. "No. I wouldn't change a thing about my life with him."

"Then why would you hold yourself back from the possibility of a new love?"

Why indeed...

"I'm scared."

"I would be worried if you weren't. Don't let your fears hold you back. Axel obviously wants to be with you, and he knows all about William, and you said Henry likes him..."

"What happened to you discouraging me from getting involved with someone. Weren't you the one preaching about keeping things casual?"

"I was wrong," she says.

"Wait. Can you repeat that?"

"I was wrong, okay?"

"That's what I thought you said."

"I never should've discouraged you. That's my bad. I'm a new woman full of encouragement and maybe a little ass-kicking to get you to follow your heart," she says.

"Henry's up."

"Okay, girl. Remember that you deserve to be happy and if Axel makes you happy, go for it."

"I hear you. Talk soon."

I hang up the phone feeling lighter than I have in a long time. Pelar is right. I can't let my fears and guilt keep me from living my life. William would never want me to live my life full of grief and sorrow. He'd want me to be happy.

Now I just have to decide what will make me happy.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Axel

IT'S BEEN A WEEK SINCE ADDY'S BIRTHDAY. I'VE STILL BEEN sending her little texts every day, even though I never get a response. Aiden and just about everyone who knows my situation have told me to leave her alone. The only person encouraging me not to give up is Tessa, and I'm starting to think that she's just a hopeless romantic and it's time for me to let it go and give up.

Everything in me rebels at that idea though. It might be the definition of insanity to keep it up, but I just can't quit on us yet. I know that Addy is the woman for me. I know we haven't known each other long, and it might seem crazy to some, but I've fallen hard and fast. There's no going back for me now. I just need to convince her that I'm the man she needs.

I know she's still mourning for her lost husband, and some part of her probably always will, but I also know she's got a huge heart. There's room in it for me if she could just get over her fears.

It's another busy night at the club, and I'm annoyed by everyone. Thankfully Wade is here tonight to be the cheerful one since I can barely muster a smile for even my friends. Finally, the bar area dies down as the guests move to the play areas.

Jealousy, hot and ugly, boils in the pit of my stomach. It's hard to watch all the happy couples as they pair up and go off to share scenes and more together. That should be Addy and me.

“If looks could kill, everyone in my club would drop dead,” Aiden says. “What’s crawled up your ass today?”

“He’s still moping about his lost lover,” Wade provides helpfully.

I turn my death glare on him. “I’m not moping. I’m angry. There’s a difference.”

Aiden shakes his head. “I’m glad you’re over the moping stage of things, but your anger is scaring away my customers. Why don’t you take the rest of the night off.”

I should be happy with the offer. I don’t want to be around happy people when I’m so damn miserable, but I also don’t want to be alone in my misery. The very idea of being alone with my thoughts is a depressing one.

“I’m fine,” I grumble.

Aiden snorts a laugh. “Dude, you’re the furthest thing from fine. Get out of here. Get your head out of your ass and come back tomorrow with your happy face on.”

I force a smile that probably looks more like a grimace. “I have my fucking happy face on, asshole.”

That has Aiden outright laughing. “Go, enjoy your evening.”

Enjoy my evening? As if that will happen. I wipe my hands on a bar rag and toss it aside. It sucks that I’m basically being kicked out. Not that I can blame Aiden. I really am a grumpy asshole tonight.

I’m heading towards the office area to clock off when I catch sight of her.

Addy.

My Addy.

She’s here.

I stop dead in my tracks and take her in for the first time in more days than I want to count. She’s wearing a white dress with yellow flowers printed on it. It looks abnormally cheerful in comparison to the look on her face.

She's wringing her hands in that anxious way of hers and has a wary look in her eyes. If I didn't know any better, I would say she looks like someone who is about to bolt. My every instinct has me wanting to calm her nerves and reassure her, but I don't know why she's here yet.

She could be here to tell me off for not leaving her alone. The thought makes me sick. I don't care how desperate I seem by keeping up with the texts. It's my only way to ensure she knows I haven't given up on her—on us.

"Addy." Her name on my lips is like a prayer.

"Hi," she says shyly, barely looking at me.

That's new. Even at her shyest moments in the past, she never avoided looking at me. Dread builds in the pit of my stomach. It can't be a good sign.

"What are you doing here?"

She wrings her hands and bites her bottom lip as she studies the toes of her shoes. "I hoped we could maybe talk?"

Hope springs to life inside me. Surely if she was going to tell me off, she wouldn't look so anxious. Daringly I reach for her and tip her chin up, so she's looking at me. "Of course we can talk. I've been waiting for days to talk to you."

Guilt and shame flash through her eyes, and I hate it. I don't want her to feel guilty for doing what she felt was necessary to protect herself. I might hate that her decision split us apart, but I can understand. She's lost so much in her life already... I want her to know I'm a steady rock in the storm. That's why I haven't stopped messaging. I want her to know I'm here no matter what.

"I know," she whispers.

I want to erase the doubt she's obviously feeling, but I need to know why she's here first. I don't want to put myself out there only to be crushed again.

"There's an empty table over there," I say, nodding toward a quiet corner of the bar.

She chews on her bottom lip, abusing the poor thing. “Umm... I actually booked us a private room... but we can talk here if you’d rather not be alone with me.”

I’m shocked and elated that she booked a private room. She wouldn’t have done that if she had come to tell me off.

“A private room is good,” I say, trying to sound neutral and not excited about the prospect of being alone with her.

Some of the tension leaks out of her at my agreement. I follow her to the reserved room. The red-blooded man in me has me appreciating the flirty way her dress sways around her thighs as she walks. She’s a knockout, and I can’t help admiring her beauty.

Addy shuts the door, locking us inside a cocoon of silence. She crosses to the little seating area and indicates that I should sit too. I follow her lead. This is her show, after all. When she doesn’t start talking immediately, I decide to fill the silence. Maybe a little idle chatter will help her relax.

“How are you?” I ask.

She shifts in her chair. “Oh... I’m okay, I guess. You?”

“I’ve been better,” I admit.

“That’s probably my fault. Isn’t it?”

“I’ve missed you,” I say instead of blaming her for my shitty mood.

“I’ve missed you too,” she says shyly.

My heart soars at her admission. If she’s missed me, I have a chance to fix what’s broken between us.

“I’m sorry,” she blurts, gripping her hands tightly in her lap and refusing to make eye contact with me. “I feel terrible about how I ended things.”

“You don’t have to apologize.”

She pops up out of her chair and starts pacing. “But I do. You deserve better. So much better.”

“It’s okay, doll. I understand.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Addy

HIS WORDS SHOULD MAKE ME FEEL BETTER. INSTEAD, THEY make me feel worse. I don't deserve to be let off the hook so easily. He should make me beg for it. I'm prepared to beg for his forgiveness.

"You shouldn't be so understanding."

He frowns and shakes his head. "You don't get to tell me what I am."

I continue to pace, trying to alleviate the built-up anxious energy inside me. This is harder than I thought, and the fact that he's making it so easy on me just makes it worse. I pace closer to him, and he reaches out and grabs my arm. The next thing I know, he's got me perched on his lap.

"Calm down, doll. It's just you and me and the truth between us. Nothing you say is going to send me running. I've been telling you for weeks that I've not given up on us."

His words have me relaxing a little. All those little good-night texts come to mind, and I realize he's right. I gave up on the possibility of us, but he never did.

"I don't know how to say everything that's running through my mind," I say.

"Why don't you start with your reasoning for ending things with me?"

I blow out a breath and close my eyes, seeking strength. "Several reasons, really. For starters, I think you deserve better than what I can offer you."

“Don’t you think I should be the judge of that?”

Axel runs his hand down my back, and I relax a little more. “Probably, but you don’t understand how broken I am inside.”

“Doll, I know you’ve been through a lot, but you need to stop seeing yourself as broken. You’re one of the strongest people I’ve ever met.”

The empathetic way he says that almost has me believing he really feels that way. I shake my head. “Losing William broke something inside me. I honestly don’t know if that wound will ever heal. How can I force you into a relationship when I’m still grieving for the loss of my husband?”

“You’re not forcing me into anything. I know you’re still grieving, and I know that a part of you will always love William. I’m not asking you to ignore those things. I’m not trying to replace William in your life. I’m asking you to open your heart up to new possibilities.”

His words give me hope. Maybe he really does understand me. Maybe we can make a relationship work...

“I’m scared.”

“Tell me what you’re scared of, doll.”

“I’m scared that I won’t survive it if I lose you too.”

He gently squeezes my thigh reassuringly. “I can’t predict the future, but I can tell you that you’re strong enough to survive anything. I don’t plan on going anywhere anytime soon.”

“I’m afraid of how much I feel for you... I’ve fallen hard and fast, and it’s terrifying.”

He tips my face towards him and kisses me. His lips are soft on mine as he reacquaints himself with me. The kiss is slow and sweet. It’s more than just lips on lips. It’s a reuniting of two hearts. He pulls away and rests his forehead against mine.

“You’re not alone, babygirl. I can’t imagine spending a day of my life without you in it.”

I swallow thickly as tears prick my eyes. I fight them back and ask the most important question of them all. “Can you forgive me?”

“Always. I love you, babygirl. I won’t ever stop,” he promises, then seals his words with a heated kiss.

My heart soars at his profession of love. I turn in his arms so I’m straddling him and wrap my arms around his neck, deepening the kiss. I put every ounce of my love for him into it, hoping he can feel the words without me saying them. I’m not quite ready to profess it to him. I might be prepared to throw caution to the wind and give us a real shot, but those words feel enormous to me. I’ve fallen in love with him but confessing it out loud feels scarier than the actual act of loving him itself.

Our kiss quickly ignites. Axel grips my bottom, pulling me tight against him. His cock is a hard bar of steel between us. I rock against it, letting out a low moan at the feeling of him rubbing along my sensitive folds. He groans onto my lips at the friction. Our kiss turns more frantic as we tease each other.

He nips at my lower lip, then kisses his way down my neck, then back up to my ear. “I want you, babygirl. Tell me I can have you.”

“Yes, daddy. I need you.”

He fists my dress in his hands and pulls it up over my head in one motion. He tosses it away and takes in my white lace bra and panties that do absolutely nothing to hide my body from his eyes. Axel cups one breast, rubbing his thumb over my hardened nipple. I shiver in response to his touch.

“Look at how beautiful you are.”

I feel my cheeks heating at his compliment. I feel silly for acting like a blushing virgin, but I can’t help feeling a little shy around him. He brings out feelings in me that I haven’t felt in so long that I don’t know how to react to them.

Axel unhooks the front clasp of my bra and slowly slides it down my shoulders. I shrug it off as he cups my breasts in his warm palms. I lean into his touch, wanting more of it. I’m not

disappointed because in the next moment, he's got his mouth on my nipple, sucking the tight bud between his lips. I feel the pleasure all the way to my core.

I grip the back of his head, holding him to my breasts as he lavishes attention on both of them. I don't hold back my moans of pleasure as I grind down on his thick cock. His fingers dig into my ass as he rocks me back and forth, driving our need higher and higher.

"Tell me you want my cock, babygirl," he commands.

"I want you, daddy," I say without hesitation.

"What do you want?" he asks, nipping at my breast.

"Oh God," I moan. "Your cock. I want your cock... please."

"Mmm, good girl."

He stands with me in his arms and carries me to the bed. He gently lays me down and then starts kissing his way down my body. I grip the bedding tightly in my fists as he takes the first lick of my soaked pussy. He circles my clit with the tip of his tongue, pulling moans from my lips. He teases my entrance with his tongue, then goes back to drawing teasing circles around my clit.

"You taste like heaven, babygirl," he growls against me.

He sucks my clit between his lips, and my thighs clamp tight around his head. He pushes my thighs apart and holds them open, forcing me to take the pleasure he's pushing on me. My orgasm rockets through me without any warning. He doesn't let up. He just keeps licking and sucking my clit until I'm so sensitive every touch sends a jolt through my body.

My hands fly to his head, and I try to push him away, but he only growls and doubles down on my sensitive clit. Another orgasm hits hard and fast. My back arches off the bed as I cry out from the intense pleasure. I'm gasping for breath when he finally moves away from my clit. I let out a sound of relief. I don't think I could've taken much more of that without losing my mind.

Axel stands from the bed and quickly strips his clothes. I admire his body as his muscles ripple and flex with his every movement. I'm a lucky, lucky girl. When his cock springs free of his boxers, a little thrill shoots through me. I can't wait to feel him buried deep inside my body. I crave that connection with him.

"Like what you see, babygirl?" he asks, taking himself in hand and giving his cock a firm stroke.

"I love it, daddy." I lick my lips, wanting to take him in my mouth and give him the same pleasure he gave me.

"Good," he says, then kneels on the bed between my parted thighs.

He covers my body with his, completely enveloping me. I wrap my arms and legs around him, clinging to him like he's my life preserver. His lips move on mine in a slow, languid kiss that has tears pricking my eyes at its sweetness. His tongue strokes against mine over and over, making my toes curl.

Axel reaches between us and lines his cock up with my entrance, never pulling his lips from mine. I moan into our kiss as he enters me slowly an inch at a time. He feels so good inside me—a perfect fit. When he's buried deep, he grinds against my clit, giving me even more pleasure. He builds a steady rhythm of deep, slow thrusts. I rock my hips to the rhythm he's created following his quiet dominance.

"You feel so good, babygirl," he groans. "I've missed you so fucking much."

I nod my head quickly, unable to form words without bursting into tears. Crying is the last thing I want to do while Axel and I make love. And that's exactly what this is. We've had scenes, and we've fucked, but this is the first time we've made love. It's a poignant moment, and I refuse to ruin it with tears.

I cling to his shoulders and try to focus on our mutual pleasure. Axel doesn't seem like he's in any hurry to get to the finish line. If I'm being honest, I'm not either. This connection

feels like everything, and I never want it to end. In this moment, we are perfection.

His lips find mine again in a gentle caress. As I deepen the kiss, I thread my fingers through his hair and hold him to me. Our tongues tangle and dance together in a heated embrace. He gently bites down on my lower lip and pulls away. I moan at the slight stinging pain. My pussy clenches tight around his cock, and it's his turn to moan.

Axel grips my ass, tilting my hips up so that every stroke inside me has him rubbing along my g-spot. I rock my hips wanting more. He doesn't disappoint. He snaps his hips forward, hitting the end of me until I'm crying out in ecstasy.

“Daddy!”

“That's it, babygirl. Take my cock like a good girl. You're going to come for me, aren't you?”

He thrusts forward again, hard. I cling to him as he hits me with one devastating thrust after another. “Yes! Oh God, I'm gonna come...”

He sits up on his knees so that I'm sprawled under him. He looks like an Adonis, muscles flexing as he moves into me. Just the sight of him is enough to have any woman on her knees ready to please him. And he's mine. All mine.

He licks his thumb, and I know exactly what he has planned. I nearly lose my mind when his thumb touches my oversensitive clit. He nearly destroyed me with his mouth, and now he's pushing me over the edge with his cock deep inside me and his thumb on my clit. I claw at his wrist, trying to pull his hand away. He slaps my thigh with his free hand in warning. The slight pain drives me even closer to my release.

“Come, babygirl,” he commands.

And because he owns my body unlike any other, I submit to his command. My whole body seems to explode from the pleasure of my release. My pussy clenches around him, and my back arches. I cling to him as I'm wracked with the intensity of it all. Lights flash behind my eyes, and I swear I lose consciousness for a moment.

Axel buries himself to the hilt, and I feel his cock kick inside me as he fills me with his release. I let out another moan as his heat washes over me. He collapses on top of me, barely catching himself on his elbows before he completely crushes me. Not that I would mind. I crave the closeness right now. I'd be happy if we stayed just like this forever.

He presses a kiss to my forehead, my cheek, my nose, then my lips. He lingers there for a moment before pulling away to look down at me. "I love you, Addy."

Those tears that I pushed aside come back to the forefront, and I know that this man will be there no matter my fears or worries. I never stood a chance when it came to him. He showed up at the right moment in my life and showed me that I can love again. That my future can be full of life and love instead of grief and sorrow.

"Why are you crying, babygirl?" he asks, wiping my tears away.

"Because I love you," I say through my tears.

"Don't cry, my love. It tears me up inside when you do."

"I'm sorry. I'm just so happy."

He shakes his head with a slight smile. "As long as they are happy tears."

"Deliriously happy tears."

"Good."

He rolls us so that I'm lying on top of him. He strokes my back, and I let out a content sigh. I listen to the steady thrum of his heart, enjoying the quiet of the room. I want to take a snapshot of this moment so that I never forget how I feel right now.

I feel hope for a bright and happy future. Something I haven't felt in a long, long time, and it's all thanks to Axel. He'd probably say that it's because of me, but I would have to disagree. If I had never met him, I would never have faced my grief head-on. I might've stumbled along the way and ran from

what he was offering me, but because of him, I found the strength to make my way back to him.

We lay together for a long time. He never stops touching me. His hand lightly runs up and down my spine, then combs through my hair, then he strokes my back again. It feels wonderful, and I'm loathe to get up, but it's late and time to go home to Henry.

"It's getting late..."

"And you need to get home to Henry," he says.

"Yeah, I do." I don't move a muscle towards leaving though.

"You'll have to get up."

"I don't want to leave you," I whine.

He lightly slaps my ass. "You aren't leaving me anywhere. I'm coming home with you." He slaps my ass again. "Now get up and get dressed before I decide to never let you leave this bed."

I giggle and do as he says because I really do have to get home to relieve Marsha from babysitting duty. Once we are both dressed, we walk hand in hand out of the private room. He pulls my hand to his lips and kisses my knuckles. I smile at the sweetness. I could definitely get used to all these little shows of affection.

When we walk past a big group of people chatting and laughing, Tessa jumps up from her seat and starts towards us. Her big boyfriend catches her around the waist and pulls her down onto his lap. She struggles for a few seconds and then gives up. Instead, she waves her arms in the air and gives two thumbs up.

Axel chuckles and waves but doesn't stop leading me toward the door. "I have a feeling there's a story there."

"Let's just say that Tessa is Team Addy and Axel."

"I think I like her," I say.

"She's a pain in my ass," he says without any malice.

“Then I definitely like her.”

Axel releases my hand and swats my ass. “Watch the sass, babygirl.”

“What are you going to do? Spank me?”

He pulls me against his chest and growls against my ear, “You just wait until we get home. I’m not nearly done with you yet.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Axel

I FOLLOW ADDY INTO HER APARTMENT, EXCITED TO GET HER alone again. Thankfully the babysitter doesn't linger. She just gives Addy a quick rundown of Henry's night, then sees herself out. Addy gives me a sultry look and leads me to her bedroom.

I shut the door, locking us inside our own private cocoon. "Strip, babygirl."

Without a word, she removes all her clothes and stands in front of me in all her naked glory. I could stare at her for hours and never get bored.

"What are you going to do to me, daddy?"

I give her a feral smile. "I'm going to spank you, then I'm going to fuck you."

Her eyes dilate, and I know she's excited by the idea. I strip off my shirt and unbutton my jeans, sit on the edge of her bed and pat my knee. She lays over my lap, presenting me with her supple ass. I stroke the smooth skin dragging out the anticipation.

I lightly slap her cheeks, one after the other until her ass is a lovely shade of pink. Once I've warmed her up, I strengthen my spanks until the sound of my hand clapping down on her backside echoes around the room. Addy clings to my leg, making little mewling noises as the spanking continues.

My cock is rock-hard in my pants, and I'm desperate to be inside her. I give her ass one final spank, then lift her up and put her on the bed on her knees. She looks over her shoulder at

me, lust in her eyes. I push my jeans off and pull her hips higher. My cock lines up perfectly with her soaked entrance, and I thrust inside her sweet heaven.

All the gentleness of earlier is gone. This is raw, primal fucking. She lets out a loud moan, and I slam my hand over her mouth to keep her quiet.

“Gotta be quiet, babygirl.”

She nods, but she doesn't stop moaning as I fuck her into the mattress. And when she comes? She practically screams into my palm as her pussy milks my cock for all it's worth. I bury myself deep and let my release spill inside her.

Addy collapses to the bed, panting for breath. I collapse beside her and pull her into my arms. She relaxes against me, her breathing evens out, and I know she's fallen asleep. I hold her close as she sleeps.

Eventually, I rouse her enough to pull my t-shirt over her head and get her under the covers. I pull on my boxers and crawl into bed beside her. She instantly cuddles against me and falls back asleep. I kiss the top of her head.

My last thought before I follow her into sleep is that I can't wait to spend all of our nights together like this.

I WAKE up to a light tap on my face. I blink my eyes open and come face to face with Henry.

“I'm hungry,” he says.

I put my finger to my lips and gently move away from Addy. She stirs but doesn't wake. I pick Henry up and carry him out of the room, quietly shutting the door behind us.

“How about we make mommy breakfast?” I ask.

“Can we make her pancakes again?”

I remember the disaster of our last attempt, but I can't say no to the hopeful look on his face. “Sure, let's make

pancakes.”

We manage to make more pancakes than mess this time which is progress. I’m flipping the last pancake when Addy walks into the kitchen wearing my t-shirt and a pair of tight sleep shorts. She looks way sexier than she has any business looking at seven o’clock in the morning.

“Morning, doll.”

“Morning.”

“Mommy, we made pancakes!” Henry says excitedly.

“I see that,” she says, giving him a hug.

I flip the last pancake onto the platter and carry it toward the table. I give Addy a quick kiss on my way by, unable to resist. Addy and I move around the kitchen getting plates and drinks like we’ve done it a million times before.

We sit at the table like a little family of three, and I can’t help but hope that’s exactly what we will be one day.

EPILOGUE

Axel—One year later

IT'S HARD TO BELIEVE IT'S BEEN A YEAR SINCE ADDY AND I started seeing each other. It's not been all sunshine and roses, especially that first meeting with Addy's mother. Let's just say even though Addy and her made up, she was definitely not Team Axel at first. It took some work to win her over, but now she's on board with whatever will make Addy and Henry happy. And since that is my number one goal in life, she's happy to have me around. Which is a good thing because if I have my way, I'll be with Addy for the rest of my life.

We discussed taking things slow for Henry's sake, but when it became clear that he was happy to have me around as much as possible, we decided to move in together. I sold my house and moved into their apartment so that we didn't put his life into upheaval again so soon after they moved to Monett. It's a bit of a tight fit with the three of us, but I wouldn't change a thing.

"Axel," Addy calls from Henry's bedroom. "I can't find his other shoe."

I head into the bedroom to help her search for the missing shoe. I find her halfway under Henry's bed, pulling out toys and dirty clothes and whatever else the little guy has shoved under there.

Henry is sitting on the bed with one shoe on and a huge smirk on his face. "Hey, little man. Do you know where your other shoe is?"

He covers his mouth and giggles. Addy pops up off the floor and levels that mom stare at him. “Where is the other shoe, Mister?”

“It’s lost,” he says with another giggle.

“Well, it needs to be found! You’re going to be late for your first day of school.”

Henry is starting preschool today. It’s taking a lot of brave faces on Addy’s part to let him go. She’s cried at least a dozen times over him going. She’s enjoyed being a stay-at-home mom so much and feels like she’s losing a piece of that. However, because she’s an amazing mom, she’s doing what’s best for him and enrolled him in a private preschool. Even though it’s only a half-day, she’s still a mess on the inside.

“Can you tell mommy where your shoe is?” I ask him.

He hops off the bed and goes to his dresser. He opens up the bottom drawer and pulls the missing shoe out. “Tada! Here it is!”

“Why does he always listen to you the first time?” she says, giving me an exasperated look.

I shrug because I have no idea, but the little dude likes doing things for me. He’s always my little helper no matter what task I’m doing, big or small. It’s endearing.

“Put it on. We need to leave in the next five minutes, or you’ll be late.”

He plops down on the floor and puts the shoe on his foot. Addy lets out a sigh of relief. Once the shoe is on, it’s a flurry of activity to gather his things and get him out the door. We get to the school minutes before his class starts.

The teacher greets Henry with a broad smile, shows him where he can put his backpack, and then ushers him to where the other kids are all playing. Henry looks back at us, looking wary. Addy smiles wide at him and gives him a thumbs up. He returns the thumbs up and sits beside a little girl playing with blocks. And just like that, he’s made a new friend.

I guide a reluctant Addy out of the classroom. “Come on, doll. He’s going to be just fine.”

“I know, I know. It’s just so hard to let him go.”

“It’s only a few hours, and then you’ll be able to smother him with your love all over again.”

She snorts a laugh at that. “I’m not that bad.”

“You’re the perfect balance of raising an independent kid and smothering him with affection.”

I open the truck door for her, and she climbs in. I lean in, and she offers her lips for a kiss. Our lips meet briefly, then I close the door and circle around the truck to get in the driver’s side. I take up her hand and hold it all the way home. She’s quiet on the way home, probably thinking about if Henry is doing okay being away from her or not.

“Quit stressing, doll. He’s going to have fun.”

“Yeah. I know. I just need you to keep telling me that a few more times,” she says.

“How about I distract you instead...” I pull her into my arms and cup her cheek.

She looks up at me with a slight smile. “And how do you plan on doing that?”

Instead of using words, I crush my lips to hers and lift her up. She squeals a little at suddenly being lifted, then wraps her arms around my neck. I kiss her as I carry her to our bedroom. She kisses me back with just as much passion.

I set her on her feet, and she grips my shirt, pulling me down for another needy kiss. I grip her ass, pulling her close. She wriggles in my arms, rubbing her sexy body against mine. My cock hardens at the friction.

“Are you distracted yet?” I ask, brushing another light kiss over her lips.

“Getting there,” she pants.

“Guess I’ll have to try harder...”

She gives me a seductive smile. “Guess so...”

We spend the rest of the morning naked in bed. It's the very best way to spend the morning. I can never get enough of her, and she's just as hungry for me.

“READY FOR BOY'S DAY?” I ask Henry as I strap him into his car seat.

“Yeah!”

We're going to the movies to see his favorite cartoon turned movie. Of course it wouldn't be a boy's day if we didn't have enough ice cream to spoil dinner.

He excitedly watches the movie while scarfing down fistfuls of popcorn. When it's over, he can't stop talking about how awesome all the trains were and how he can't wait to see it again. He barely stops talking to pick out his favorite ice cream, which is still vanilla with sprinkles.

“So buddy, I have a question for you.”

He looks up from his ice cream and waits.

“I want to marry your mommy, but I want to ask for your permission first.”

“Does that mean you'll be my daddy?”

That question catches me off-guard. “Do you want me to be your daddy?”

“Yes,” he says simply, then goes back to eating his ice cream.

He just sits there eating while my whole life has been changed. Rearranged into something wholly new. Just because I've taken up the fatherly role in Henry's life, I never expected him to want me as his daddy. Addy has made it a point to talk about William with Henry so that he knows who his dad was, even going so far as to put pictures up in his room.

Some men would be jealous of having another man's pictures hanging on the walls, but I know how important it is for Addy to keep William's memory alive for her son. I would never deny her anything she wants, especially when it means so much for Henry to know where he came from. I'm secure enough in our love that I don't need to feel jealous.

Addy had a past love, one that she will always hold in her heart, and I can't be mad at that. All the events that led up to her moving to Monett, including her life with William, brought her into my life, and I'm happier now than ever.

I wouldn't change a thing... except that I want my ring on Addy's finger. I've been waiting for the perfect time to ask, but I'm quickly learning there is no perfect time when you have a four-year-old around. Now that I have Henry's blessing, it's time to pop the question.

I call Marsha and arrange for her to babysit tonight. When I tell her why she's more than happy to drop her plans and accommodate mine. She's been an angel when it comes to helping with Henry. And he absolutely adores her. We are lucky to have her in our lives. I have a certain fondness for her after I found out how she encouraged Addy to follow her heart. She's a good kid.

"What do you mean we are going to the club tonight?" Addy asks, surprised.

"Marsha will be here in thirty minutes. I thought we could use a little time for ourselves."

"Thirty minutes! I can't get ready in thirty minutes. I'm a mess." She might feel like she's a mess, but I think she's gorgeous in one of my t-shirts and a tight pair of leggings that makes her ass look fantastic.

"Better hurry then, babygirl," I say, giving her ass a little swat.

She jumps away, rushing to the bedroom to get ready. I follow after at a much slower pace because I'll be damned if I miss a chance to watch my girl getting naked. Addy rushes through getting dressed and brushes out her long hair. It falls

around her shoulders in a silky blonde wave. She's touching up her makeup when Marsha shows up.

"Time to go, doll."

She gives me an exasperated look. "I'm almost done."

I wrap my arms around her from behind. "You look beautiful."

She leans back against me for a second, then elbows me away. I just need to fix my lipstick, and I'll be good to go. Part of me wants to pull her away so we can get this night started. I'm full of anxious energy that won't go away until she's said yes to marrying me. The other part of me remembers how sexy her lipstick looks when she's got those plump lips wrapped around my cock.

Once we are at the club, I bypass everything and lead her straight to the private room I've reserved for the night.

"What's the hurry?" Addy asks, tugging on my hand to get me to slow down. "Don't you want to see who's here? It's been a while since we've seen the gang."

"Nope. Not here for them."

I pick her up and toss her over my shoulder when she still drags her feet. She lets out a breathless laugh but doesn't put up a fight. Good thing because I won't be swayed away from my plans to lock her down as my fiancée as quick as possible.

I take a quick look around the private room, and I'm impressed by how quickly Tessa pulled everything together for me. Yellow roses and candles are on every flat surface available. It looks just like I hoped.

I set Addy on her feet, and she gets her first look at the room. "What's all this?" she asks, spinning around to take it all in.

I get down on one knee, and when she turns to face me again, her lips pop open in surprise. Her hands cover her mouth as her shock rocks through her.

"Addy, my love, my babygirl, will you make me the happiest man in the world and marry me?"

She's quiet for a long moment... long enough that I start to worry that she might think that this next step is too soon. I know she never thought she'd marry again, but I'm praying she's changed her mind.

Just when I think she's not going to answer, she throws herself at me. I catch her in my arms and steady us before we topple to the floor. She peppers my face with kisses before pressing her lips to mine for a deep kiss.

"Does this mean you'll marry me?" I ask, hopeful.

"Yes! Yes, I'll marry you," she says with tears in her eyes.

It's my turn to crush my lips to hers. We lose ourselves in the kiss, sealing our promise to each other. When we finally part, I slide the diamond onto her finger. She admires the emerald cut stone for a second then she's kissing me again.

She tugs my shirt up over my head, then starts working on my pants. I nearly rip her dress in my desperation to get her naked and underneath me. She gasps when I rip her lace panties straight off.

"Hey—" her protest is cut off when I bury my face between her legs.

I eat her like a starved man. I lick her until she's a panting mess and pushing my head away from her sensitive clit. I strip off the rest of my clothes and sink into her heat. We make love right there on the floor of the private room, not even taking the time to move to the bed. I take her until we are both fully sated.

"Wow," she says, breathless. "Engaged sex is the best."

I chuckle. "Just wait for married sex."

EPILOGUE

Addy—Six months later

“DOESN’T YOUR MOMMY LOOK PRETTY?” PELAR ASKS HENRY, who looks adorable in his mini-tuxedo.

“She looks like a princess.”

I run my hands down my wedding dress, smoothing out non-existent wrinkles. As the minutes tick down to time to walk down the aisle, my anxiety grows. I’ve been anxious since last night when Axel kissed me goodnight and went to his own hotel room.

Even though I’ve done this all before, he insisted on doing it right and following all the typical traditions. I would’ve been happy going to the courthouse and having a small reception after. He wouldn’t hear of it though. He wants me to have the whole experience.

“It’s almost time,” my mom says, bustling into the room I’ve been getting ready in. “Oh, darling, you look beautiful.”

I give her a tight smile. “Thanks, mom.”

My anxiety doesn’t escape her. She grabs my hands and holds them tight between hers. “Relax. Everything is going to go without a hitch. The room looks perfect, the guests are all here, and your husband-to-be looks drop-dead gorgeous in his tux. All the ladies are drooling after him.”

“I’m just nervous. I know I’ve done this before, but it feels different this time.”

Mom gives my hands another supportive squeeze. “It is different, but it’s a good thing. You and Axel are perfect

together, and Henry just loves him to pieces.”

I look at my son as he spins in circles holding the little ring bearer pillow.

“Yeah, he does. Axel is a great dad.”

She nods in agreement. “William would be so proud of you for moving forward with your life. He wouldn’t want you to be stuck in your grief for your whole life.”

“I know that. It’s just a big day. I’ll be fine once I see Axel again. It was a horrible idea to sleep apart last night.”

“It’s tradition,” my mom tsks.

“That’s what everyone keeps telling me. I think it’s a stupid tradition.”

There’s a knock on the door, then my dad pokes his head in. “It’s time.”

I run my hands over my dress again and look in the mirror for the hundredth time.

“You look beautiful,” Pelar says. “Everything is perfect. Everything is going to be perfect. Now let’s go get you married.”

My dad leads me to the entrance of the room the ceremony is taking place, and we wait for Pelar and Henry to walk down the aisle. It seems like it takes them a lifetime to make their way to their spots.

“He’s a good man,” my dad says, pulling me out of my anxiety spiral.

“I know.”

“Just remember to follow your heart, and it won’t steer you wrong.” He pats my hand and smiles down at me. “Ready?”

He’s right. My heart has never steered me in the wrong direction before. I need to trust in myself. Being with Axel has changed my life for the better, and I can’t wait to spend the rest of my life with him.

“Ready,” I say, feeling more sure than I ever have in my life.

The doors open in front of us, and I take my first step toward my forever. My eyes lock on Axel, and all of my worries fly away. My previous anxiety is gone, and all I see is my future laid out in front of me, bright and happy.

“HAVE I told you that you look beautiful yet, my bride?”

“Only about a dozen times, my husband.”

“Definitely not enough times, then. You look beautiful, Addy. I could stare at you for days and never bore of you.”

I give him a wide smile. “You don’t look half bad yourself, handsome.”

And he doesn’t. He looks sexy as sin in his tuxedo. It’s no wonder the single ladies are all drooling and jealous of my husband.

My husband.

I don’t think I’ll ever tire of that.

He leans in and gives my neck a little kiss. “When can we sneak out of here?”

I laugh at his excitement to get on with our honeymoon. He didn’t even want to come to the reception. In fact, he stole me away to a coat closet for a private moment before he agreed to share me with our friends and family. One orgasm later, I was flushed and sated, and the last thing I wanted was a big party. But I didn’t want to disappoint my family, so here we are, eating cake and being smothered with well wishes.

“We still have to dance...”

He groans. “Then we can leave?” he asks for clarification.

“Yep. We just have to do our first dance as man and wife, and then we’ve completed all the obligatory wedding traditions.”

He stands from his chair so fast that it rocks on its legs, nearly toppling to the ground. I give his back a confused look as he marches away. He's back a couple minutes later, pulling me from my chair and towards the dance floor. The music starts, and he spins me around so that I'm in his embrace.

I throw my head back and laugh. "People aren't done with their cake yet."

"Do I look like I care? You said one dance, and we're done. I want my wife to myself," he growls.

He twirls me around the dance floor, then dips me backward and gives me a movie-worthy heated kiss. The room erupts in applause, causing my cheeks to heat in a blush. The song ends, and Axel grabs my hand and pulls me off the dance floor. When I stumble over the front of my wedding dress, he turns and picks me up, throwing me over his shoulder caveman style.

He carries me out of the reception and straight to our hotel suite, where we spend the next twenty-four hours completely lost in each other. It's the perfect start to our new lives together. I can't wait to spend every day living life to its fullest with Axel at my side.

THE END

Want more from Addy and Axel? Read their bonus chapter [here: https://BookHip.com/KXTNSZS](https://BookHip.com/KXTNSZS)

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Rory Reynolds is a stay-at-home mom of two. She's a ravenous reader of romance and firmly believes that you can never have too many book boyfriends.

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