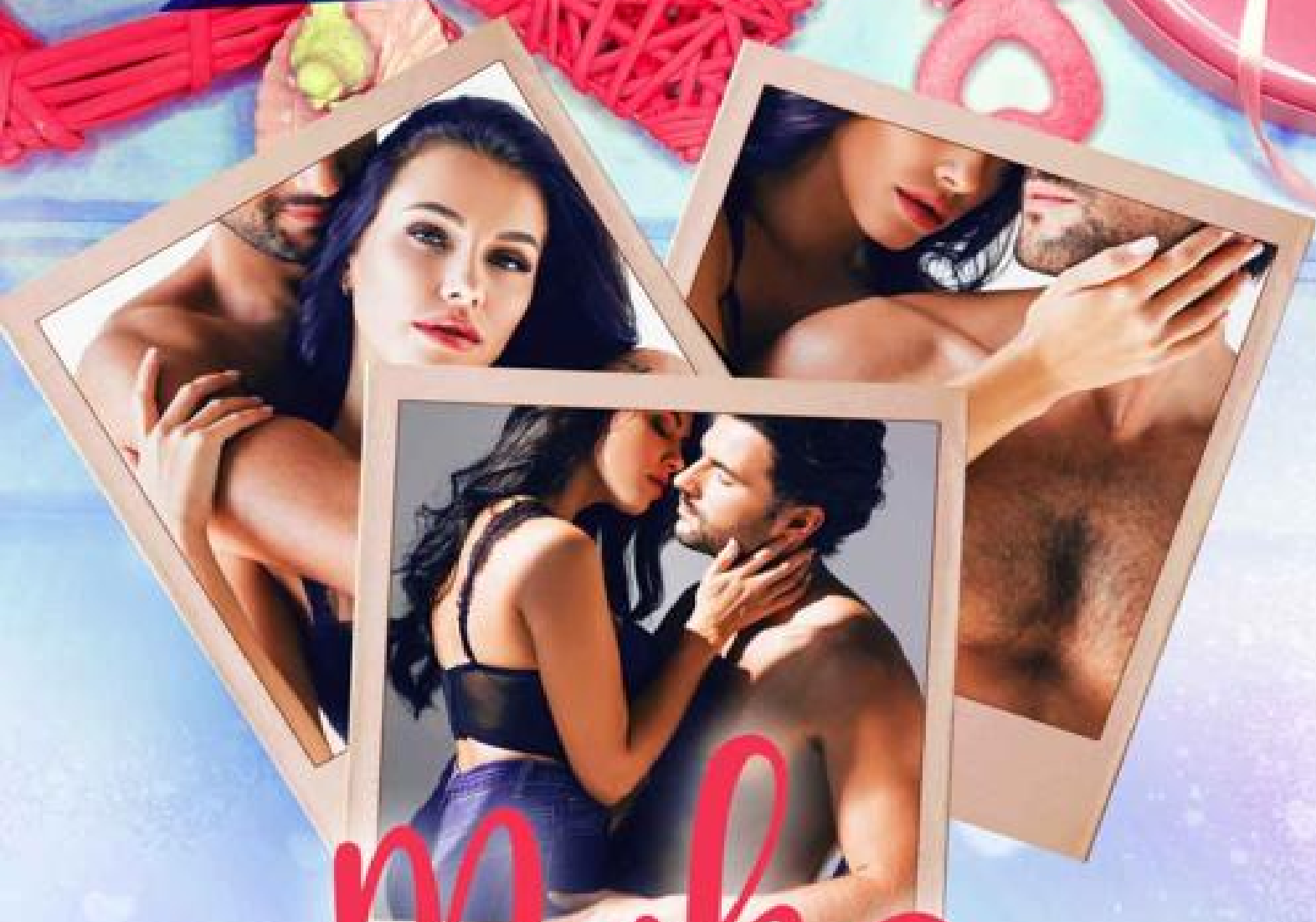


A SWOON WORTHY ROMANCE COLLECTION



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RUINED

DESTINY FALLS

*

This story starts with a car crash.

Lyla Winters's life is at a crossroads. She's bounced around from one job to another since she was sixteen, wanting to experience everything, but now that she's twenty-five, her lack of a plan is a little less cute. Too bad for her, she has no idea what she wants to do with the rest of her life.

She's got a plan though. She'll take a year off to travel and find herself. That plan goes off the road though when she gets to Destiny Falls, Michigan, and runs into some fancy SUV.

Out climbs Hudson Hayes. Restaurateur, James Beard Winner, and the man with a plan.

Also, maybe the man of her dreams.

She has to pay for the damage to both of their cars and just like that, there goes her savings for the year. Now she's stuck in Destiny Falls, working at the Mystery Cabin and living in the apartment above Hudson's restaurant.

The plan for the year off is still in play though. She just needs to save up her money and keep her eye on the prize. It's just that the prize looks more and more like Hudson every day.

When Lyla finally has enough saved to leave Destiny Falls, will she be able to say goodbye to the friends and life that she's made here in this small town? Or will she have finally found the one place that she truly belongs?

This is a 50,000 word small town romance novel that ends in a happily ever after

ONE



This story starts with a car crash.

I'll get to that part in a minute though. Right now, I'm running late for work.

I race down the stairs of my apartment, bursting out the front door and onto the sidewalk of Main Street. My black Jeep is parked in its usual spot right outside of the door and I head that way, digging in my purse for my car keys. I don't miss a beat as I grab the scrap of paper tucked under the windshield wiper on the driver's side that is always there every morning and hop behind the wheel.

I only live about ten minutes away from the Mystery Cabin, where I work, and there is never any traffic in Destiny Falls, Michigan, so the commute doesn't take long. I head down Main Street, past all of the little tourist shops, and head just outside of downtown.

I spot the familiar A-frame house that my boss made into his tourist trap of a business. It's old, with a few shingles missing in some spots on the roof, but seeing the place always makes me smile.

I park next to Sutton's old Volkswagen Beetle and hop out, sprinting for the gift shop door.

"Well, it's about time you showed up," Stan, my boss, says without looking up from the clipboard in his hands as I walk inside.

"I'm right on time," I tell him, nodding to the clock on the wall and he hums his disapproval.

Stan reminds me a lot of that movie *Grumpy Old Men*. He's crotchety, always grumbling unless he's in front of a group of tourists whose money he's about to take. He puts on a gruff exterior but I know that inside, he's a big old soft marshmallow. He took a chance on hiring me when I first got to town and has always treated me fairly, and for that, I'm grateful.

"Hey," Sutton says with a smile as she walks into the gift shop with a cup of steaming coffee in her hand.

The Mystery Cabin is still set up as a house. The living room at the back of the house has been set up as the gift shop. It has its own door that leads out to the back of the house, where Stan has set up a miniature golf course and zipline.

From the gift shop, you head down a hallway that leads to the rest of the house. Off to the right is the entrance of the Mystery Cabin and if you head straight, it leads to the kitchen, living room, and bedrooms.

Sutton is Stan's great-niece, and she just moved to Destiny Falls a few months ago after the death of her mother. She was supposed to just spend the summer here, connecting with the last bit of family that she had left on Earth and finishing off the bucket list that her mom left behind for her. After the summer, she had a great job lined up for her in Boston, but instead of going, she fell in love with Teller, the Mystery Cabin's handyman, and decided to stay in town and work for her great-uncle.

"Hey, how's it going?" I ask her as I bend down and give Bandit, Sutton's dog, a pat on the head.

The black and white mutt nudges my hand and I know what he's after. I chuckle as I oblige him and scratch him behind his ears.

"Come on, Bandit," Stan says gruffly. "Let's let these two get to work. I can't keep paying them for nothing."

Bandit happily follows Stan out of the gift shop and down the hall. Sutton just rolls her eyes. We're all used to her great-uncle pretending that he doesn't care about things. It's been his

coping mechanism for a long time and it caused some problems between him and Sutton when she first got here.

Stan had given her a hard time when she first found Bandit, but now the two of them are practically inseparable—not that Stan would ever admit that.

“It’s going to be a slow day, so I was hoping we could start inventory on the supply closet?” Sutton asks and I nod.

The kids just started back at school, so Stan has warned us that the next few months will be a little slow, especially during the week. It’s boring just sitting around staring at the walls of the Mystery Cabin and at all of the merchandise, so I’m actually looking forward to organizing and doing inventory.

“Sounds good. Did Teller fix that cabin next door yet?” I ask her, and she shakes her head.

Stan also owns the Pines Motel and Cabins next door and Teller is in charge of keeping them running smoothly too.

“No, he’s doing that today. I was thinking about heading over there and helping him.”

“Go for it!” I encourage her, knowing that she’s probably excited to spend a few hours alone with her boyfriend.

“Thanks. I’ll have the walkie-talkie, so just let me know if you need us for anything.”

“Will do. Have fun,” I call as she heads for the back door.

She waves and I see Teller smile as he grabs his toolbox and waits for her to join him. Teller waves at me, his usual baseball hat on backward, his dark hair curling over the edges.

I can’t help but feel a pang of jealousy as I watch the two of them head next door to the cabin rentals. They got together shortly after Sutton came to town and, after a minor hiccup or two, are now together and stronger than ever.

It’s obvious to see how much that they love each other and I wish that I could find that too. I’ve never loved anyone romantically. I’ve never even come close.

I've dated, more so when I was younger, in high school, and had more time, but I never seemed to be able to make it past the first date. Something always went wrong, or I found some way to ruin it.

There was that date with Robby Schulmer where we went to the county fair and I threw up on him after one too many funnel cakes and twister rides. Or the time where I accidentally ran over Trever Beltima's foot when we went go-karting. Every single date has ended with someone sick or injured. After a while, I just stopped trying. It seemed safer for everyone that way.

Like it was a sign that maybe I'm just not meant to be in a relationship or find love.

An image of Hudson pops into my head and I know that I can't go down that road, so I turn and try to focus on the inventory that needs to be done.

It doesn't work.

I only make it a few minutes before I'm back to thinking of my dark-haired landlord. I've been thinking about Hudson since I first got to town. In fact, he's the reason why I'm currently living and working in Destiny Falls. Remember that car crash that I mentioned?

It all happened two and a half months ago.

I had just driven over the bridge and into the small town of Destiny Falls and was trying to grab my sunglasses from out of my purse when some fancy black SUV had pulled out in front of me. I had tried to stop, but it was too late and I ended up rear-ending them.

The *them* being Hudson Hayes.

I had thought that maybe I needed more sleep, that I must have been seeing things, but when I blinked again, it was still him. I had closed my eyes again, praying for sweet death to take me so that I didn't have to get out of this car and face him.

Hudson Hayes is a big deal in New York City, where I'm from. He's actually a big deal to anyone who likes good food

or handsome men. He's a Michelin star chef, a James Beard winner, and the owner of restaurants in all of the major cities all over the world.

He got out of his car, his hand grabbing the back of his neck as he went to look at the damage and I couldn't help but notice that his hair had looked longer than the last time I saw his picture in the newspaper back home. It'd been a while, probably over a year, but I hadn't really noticed. The two of us didn't exactly run in the same circles, and if I was ever able to get off the waitlist for a night out at one of his restaurants, then it would mean that I couldn't afford rent that month.

He used to be a staple in the *New York Times* and the society pages, standing in his chef's uniform, arms crossed, easy smile on his sculpted face. Sometimes I wonder if it's that face that has so many people clamoring to get a reservation at one of his places.

I had gotten it together, jumping out of my Jeep to assess the cars and looking at how bad the damage was.

Luckily, there had only been a scratch on the front of my Jeep. His Range Rover didn't get away so easily. One of his taillights was busted and the back door was dented along with his bumper. I couldn't help but wonder how much of a dent this was going to put in my travel fund.

"I'm so sorry. Are you alright? I was trying to grab my sunglasses and didn't see you in time," I apologize.

"It's... fine," he finished as he finally turned to look at me.

"I can grab my insurance card," I offer, wincing as I think about what this is going to do to my rates.

I had an accident when I was sixteen and had just gotten my license and another right after my father's funeral several weeks ago. I could barely afford insurance before this; it's going to be impossible now.

"I'll tell you what. Let's just take it around the corner to Gavin's Mechanic Shop. He can take a look at it and maybe we won't have to go through all of that paperwork," he

offered, and I almost gave myself whiplash turning back around.

“Really? Are you sure?” I asked, and he gave me an easy smile.

“Yeah, I’m sure. Gavin’s shop is just around the corner.”

“I’ll follow you,” I promised.

He nodded, heading back to his car, and I climbed into mine. Gavin’s Mechanic Shop really was just right around the corner but given the fact that this town seems to be one main street and not much else, that’s not a surprise.

Hudson pulled in front of one of the loading bay doors and I parked in a spot in front. I grabbed my purse, hopping out, and sighed as I stretched my legs. I’d been driving for the last few days and I didn’t realize how tight my muscles had gotten.

I did my best to stretch as I headed over to meet Hudson at the door. He opened it for me and I smiled, walking in front of him inside.

It had taken some time for Gavin to look over Hudson’s car and when he came back, wiping his hands off on a greasy towel, I knew that I was screwed. I had only saved up a few grand for this soul-searching trip and I had a feeling that my savings were about to get wiped out.

I was right.

I had still offered to go through the insurance since I couldn’t cover the cost, but Hudson said that he trusted me and that I could make payments.

That’s how I ended up working at the Mystery Cabin and living in the apartment right above Hudson’s restaurant downtown. It was the cheapest place to live since he gives me a break on the rent and I just have to cover the utilities.

He got his car fixed. I know, because he leaves it parked right next to mine every night even though he lives in a nice house on the water a block and a half away.

That reminds me, and I reach into my pocket, opening up the note that was left on my windshield. Hudson has been

doing it for months and it's always the same. A would you rather question and an invite to dinner.

So far, I haven't taken him up on his dinner offer and I never reply to his would you rather questions either, no matter how entertaining I may find them. I swore off guys until I have a plan for the rest of my life. I thought that it was a good idea... before I met Hudson.

Hudson makes me wish that I already had my life together, that I already had a plan.

He's basically my dream guy and I hate having to ignore him every time he leaves me a note or when we run into each other in town.

I take a deep breath as I read the note that he left for me today.

LYLA, would you rather be forced to sing along or dance to every single song you hear?

Have dinner with me and we can discuss...

x. H

"ARE YOU HUNGRY, LYLA?" Stan asks as he comes back with Bandit on his leash.

"Yeah, I skipped breakfast."

"Hmph, you should wake up earlier. You need to eat," he says with a frown, and I try to hide my smile.

"You're right. Want me to go grab us something to eat?" I ask and he sighs.

"I guess. Can't have you collapsing on me at work," he says, pretending to be annoyed as he grabs his wallet and hands me a ten-dollar bill.

"The Upside Diner?" I ask, naming the retro-style diner just down the road and he nods.

“Get my usual. You should probably take Bandit. He’s been cooped up in here for too long.”

“What a great idea!”

“Smartass,” he mumbles, but I can see him smiling as I take the leash and grab my phone.

“I’ll be right back!”

I head across the gravel parking lot and down the sidewalk toward downtown Destiny Falls. It’s a beautiful day, not too hot yet and I enjoy the slight breeze blowing in off of Lake Michigan. Bandit has to stop and sniff every blade of grass, so the ten-minute walk ends up taking twenty, but I don’t mind.

I wonder what the weather will be like when I leave. I’m close to having enough to pay Hudson back and then I’ll be hitting the road again. I don’t mind the cold and I wonder what a Michigan winter is like. Part of me wants to find out, but I’m on a mission.

My dad passed away a few months ago and that’s when this itch to travel first started. It had been just the two of us for so long that I just couldn’t bear to live in our cramped New York City apartment without him. I could barely afford it either and I didn’t want to get a roommate and have them touching mine and my father’s things.

The plan was for me to travel across the country, working when I needed to, but mainly just exploring and learning more about myself and what I wanted out of my life.

The truth is, I’m twenty-five and I have no idea what I want to do with my life. I never have, though I’ve tried to work in a vast number of fields. None have been a perfect fit.

I was hoping that this trip would help me find my place in the world now that the last real family member that I had was gone. Help me figure out what I’m meant to do, what makes me happy. It’s not like I had anything left for me in New York City.

“Lyla!” my friend Madelyn calls and I smile as she joins me at the door for The Upside Diner.

“Hey, grabbing breakfast?” I ask her.

“Yeah, Flynn and I are supposed to meet here, but it looks like he’s running late,” she says and I smile wider as I see Flynn pulling in behind her.

Flynn is Madelyn’s friend from college and roommate. Everyone is pretty sure that they’re in love but they have yet to admit that.

“Speak of the devil,” she teases and Flynn laughs as he joins us.

“Are you joining us for breakfast, Lyla?” Flynn asks and I shake my head.

“No, I’m just here to grab something to eat for Stan and me.”

We head inside and I put my order in with Suzie at the counter before I head over and join them at their booth to wait.

“Are you ready for girl’s night tonight?” Madelyn asks as I slide in next to her and I grin.

“I forgot that was tonight.”

“What are you ladies going to be doing?” Flynn asks.

“Probably just head up to The Fainting Goat,” I tell him with a shrug, looking over to Madelyn.

“Yeah, or we could head over to Lilac Harbor. I heard that there’s some new bar opening up over there,” Madelyn suggests, naming the next town over.

“Lyla!” Suzie calls with my food all bagged up. I stand up, telling Madelyn that I’ll see her tonight before I wave goodbye to both of them and start the walk back to the Mystery Cabin.

Bandit sniffs the food as we walk and I laugh as he tries to bury his nose in the bag. I know that I’ve only been in Destiny Falls for a few months, but I’m at peace here. The first real peace since my father passed away.

I’ve got a job and great friends here but is it enough? Shouldn’t I want more than a dead-end job working in the gift shop of some tourist trap?

I frown as I head back across the gravel parking lot and to the gift shop door, and I realize something as Bandit and I head inside.

It's going to be hard to say goodbye when it's time to leave this town.

TWO



I wince as some of the hoots and hollers of the drunk guys around the mechanical bull in the corner of the bar hit eardrum busting decibels. They've been doing that off and on for the last twenty minutes and it's causing the headache that I had when I first got here to kick up a notch and now all I can concentrate on is the pounding I can feel in my head.

We're at the bar in town. It's a western theme place with a mechanical bull in the corner and a stage on the other side of the bar. They're not doing live music tonight, but the place is still pretty crowded.

I rub at my temples, wondering if maybe the alcohol isn't helping with the headache as I try to tune back in to my friends as we sit around a table in the center of the bar.

"I'm just saying, he's totally into you," Madelyn tells Iris as we all try to pretend that we're not watching Arlo, the bartender here at The Fainting Goat, checking out Iris every chance that he gets.

Iris sighs. I think that she's used to us encouraging her to go for him but she seems happy to run her antiques store downtown and hang out with all of us instead of dating and all of that.

"I'll tell you what. I'll ask Arlo out, when you ask Flynn out," Iris says with a smirk, and Madelyn pouts at her.

"For the millionth time, Flynn and I are just friends," Madelyn argues, but no one with eyes believes that.

“Yeah, um, we’ve seen you two together so...” Sutton says, trailing off as she grabs her martini and takes a drink.

“Alright, alright,” Iris says, waving her hand to stop Madelyn before she can start to argue. “How’s this then? I’ll go out with Arlo when Lyla finally takes Hudson up on one of his dinner date offers.”

All eyes turn to me expectantly and I regret sharing that he leaves me notes every day asking me out. I’m saved from having to answer by Flynn heading over to our table.

“Ladies,” he says with a smile as he grabs a chair from a nearby table and joins us.

“You know that this is girl’s night, right?” Madelyn asks as he takes her drink, finishing off the last of her appletini.

“You aren’t happy to see me?” he asks and I lean back in my chair, getting comfortable for this argument.

“What are you doing here?” Iris asks.

“I’m meeting some friends. I thought that you guys were headed over to Lilac Harbor tonight?”

“We were going to, but Iris is headed to some flea market tomorrow morning and has to be up early,” I tell him and he nods.

“Can I get you guys another round?” Arlo asks as he stops by our table.

The glasses that he’s holding clink together as he shifts them, his eyes straying constantly to Iris who is blushing and can’t seem to meet his eyes.

“Sure, that would be great,” I say as I smile up at him.

He smiles back, taking one last look at Iris before he heads back to the bar. Gavin and a guy that I don’t recognize come in and Flynn waves at them, standing up to greet them.

“I’ll let you ladies get back to your night,” he says as he heads over to a table nearby and takes a seat with his own friends.

Madelyn watches him go and I bite back a smile. She has it bad for him and if the way that Flynn keeps stealing glances over here at her is any indication, then he's head over heels in love himself.

"Thanks," I say as Arlo drops off the next round of drinks and he nods before he heads back to the bar, grabbing some empty beer bottles as he goes.

"He's cute," I say, nodding at Arlo.

Iris sighs and I grin. It's true though. Arlo is lean but fit, with sandy brown hair and bright green eyes. He looks like Captain America and he has the same wholesome vibe. I think that he'd be perfect for Iris but I know that I won't be able to convince her of that.

I take a sip of my martini, relaxing as the girls chat about some town gossip with the mayor's son and about the new bar that opened up in Lilac Harbor.

"Want to try to check it out next week?" Sutton asks as I finish off my martini and we all agree.

Iris is getting ready to leave and even though it's only nine-thirty, I'm ready to call it a night too. Normally, I love hanging out with my friends but I'm just not in the mood tonight. I've been distracted all day. At first, I thought that I was just bored since work has been so slow but I know that it's more than that.

I'm just feeling... adrift.

And I've been feeling this way for a while. Probably ever since my dad died but I can barely remember those months that he was ill, so maybe it was even before that.

I'm sick of it.

I'm sick of bouncing from one job to the next and feeling like I have no direction or idea about what I want to do with the rest of my life.

I'm lost in thoughts as I look around at my friends and the rest of the bar.

Everyone that I know seems to have it figured out.

Sutton turned down her dream job in her dream city to help Stan run the Mystery Cabin and to be with Teller. Madelyn runs the Falls Market in town and has her friends and Flynn. Even Iris has her career figured out. She's always loved antiques and the classics and now she's running her own store in her hometown, doing what she loves, where she loves. Plus, she has a guy that's obviously into her.

Me? I'm in a town that was just meant to be a blip on my road trip. I'm working in the gift shop of some tourist trap that most people have never heard of. I have no idea what I want to do with the rest of my life career-wise, where I want to do it, and the only remaining family that I have left is my mom, stepfather, and stepsister, all of whom I don't get along with.

I stopped being close with my mom when I was nine and she ditched my dad and me for someone better. I haven't seen her since I was twelve. That was when she married my stepdad and got busy with her new family. She called me a few months ago to inform me that one of my stepsisters, Heidi, was engaged, but that was the last time that we spoke.

The call hadn't ended on a good note. Dad was sick, in hospice by then, and we knew that he didn't have much time left. My mom didn't care about that though and didn't even ask about him. She was too wrapped up in planning her daughter's wedding and demanding that I be there. I had promptly told her to fuck off and hung up on her.

I was distraught over losing my only real parent and even if my dad had been healthy, I still couldn't have cared less about my evil stepsister and her upcoming wedding.

My dad died two days later and I had quickly forgotten about the wedding and phone call. My mom didn't show up to the funeral. She didn't even call to ask me how I was doing and if I needed anything. I don't know why I was surprised by that.

Like every other time I think about my mom, my mood turns sour and I know that it's time for me to head home before I start to bring everyone else down.

“I think that I’m going to take off,” I say and everyone else nods.

“Yeah, I’m getting pretty tired too,” Madelyn says, covering up a yawn.

“Are you headed to Teller’s?” I ask Sutton.

He had dropped her off tonight and doesn’t live that far from me, so I could drive her home instead of having him come out to get her.

“No, he’s got his volunteer shift at the fire station, so I’m going to call a car and head back to the Mystery Cabin and hang out with Uncle Stan and Bandit.”

“I’ll give you a ride,” I say even though it’s in the opposite direction from my place, and she smiles, grabbing her purse as we all stand.

“See you guys later!” I call as we watch Madelyn and Iris head across the parking lot to their cars.

They wave and I unlock my Jeep, climbing behind the wheel.

“Do you want to just crash at the Mystery Cabin too? We can share my bed,” Sutton offers as I yawn but I shake my head.

“No, I’d have to stop and grab clothes from my place for work tomorrow, so I’ll just head home. Thanks for offering though.”

“Plus, you’d miss out on your note if your car wasn’t parked outside of Prim + Proper,” she points out with a smirk and I roll my eyes as we start to head down Main Street.

I know that she’s right though. I live for these notes.

We pass by the Destiny Falls fire station and I see her look over, checking to make sure that Teller’s truck is there. I know that she still gets anxious for him to be a firefighter after his accident a few months ago when he hurt his arm fighting a house fire and I don’t blame her. It has to be nerve-racking waiting to see if he’s going to come home in one piece or not.

“Thanks for the ride,” Sutton says as I pull up in front of the Mystery Cabin.

“No problem. I’ll see you tomorrow,” I tell her as she hops out.

She waves as she heads up to the front door and I wait until she’s inside before I pull back out onto Main Street.

It’s late and the streets are deserted as I drive back downtown and pull into my usual parking spot outside of Prim + Proper. Hudson’s Range Rover is parked next to my Jeep in its usual spot and I can’t help but look into the front windows of the fancy restaurant to see if I can spot him as I hop out of my Jeep.

It’s just after ten-thirty, so the restaurant must have just closed and there are only a few lights on in the kitchen. I slow as I head past the window and look into the empty dining room, only to lock eyes with Hudson.

He’s standing over by the maître d stand, some papers clenched in his hands and he grins at me, a dimple popping out in his right cheek. His eyes do that sexy smolder thing and I can feel my inner thighs start to quiver.

I give him a little wave with my fingers and grin before I turn the corner of the building and head upstairs to my apartment. As I go, I can’t help but wonder what the note on my windshield will say tomorrow morning.

I head into my bedroom, digging in my jean pocket and pulling out the note that he left me this morning. I don’t know why, but I’ve never been able to force myself to throw them away. Instead, I’ve been keeping them in a box under my bed with the money that I’ve been saving up to pay him back.

I grab the shoebox now, opening the lid and dropping the latest piece of paper inside. The box is getting pretty full and I bite my lip, wondering what I’ll do with the notes when I leave town.

THREE



Hudson is just slipping the note under the windshield wiper of my Jeep the next day as I come downstairs to head to work.

“Listen, I’ve almost got your money, man,” I joke, and he freezes, looking up at me sharply.

If I didn’t know any better, I would swear that he almost looks sad to hear that, but that can’t be right.

“I’m not in any hurry. You don’t need to stress about it,” he says and I nod.

“Thanks, but Stan pays me well, actually. Besides, my landlord is really lenient on rent,” I tease him.

Hudson looks away from me and I study him. He’s wearing his usual attire. White button-up shirt with the sleeves rolled halfway up his forearms, a pair of dark blue jeans, and navy blue tennis shoes. Today there’s something different though. He looks tired. There are dark circles under his blue eyes, his mouth pulled down at the corners. Even his hair seems flatter, like he didn’t have time to style it.

I still look like a slacker compared to him in my old, ripped jeans, beat-up Converse, and Mystery Cabin employee shirt that is a size too big. I threw my hair up into a bun, but I can already tell that it’s starting to fall apart. Loose pale purple strands keep blowing in my face and brushing against the back of my neck.

“Late start today?” I ask him as I dig my keys out of my purse.

“Yeah, my alarm clock broke.”

“You still have an alarm clock? Like an actual alarm clock? You know your phone does that, right? It has one built in and everything.”

“Ha ha. I like my alarm clock more. I’m headed to grab another one this morning. Do you need anything from the store?”

“No, I’m going to go grocery shopping tonight after I get off work.”

“Are you out of food?” he asks and I can hear the concern in his voice.

“Nah, I’ve got some ramen and cereal. I’ll be fine.”

“Or, you could come out to dinner with me,” he suggests and I shake my head at him.

“I would... but I’m busy. I need to go grocery shopping tonight,” I say with an evil grin and Hudson laughs.

“Yeah, alright. In all honesty though, are you alright? You seemed a little, I don’t know, sad, last night.”

There is no way in hell that I’m telling Hudson about my lack of direction in life. I’m pretty sure the guy was saving up for his first restaurant and learning how to cook before he could walk. He wouldn’t get it. How could he understand that I’ve failed at pretty much every career that I’ve ever had when I doubt that he’s failed at anything ever?

“Yeah, I’m fine. Just tired after work and girl’s night last night.”

“Did you guys go to The Fainting Goat?”

“Yeah, we were going to try that new bar in Lilac Harbor, but it will have to wait until next week.”

“Did Arlo ask Iris out yet?” he asks and I can’t help but laugh.

Even Hudson knows about Arlo and Iris and he practically lives at Prim + Proper.

“Nope, but he did stare longingly across the bar at her for most of the night,” I say with a dramatic, dreamy sigh.

“Well, I guess that’s baby steps then,” Hudson says with a grin.

“Yeah, at this rate they could have their first date in a few decades!”

Hudson laughs and I unlock my Jeep. I need to get to work before I’m late and have to deal with Stan.

“Can I have my note?” I ask as he opens my door for me and our eyes meet and lock.

“I wasn’t sure that you liked them,” he admits in a low voice and I give him a little smile, plucking the piece of paper out of his hand.

“They’re entertaining,” I hedge as I climb behind the wheel.

“We could have an entertaining conversation instead of this. Perhaps over dinner?”

I grin at him, biting my lip. It’s getting harder and harder to turn him away, to remind myself why it isn’t a good idea to go out with Hudson no matter how attracted I am to him.

“I’ve got to go. Don’t want to be late for work.”

He looks disappointed, but he nods, stepping back as he closes my door. I roll my window down and he leans his elbows on it, meeting my eyes.

“Drive safe,” he teases with a grin and I laugh, flipping him off as I back out of my spot and head toward the Mystery Cabin.

I park next to Sutton’s car and head into the gift shop. Sutton and Stan are arguing over by the snow globe display, and I wince as Sutton’s hands get a little too close to the glass shelves. She barely misses it and I shake my head as I make my way back behind the cash register.

Bandit is curled up in his bed by the stools, and I shove my purse into the cupboard beneath the counter before I pet him.

He tries to kiss my face and I laugh as I push him away and scratch his ears.

“It could bring in more business! Even in the off season,” Sutton argues and Stan snorts.

“I’ve been running this place for longer than you’ve been alive.”

“Yeah, and things have changed a lot in all of those years! I went to school for business. All I want to do is see this place succeed. Why won’t you just trust me? All I want to do is help.”

Stan sighs and I stay crouched down behind the register with Bandit, listening as they argue.

“Fine. Let’s try it your way,” Stan says after a minute, and I smile, happy that he’s learning to trust Sutton and other people more.

I hear Stan leave, probably headed back to his office, and I kiss Bandit on the head before I stand and smile at Sutton.

“Congratulations on getting Stan to agree that maybe, *just maybe*, you might be right,” I say with a laugh and she rolls her eyes as she smiles and heads over to join me.

“I know. I guess maybe miracles do happen.”

I laugh, leaning on the counter by the register. She leans on it from the other side, looking around the gift shop.

“Did you finish the inventory yesterday?” she asks and I nod.

“Yeah, we only had that one tour group, so I got it all done. I gave Stan the forms.”

“Did he order the rest of those pastel shirts that we sold out of last week?”

“I’m not sure. He didn’t say if he did or not.”

“I’ll go check,” she says, petting Bandit before she heads down the hallway to talk to her uncle.

If today is anything like yesterday, then we won't be that busy. I take a seat on the stool and open up a new browser on the computer. It's an older model and I head into the kitchen, letting the computer boot as I grab myself a cup of coffee and head back to Google a career assessment test.

I remember taking one of these in high school. I had thought that they were a joke then and I still think that, but I'm getting desperate to find some kind of direction to go in with my life.

I click on the first link and take a sip of my coffee as the first few questions start to load. I can't really remember the tests that I had to take in high school. I think one said that I should be a lawyer and the other one a teacher.

Neither option interested me. I don't want to argue for a living and I'm not patient enough to deal with kids all day long.

Maybe I'll get a different answer now. I know myself better than I did as a teenager, and I'm more focused on it than I was when I was fourteen years old.

The website finishes loading and I take another drink before I start answering the questions.

Would you rather work in an office or outside? Both isn't an option and I bite my lip, trying to decide which I like more. This already feels like I'm off to a bad start.

I click 'inside' and start on the second.

Do you like to help people? *Sure, who doesn't.*

Question three is do you like building furniture? *Does anyone enjoy building furniture? Like Ikea furniture?* I hit the circle for no on that one.

The list of questions goes on and on and by the time I've gotten to the end, I've skipped probably half and I don't feel that confident about another quarter of my answers. I'm starting to remember why I hated doing these in school.

I go back, doing my best to fill in the missing questions. I hit submit and groan when it asks me for my credit card

information.

I close out of the browser, finishing off my coffee and looking out the window. There are still no guests pulling in so I head to grab another cup of coffee from the kitchen. Stan must have beat me to it, so I grab the coffee and a filter from the cabinet and get to work on making another pot.

I lean against the counter as the coffee starts to drip into the pot and that's when I remember the note that I took from Hudson this morning and I reach into my pocket and pull it out, opening it up to read it.

LYLA, would you rather find true love today or win the lottery next year?

Have dinner with me and we can discuss...

x. H

THE WOULD you rather question reminds me of the career assessment that I just took and I bite my lip, giving his question some real thought.

Unlike the career assessment questions, I don't have to think long to answer Hudson's.

Love, I'd rather have true love. I've seen my mom marry for money and she still seems miserable. I never understood why she married my stepfather or put up with his kids. No amount of money seemed worth that.

I know that money doesn't cure everything. Having true love, someone who supports you and wants to be with you no matter what, that's priceless. That's what I want from my life.

I fill my coffee cup and head back to the gift shop. Sutton is at the register looking over some order forms and I join her.

"Do you need any help with anything?"

"Some of that would be nice," she says when she smells my coffee and I laugh as I head back to the kitchen to grab a

cup for her.

“Thank you. I was just joking though. I could have grabbed my own cup,” she says with a sigh as she blows on the coffee.

“It’s no problem,” I assure her.

“How have you been?” Sutton asks and I’m surprised by the question.

Sutton and I see each other pretty much every day. We talk all of the time. She knows how I’m doing. Right?

“Um, fine.”

“Yeah? Are you sure? Because you seemed a little off last night.”

I shrug, not wanting to get into everything right now.

“Is this about Hudson?”

“What?” I ask, almost spitting out my sip of coffee. “Hudson and I are not together.”

“Yeah, I meant to ask you about that. Why aren’t you jumping that guy’s bones?”

I laugh, sitting back on the stool as Sutton takes a drink from her cup.

“We’re just friends,” I insist and she snorts.

“Yeah, but he wants to be more than friends with you, and I think that you want to be more than friends with him too. You just won’t admit it for some reason.”

“Maybe it’s a Destiny Falls thing? Madelyn and Iris won’t admit how they feel either,” I suggest, trying to deflect her question.

She gives me a look over the rim of her coffee cup and I sigh. I know that she’s right. Why am I fighting this thing between the two of us so hard?

“Well, there’s nothing to tell,” I inform Sutton and she pouts.

I think she's looking to going out on double dates and having her friends fall in love too.

"Madelyn asked if we wanted to go up to Honey Peak tonight. I've never been there before and I wanted to take a look around. Teller gets off his volunteer shift at four this afternoon and he said that he's in," she says, changing the subject.

"What time are we leaving then?" I ask.

"Probably seven thirtyish? Then we can be there by eight for sure."

"Yeah, I'm in," I say with a smile and she grins back at me.

"Great! I'm going to go finish ordering the last of the merchandise. I'll be back to walk Bandit in a little bit and then Stan said he'd cover us if we wanted to go to lunch together."

"Sounds good," I say as she gathers her papers and heads to the office.

I watch her go before I pull the note from Hudson out of my pocket, rereading his words and wondering if I'm making a mistake by keeping him at arm's length.

FOUR



Sutton and I didn't end up getting our lunch together. We had a tour bus come through at eleven and had to take it separately but Sutton did run out and grab a pizza for the both of us to eat.

"Are you still coming tonight?" Sutton asks as I grab my purse from under the register and get ready to leave for the day and I nod.

"Yeah, I need to run to the store and grab some groceries. I've been living off of cereal and ramen for a while now and it's getting old. I'll do that and then I'll head up to Honey Peak to meet you guys. It's the Honey Bee Bar, right?"

"Yeah. Did you want to ride up there with Teller and me?" she offers, but I shake my head.

"No, I don't want you guys to have to wait for me in case the store takes a while. I'll be fine," I say and she smiles.

"See you in a bit then."

I wave and head out to my Jeep, starting it up and heading down Main Street. I roll my windows down so that I can hear the waves crashing on the shore and I smile. It's peaceful here in Destiny Falls.

There are a few people out walking down the sidewalk and the kids just got out of school. I stop as a bus in front of me turns on its lights and a few kids come clamoring off, excited to be done with school for the day.

I get to downtown and try to find a place to park. The Mackinac Bridge looms large in the background and I study it, wondering when I'll be driving back over it to continue on my journey of self-discovery.

I park a few doors down from the Destiny Falls Market and as I'm climbing out, I spot Iris. She's out front of her antique shop, Blast From The Past Antiques, and I wave as I head over her way.

"Hey, how's it going?" I ask and she smiles, setting down some big flowerpot vase-looking thing with a groan. The thing looks like it weighs more than her.

"Hey, not much. I just got back from the antique sale so I'm just trying to find some spots for the new purchases."

"Need a hand?" I offer.

"No, this was the last of it. I sold a few things online so I need to package them up and mail them before the post office closes tonight."

"Did you find some good stuff this morning?" I ask and she grins, pointing out a few things.

"And then I found this cool old kitchen sign that I think will sell fast," she says as she finishes going over her new treasures.

"Sounds like a good haul," I say and she nods.

"It was. I'm thinking I'll go to the next one too."

I nod, leaning against the front door.

"How have you been?" Iris asks me, her voice soft and I try to force a smile.

Iris is the one in the group that always seems to see everything. She's quiet, so maybe she's just paying attention more than the others. Either way, she can always seem to tell when something is wrong or when someone needs to talk.

"I'm good," I lie.

"No, you're not," she says, her voice kind but I can tell that she's growing frustrated with me telling everyone that I'm

fine. “What’s going on, Lyla?”

“I’m just feeling a little lost,” I admit. “I’ve been trying to figure out what I want to do with the rest of my life, but it’s harder than I thought it would be.”

“You’re not happy at the Mystery Cabin?” Iris asks, sounding surprised, and I shake my head.

“I actually love working there. The job is easy and I love Stan, Sutton, and Teller. It’s just... I’m twenty-five and work as a cashier at a tourist trap. Shouldn’t I want to do more with my life?”

“Like what? What do you want to do instead?”

“I don’t know. Maybe become a cat burglar or run the lighthouse?” I joke, nodding next door to the large white and blue lighthouse.

Iris laughs at that but I’m only half joking. The truth is that I have no idea, but shouldn’t I want to do more than work in a gift shop? Am I really helping society or anyone where I’m at?

“Then do that! You can do anything that you want. My parents wanted me to be a doctor or a lawyer or something. Something where the pay is good and the chance of me getting laid off was low and I understand why they want that. It’s an easier path than selling antiques. We lived paycheck to paycheck growing up and I know how stressful that is, but I would have been miserable in any of those fields.”

I can’t picture Iris as either. She’s too sweet to be a lawyer and I’ve seen how she handles blood. She would have made a crappy doctor.

“What do you like doing? What hobbies do you like?” she asks.

“I like being creative and daydreaming. I like setting up the shelves at the Mystery Cabin and I like that it’s not some boring store or restaurant.”

Iris nods, biting her lip as she thinks for a moment.

“Maybe you should do something creative then? Be a writer or go into advertising or graphic design? Or even

interior design if you like setting up the gift shop?" she suggests.

"I don't think I want to work in a corporate office. It would suck my soul dry," I say with a wry smile.

"What about writing? Or can you draw?"

"Not well," I say with a laugh.

"We'll come up with something," Iris promises.

I nod, but I can't help wonder if there is something else out there for me. Iris still has her family, though they don't see each other much since they moved to Arizona to retire and help with her grandparents. She has Madelyn and Flynn in town though, people who she loves and are basically family.

"What else is it?" she asks gently.

"I want what Teller and Sutton have. She was so lost when she got to town too."

"And you think that it was Teller that helped find herself?" Iris asks, leaning against the wall next to me.

"No, not just Teller. I mean, Stan is her family and she loves this place. She has a job now and a man who loves her and she still has family, even though she thought that she was all alone. I just want that. I want some area of my life to feel settled."

Iris nods but doesn't say anything and I sigh.

I have friends here but no real family left. I can't help but wonder if deep down, I want that more than a career path?

My chest hurts as I think about my dad and I blink back tears. All of this rolls into this lost feeling that I've had ever since his funeral. I've been telling myself that if I just had a career or some idea of what I wanted to do for the rest of my life, that everything would settle, but maybe that's not accurate. I didn't have a real career with my dad and I was happy.

The truth is that I want what Sutton and Teller have, what Madelyn and Flynn like to pretend that they don't have.

I want to belong somewhere. Maybe then this feeling will finally go away.

“Are you coming with us to Honey Peak tonight?”

“Yeah, I’m riding up with Madelyn and Flynn. Want to join us?”

“Maybe, I need to head to the market here for some groceries but I’ll let you know when I’m done and see where you guys are.”

“Sounds good! See you soon,” she says as a couple starts to browse some of the items that she has out front.

I wave and leave her to help her customers as I head back down the sidewalk to the Falls Market, grabbing a basket as I make my way up and down the aisles. I grab the staples, bread, eggs, milk, moose tracks frozen yogurt, and then throw in some pretzels, a few frozen meals, and some macaroni and cheese.

Eggs, frozen pizza, and macaroni and cheese are pretty much the only meals that I can make without something getting ruined or getting horribly burned. My dad always did the cooking when I was growing up. He tried to teach me on more than one occasion, but each time ended with something going terribly wrong. He never minded, just laughed and helped me clean up before we ordered takeout.

A wave of grief hits me and I blink back tears, wishing that he could still be here with me. I hated my receptionist job back in New York but I would work there every day if it meant that I could go back and hang out with him at the end of the day in our tiny closet of an apartment.

I check out, carrying my groceries out to my Jeep and hopping in so I can drive the few blocks back to my apartment. Hudson is by the maître d stand and he looks up as I park and head to grab my groceries from the back. He comes outside, meeting me at the trunk, and I step back and let him reach past me and take some of the grocery bags.

“Hey, I thought that you were getting real food,” he says with a frown as he looks down at all of the frozen meals.

“I did.”

“This is... not real food,” he says, still staring down at the frozen boxes in the bag like they’ve offended him somehow and I wonder if he’s ever eaten them before in his life.

“We’re not all five-star chefs like you,” I remind him primly as I try to grab the bags from his hand.

“Take me up on my dinner offer then. I can feed you better than this.”

My heart kicks in my chest and I’m so tired of pushing this guy away. I hate turning him down, seeing that flicker of disappointment on his face before he masks it. He’s been so nice about his car and he didn’t have to be. Maybe I should just give him a chance. With my track record, I’ll have ruined things and we’ll be over before we ever begin.

Is that why I’ve been turning him down? Because I don’t want it to be over? Because if I ruin things with him, then I’ll miss out on the notes and feeling his eyes on me every time I pass.

I shouldn’t be letting that dictate things. I make a split-second decision, shifting the groceries in my hands.

“Hey, I know that it’s super short notice, but the girls, Teller, Flynn, and I are going up to Honey Peak tonight. There’s some new bar up there that everyone wants to try. The Honey Bee Bar. Why don’t you join us?” I offer and his mouth drops open in surprise before he recovers, the dimple in his cheek popping out as he grins at me.

“I’m in. I’ll drive us.”

“I can drive,” I offer and he shakes his head.

“I don’t mind.”

“More like you don’t trust me,” I joke and he grins wider.

“Just want to make sure that we all get there in one piece without any other fender benders.”

I laugh as we head up the stairs to my apartment and he sets the bags down on the kitchen counter, looking around my

place.

It's a large one-bedroom apartment with windows lining one whole wall overlooking Main Street, the lighthouse, Mackinaw Bridge, and lake. I never added curtains, wanting to see that view every day.

I don't have that much stuff since I was traveling, so there's only a TV, couch, and coffee table in the living room. The kitchen is the same way with just the essentials and a few stray papers on the counter. My dirty dishes are in the sink from this morning and I left the empty cereal box on the counter.

"I like how you decorated it," he compliments and I stare at him like he's crazy.

My place is filled with hand-me-downs and furniture that I pulled in off of the curb before trash day. I didn't have money to furnish it and this was supposed to be temporary, so there wasn't much point in buying new stuff.

"I'm serious. It's inviting and comfortable. It just seems like you. It suits you."

I look around the living room, trying to see it the way that he does. I guess there is a certain kind of charm to the eclectic design.

"What time tonight?" he asks.

"Uh, we're leaving here at about seven-thirty and meeting at the bar around eight."

"Let's leave at seven. We can grab food first."

I look over to the clock seeing that it's already after six.

"Okay, I'll get ready and meet you downstairs at seven," I say and he nods, grinning at me as he turns to head for the door.

He gives me one last smile as he closes the door after him, and I bite my lip after he's gone. I wonder if dinner and the bar tonight is a good idea. I guess either way, it's done and there's no going back now.

Still, I can't help but wonder why it feels like I'm
balancing on the edge of something important.

FIVE



I finish applying another coat of mascara, looking at my reflection in the bathroom mirror. I look pretty good considering that I didn't have that much time to shower and get ready, so I just applied a new layer of deodorant and perfume and tugged on a dress.

The bar is supposed to be casual so I didn't apply too much makeup. I tug my hair up into a messy bun and grab my wedge sandals before I head out to the living room. I still have a few minutes before I need to be downstairs but I don't want Hudson to have to wait for me. I stuff my phone and keys in my purse before I head for the door.

I open it, startling when I almost run right into Hudson.

"Hey, I thought maybe we could just eat here," he says, holding up the two plates in his hands.

I can tell from the plates that they're from Prim + Proper and it smells delicious. My stomach growls and Hudson frowns. I don't want to turn him down after he went through all of the trouble, so I open the door, letting him carry everything into the kitchen.

He sets the plates down at the counter in front of the barstools and grabs the bottle of wine that I didn't notice under his arm.

"Hope you like red," he says and I laugh.

"I like alcohol," I joke and he laughs, grabbing a wine opener out of his pocket and opening the bottle with a flourish.

I go to grab some wine glasses and silverware for us while he opens the wine and he smiles at me as he pours us each a glass.

“This looks delicious,” I tell him and he smiles.

“Thanks. I’ve been playing with some new spices and recipes so I hope that you don’t mind testing them out.”

“Not at all. Are you going to be changing the menu at Prim + Proper?”

“Maybe, but I’m actually thinking about opening up a new restaurant over in Lilac Harbor or maybe Maple Bend.”

“Really? Is Upper Peninsula Michigan going to be some new culinary hotspot?” I ask as I take a bite of the sliced steak.

“No, I just—”

I cut him off with a moan.

“Oh my god. This is so good,” I say, taking another bite of steak.

“I’m glad that you like it,” Hudson says with a laugh.

He watches me chew, his eyes darkening so that the blue looks almost black and I swallow, giving him a small smile as I pick up my wineglass and take a sip.

“It’s so good, but I’m sorry, what were you saying?”

“I just like this place. It’s not as competitive or stressful as the big cities,” he says as he takes a bite of his own food.

“Will it be a second Prim + Proper?”

“No, I’ll have a different name and I need to research what those towns already have and what type of food and atmosphere that I think would do well there.”

We talk about food as we eat. I tell him about this greasy spoon diner that my dad and I ate breakfast at every Sunday back in New York. I’m not surprised that he had never heard of it. They made the best eggs benedict but Hudson promises that his is better. I believe him. He asks me where else I liked

to eat and I tell him about my favorite pizza place and this fancy burger place on Coney Island that we went to once.

He tells me all about culinary school and the places where he's cooked, and I practically lick my plate clean. He went to culinary school at the Culinary Institute of America at Hyde Park in New York. He tells me about how he took a year off and cooked his way across Europe and part of Asia before he came back to the United States and worked under a chef in New Orleans.

He's been all over, cooked in some of the best kitchens in the world and it shows. His food is delicious.

Hudson seems pleased that I loved his food so much and I let him clean up the dishes while I finish off my glass of wine.

"I'll leave this for you," he says, putting the cork back in the wine bottle and putting it in my fridge.

I can tell that he's frustrated to see my fridge mostly empty except for the milk and eggs. I don't want him to worry about me. Maybe that's why I say what I say next.

"I'll have to stop by Prim + Proper more often," I say casually and I see Hudson smile as he closes the fridge door and turns to face me.

"Anytime you want. I'll reserve a table for you every night."

I try to ignore the way that my stomach flutters at that.

"Are you ready to go?" I ask and he nods, grabbing the dirty plates as we head for the door.

I wait on the sidewalk while he runs inside and hands off the dishes, and then he's escorting me over to his car. I already texted Iris to let her know that I had a ride with Hudson. She was still getting ready, so I have a feeling that we'll be beating everyone up there.

"How are you liking Destiny Falls? It's quite the change from New York," he says as we start to make our way up to Honey Peak.

“I like it. New York isn’t the same without my dad there. Besides, who can afford it.”

He nods even though I’m sure that he is one of the few who could afford to live there without their apartment being the same of a shoebox or having ten different roommates.

“Where are you planning on going? Or are you staying here?”

“I’m supposed to be on a cross country trip but *somebody* pulled out in front of me and messed that up.”

I smile as I say that, letting him know that I’m not actually mad or blaming him for that.

“What luck! Was he handsome?” he asks and I laugh, refusing to answer that question.

“Have you been to Honey Peak before?” he asks as we pass by the town welcome sign and I shake my head.

“I haven’t left Destiny Falls,” I admit and he smiles.

“We’ll have to fix that.”

We reach Honey Peak and I lean forward, admiring the view. We’re so high and you can see all of the bridge and the lights from the towns down below.

“I didn’t know that Michigan had mountains.”

“They don’t. Well, not really. There are a few peaks or man-made ones, but no mountain ranges or anything like that.”

I nod, staring out my window as the sun starts to set. You can see most of the lake from here and even a few boats as they cruise across the water.

We pass by a few shops. There’s a trading post and market, a mechanic shop a street over and a few little boutique shops lining the streets. We head down Main Street and I smile at a cute little coffee shop. The bar where we’re meeting everyone is another block down, and I look out the window as the mountain peak comes into view.

“Honey Peak is a smaller one. That one was made for skiers and sledding. There are some more cabins and hotels up

there on that mountain that I've heard are pretty cool," Hudson says as he nods over to the peak in the distance.

I can just make out the ski lift and what look to be cabins dotted along the side.

"I bet the view is awesome," I say as Hudson parks in front of the Honey Bee Bar.

"It doesn't look like everyone else is here yet," he says and I nod.

"Let's go in and grab a table. This place looks packed."

We climb out and I let Hudson lead me inside and over to the far wall where there is a big circle booth that just emptied out.

We both slide in and I grab my phone to text Sutton and Iris that we're here, but they walk through the door and spot us before I can. I wave them over and we all try to cram into the booth. It's probably only meant to fit five, so seven is a bit of a stretch.

I'm plastered up against Hudson and he rests his arm along the back of the booth, giving me a little more room. The heat from his body radiates to mine and I'm in danger of overheating in minutes. I have a feeling that he's going to be glued to my side all night.

"I'll grab drinks," Flynn says and Madelyn goes with him to help him carry everything.

"I didn't know that you were coming, man," Teller says to Hudson and the two men start talking.

Sutton and Iris are both staring at me, practically giddy to see Hudson and me sitting so close. I widen my eyes at them, begging them to be cool and not do or say anything embarrassing, and they finally stop grinning at me like loons.

"Did you get everything mailed this afternoon?" I ask Iris and we start talking about the antiques that she bought today and a new flea market sale that she wants to check out next week over in Maple Bend.

Madelyn and Flynn get back with our drinks and I down half of my lemon martini. I'm overheating crammed into this booth with everyone and I look over to the dance floor. It's only about half full and my favorite song comes on. I smile, getting ready to head that way, and it's as if Hudson can read my mind because he nudges me.

"Want to dance?" he offers and I nod.

We scoot out of the booth and I let him take my hand and lead me into the crowd. I'm glad that I wore my hair up as we start to dance and I grin at Hudson. I'm surprised to see that he's terrible at dancing and seeing him try to move to the beat and failing just makes him more adorable.

"I'm really bad at this," he calls over the music and I laugh.

"I can see that! Thanks for doing it with me though."

He nods, growing serious as the fast-paced pop song that was playing ends and a slow song starts to play. He moves closer, his hands gripping my hips as my hands go to his shoulders.

I feel flushed and I try to tell myself that it's just from the heat and dancing, but I know that that's not it. At least not all of it.

Hudson moves closer to me, his warm breath fanning some of the loose hairs at my temple and I swallow hard, looking up into his dark blue eyes.

"Lyla," he whispers, his eyes wide and honest. "I can't get you out of my head."

I want to pretend that I can't hear him over the music but that doesn't seem right. I stare up at him, not sure how to respond.

"I can't figure you out," he goes on. "You're an enigma to me and I've been trying to find a way in with you for but you've been keeping me at arm's length."

I look down, knowing that he's right and his fingers tighten on my hips.

“I can’t take it anymore. I swear, this will be the last time that I ask you this.”

I look up at him, my eyes meeting his, and my heart starts to race.

“Lyla, will you go out with me?”

The question seems to hang in the air between us, and I want to say yes. It’s right there, but I can’t get my throat to work, I can’t seem to get the words out of my mouth, so I do the next best thing.

So instead of answering, I grip his shoulders, leaning up on my tiptoes until my lips meet his. Hudson seems surprised by the move but he catches up fast. My eyes flutter closed and Hudson’s hands move around to my back, drawing me closer until I’m flush against him, until I can feel every hard ridge and plane of his body.

We’re still swaying slowly, our hands wrapped around each other as our lips mold together, moving in sync. It’s nice to see that his rhythm problems don’t extend past the dance floor.

He tastes like the red wine that we had at dinner and something that is all Hudson. He takes over the kiss, one of his hands wrapping around the back of my neck as he changes the angle and deepens the kiss.

I don’t know how long we stay locked together, our bodies moving closer, grinding together and then swaying together for the slow songs. By the time we head back to our booth to grab something to drink, I’m a sweaty, horny mess.

“Hey, there you are!” Madelyn shouts over the music as I down the last of my lemon martini. “We were just saying that we think we’re going to call it a night.”

I nod, grabbing my purse from the booth and following after my friends as we make our way through the crowd and outside. I feel bad that I didn’t really hang out with them much tonight, but I have a feeling that I’ll be seeing them a lot tomorrow.

“We parked over here,” Sutton says and Madelyn nods, moving to head that way too.

“See you guys later,” I call and they all give me equally mischievous and knowing looks before they head down the sidewalk.

I’m sure that I’ll be answering questions all day tomorrow about what is going on between Hudson and me and that kiss on the dance floor.

Hudson takes my hand and I let him open my door for me and help me in. He’s smiling softly as he rounds the hood and slides behind the wheel and I’m not surprised when he picks up my hand again in his and holds it for the entire drive back to Destiny Falls.

The drive is mostly silent. It’s warm in the Range Rover and I’m tired from a long day. The soft sway of the car as it heads down the mountain and with Hudson gently stroking the back of my hand with his thumb, I must doze off. I wake up when he parks in his usual spot next to mine outside of Prim + Proper and my apartment.

I yawn as he turns the car off and unbuckles, rubbing my eyes to try to clear them of sleep.

“I’ll walk you up,” he says gently and I nod, grabbing my purse and letting him help me out of the car.

We walk up the stairs together and I dig my keys out of my purse as we go. I’m about to unlock the door when he turns me to face him. He cups my face, tilting my head until he has me where he wants me. Then he looks into my eyes, his fingers softly stroking my cheeks. I lick my lips, holding my breath, and he stares into my eyes.

He dips his head and the spell is broken. His lips meet mine and I get lost again in the taste and feel of him, in the angle of his head and the way his lips feel against mine.

He pulls back and I blink, trying to clear the fog from my head. He shoves a piece of paper in my hand, giving me one last smile, the dimple popping out in his left cheek, before he turns and heads back down the stairs.

I unlock the door and stumble my way inside, closing and locking it after me. I lean back against the door, dropping my purse onto the table next to me before I unwrap the note that he gave me.

I can't help but smile as I read it.

LYLA, would you rather detect every lie you hear or get away with every lie you tell?

Here's my number. Call or text anytime.

517-518-4549

x. H

SIX



I make it all the way until noon the next day before Iris, Madelyn, and Sutton corner me, demanding to know what's going on with Hudson and me. If I'm being honest, it's longer than I thought I would get.

"Spill!" Madelyn half shouts as she jogs into the gift shop, tossing me a slightly greasy paper bag from The Upside Diner.

"Hey, Stan!" I call, half laughing as I open the bag. "I'm going to take my lunch."

He wanders out of his office, nodding to the girls before he takes a seat behind the counter. Bandit nudges his hand and I see Stan smile as he scratches his ears.

I take my food into the kitchen and everyone sits down at the table over by the window.

"So?" Sutton says, grinning at me and I roll my eyes.

"So, we're going out tonight," I tell them, and I can't help but laugh when they all cheer. "Don't get too excited. It's just the first date."

"What are you doing?" Iris asks.

"Yeah, where is he taking you? Or is he cooking for you?" Madelyn asks, wiggling her eyebrows at me.

"I don't know. He just asked me out last night and then in his note this morning said to be ready at six-thirty."

The girls all grin at that and I roll my eyes, taking a bite of the burger that they brought me. Sutton steals some of my fries

and I move them to the middle of the table so that everyone can have some.

“You guys aren’t working today?” I ask as I take a drink of water.

“Lunch break,” Madelyn and Iris say at the same time.

“Teller is fixing one of the cabins next door and then we’re headed home,” Sutton says with an excited smile.

She’s so in love and a momentary twinge of jealousy hits me. I push it away because Sutton is a total sweetheart and she’s been through so much, she’s lost so much. She deserves a man that is crazy about her and Teller is definitely that.

“Maybe he’ll take you over to Mackinac Island!” Madelyn suggests.

“Or somewhere fancy over in Maple Bend?” Iris adds.

“He could just be taking me to Prim + Proper,” I add and they all look appalled.

“That seems tacky. He wouldn’t do that,” Sutton objects, and Madelyn and Iris nod.

“He’ll take you somewhere good,” Iris says, sounding confident.

“I’d be happy if he took me back to his place and cooked for me. He’s supposed to be a god in the kitchen, right?” Madelyn asks and I laugh at how reverent she sounds when she says it.

“Yeah, he is.”

“Have you eaten his food before? He was big in New York, right?” Iris asks and I nod.

“Yeah, he has two restaurants in New York but I’m pretty sure the waitlist is like a year out and I could never afford it. He made me a steak and some vegetables last night before we went to Honey Peak and it was delicious though.”

“Lyla!” Stan calls and I look out the window to see a tour bus pulling into the parking lot.

“Coming!” I call back, shoving the last french fry into my mouth as I ball up my trash and stand.

“We’ll let you get back to work, but call us if you need anything tonight,” Iris says, pulling me into a hug.

“Send us a picture of your outfit!” Sutton adds.

“And text us tomorrow to tell us how it went. I want to know everything,” Madelyn says, hugging me.

Sutton hugs me too, whispering to have fun in my ear before she pulls back.

I smile as I watch them leave and head back to the gift shop. The first guests are just about to come in and Stan and I switch places as they do.

I watch him launch into his welcome speech and grin as everyone hangs on his every word. He really can be charismatic when he wants to be.

He starts to lead them down the hallway and into the first attraction room. I take a seat behind the register, petting Bandit as I take a seat. He whines and I know that he’s looking for treats.

“Hey,” Teller says as he comes into the gift shop and I look up with a smile.

He’s got his usual baseball hat on backward and he grins at me as he sets down his toolbox by the register.

“Is my girl in here?” he asks and I nod.

“She’s around here somewhere.”

Bandit wags his tail, pacing at Teller’s feet, and he opens the door, letting Bandit head outside and over to his truck. He stops over by some trees, sniffing around happily.

“Hey,” Sutton says as she comes into the gift shop and heads over to greet Teller.

I look away as they kiss and say hello.

“We’ll see you later, Lyla,” Sutton says and I wave goodbye as they head out.

The rest of the afternoon passes by pretty slow. We only get the tour bus and one family who comes through and Stan lets me leave half an hour early. I text Hudson before I head home, my heart racing for some reason before I hit send.

LYLA: Hey, it's Lyla. What are the plans for tonight? I'm wondering what I should wear.

I START DRIVING, figuring that it will be a few minutes at least before he gets back to me but my phone dings a minute later with a reply.

I drive back to my apartment, parking next to Hudson's Range Rover. I don't see him in the restaurant's front windows, so I head up to my place.

HUDSON: The place is casual. Just wear whatever you're comfortable in. I'm sure that you look beautiful no matter what.

I'VE ALWAYS loved surprises and I love that he didn't tell me where he's taking me. I head to my bedroom, rummaging through my clothes as I try to decide what to wear. I want to kind of dress up, so I grab a pair of dark wash skinny jeans and a fancier tank top. I didn't think to pack anything too fancy before I left for my trip and I wonder if I should go shopping soon for some nicer clothes.

It's nice outside today and I hope that wherever we go, we can sit outside and eat. I have one black cardigan and I grab that in case we do and I get cold.

I don't have that many shoes either, so I grab the same wedge sandals that I wore last night and head to the bathroom to put on some makeup.

Hudson knocks at my door at exactly six-thirty and I hop on one foot, tugging on my shoes as I make my way to the

door.

“Hey,” he greets me and I grin, taking him in.

He’s wearing jeans too and a tight black T-shirt that clings to his biceps and chest. It’s probably the most casual that I’ve ever seen him and I like that.

“Hey,” I say as he leans down and brushes a soft kiss across my cheek.

“You look beautiful,” he tells me and I smile up at him.

“You look nice too,” I tell him as I grab my purse and lock my front door.

He has a bag in one hand and he uses the other to grab my hand as we head downstairs. I expect him to lead me over to his car, but we keep walking, crossing the street and heading down to the beach.

Hudson stops and digs a blanket out of the bag.

“A picnic?” I ask, bending over and kicking off my shoes as we start to walk across the sand.

“Yeah, it’s so nice out today and I thought that we could eat and watch the sunset over the water.”

“That sounds perfect,” I say as I take a seat on the blanket.

Hudson starts to unpack the food from the bag and I take the wine from him. He brought two of the single-serve wines that you can buy in some stores, and I get to work peeling off the tops. My stomach growls as he pulls out a small charcuterie board with some crackers, meats, cheeses, olives, and jams.

“That looks amazing,” I say, making room on the blanket for the tray and plates.

“Thanks. I made some snacking plates and a few desserts too. I hope that’s okay.”

I would reply but I’ve already got a mouthful of crackers and cheese. I flash him a thumbs up and he laughs as he takes out the rest of the food from the bag.

“It’s awesome,” I say after I’ve swallowed.

Hudson just smiles and passes me another plate. This one has mini tacos with homemade shells and I practically inhale mine. We work our way through the food and wine as we watch the sun start to set over the water.

“So, tell me about yourself,” Hudson says as he reclines on the blanket and we listen to the waves crash on the shore.

“What do you want to know?” I ask, looking out over the water.

“Everything.”

I smile at that, squinting as I look over to the bridge. The lights are starting to turn on as the sun sets.

“Well, I grew up in New York with my dad. My parents divorced when I was twelve, but I can’t really remember a time where they got along. My mom wanted more than my dad could provide, so she left and she got remarried to my stepdad like six months later. I haven’t seen her since I was twelve. She’s been busy with her new husband and stepkids ever since.”

“I’m sorry about that,” he murmurs but I wave him off.

“It’s alright. My dad was awesome. He got me, you know? We had the same sense of humor and he always supported me in whatever I wanted to do.”

“When did he pass away?”

“About six months ago. He was sick for a while, cancer.”

“I’m so sorry, Lyla.”

I nod, staring out at the water so that Hudson can’t see the tears in my eyes.

“Thanks.”

“Is that why you’re in Michigan?” he asks after a minute and I shrug.

“Kind of. I had been feeling lost since he passed. I didn’t know what to do in New York without him there.”

Hudson nods, his fingers starting to sift through the sand, and I clear my throat before I go on.

“I never knew what I wanted to do with my life and I’ve had quite a few jobs over the years. I thought that I was just exploring when I was younger, but now I’m in my mid-twenties and I still don’t know. Shouldn’t I have some things figured out by now?”

“I don’t think so. Some people know what they want out of life early on and others it takes longer. There’s no right or wrong time.”

“It’s not just my career. I don’t have *anything* figured out,” I say with a humorless laugh. “New York doesn’t feel like home without my dad there, and I thought that I would take a road trip around the country. Maybe I would go somewhere and it would just click and this feeling would go away.”

“You don’t feel that way about Destiny Falls?” Hudson asks with a frown.

I shrug. “I don’t know what I feel. I still just feel a little lost. A little adrift. I’m like one of those buoys over there. I’m just bobbing along.”

I can’t plan for a family or finding my happily ever after, so that leaves a career. Maybe that’s why I’m so focused on it.

I wish that I was more like Hudson. He knows what he wants to do with his life and he went after it until he became the best at it.

We’re both silent for a minute, watching as the sun starts to set, painting the sky with streaks of orange and pink. The lights on Mackinac Island are starting to flicker on and I know that it will be dark soon.

I can’t help but wonder what he’s doing with me. He’s so put together. He doesn’t jump into anything on a whim, researching and studying market trends before he makes a decision. He never seems to misstep, and that’s all I ever seem to do.

I wonder if this conversation is going to scare him away. I mean, he’s a Michelin star chef and successful restaurant

owner. He has everything figured out and I barely graduated high school and have no idea what I want out of life.

“What about you? Where did you grow up?” I ask him, clearing my throat and trying to distract myself from those thoughts.

“Originally? New Orleans. My parents owned a few boats and seafood markets there.”

“Do you have a restaurant there?” I ask him and he nods.

“Yeah, I have a place in the square. I still buy the seafood for the restaurant from my parents’ place, though they retired a few years ago.”

“How many restaurants do you own?” I ask, drawing circles in the sand next to the blanket.

“Total? Nine. I have the one in New Orleans, two in New York, one in Paris, one in Spain, one in London, two in Los Angeles, and then Prim + Proper here.”

“Why are you in Destiny Falls?” I blurt out and he laughs.

“I like it here. I’ve been going non-stop, constantly building and trying to grow for the last five, ten years. I wanted to slow down and just enjoy cooking. I still travel to check in on the restaurants but I’m happy here.”

I ask him about some of the places that he’s been and we go down to the shore, dipping our toes in the water. I help him gather up the blanket and plates, and he takes my hand as we head back to my apartment.

“I had a lot of fun tonight,” he says as we head down the sidewalk past Prim + Proper.

“Me too,” I tell him honestly.

“Want to do it again tomorrow night?” he asks as we walk up the stairs to my apartment and I grin as I turn to face him.

“Aren’t you supposed to wait a few days so you don’t come off as desperate?” I tease.

“Is that how I’m coming across?” he asks and I slowly shake my head no.

“I’m not sure that you could pull off desperate,” I whisper and he pulls me into his arms.

His lips meet mine and I can taste the chocolate mousse and white wine from dinner on his lips. I open under him, wanting more of his flavor. His tongue pushes into my mouth and I flick mine against his, teasing him before I pull back.

He groans, his fingers gripping my chin and holding me in place so that he can plunder my mouth. I moan, letting him take what he wants, what he’s acting like he needs.

He’s acting like he’s desperate for me, like he needs me more than air. I wonder how long he’s been thinking about kissing me like this.

We come up for air and his fingers let go of my face, sliding down my throat and then to the back of my neck.

I blink my eyes open slowly and meet his. I wonder if I look as dazed as he does right now.

“Is that a yes for tomorrow?” he asks, his dimple popping out in his cheek as he smiles down at me and I laugh.

“Yeah, that’s a yes for tomorrow.”

He waits while I let myself into my apartment and I wave as I close and lock the door. I grin as I look down at the folded-up piece of paper in my hand. I don’t even remember when he slipped it to me, and I open it, biting my lip as I read it.

LYLA, would you rather be the funniest person in a room or the smartest person in a room?

You look beautiful. You take my breath away. Always.

x.H

FOR THE FIRST time since I got to Destiny Falls, I want to write him back. I grab a piece of paper from my room and

scribble out a quick note before I sneak back downstairs and over to his SUV.

I'm giggly as I race back upstairs and into my apartment. I wish that I could see his face when he finds the note.

I grab my phone and head to my room to get ready for bed. I remember that my friends asked me to text them so I send off a quick message.

LYLA: Made it home safe.

Madelyn: How was it?

Iris: Where did he take you?

Sutton: What did you eat?

I CAN'T HELP but laugh at Sutton's question and I wash my face clean before I reply.

LYLA: We went to the beach and had a picnic. He cooked a bunch of small plates for us.

Madelyn: Awwwwww!

Iris: So romantic!

Sutton: Did you have fun?

Lyla: Yeah, it was really nice. I'm getting ready for bed now. Talk to you tomorrow!

THEY ALL TEXT me good night and I pull on my pajamas and crawl into bed. As I close my eyes and start to drift off to sleep, I realize something.

I'm excited for the future for the first time in a long while.

SEVEN



I study my appearance in the bathroom mirror as I gather my pale lavender hair back into a high ponytail. It's an overcast day and I'm betting that we won't have many tours, so I don't bother with makeup as I finish in the bathroom.

I tug on one of my Mystery Cabin employee shirts and a pair of jeans before I grab my purse and head for the door. My usual note is on the windshield and I grab it with a smile as I slip behind the wheel.

I'm actually early for work today, so I stop by The Upside Diner and grab three pancake breakfasts to go. Sutton is running errands today, so it's just Teller and me in the gift shop. They both cheer as I come in, holding the bag of pancakes up over my head like Simba in *The Lion King*.

"My hero!" Teller jokes and I laugh as I reach inside and pass him one of the to-go containers.

Stan grunts out a thanks as I pass him his and I lean over, kissing his wrinkled cheek.

"Anything for the best boss in the whole wide world."

"I'm not giving you a raise," he says back right away and I laugh.

"I can't just do something nice?"

He eyes me suspiciously but takes his pancakes and shuffles out of the gift shop. I'm guessing that he's headed to eat in his office. I know that he has a mountain of paperwork to catch up on and I'm pretty sure that Bandit is in there

snoozing and he probably wants to share the pancakes with him. Stan bought him some fancy dog bed and put it in the corner of his office and Bandit loves the thing. I'm pretty sure Stan ordered another one for the living room since he seems to like it so much.

Teller and I eat our pancakes on the counter by the register. He lets me have the stool and we talk about the gloomy weather and take bets on how many tourists that we'll have come through here today.

It's a slow morning, but by noon we've only had two tours. That means that I won the bet with Teller since he said four. It looks like the afternoon is going to be slow, so I'm thinking that I might be able to head home early, especially if the weather stays like this. It's started to rain half an hour ago, so Teller is back inside hanging out with me while I stock some shelves.

"Did you fix that hole on the putt-putt course?" I ask him and he nods.

"Yeah, but it's about all that I finished before it started raining," he says as he puts the last of his tools away in the back closet.

"It was more than me. There wasn't much to stock after the tours," I say and he looks around the shop.

"Do you want to go outside, Bandit?" he asks and I look over to see the dog side-eyeing Teller. I didn't even hear him come into the gift shop.

"Looks like that's a no," I say with a laugh and Teller grins, bending down to scratch Bandit's ears.

"Smart boy," Teller whispers and I smile, putting the last snow globe up on the shelf.

"I meant to ask, I heard about the fire last night over at Mrs. Mason's place. Is everyone alright?"

Teller is one of the volunteer firefighters for Destiny Falls. Our town is too small to have a full-time department, so I'm sure that he went to help last night even though he was off duty.

He used to be a firefighter in New York City but he said that it was too expensive living in the city and he got sick of working two jobs just to barely be able to make ends meet, so he left and came out here. He just happened to see a help wanted sign when he was passing through town and Stan hired him on the spot, so he's been living and working here in Destiny Falls for the last two years.

"Yeah, Mrs. Mason fell asleep with a lit cigarette in her mouth. She's honestly lucky to be alive, but her whole house is gone now."

"Oh, man. Does she need anything?"

"All of her possessions are gone now, so I think that they're organizing some drive for people to donate to. The firehouse is planning it but I headed home before I heard all of the details last night."

"Let me know when you know. I'll donate some money."

"I will," Teller says with that affable smile of his.

"Is she going to go live with her son now?"

"No, I don't think so. Last I heard was that he couldn't take her in. She'll be going to the nursing home down by him though, so at least she'll be close by and she'll get to see the grandkids more often."

"That's too bad. I'm sure she'd rather stay with her son and grandkids."

"I know. I don't think that Peter can handle it though. He's got a lot on his plate with the kids and work. His mom is going to need a lot of help and supervision. Probably round-the-clock care. It sucks, but at least he's honest with the level of care that he can provide for her. The home will be able to give her the care and attention that she needs and they do outings and activities there that she can go to."

I nod and I wonder if maybe I messed up by taking care of my father by myself. Maybe he would have lived longer if he was in a place like that, with trained nurses instead of his flighty daughter.

“Can I ask you a question?” I ask him after a few minutes.

“Sure, what’s up?”

“You and Sutton, you’re perfect together.”

Teller smiles and it’s adorable that just the thought of his girl can cause that reaction.

“Is that the question?” he teases and I smile, looking down at the box of coffee mugs at my feet.

“How did you know that she was the one? That you loved her, I mean?”

Teller rocks back on his heels, blowing out a deep breath as he looks up to the ceiling for a minute as he thinks about his answer.

“Honestly? I don’t know.”

“Sutton will be so happy to hear that you said that,” Stan says as he comes into the gift shop with a huff.

Teller just laughs, not worried at all, and I bend down, starting to stock the coffee cups on the shelf.

“I guess we just had a connection. I just felt it as soon as I met her. Maybe even before that because I was intrigued as soon as her mom told me about her. I don’t know how to describe it. I’ve never had to put what being in love feels like into words.”

“Luckily you don’t have to. Literally millions of books and songs have done it for you,” Stan says with a straight face and I can’t help the bark of laughter that escapes.

I nod, remembering the look on his face when Sutton’s mom had shown us a picture of her daughter. He had looked dazed for the rest of the day and hung on her every word about Sutton for the rest of her visit.

“I love working here, but once she got to town, it wasn’t the job that I was excited about. Sutton was the one that I came to see every day. No offense,” he says to Stan and I laugh at Stan’s less than impressed face.

Stan just snorts and rolls his eyes so Teller continues.

“She was the first person that I thought about when I woke up and the last one before I fell asleep. She makes things better, makes me a better man. Definitely makes Stan and this place better,” he teases and I laugh as Stan glares at him.

His answer leaves me feeling dissatisfied and even more confused. If that’s love, then I’ve either been in love a hundred times before or not at all. It has to be more than that.

I’ve felt connected to dates before, been excited about new crushes. That wasn’t love, obviously. None of them were right for me. Is love just those feelings but stronger?

“Is this about that Hudson fella?” Stan asks and I’m surprised that he knows about that, but I play it off with a shrug.

“Yeah, how are things going between you two?” Teller asks and I grab some more mugs, lining them up on the shelf.

“Good, I guess. I mean, we’ve only been out on the one date, so it’s not that serious.”

I see Stan and Teller share a look with each other out of the corner of my eye and I wonder what they know that I don’t.

“How do you *feel* about Hudson?” Teller asks and I pause to think about it.

“Connected,” I whisper, but I know that they hear me. “There’s chemistry there, like you said.”

“But...” Stan asks and his surly, impatient attitude makes me smile.

“But I’ve felt connected to other guys before him. It didn’t mean anything those times so I’m not sure that it means anything this time.”

“Do you feel more connected to Hudson? Or is it the same as when you went out with those other guys?” Teller asks.

“More,” I whisper, twisting a coffee mug around in my hands.

“Then maybe you should see where this goes,” Stan says quietly.

“Maybe,” I say, finishing up stocking the coffee mugs.

Teller and Stan both smile gently at me and I clear my throat, grateful when some cars pull into the lot.

“Back to work. No more slacking off and talking about boys,” Stan says as he heads back to his office to get ready for the tour, but I see him pause and look at me, waiting for me to nod and tell him that I’m okay before he goes.

“I’m going to go finish cleaning out the back stock room. Need anything before I go?” Teller asks and I shake my head no, grabbing the box of coffee mugs to put away.

“I’ll get it,” he says, taking the box from me. “I’ll have the walkie-talkie. Let me know if you need a hand with anything. Or if you want to talk some more.”

I wave to him, pasting on a smile as the first tourists step inside out of the rain. I welcome them, pointing them down the hallway right as Stan steps out, ringleader persona on full blast. They follow him out and I smile as they head into the first room.

As soon as they’re gone, thoughts of Hudson and my feelings come flooding back. I might like Hudson more than any of my other dates, but can I really trust this feeling?

I try to convince myself that things are finally different. I never made it past the first date with any of those guys, but I said yes to a second with Hudson. Maybe that is a good sign. Maybe the times of me ruining everything are finally over.

EIGHT



“You look gorgeous,” Hudson tells me as he picks me up for our date.

“Thanks,” I say, smoothing my hands down my sweater.

The rain this afternoon cooled things off, so I’m in a thin sweater, jeans, and a pair of flats that have probably seen better days. I just couldn’t handle walking in those wedge sandals for another night and it was either the flats or my Converse which are in even worse shape.

“No picnic basket?” I ask as he leads me over to his car.

“No, I think it’s a little too cold outside for a picnic. Besides, I didn’t want you to think that I only had one date idea. Can’t have you getting bored with me,” he says with a smile as he helps me into the passenger seat.

“Where are we headed?” I ask him as he starts up the SUV.

“I thought that we would head over to Lilac Harbor and check out the restaurants there.”

“Oh, I see. Is this a research mission or a date?”

“A date. Definitely a date.”

I lean back in my seat, smiling as Hudson reaches over and picks up my hand.

“How was work?” he asks and I shrug.

“Slow. We had like two tours the whole day. I got all of the stocking done though and I got to hang out with Teller and Bandit for a bit, so still a good day.”

“Sounds like it,” Hudson says with a smile as he squeezes my hand.

“What about you? Create any new culinary masterpieces today?”

“No, not quite. I did inventory today too. We got our produce delivery this morning and I spent the morning helping with that and the afternoon balancing books and finishing up some paperwork.”

“Being a chef sounds boring,” I tease and he laughs.

“The business side can be sometimes,” he admits as we head out of Destiny Falls and farther down the coast to Lilac Harbor.

“I’m not a businesswoman but it seems to me that not opening more restaurants might help with the business side a bit.”

“Smartass.” He laughs and I grin at him, smiling wider when his thumb rubs against the back of my hand.

Lilac Harbor isn’t far from Destiny Falls and it doesn’t take us long to pull in front of the Blue Plate. The Blue Plate is a casual restaurant right on the water. It’s a two-story restaurant with a deck on the lower and upper level so that diners can sit and enjoy the water.

“I’ve heard about this place. Iris loves it. She said that she and Madelyn always come here for her birthday.”

“I’ve heard that it’s good, but I don’t get over to Lilac Harbor that often. I’m always working at night, so I don’t eat out that much.”

“Well, I’m glad that you made an exception tonight for me.”

“Always,” he says as he hops out and I open my door, hopping out and joining him at the sidewalk.

I take his hand, interlacing our fingers as we head inside and up to the hostess stand.

“Table for two?” a pretty brunette asks Hudson and he nods. “Would you like to sit inside or out?”

I don’t know how she manages to say that and make it come across like a pickup line, but she does.

“Inside,” Hudson tells her, turning to me to make sure that that’s okay and I nod.

“Yeah, with the breeze off the water, it’s a little too chilly out there for me.”

She gives me a tight smile and I roll my eyes at her antics. That earns me a glare and Hudson wraps his arm around my shoulders, laughing as the waitress continues to glare at me as she grabs our menus.

“Look at you. Making friends all over the place.”

“She started it,” I sass back and he laughs, tugging me closer to his side.

“You don’t have to worry. I only have eyes for you,” he whispers in my ear, and I bite back a grin as we reach our table.

“Here you go,” the hostess says, batting her eyes at Hudson, but he doesn’t even look at her.

He pulls out my chair and I sink down, picking up a menu. Hudson sits across from me and we’re quiet as we look over the menu. Our table is right by a window overlooking the water and I watch as the sun starts to set.

“I think I’m going to get the salmon. What about you?” Hudson asks and I grab my menu, flipping it open to remember what it was called.

“I’m getting the pistachio-crusted halibut with the twice-baked potatoes.”

“That sounds good too,” he says as he sets our menus aside and reaches across the table for my hand.

Before he can though, our waiter comes over to take our order.

“Welcome to the Blue Plate! Can I get you two started with something to drink?”

“Do you want wine?” Hudson asks me and I shake my head.

“Can I get a pomegranate martini, please?”

“Of course,” the waiter says with a wink at me and I look over to Hudson to see if he saw that.

If the scowl on his face is any indication, then yes, yes, he did.

“I’ll have a whiskey. Neat.”

The waiter nods, writing down his order before he turns to head back to the kitchen. He gives me a smile as he heads back and I grin wide at Hudson as he goes.

“You’re enjoying this, aren’t you?” he says dryly and I laugh.

“You have nothing to worry about. I only have eyes for you,” I quote back to him.

He stares at me and I could swear that his eyes are full of longing.

I can’t handle seeing him look at me like that and I turn, looking around the rest of the restaurant. We’re on the first floor still, and I look around at the other tables. The place is half full with some people sitting at the bar on the other side of the restaurant.

The tables and chairs are all painted a bright blue and stand out against the dark wood floors and walls. There’s fishing gear tacked up on the walls every few feet and some nautical kitsch on some shelves behind the bar.

“Would you ever have a restaurant like this?” I ask Hudson and he looks around.

“No, probably not. The kitsch stuff isn’t really my style. I’d rather have murals or framed artwork than all of this. I like the style of this place though, with the decks and the two stories.”

“I like how laid back it is. I don’t usually dress up, so this is kind of my kind of place,” I say with a wry grin.

“I can do laid back.”

“What if the market trends don’t point that way?”

“I can still do it.”

“Seems like a pretty big gamble,” I say and I wonder if we’re still talking about restaurants.

“It’s worth it,” he says, his eyes holding mine prisoner and I swallow hard.

“Here you are!” the waiter says as he sets our drinks down in front of us. “Are you ready to order now?”

“Yes,” Hudson says, grabbing our menus and rattling off both of our orders.

The waiter grabs the menus, nodding as he continues to write down the order. I don’t look at him so I’m not sure if he smiles at me as he leaves this time.

“Are you going to open a place up over here still?” I ask him as I take a sip of my martini.

“Maybe. I need to look into the area more. I like Maple Bend, and even Honey Peak was cool when we went up there.”

I nod and ask him more about his other restaurants.

“Which is your favorite restaurant that you own?” I ask him and he sips his whiskey.

“That’s a hard one. I like Noir et Blanc, the one in France for the location. It’s right in the heart of Paris and surrounded by these bakeries and cafés. Tru Blu in New Orleans reminds me of home and it’s right in the square. I like Prim + Proper too though. Like I said, it’s laid back and fun here.”

“Why would you ever leave Paris?”

“Have you been?”

“No, I wish.”

“It’s nice, but I missed the states.”

I nod as our waiter comes over to drop off some fresh rolls and butter.

“What was your favorite job?”

“Ohh, that’s a long list.”

“Really?” Hudson asks with a laugh as he butters me a roll.

“Yeah, I’ve had quite a few.”

Hudson leans back in his chair with a grin and I take another drink of my martini before I tell him about some of the jobs that I’ve worked over the years.

“Let’s see, there was the ice cream parlor in high school. I worked one day for this pest control company—it was the worst day of my life. Then I worked a month at an animal shelter and tried to adopt eight dogs and five kittens. That’s apparently too many animals and I was let go to find a job that was a better fit.”

Hudson grins at me as I go on.

“Then I tried to be an assistant for a wedding photographer. The three months I worked as a gas station clerk. They got robbed one night while I was off and I just couldn’t bring myself to go back.”

“I don’t blame you,” Hudson says with concern.

“I spent a summer on the carnival circuit, working the Ferris wheel, a few months as a dog groomer before I finally landed at a law office as an assistant to one of the partners.”

“Did you like it?”

“Nope, but it paid well and was a quick commute from our apartment. Plus, it had great health benefits,” I say with a shrug.

Saying all of my failed careers out loud just reminds me that I still don’t have it figured out.

“I guess I never really knew what I wanted to do with my life and I still don’t,” I mumble, a lump forming in my throat.

“That’s okay. You’re still young and it’s cool that you have so much experience in all of these different areas.”

“I wish that I could find what I love though.”

“You will,” he promises me and I smile as the waiter comes back to drop off our food.

He asks me more about my jobs and growing up. I tell him about my dad and I swear it’s like my mom can tell that I’m happy because she calls as we’re getting ready to leave.

Hudson pays and I excuse myself to the bathroom where I can call her back.

“Finally!” my mom says in annoyance as soon as the call connects and I want to point out that I literally *just* missed her, but I know it’s no use, so I bite my tongue.

“Sorry, I was out on a date. What’s up?”

“I’m calling about your sister’s wedding. You already missed the engagement shower,” she huffs.

“Stepsister,” I correct her and I can feel the icy chill coming through the phone at that reminder.

“You need to be here for her bridal shower, bachelorette party, and wedding. Is that clear?”

“I’ll try, Mom.”

“You need to do better than that. If you’re going to bring a date, then I need to know now.”

“This is only our second date and I’m not even sure that I can make it, so no, I don’t need a plus one.”

“When are you going to settle down?” she demands and I roll my eyes.

“I don’t know, Mom.”

There is a moment of silence and I shift uneasily. I never know how these phone calls with my mom are going to go and they make me uneasy.

“I’ll see you soon,” she says before she ends the call and I sigh as I head back to the table.

Hudson has paid by now and the waiter waves at me as I grab my purse and take Hudson's hand as we head out.

He holds my hand the whole way back to Destiny Falls and I stare out over the water, wondering what I should do with my mom.

I'm looking for family, and she's the last bit that I have left. Maybe I should be trying harder with her. Maybe I should go visit. I could help with the wedding planning and try to bond with my stepfather and stepsiblings.

It sounds awful, but maybe I'm just not trying hard enough.

"I'll walk you up," Hudson says as he parks in the spot next to my Jeep.

I nod, letting him help me out of his car and up the stairs to my apartment. I stick my key into the lock, but before I can open it, Hudson's fingers are on my chin and he's tilting my face up toward his.

His lips are warm and firm as they claim mine and I wrap my arms around his neck, wanting to get lost in him.

Everything else in the world fades and for a moment, I forget that we're still technically in public. I can't bring myself to care though. In this moment, it is just Hudson and me.

He pushes me back against my door and I moan as he leans into me, the hard planes of his body molding against mine. His fingers caress my jaw as his tongue licks along the seam of my lips and I open for him greedily.

His teeth nip my bottom lip and I gasp, my fingers running through his hair and pulling him closer to me. He moans, his tongue pushing into my mouth and twisting with mine.

I gasp, swearing the world shifts on its axis under my feet. I moan into his mouth as one of his hands tangles in my hair to hold me to him while the other wraps around my waist to steady me.

I want to wrap my legs around him. I want to climb him like a tree, but his phone starts to ring and I remember that

we're not even in my apartment.

I expect him to answer his phone, but it's like he can't even hear it and I'm not going to tell him to stop. His phone stops ringing and I'm trying to wrap one of my legs around his hips when it starts to ring again, and he pulls back with a groan.

"I'm so sorry," he whispers as he rests his forehead against mine and I smile.

"I get it."

"Let me cook for you tomorrow night," he says and I grin.

"Alright—wait! I can't tomorrow. It's girl's night."

He frowns, stealing another kiss as his phone continues to ring.

"The night after then."

"Friday? Isn't that a busy night for Prim + Proper?"

"Yeah, but my staff can handle it for one night."

"Alright then. Friday."

His phone starts to ring again and I let myself into my apartment, smiling at him one last time before I close the door and he answers his phone.

Friday can't come fast enough.

NINE



I peruse the menu even though I've been to this restaurant at least a dozen times in the last few months and I always get the same thing.

Madelyn is running late, so Iris orders her food for us when the waiter comes over to ask us if we've decided yet. We split a large pepperoni pizza and two orders of breadsticks. Iris gets the mozzarella sticks with extra ranch dressing for Madelyn and we order a round of Cokes to drink.

The waiter nods, scribbling down our order still as he turns and heads back to the kitchen.

"How was your day?" Sutton asks Iris and I lean my elbows on the table, my face in my hands as I wait to hear her answer.

"It was fine. Slow," she says with a sigh.

"The Mystery Cabin was too," Sutton tells her, squeezing her shoulder slightly in comradery.

"It's probably because of the weather," I add and they both nod.

"I'm sure that it will pick up soon," Sutton tells her.

It's got to be stressful running your own business. I wonder if I would like to do that. I have no idea what I would sell though. What am I passionate about that I wouldn't mind looking at it every day for the rest of my life.

I'm not sure that I could handle the stress or pressure either though. Iris is so smart and she is great with money. She's

more business savvy than I am. I bet that I would be bankrupt in months if I were in her position.

“Sorry I’m so late!” Madelyn says the next minute as she hurries over to our booth in the back of Mancini’s Pizza Parlor.

“No worries. The food isn’t even here yet,” I tell her as I slide over in the booth to make room for her.

“Busy day at the market?” Sutton asks her and she nods.

“Yeah, there was a problem with the delivery today and it was a big headache. Enough about work though. Tell us all about your date with Hudson!” Madelyn says, turning to me with a big grin.

“It was nice,” I say with a smile.

They all groan and I laugh.

“You have to give us more than that,” Sutton complains and I take a sip of my Coke.

“We went over to Lilac Harbor, to the Blue Plate,” I say, nodding at Iris.

“Oh, what did you eat?” she asks excitedly and I see Madelyn look at her like she’s crazy.

“What did they eat? No, tell us the good stuff!” Madelyn says, and I’m saved from having to answer by our pizza and breadsticks getting delivered.

Everyone takes a slice and I take a bite of the cheesy goodness.

“So? What did you guys talk about?” Sutton asks.

“We talked about his restaurants and some of the jobs that I’ve had. He told me about growing up in New Orleans and his parents and then going to culinary school in New York.”

“He still has a restaurant there, right?” Iris asks and I nod.

“Yeah, he’s got places all over.”

“Then what happened?” Madelyn asks.

“Then we got ready to go and my mom called. She wants me to go to Chicago for my stepsister’s wedding and

bachelorette party or something.”

“Are you going to go?” Sutton asks and I take another bite of pizza, shrugging.

The truth is that I’m still undecided on that. I want to find my place in the world, where I belong, and the truth is that I don’t think it will be with them. Still, I guess it wouldn’t hurt me to go and try. Maybe I’ll have enough to pay Hudson back by then and I’ll be getting back to my trip and I can stop there first.

“Did he kiss you goodnight?” Madelyn asks.

“Yeah,” I say and I can feel my face heating as I remember the way that he kissed me goodbye last night.

They all ohh and giggle and I laugh, taking a sip of my pop.

“Are we going to The Fainting Goat after this?” I ask before I take another bite of pizza.

“Sure,” Madelyn says with a shrug, and I see Iris bite her bottom lip.

“Should we invite Flynn?” Sutton asks and Madelyn gives her a dry look.

I’m sure she’s getting tired of the comments about how good the two of them would be together.

“No, it’s girl’s night,” she says, taking another bite of her pizza and I laugh.

The subject changes to upcoming holidays. Sutton is already starting to plan for Halloween at the Mystery Cabin and potentially doing some themed nights or promotions. I told her that as long as I didn’t have to dress up like I was working in some kind of haunted house that I was fine with it, but I have a feeling that Stan might be harder to talk around.

The three of us throw out ideas like decorating the miniature golf course and having a deal on it or even setting up a haunted house inside the Mystery Cabin. Iris mentions advertising in the local papers or on social media sites like Facebook or Instagram. Madelyn recommends billboards on

either side of the Mackinaw Bridge and I see Sutton writing them down on her phone.

I can't help but wonder if I'll be here to see any of it.

We finish off our pizza and pay our bill before we head across the street and down the block to The Fainting Goat. It's live music night and the band is already in full swing when we walk in and grab a table close to the bar.

Sutton grabs us a round of martinis and we settle in to listen to the band play. The place is pretty crowded.

"Did Hudson ask you out again?" Sutton asks as the band takes a short break.

"Yeah, he's going to cook for me tomorrow night."

"Marry him," Madelyn says with a straight face and I laugh.

"I'm being serious!" she insists. "Does he have a brother by chance?"

"Does who have a brother?" Flynn asks as he plops down into the chair next to Madelyn.

"Hudson," I tell him, and I can't help but notice the way that he frowns at hearing that Madelyn was interested in someone else.

"So, does he?" she asks and Flynn shifts in his seat, taking a sip of his beer.

"No, I don't think so. I'm pretty sure he's an only child. At least he's never mentioned any siblings."

"You can ask him for me tomorrow when he cooks for you," Madelyn says and I laugh.

"Ugh, I bet it's going to be delicious," Iris says with a moan and I see Madelyn stare at her.

"There is something wrong with the way that you're more interested in food than the man," she says with a frown and Iris laughs.

“He’s a famous chef with an entire cabinet of awards. It’s literally guaranteed to be incredible. I think it’s weird that you’re not excited about it,” Iris argues and I smile as they start to bicker.

“Yeah, but we’re not getting to eat it,” Madelyn says and I see Sutton roll her eyes before she interrupts them.

“Have you talked to Arlo yet? Maybe he can cook too,” Sutton suggests and Iris’s face turns beet red with a blush.

Her eyes dart to the bar but Arlo isn’t working tonight.

“Maybe,” she mumbles but she looks doubtful and I wonder if it’s because she doesn’t think that he can cook or because he isn’t here tonight.

The band starts back up and we take a break from talking to listen to the music. Flynn hangs out with us for a bit and we debate a second round, but I think everyone is tired after a long week. Besides, we all have to work tomorrow, so when Sutton says she’s going to head out, we all decide to call it a night.

Madelyn has to go back to the market to make sure that the delivery is put away and that there weren’t any other problems. She heads across the street to the market and I watch Flynn as he watches her go.

Sutton and Iris both head back to their cars, but I’m just walking home.

“I’ll give you a ride,” Flynn says, nudging my arm and I nod my head, yawning as I follow him over to his car.

“You know, if you like Madelyn, you should just tell her,” I say as Flynn turns out onto Main Street.

He doesn’t answer me right away and I’m ready to let the subject go when he finally does speak.

“It’s more complicated than that,” he says quietly and I get the feeling that he’s relieved when we pull up outside of Prim + Proper.

“Thanks for the ride,” I say as I climb out and he nods but seems distracted.

I wave as he backs out and I'm about to head up to my apartment when I remember the note that I wrote out to Hudson at work. I don't see him when I look into the restaurant windows, so I sneak over and slip it beneath his windshield wiper before I head upstairs.

I let myself into my apartment, kicking off my shoes and heading into the bedroom. I'm looking forward to showering and then heading to bed.

I got paid today and I pull out the cash that I got from the bank this afternoon. I count it out, grabbing the box from beneath my bed and opening it up to add the new cash. I owe Hudson three grand and I count it out. I'm at two thousand five hundred and fifty-eight. I'll be able to pay him back in two weeks.

Why does the thought of paying him back and getting to move on from Destiny Falls no longer hold the same appeal?

Stan asked me today why I was being so weird lately this morning and I admitted that I didn't know what I wanted to do with my life. I thought that he might be able to offer me some kind of wisdom or advice.

He had suggested college. According to him, "that's where kids go to figure shit out." The only problem with that is that I never really liked school and the thought of going for four more years makes me feel like I'm dying a little bit inside. I doubt that I could afford it either and I don't want to take out a bunch of loans. Especially not for something that I don't even want to do.

When I had told him that, he said I just needed to figure out what I loved and try to make a career out of that. Figuring all of that out though seems easier said than done.

I know that I don't want to work for a big company or corporation and I don't want to work in food which is probably a good idea since I can't actually cook anything and I don't want to smell like grease every day if I were to work at some fast-food place. I don't want to have a long commute, work in a cubicle, or do the same thing every day.

I have this long list of things that I don't want, but nothing that I do.

My mind flashes to the Mystery Cabin, to my friends that I've made here, and to and I realize that maybe I do know what I want after all.

TEN



“So, this is your place,” I say as Hudson opens the door for us and ushers me into the foyer of his house.

Hudson lives in a two-story white house right on the water and only about a block and a half away from his restaurant, Prim + Proper. The place is beautiful with a bunch of windows to let in natural light and provide amazing views of the lake and bridge behind it.

“Yeah, this is my home,” he says and I let him take my hand and give me a quick tour.

There are dark brown hardwood floors running throughout the first floor and up the stairs. The walls are white and I wonder if that’s by choice or if he just didn’t want to bother with painting them a different color.

The living room and stairs are to the right and the dining room is to the left. Neither are decorated very much, just the bare necessities like a couch, TV, kitchen table, and chairs.

He leads me down the hallway, past the stairs and into the kitchen. It’s obvious that this is the room that he loves the most.

The counters and the appliances all gleam under the lights. There are cookbooks on the shelf under the kitchen island, spices lined up on a huge shelf that almost covers an entire section of wall, and shiny copper pots and pans hang from the rack on the ceiling.

The cabinets are painted a dark teal color that matches the hardwood floors and white backsplash perfectly.

“I like it,” I tell him as he pulls out a cushioned stool for me at the counter. “It looks like what I imagine is a chef’s dream kitchen. Is that why you bought this place?”

“Partly. I like the layout but what really sold it for me was the location. I have my own little slice of beach right outside those doors,” he says, nodding to the double back doors.

“Yeah, that would sell it for me too. I always dreamed about falling asleep with the windows open, the sound of waves lulling me to sleep,” I say with a sigh and Hudson grins at me.

“I haven’t done that yet. Maybe I’ll have to try it one of these nights.”

“I bet it’s relaxing.”

“Me too,” he says as I take a seat and he leans down, kissing me before he heads over to the deep copper sink to wash his hands.

“So, what are we eating for dinner?” I ask him as he starts to pull some vegetables and other ingredients out of the fridge.

“I thought I’d make us some chicken since we had fish the other night.”

“Can I help with anything?”

“Sure,” he says as he pulls out a cutting board and a knife.

“I should warn you that I’m not great in the kitchen,” I say as I slide off of the stool and go to wash my hands.

“It will be okay. I’ll show you a few tips.”

I wash my hands and move to join him at the counter. He passes me some carrots and a peeler and I get to work. He’s ten times faster than me, but he doesn’t complain about the wait. We finish peeling and he shows me how to cut them. I’m sure that he could cut them in no time, but it takes me almost ten minutes.

He’s so patient with me. He shows me how to prepare the chicken and tells me about marinades and different spices.

We're doing blackened chicken and he tells me about the different spices as we mix them together.

"Then we dip them in the olive oil, making sure that they're coated before we cover them in the spice mix."

I nod, grabbing a chicken tenderloin and doing as he says. We line them up on a plate and he explains how we'll fry them for a few minutes on each side before we put them in the oven to finish cooking.

"Now for the carrots," he says.

We melt butter and add garlic, stirring it together before we dump it over the cut-up carrots and toss them so that they're all evenly coated.

"And we just bake these?" I ask as he spreads them across the parchment-covered pan.

"Yep. I'll put them in now since they'll take longer than the chicken and the broccoli."

I nod, watching as he slides them in.

"Want something to drink?" he asks as he sprinkles some spices on top of the broccoli.

He cut that up while I was doing the carrots, so I don't think that there is much left for me to do.

"Sure. What are you having?"

"How about a beer? Or I have wine here?"

"A beer sounds great," I say as I reclaim my stool.

He grabs two from the fridge and pops the top off of them before he passes me one.

"Can I ask you something?" I ask as he flips the first batch of chicken in the pan.

"Of course."

"Why do you always leave your car at Prim + Proper? I mean, I get that it isn't a very long walk, but you have to be tired of being on your feet all day, so why walk home at all?"

He smiles as he takes the chicken from the pan and lines them up on the baking sheet.

“I was hoping that you would finally reply to one of my messages.”

I’m not sure if it’s the heat in the kitchen or what, but I could swear that he’s blushing a little bit.

My heart starts to race and I suddenly get what Teller was talking about.

Is this love?

I rub my sweaty palms on my jeans as I ponder what I’m feeling. I’ve certainly never felt this way before in my life about anyone. It’s stronger than just a crush or a like. Could this finally be it?

I take a bigger drink of my beer and try not to panic. Hudson is busy cooking, in his happy place, so he doesn’t notice me freaking out at the counter.

The oven goes off for the carrots and broccoli and I stand to help set the table. Hudson nods to a cabinet and I grab some plates out while he puts the chicken in the oven to bake for a few minutes.

“This looks amazing,” I say as he passes me a fork and knife and he takes a seat next to me at the kitchen island.

Hudson made some kind of avocado dip to go with the chicken and I realize why when I take a bite.

“Oh man! This is spicy,” I say and Hudson laughs.

“Yeah, try it with the dip,” he says and I nod, dipping the next piece in the avocado sauce.

“Better?” he asks and I nod, taking another bite.

“It’s really good,” I compliment him and he smiles.

“How was work?” he asks and I tell him about the Halloween planning.

“Isn’t it a little early for that? It’s the beginning of September,” he says with a laugh.

“I know, but I guess you have to plan for theme nights and different advertising things.”

Hudson nods and I take a bite of my carrots.

“Would you rather,” Hudson starts and I can’t help but laugh.

“Really?” I ask him and he nods.

“We never got to play the other night.”

“Alright, you’re right.”

“Would you rather live in a tent every day or in a hotel room?”

“Hotel room.”

“Really?” he asks and I nod.

“Yeah, I mean, can you imagine being in a tent in a hurricane or twister or something? Hotel, hands down.”

He nods, chewing as he thinks of another question.

“Would you rather have the ability to see ten minutes into the future or a hundred and fifty years into the future?”

“Hmm, hard one. I guess ten minutes into the future. I can’t change the past after all.”

“Yeah, me too,” he says.

“My turn. Would you rather have the ability to move things with your mind or the ability to read minds?” I ask him.

“Read minds.”

“Why?” I ask as I finish off my chicken.

“I think it would come in handy with you. I swear, sometimes I’d kill to be able to know what you were thinking.”

My heart beats fast at that and I grab my beer, finishing it off.

“What about you?” he asks.

“Yeah, I want to read minds too.”

He seems to pick up on my change in mood and he steers us back to more neutral territory.

“Would you rather be chronically under-dressed or overdressed?”

“Under. That way at least I would be comfortable,” I say with a laugh.

He nods and the game goes on until we’re done eating. I insist on helping him with dishes and clean up.

“Want another beer?” he asks and I nod, wandering over to the glass door and looking out over the beach and water.

He passes me a beer and I follow him into the living room. He takes a seat on the couch and I sit down next to him. There is a TV, but he doesn’t turn it on. Instead, we both look out the window, watching as the waves come in.

“I love your place. It’s cool that you’re so close to the water,” I tell him and he turns to me with a soft smile.

His dimple is just barely showing and I suddenly have the desire to lean over and kiss it.

So, I do.

Hudson’s breath catches as my lips make contact with his cheek. His body goes stiff as a board as I lean against him.

“I’ve been wanting to do that for a while,” I whisper as I pull back and he stares at me for a beat.

Then his lips are on mine. His hands are in my hair and I move closer to him on the couch. His body is so firm and warm beneath my fingers. I want to feel him against me. I want to straddle him. I want to feel his weight on top of me.

Hudson’s hand falls to my hip and he tugs on the back of my thigh. I get what he’s trying to say and throw my leg over his. His hands grip my hips then and he pulls me tight against him so that I can feel that thick ridge in his pants.

I moan, opening my mouth for him and greedily tangling my tongue with his. He groans as I suck on his tongue, my hips starting to grind down on him.

“Fuck, Lyla. You’re so hot,” he whispers as we come up for air.

“Take your clothes off,” I whisper back and he laughs.

“Yes, ma’am.”

I tug my tank top off as Hudson starts to unbutton his shirt and I stand, wiggling out of my jeans and kicking my shoes off as Hudson’s shirt gets tossed aside. He lifts his hips, unbuttoning and tugging down his pants as I move to straddle him again.

My hands land on his chest and I rub my fingers through his chest hair and up to his shoulders.

Hudson is watching me, his eyes dark and locked on my face. He’s waiting to see what I’ll do next, how far I want to go tonight.

I want to go all the way with him.

I reach behind me, keeping my eyes locked with his as I unhook my bra and let the straps slip down my arms.

“Fuck,” Hudson hisses.

“Yes please.”

Hudson growls and the next thing I know, my back is flat on the couch and Hudson is coming down over me.

He buries his head in my neck, licking, biting, and sucking a trail down my neck to my collarbone. He nips my collarbone, kissing lower over the swell of my breast.

“Yes,” I moan as his lips wrap around the bud of my nipple.

I arch into his mouth, my fingers tangling in his dark locks as he teases my nipple into a stiff peak. His fingers are playing with my other breast and I never thought that I could come from someone playing with my nipples, but I’m on the edge already.

Hudson looks up at me, his eyes filled with desire and I wiggle under him. I need more.

He kisses between my breasts and I watch as he licks a path down my stomach. His hands go to my panties and he tugs them down my legs, moving back between my spread thighs as soon as they're removed.

"Beautiful," Hudson murmurs as he spreads my folds and I lean up on my elbows, looking down my body at him.

He leans forward, licking a path up my center, and my eyes almost roll back in my head at the sensation.

"More," I moan and Hudson grins up at me.

He does as I ask and buries his face in my pussy. His tongue finds my clit and he sucks the pearl into his mouth, rolling his tongue over the ball of nerves until I'm seeing stars.

"Oh my god!" I scream as I come against his lips and he buries his face between my legs, trying to lick up all of my juices.

As soon as I come back to Earth, I'm reaching down, tugging on Hudson's arm and trying to pull him up my body.

He rises up, kneeling between my legs and I wrap my arms around his neck, pulling him to me and kissing him. I can taste my tangy passion on his lips and I moan, opening for him as I hook one of my legs around his hips.

Hudson kisses me harder, his hand searching for his discarded jeans on the floor, and I grin against his lips as he finds a condom. We break apart and he rips it open with his teeth, rolling it on in one smooth move.

"Lyla," he whispers and I nod, letting him know that I want him.

That I need him.

He nods back, smiling softly. Then he's lining up with my entrance and we both stare into each other's eyes as he slowly pushes into me.

We both moan as he sinks an inch in and my eyes flutter as I feel him stretching me. He sinks another inch and I wrap my legs around his waist, rocking against him and trying to take more of him.

Hudson gives me what I want then. He kisses me as he thrusts fully into me and I groan, my hips restless as he keeps me pinned to the couch.

I forget all about time and the things that have been weighing on me since my father passed and I just get lost in Hudson, in what he does to my body.

I can feel my second orgasm building, growing inside of me. As it starts, Hudson leans down, claiming my lips and cries with his mouth. He groans and I know that he's found his release too.

We both pant, our faces flushed as we stare at each other, and I can feel myself giving him a tiny piece of my heart in this moment.

"Maybe you should show me your bedroom now," I suggest and Hudson grins, pulling me off the couch and carrying me upstairs.

ELEVEN



I blink my eyes open, squinting as the sun blinds me and I remember where I am.

“Morning,” Hudson says and I squint, smiling when I see him coming into the bedroom with a tray in his hands.

“That smells amazing,” I groan as I move to sit up in bed.

I’m still naked and I pull the sheet up to cover myself as Hudson sets the tray down over my lap.

“Thank you,” I say and he smiles, kissing me before he stands and heads around the bed to his side.

He slides in next to me and I cut up the pancakes, offering him a bite. We share the pancakes and eggs but I eat all of the bacon by myself. Hudson just smiles and sips his cup of coffee.

“What are your plans for today?” he asks as he moves the tray off of my lap.

“I actually have it off, so I’m just going to relax.”

“Want to relax with me?” he asks and I’m surprised that he doesn’t have to go into Prim + Proper.

“Sure. What did you have in mind?”

“You’ll see,” he says and I watch as he grabs the tray off of the ground.

“I’ll go clean up. You can help yourself to the shower or whatever you need or I can take you home and then meet you in a little bit.”

“Yeah, I think I should go home. I don’t really want to wear last night’s clothes all day.”

He nods, handing me my clothes that he must have grabbed from downstairs off of the dresser and putting them at the end of the bed.

“I’ll let you get dressed then. I just need to take a quick shower and then I can go into Prim + Proper while you get ready.”

I nod and he heads downstairs as I slide out of bed and pull my jeans and tank top back on. My shoes must still be downstairs, so I head down and into the living room to find them.

I pass Hudson and he drops another kiss on my lips before he heads upstairs to shower. I find my shoes. One is tucked under the couch and another is behind the end table. I wonder how the heck they got there.

My purse is on the kitchen counter still and I pull my phone out, groaning when I see I have five missed calls from my mom. I know that she didn’t call me to see how I was doing, so I’m guessing it was about making sure I was there at the end of the month for Heidi’s wedding.

I decide I’ll call her back later and I’m just tucking my phone back into my purse when Hudson comes back downstairs, freshly showered and wearing a new T-shirt and pair of jeans.

“Ready to go?” he asks and I nod, taking his hand as we head out.

We walk the block over to my apartment and Hudson tells me he’ll be downstairs when I’m ready before we part ways.

I head upstairs and into my apartment and hurry through a shower and throwing on some new clothes before I head downstairs to meet him. He’s not out front so I open the front door, poking my head in to see if I can spot him.

I don’t see him, but I can hear him, so I head farther inside, poking my head around the kitchen door.

“Hey,” I say and he looks over.

“Okay, so finish up with the freezer inventory and I’ll be back later.”

His staff nods and he heads my way, wrapping his arm around my shoulders as we head outside to his car. He opens the door for me and I hop in.

“Where are we going?” I ask as he buckles up.

“There’s the annual fudge festival over in Maple Bend. Or we could go explore Honey Peak or something,” he suggests.

“Let’s do the fudge festival. I could use some good peanut butter fudge.”

He nods, backing out of his parking spot and heading east toward Maple Bend. He interlaces our fingers together and I smile as I slide my sunglasses on.

“I’ve got some chef friends coming into town in a few weeks to visit. It’s the annual Honey Festival up in Honey Peak and we’re going to go check it out. Want to join us?” he asks as we park in the lot and climb out to head across the street to the festival.

“Sure. Sounds like fun, though I’m scheduled to work on Sunday.”

“That’s okay. We’re going Saturday.”

“Perfect.”

The fudge festival is set up like a farmers’ market with different stands, and we take our time wandering around. By noon, I’m stuffed and have a stomachache from all of the junk food that I’ve eaten.

“What do you say to me feeding you something a little healthier now?” Hudson asks as I try to juggle my boxes of fudge.

“I say it’s about time.”

He laughs, taking the fudge from me and we double back to his car, dropping it off before we head down the street in search of a restaurant that isn’t packed.

“How about tacos?” I ask, nodding to the restaurant with the sombreros hanging in the windows.

“Sounds good.”

We cross the road and Hudson puts our name in with the hostess. It doesn’t take long for us to be seated, and I smile as I look around at the brightly colored tables.

We both order the enchilada plate and a margarita, and I lean back in my seat.

“Thanks for bringing me here. I had a lot of fun,” I say and he grins.

“Me too. Just remember that later tonight when you can’t sleep from all of the sugar,” he jokes.

“Maybe I won’t be able to sleep for another reason,” I whisper back and Hudson grins as he leans over the table and kisses me.

Our food gets delivered a few moments later and we both dig in, talking about the festival and our upcoming weeks. He tells me about his friends that are visiting next weekend. They’re all chefs too with their own restaurants and we talk about their specialties and where they work. They all seem to be in New York but in different boroughs.

Hudson pays and we head back to Destiny Falls. He parks next to my Jeep and I smile as I unbuckle.

“Want to come up? I can make us dinner in a few hours.”

“Sure,” he says, hopping out.

“Would you rather have a frozen TV dinner or some cereal?” I ask and he groans, his head tipping back as he drapes his arm around my shoulders.

“I’ll figure something out. You have to eat better than that,” he says and I shrug as I unlock my apartment door and head inside.

I set the boxes of fudge down on the kitchen counter and turn to face him.

“Are you hungry now?” I ask.

“Not for food,” he says, caging me in against the kitchen counter.

I grin, pushing my body into his until I can feel every ridge and sculpted muscle through both of our clothes.

“Want to see my bedroom?”

“I’ve been wondering what it looks like,” he murmurs as he leans down, nuzzling my neck.

He steps back and I take his hand, leading him down the short hallway to my bedroom. My bedroom is pretty bare. There is only a full-size bed with mismatched pillows and sheets and a small chest of drawers. I don’t even have a headboard for the bed, just the frame and mattress, but I didn’t think that I was staying for very long, so I never bothered to furnish it.

There’s a small pile of dirty clothes in the corner since I haven’t had a chance to bring it to the Mystery Cabin to do laundry.

“It’s kind of messy,” I say apologetically, but he just smiles.

“I like it.”

His hands grab my hips and he pulls me into him. I can feel his dick starting to swell against my thigh and I can’t help but rub against it.

I feel wanton and desired as his cock hardens even more. I shift so that the thick ridge is between my legs and I can’t help but moan. It feels so good, so hard.

His head dips, his warm breath hitting my face and my eyelids flutter shut as his lips land on mine.

My heart is racing and as my hands rub up his chest, I can feel that his heart is beating out of control too. My fingers climb higher and I run my fingers over his collarbone, memorizing every line of his body as I go.

Hudson backs me up a step and I go willingly. The sunlight is shining through the bedroom window and I like that I can see all of him this time.

My fingers trace along his jawline and he pulls away, staring down at me. I trace around his ear, my fingers tangling in his dark locks, toying with the long strands.

“I really like you,” he says.

“I really like you too.”

The words I love you are on the tip of my tongue but I can’t get them out. Surely, it’s too soon to be saying things like that. Right?

His lips capture mine as his hands move up my ribcage until he’s cupping my breasts in his big, capable hands. His hands knead the soft globes and I break the kiss, pulling away as I moan, my head falling back.

Hudson kisses down my neck, his lips finding the pulse point at the base of my throat. I push into him, wanting his hands on my skin, on every inch of me.

I raise my hands over my head, letting him drag the thin cotton of my shirt over my head. He drags the cup of my bra down, exposing my nipple to the cold air. It puckers instantly, tightening into a stiff peak.

“Perfection,” Hudson whispers against my skin and I gasp as his warm mouth sucks the tight bud into his mouth.

His tongue swirls around it and I arch into him. My eyes flutter open and I watch as the fan spins round and round on the ceiling above us. Hudson’s hands go around my back and he pulls me into him, his hands tangling in my purple hair as he devours my breasts.

He pulls the other cup down and I swear that I’m about to explode. My whole body feels like it’s on fire. I’m hot and needy, aching for him to make me come.

Everything about Hudson turns me on. He’s so strong, so smart and capable. He’s sexy and funny, but right now it’s his body that is doing it for me.

The toned abs, the full lips, and dark blue eyes, the chiseled lines of him, all of the dips and planes. All of it is a work of art that I want to admire for hours.

Hudson pulls back and I bite back a whine, missing having his mouth on me.

“Bed,” he orders and I nod, pushing down my pants as I back up toward the mattress.

Hudson’s eyes are burning, glinting in the sun as he takes me in and I straighten my shoulders, wanting him to look his fill. It’s obvious that my body turns him on just as much as his turns me on.

Hudson pushes me down onto the bed and I start to wiggle let out of my panties, letting Hudson pull them the rest of the way off.

“Fuck. Every inch of you is a dream, Lyla.”

My body warms at the compliment and I hold my hand out to him, wanting to feel his weight on top of me. He pulls his shirt off first, kicking his shoes off as he pushes his pants down his toned legs.

He comes down over me and I spread my legs. He’s still wearing his boxers, so we’re not skin on skin but I can still feel how hard and hot he is.

His head dips again and his mouth latches onto one of my nipples, sucking the whole thing into his mouth. His mouth is so hot and wet, the suction so perfect that I’m close to coming in seconds.

My toes curl into the sheets as my hips rock restlessly against his and he switches to my other breast.

That spot between my legs is getting wet, tiny sparks going off with every bite, suck, and caress that he gives my breasts. It’s not quite enough though. The nagging emptiness between my legs just won’t go away and the dull ache is starting to drive me crazy with need.

I remember how he went down on me on the couch at his house and I want to return the favor. I push on his chest and he lets my nipple go with a pop, leaning up to look at me questioningly.

“I want to take care of you,” I say, my fingers running down his chest, following his happy trail down to the band of his boxers.

Hudson pushes off of the bed, reaching for his boxers and I drop to my knees, helping him pull them down his legs. They pool at his feet and he steps out of them as I reach up, fisting his thick length.

I open my mouth wide, sucking in the tip of his cock as Hudson’s hand tangles in my hair. He doesn’t push on my head, he just rests his hands there, his fingers tugging on the strands as my head starts to bob.

The feeling lights up my scalp and I moan as I take more of him into my mouth. I work my hand in time with my mouth and my body only burns hotter as I feel him swell against my tongue, hear the moans and the way that he says my name like it’s a prayer.

“Fuck,” Hudson says, pulling me off of him and he reaches down, dragging me up to my feet and then pushing me onto the bed.

I pull him down and our lips meet, we cling together as we take our time exploring each other. The earlier rush is gone and I moan, rolling him onto his back and straddling his hips.

“Let me lick your pussy,” Hudson says, but I shake my head.

I’m already wet enough and I know that if I let him do that, that he’ll take control again and I want to set the pace this time.

I reach behind me, grabbing his dick and lining it up with my opening as I slowly sink down, taking him into my body inch by delicious inch.

“Fuck,” he hisses out as I slowly sink down until he’s fully seated inside of me. “You’re so wet. So fucking hot.”

I grin at him, resting my hands on his chest as I slowly roll my hips. We both moan with every rock of my hips, every in and out, every push and pull of his cock inside of my snug channel.

His hands go to my ass, groping the globes, using them to pull me down harder onto him. I pant as I grind against him and he leans up, sucking one of my tits into his mouth.

He takes over, thrusting up from beneath me as our mouths fuse together and I can feel myself starting to splinter apart around him as the pressure inside of me builds.

He hits a certain spot deep inside of me and that's all it takes to send me flying over the edge of the cliff into oblivion.

Hudson's brow furrows in concentration as he grips my hips and drives into me in perfect precision.

Seeing him like that is intoxicating, and I can't look away as he finds his own release inside of me.

If I wasn't in love with him before, I sure am now.

TWELVE



I shove the last bite of cereal into my mouth, rinsing the bowl out and leaving it in the sink to wash later as I finish getting ready to head to work.

I'm a little early to leave for work but I don't have anything else to do at my apartment, so I head out.

There's a new note under my windshield wiper and I grin as I grab it. I think it's adorable that Hudson still leaves me messages even though he has my phone number now. He still asks me out at the end of every one or if we've already made plans, then he asks what I want to eat or where I want to go. I like him surprising me so I always leave that part up for him to decide.

I open the gift shop door and am immediately greeted with the sounds of Sutton and Stan's latest argument.

"We can form new relationships with better vendors," Sutton says and I'm guessing that she's arguing with Stan in his office.

The Mystery Cabin isn't open yet and it's been like this for the last few days as they try to plan for the upcoming promotions and order new merchandise for the gift shop. Yesterday I came in to hear them fighting about the website. Eventually Stan gave in and let her hire someone to spruce it up a bit since the other one looked like it was made in the nineties. Probably because it was.

"But we've had these vendors for years," Stan argues back, sounding annoyed.

“And they’re ripping us off! We could get better quality for cheaper at any of these sites.”

I can hear some papers rustling and I set my purse down under the counter, smiling when Bandit and Teller come through the gift shop door.

“Morning,” I tell him as I bend over to pet Bandit.

“Morning! Are they still going at it?” he asks me and I nod.

“Looks like it.”

He shakes his head, setting down his toolbox on the counter.

“We can try them,” Stan relents and Teller smiles, happy that his girlfriend won the argument.

“I think the new shirts came in yesterday. Want me to grab them for you out of the storage closet?” Teller asks and I nod.

“Yeah, that would be great.”

He nods and heads over to the closet to grab the boxes for me. I decide to grab some coffee and make my way down the hallway and into the kitchen.

“Are you making a new pot?” Stan asks, coming in as I close the filter lid and hit start.

“Yeah, you want some more?”

He grunts out yes and I smile as I lean against the counter and listen as the coffee starts to brew.

“Want some French toast?” I ask him and he perks up.

“Are you making it?”

“Only if you want it to be burned or for me to possibly start a fire in your kitchen,” I say with a laugh and he smiles.

“I’ll make us some in a minute. I have a feeling that we’ll be slow today since it’s supposed to start raining soon.”

I nod and he shuffles out of the kitchen and back toward his office. I’ve seen Stan make it enough to remember the ingredients, so I start to dig around in the cupboards, pulling

out a bowl and frying pan. There are only a few pieces of bread left and I add bread to the grocery list on the fridge before I grab milk and eggs.

Stan comes back in as I pour the coffee into our cups and he gets to work on the French toast.

“Are you hungry?” Stan asks Sutton as she comes in to grab herself a cup of coffee.

“No, thanks. Teller and I ate breakfast before we got here,” she says and he nods.

“Can Bandit have some?” Stan asks and Sutton sighs.

“A little bit. *Little*,” she stresses. “At his last vet appointment, they mentioned that he was a little high on weight.”

Stan doesn’t look like he’s bothered by that, but he’s smart enough not to say anything to Sutton.

“I’m going to get started on the books,” she says as she grabs her coffee and heads back to the gift shop.

Bandit comes in a few seconds later, and I wonder if he heard us talking about him.

“Grab us some plates?” Stan asks and I grab two from the cabinet, holding them out as he puts some perfectly golden brown French toast on each one.

“I’m surprised that your fancy new man didn’t cook breakfast for you this morning. He’s a chef, right? Surely he could have made you something better than this,” Stan says and I pause with a piece of toast halfway to my mouth.

“He offered,” I admit. “I just woke up late and was running behind.”

Stan huffs and I smile sweetly at him, stuffing my piece of toast into my mouth. We eat in silence and when Stan stands, I tell him that I’ll clean up since he cooked.

He pats me on the shoulder as he passes and I smile.

My grandparents both died when I was young and I don’t really remember them all that much, so Stan is kind of like the

grandpa that I never had. I know that he and Sutton got off to a slightly rocky start but they're solid now. Even if they do argue a bit.

It starts to rain as I finish up the dishes, the drops splattering against the windowpane by the kitchen table. I lean against the counter, sipping the last of my coffee and listening to it. I used to love the rain in New York City. It was the only time that the city was even remotely quiet. I can remember turning off all the lights and sitting cross-legged on the floor in front of the window in my bedroom, watching the lightning strike across the sky and the raindrops slide off the roofs of buildings.

A car pulls into the lot outside the window and I sigh, pushing off the counter. I refill my coffee cup before I head into the gift shop to get to work. I pull out my phone, sending Hudson a quick message as I go.

LYLA: I just had a man make my French toast for breakfast and it was delicious. Probably better than anything that you could have made.

I SLIP my phone back into my pocket as I get started stocking the new T-shirts and sweatshirts. The car that pulled in must have turned around because no one ever comes in. My phone buzzes a minute later and I grin as I pull it out to read Hudson's message.

HUDSON: Sounds like I need to up my game. Can't have someone stealing you away from me. Let me cook for you tonight.

Lyla: I don't know... I bet I could convince Stan to make me a roast or something.

Hudson: I bet you could. I promise that mine will be better though.

Lyla: I'll be the judge of that.

Hudson: Six?

Lyla: Perfect.

SUTTON IS bent over the front counter busy balancing the books, so I try not to distract her as I get to work stocking.

Bandit comes in from Stan's office and curls up in his dog bed behind the counter. It starts to rain harder and I have a feeling that we won't be getting a lot of tourists today.

"What did you do yesterday?" Sutton asks me as she takes a break from the accounting.

"Hudson and I went over to Maple Bend and checked out the fudge festival."

"How was it?"

"Good... and kind of nauseating. I ate way too many sweets," I say with a laugh.

Sutton laughs too, bending down to scratch Bandit's ears when he barks, wanting to join in on the fun.

"Did you save me any fudge?"

"Yeah, I have two boxes for girl's night on Thursday," I tell her and she cheers.

"Peanut butter?" she asks and I nod.

"Of course. I got a bit of peanut butter, cookies and cream, and then a whole box of chocolate."

"Have I told you lately that you're the best?" she asks and I laugh.

"Not today."

"Well, you are. Now I can't wait until girl's night. I've been craving something sweet."

"Glad I could help," I tell her as I grab the last shirt from the box.

We work in silence for another few minutes and then I break it.

“He invited me to the Honey Festival up in Honey Peak in two weeks. I guess some of his chef friends are coming into town and he wants me to meet them.”

“That’s great! That’s a big step, right?” she asks and I shrug.

“I don’t know. I thought the next big step was meeting family or something.”

Sutton thinks about that. I know that neither of us really has much experience with relationships, so I’m not sure that we’re the ones we should be asking about it.

“Well still, that’s exciting. I think it’s a good sign that he wants to introduce you to people in his life.”

My phone buzzes again and I pull it out.

HUDSON: Do you really want a roast tonight?

Lyla: I was just teasing. Whatever you make is fine.

Hudson: I’m aiming to please here, baby.

Lyla: Alright, then yeah, a roast with all of the fixings pretty please.

Hudson: Done.

MY PHONE GOES OFF AGAIN before I can put it away and I expect it to be Hudson again, maybe asking me what I want for dessert. I have a witty retort ready to go. Maybe that’s why I’m so disappointed to see my mom’s name on the screen instead.

I don’t want to deal with her today. This whole weekend was great and I want to continue that streak into this week, so that means ignoring my mother.

I already know what she's going to want to talk to me about. Heidi's wedding. It's all she ever wants to talk about lately and seeing as how I still haven't decided whether I'm going to make that trip yet, there's really nothing new for us to talk about.

I know that if I answer, she'll only try to pressure me into promising that I'm coming or worse, she'll just pretend that it's already a done deal. I don't want to deal with her steamrolling over me and not giving a shit what I want. She probably won't even ask how I'm doing. Come to think of it, I don't think that she even knows where I am right now. I never actually told her about my trip.

I push thoughts of my mother and how terrible our relationship is aside and try to think of nicer thoughts.

It doesn't last long.

Do I want to go to Chicago? Maybe I could sit down with my mom and tell her how I wish things were different between us. Maybe things would finally change or even improve.

Can I leave Destiny Falls though?

Things have been going great with Hudson and I want to see where this thing goes. Maybe he's what I was searching for. All I know is that I've stopped feeling so lost and antsy since I started going out with him.

Apparently my mom doesn't get the memo that I don't want to talk to her because she calls me five more times over the course of my shift. Every time my phone goes off, I get tenser and tenser and by the time that I clock out and head out to my Jeep, I'm wound pretty tight.

My stomach is in knots because I know that I'll have to deal with my mom tonight and that the conversation isn't going to go well.

She calls again as I'm driving home. I park next to Hudson's Range Rover, biting my lip as I decide what to do.

I send Hudson a quick text, asking if we can do a raincheck tonight for dinner. I don't hear back from him right

away and I assume that he's busy in the kitchen, so I dodge the rain and run upstairs to my apartment.

I take a deep breath, deciding to get this over with. I figure that it's best to rip it off like a Band-Aid and I hit call, holding my breath and praying that she doesn't answer.

I'm not that lucky.

"There you are."

"Yeah, hi Mom. Sorry I didn't answer earlier. I was at work."

I can practically see her scrunching her nose up in distaste at the idea of working for a living.

"This was important. I expect you to call me back faster next time. We're making wedding plans and we can't be sitting around waiting for you to get back to us. This is about Heidi and she's stressed enough as it is having to plan all of this. The least you could do is answer and do your part to help her out."

"Right," I say, even though I don't mean it.

Heidi is a younger version of my mom. I bet every dollar that I have that she's not planning any of this. I bet that she hired a wedding planner or maybe even two to take care of everything. She's probably having a blast bossing them around and making their life miserable.

"We have to get you fitted for your dress as soon as possible," my mother continues and I wrinkle my nose.

"What dress?" I ask, wondering if I missed something.

"Your bridesmaid dress," she says like that should be obvious.

She sounds so put out that I have to think if maybe she mentioned this before and I just forgot but I think that I would remember if Heidi had asked me to be in her wedding and I haven't talked to her in years.

"One of Heidi's bridesmaids dropped out, so we need you to fill in," she continues and I almost laugh.

I want to point out that Heidi never asked me and that it's the least that she should do but I know that it would only start another fight with my mom and I just want this phone call to be over.

Truth be told, I'm surprised that one of Heidi's bridesmaids dropped out. Both Heidi and Holly act like Stepford wives and usually their friends are the same. At least that's what I remember from the last time that I visited. If one of them dropped out, then Heidi must be a real bridezilla to get someone to step out of line.

"I'm not sure that I'm going to be able to make the wedding, Mom," I start and I can practically feel the disapproval from my mom coming through the phone.

"We are your family, Lyla Mae. You will be here. You will be here in two weeks so that we have enough time to get you fitted for your bridesmaid's dress and you will do everything that you can to support your sister on her big day. I will see you in two weeks."

With that, she hangs up on me and I toss my phone onto the couch. I run my fingers through my hair and sigh. Things were finally starting to be good. Then my mom drops in to ruin everything.

I know that Stan would probably give me the time off if I wanted to go home for the wedding since we've been slow lately. Now I just need to figure out what I want to do.

Do I leave Destiny Falls and go visit my mom and stepfamily, maybe even try to repair our relationship? Or do I stay here with the friends that I've made here?

THIRTEEN



It's been a week and a half and I haven't had any more phone calls from my mom. I've been counting that as a blessing. She did text me to ask my size so they could at least buy the dress and since she didn't seem to be letting this go, I ended up asking Stan if I could have a week or two off for the wedding. He had said yes, just like I knew he would.

I haven't told Hudson or any of my friends yet that I'm leaving. I think it's because I don't want to go, so I don't want to talk about it. If I don't talk about it, I don't have to think about it either.

Things have been going great with Hudson. We've spent the last ten days exploring the town and surrounding towns together and we have a new routine now. He works until later at night most nights so he usually comes over to my place and we spend the night together. On the days where he leaves work early, we go to his place and he cooks for me or we kick off our shoes on his back deck and walk along the water.

We spent last Sunday hiking out to the Destiny Falls waterfall and splashing in the water. He may have pushed him in at one point and he may have jumped in after me. One thing led to another and he ended up taking me roughly against the rocks underneath the waterfall. On Tuesday we went kayaking over by Maple Bend and I considered it a success that I only flipped my kayak twice. Then on Thursday, we went back to Lilac Harbor and got donuts from this cute little bakery before we walked around downtown.

"Here's your paycheck," Stan says as I get ready to leave.

“Thanks,” I say, taking the check from his hands.

“I’ll see you when you get back,” he says and the way he’s looking at me makes me wonder if he thinks that maybe I’m not coming back after the wedding.

I know that Stan has issues with people abandoning him. Sutton let that slip one day, though she didn’t tell me why. I wish that I knew how to assure him that I wasn’t leaving him.

“Yeah, of course,” I say, leaning over and giving him a side hug.

I tuck the check into my purse, waving goodbye to him as I head out to my Jeep and head back to my apartment. I need to cash the check at the bank on the way home so I swing through the drive-through before I head back toward downtown.

I don’t see Hudson’s car when I park and I wonder where he went. Then I remember that he mentioned wanting to check out some real estate over in Lilac Harbor today.

That means that I probably won’t be seeing him tonight which will be the first time all week. I should be used to sleeping alone but as I head up to the apartment, I find myself feeling lonely and bored.

I add the money that I got from the bank to the money in the box under my bed, counting out the three thousand that I owe to Hudson. I put his money into an envelope so that I can give it to him on Saturday when he picks me up for the Honey Festival.

His friend comes in on Friday and I know that he’s going to pick them up from the airport. Since tomorrow is girls’ night, I don’t think I’ll see him until Saturday when he picks me up for the festival.

Part of me doesn’t want to pay him back just yet. I know that I don’t need it, but I like having a reason to need to be in his life.

I want to tell Hudson that I love him, but I think maybe it’s too soon. We’ve only known each other for a few months now but we’ve only been dating for a few weeks. Maybe I should

wait for him to say it first or maybe I should wait until after his friends have left and we're alone again. I could tell him and invite him to Heidi's wedding. I would love to see the look on her face when he stole the spotlight away from her but I'm not sure that I want to subject Hudson to my family.

I tuck the envelope with the money in it back into the box of notes that he left for me and slide it back under my bed. I decide to take a shower and change into my pajamas. I don't feel like going out, so I'll order food or make some ramen and curl up on the couch.

I take a shower, taking my time and letting the hot water loosen the tense muscles in my neck and shoulders. I take my time drying off and rubbing lotion into my skin before I head back to my bedroom and pull on my comfiest pajamas.

I'm about to decide whether I want to order takeout or just warm something up here when there is a knock at the door.

I frown as I head over to answer it and I'm surprised when I open the door to see Hudson standing there with a bag of groceries in his arms.

"Hey, what are you doing here?" I ask, opening the door wider to let him in.

"I thought I'd surprise you," he says as he drops a kiss on my lips and heads past me to the kitchen.

"I didn't think that I would be seeing you tonight. I figured you'd be busy at Prim + Proper."

"No, I finished up the desserts earlier and my staff can handle the rest."

"So, what's all of this?" I ask as he starts to take out food from the bags.

"Dinner. How do you feel about salmon and some roasted vegetables?"

"That sounds delicious."

I sit at the counter and watch as Hudson cuts up some zucchini, mushrooms, and potatoes. He tosses them in olive oil with some spices and spreads them out on a baking sheet.

“Would you like some wine?” he asks, pulling a bottle out of the bag and I grin.

“Oh, you’re trying to spoil me,” I say with a laugh as I go to grab some glasses.

He pops the cork and I hold the glasses out to him to fill. He takes a sip of his, moving to the salmon to prepare it and I take my seat at the counter again.

I take a big gulp of my wine and Hudson notices, raising an eyebrow at me in concern.

“Everything alright?” he asks, setting the salmon on the baking sheet.

“Yeah, it’s just been a long week.”

“Yeah?” he asks and I nod, taking another drink of my wine.

“My mom has been calling me. I have to go to Chicago for my stepsister’s wedding next weekend.”

“And you don’t want to?”

“Not at all. It’s going to be awful. I can already tell you how it will go. I’ll get bossed around, pushed around, for the whole weekend. Nothing that I do will be good enough and I’ll leave at the end with a pounding headache.”

“They’re all really that bad?”

“Yep. I know that I’m still pissed at how she left me and my dad but that’s not the only reason why I’m mad at her, at them.”

He nods, waiting for me to go on and I take a deep breath. I can already feel the stress tightening my muscles and I’m not even with them yet, just talking about them.

“I know that she’s my mom and that’s why I’ve put up with her for this long but the truth is that they just aren’t really loving people. They care more about looks and status than they do people and relationships.”

“Then why go back at all?”

“She’s the last bit of family that I have left. I haven’t seen her in years, so what do I know? Maybe she’s changed.”

“Does it sound like she’s changed on your phone calls?”

“Nope. She’s still demanding, talks down to me and doesn’t ask about me or my life. It’s all about my stepsisters and stepfather. But maybe that’s just stress from all of the wedding planning.”

Hudson looks doubtful but I can tell that he doesn’t want to hurt my feelings or upset me.

“Your mom is an idiot,” he says quietly and I almost choke on my wine. “If you’re going to go and be miserable, then don’t go. If she can’t see how amazing you are, then it’s her loss. You know that, right?”

Part of me knows that he’s right but I still have to wonder what my mom saw in them that she never did in me.

“Besides, you’ve got your super successful restaurant owner and chef boyfriend to hang out with.”

I smile at that, liking that he called himself my boyfriend.

“If I told my mom that I was dating *the* Hudson Hayes, she would flip out. Maybe then she’d finally be proud of me or have some questions about my life.”

“She should already be proud of you. You’re incredible, Lyla.”

I look away. I’ve never been great at taking compliments so I drain the last of my wine to avoid having to say anything.

“Do you want me to go to the wedding with you? I don’t mind being your backup if you need me,” he offers.

“That’s sweet of you, but I already told her that I wasn’t bringing a plus one. I have a feeling changing that so close to the date would make her snap.”

“Fair enough.”

The oven goes off and he moves to take the food out as I pour myself another glass of wine.

I remember the money that I have for him and I know that I should go get it for him, but I can't bring myself to do it.

Hudson smiles at me as he sets the plates down on the counter and I pick up my fork, smiling at him as he joins me.

I hate to admit it, but talking to my mom has brought back that lost feeling again. I try to push it aside as Hudson and I eat, but I have a feeling that I'm not fooling anyone.

FOURTEEN



“Can you pass me the sour gummy worms?” Iris asks and I slide the bag of candy over to her.

It’s girl’s night and we’re at Madelyn’s house. We grabbed some candy from Sweets, the candy store in town, and then grabbed takeout from Prim + Proper and now we’re sitting in her living room, eating junk food and watching some old nineties movie.

“Is this mask supposed to be sliding so much?” Sutton asks, picking at the sheet face mask near her eye and putting it back in place.

“I was just thinking the same thing. Every time I talk, it moves,” I say with a laugh.

Madelyn giggles, trying to take a drink from her pop but the straw keeps moving and when she finally gets it right, the mask slips.

“Whose idea was it to do the masks?” Sutton asks, pushing the mouth hole back up.

“Yeah, you guys look like serial killers,” Flynn says as he comes into the living room.

I didn’t even hear him come in and I laugh at his joke. Madelyn throws the spare mask at him and he catches it.

“It’s girl’s night. Put the mask on or get out,” she tells him.

He grins, popping a chocolate into his mouth before he tears open his mask and puts it on.

“My skin is going to look so good after this. My pores are going to be nonexistent,” he says, reclining on the floor next to the couch.

“What are you doing home? I thought that you were going over to Maple Bend tonight with the guys?” Madelyn asks Flynn as he steals some fries from her takeout box.

“It got canceled. Toby has the flu or something, so we just decided to do it next week.”

“Well, you can join us for girl’s night,” Iris says and he grins.

“What are we doing tonight?” Flynn asks.

“I wanted to redye my hair,” Sutton says and I nod.

“Me too.”

“Want me to run to the store for you guys?” Flynn offers but Madelyn shakes her head.

“No, I want to get some new nail polish too.”

“I can drive you guys.”

We nod, standing and getting ready to head out.

“You know, I’ve always wanted to know. How did you two meet?” I ask Madelyn and Flynn as we climb into Flynn’s car.

They’re in the front seat and they look at each other, both of their cheeks turning pink.

“It’s a long story,” they say at the same time and I roll my eyes.

“We’ve got nothing but time,” I point out.

“Yeah!” Sutton chimes in.

“We met in college,” Madelyn says and I wait for her to go on.

“Yeah, but how?” I ask when neither of them says anything else.

“Um, a party,” Flynn says but I can tell that that’s not the whole story.

We arrive at the Falls Market and the conversation ends as we all climb out and head inside. Madelyn and Flynn head toward the nail polish display up front, Iris heads toward the snack aisle, and I follow after Sutton to where the hair dye is.

My phone buzzes and I pull it out to see a new text from Hudson.

HUDSON: How is girl's night going?

Lyla: Good. We're at the Market now.

Hudson: Stocking up on more snacks? I can make more takeout for you if you're still hungry.

Lyla: Actually we're getting hair dye and nail polish.

Hudson: Are you going to go purple again?

Lyla: Maybe. Would you rather I did purple or pink?

Hudson: I'm a fan of the purple but whatever you want, I'll love.

MY HEART SKIPS a beat at the word love, but I shake it off.

LYLA: Purple it is then.

Hudson: Want to come over to my place after girl's night is done?

Lyla: Will you be done at Prim + Proper by then? I think we'll be winding down around nine or ten.

Hudson: I don't think I'll be done until eleven or midnight. We need to deep clean tonight. But I can give you a key. I had a spare one made for you.

I'M NOT sure how to take that revelation either.

HUDSON: Swing by Prim tonight when you're done and I'll give it to you and meet you at home.

I BITE MY LIP, debating if I should say yes or just head back to my apartment for the night.

HUDSON: Don't make me beg, Lyla.

Lyla: Alright, I'll see you around nine-thirty. You can't be mad if I get purple dye all over your pillows.

Hudson: I wouldn't dream of it.

I TUCK my phone away, grabbing a box of lavender hair dye from the shelf.

"Are you going with pink again?" I ask Sutton when I notice her eyeing the blue.

"I think so. I don't know that I could rock the blue."

"I think you could," I tell her but she shakes her head, grabbing the pink one.

"I like my cotton candy hair," she says with a smile.

We head up front to join Iris, Madelyn, and Flynn at the checkout counter. Madelyn has about ten different colors in her hands and Flynn grabs his wallet as she dumps them on the counter.

Iris already has a bag of white cheddar popcorn open and is popping a few kernels into her mouth.

And that's when Arlo steps into line behind her.

I watch as she almost chokes on the popcorn, her face turning bright red. I set my hair dye on the counter, peeking out the corner of my eye as they shift nervously, still not saying a word to each other.

"Hey, Arlo," Sutton says, coming to the rescue.

“Hey, how’s it going?”

“Pretty good,” she says, setting her dye down next to mine.

“Are you dying your hair too?” Arlo asks Iris and she shakes her head.

“I’d have to bleach it to get it light enough for any other color to show,” she tells him and he smiles.

“Good. I like the red,” he says sweetly and I want to ahh but I have a feeling that the reaction wouldn’t be welcome.

“Thanks,” she says as I pay and then it’s her turn.

She hurries to pay and we wave goodbye to Arlo before we head outside to Flynn’s car and pile in.

We spend the next few hours painting our nails, dying our hair, and asking Iris about Arlo. She insists that she’s just not ready to talk to him yet or try to start a relationship with him yet, so we let it go.

I fill them in on Hudson and me, and Sutton tells us that Teller asked her to move in with him. We congratulate her and help Madelyn clean up before we call it a night.

I wave goodbye to Iris and Sutton and hop in my Jeep to head to Prim + Proper. I stop by my apartment first, grabbing a change of clothes and some other overnight items before I head to the restaurant to see Hudson.

He’s busy in the kitchen, so I wait outside the doors for him to come out and give me the key.

“Hey,” I say as he comes out, looking distracted.

“Hey,” he says, leaning down and giving me a quick kiss.

“Everything alright?” I ask him and he nods, still looking distracted.

Something falls and breaks in the kitchen and I see Hudson biting back a curse but he shakes it off as he looks at me.

“I made you some more food in case you were hungry,” he says, passing me a bag of takeout and the key to his place.

“Thanks, I’ll see you in a little bit?”

“Yeah,” he says, already turning to head back into the kitchen to fix whatever mess was just made.

“See you,” I call, turning and heading for the front door.

I make the short drive over to Hudson’s house, letting myself in and heading into the kitchen to unpack the food.

I smile when I see that the bag is filled with desserts. That man knows me well. I’m not that hungry, so I put it in the fridge for later. Maybe I’ll have dessert for breakfast tomorrow.

I grab my overnight bag and head upstairs to his bedroom. His bed is perfectly made and I laugh as I run and jump onto it.

I need to take a shower and rinse my hair again before I head to bed. I strip, hopping in the shower and grabbing Hudson’s body wash as I step beneath the hot spray.

I take my time, enjoying taking a shower in a bathroom that isn’t the size of a small closet. I towel off, pulling on my pajamas and heading back into the bedroom.

Hudson has a balcony in his bedroom and I go over to the doors, opening them and letting the sound of the water in. It’s a nice not, not too hot or cold, so I decide to leave them open as I lay down in bed.

I never even hear Hudson come in or lie down behind me in bed, but he’s there when I wake up the next morning and I smile as I cuddle closer to him.

“Morning,” he says sleepily and I kiss his chin.

“Morning.”

“Want me to make you some breakfast?” he asks and I shake my head.

“I’m going to eat the dessert that you gave me last night.”

Hudson laughs and I kiss his chest before I climb out of bed. I smile when I see the purple streaks staining his pillowcase. I like that I’m leaving my mark on this place, and I grin as I head downstairs to eat my breakfast.

FIFTEEN



I can't tell if my upset stomach is from being excited to meet Hudson's friends, or nerves. I've changed my clothes three times trying to find the perfect outfit.

At first, I had on a sundress that I borrowed from Sutton but that seemed a little too fancy for a honey food festival. I had tried on cutoff jean shorts next, but that seemed a little too casual and while it was warm out, I was worried that it would be colder up on the mountain. In the end, I settled on a pair of my nicer skinny jeans and a nicer T-shirt.

"They're going to love you," Hudson reassures me as we walk down the stairs of my apartment.

I squeeze his hand, my old sneakers slapping on the steps the whole way down. It's warm, a perfect day for the Honey Festival and I'm excited to finally meet his friends.

We head over to his Range Rover and I see that his friends are already sitting inside. They stayed the night at his house last night and are just here to pick me up. I didn't get to meet them last night since they got in so late.

There's a pretty redheaded girl in the passenger seat, so I head to the back to climb in. There are two guys already sitting in the back and the one who was sitting behind Hudson's seat grumbles slightly as he slides over into the middle seat.

"Guys, this is my girlfriend, Lyla. Lyla, this is Heather, Alex, and Steven."

"Nice to meet you," I say as I buckle up and they all murmur the sentiment back, but I can feel them studying me,

taking me in, and seeing how I measure up.

I can tell right away that they find me lacking. It's the same feeling that I get around my mom and stepsisters.

Heather especially seems to have a problem with me. She gives me a fake smile before she turns around in the passenger seat and slides her sunglasses on.

Steven starts up a conversation about some other New York chefs and I stare out the window as we head up to Honey Peak. I think it's rude that they're excluding me, but I'm also conscious that they haven't seen each other in a while and are probably just trying to catch up.

We follow some other cars as they head to the designated parking and I hop out as we park, brushing my hands on my skinny jeans. I'm wearing my old Keds and a dark blue T-shirt and I thought that this outfit would be fine for a festival, but compared to Hudson and his friends, I'm wildly underdressed.

Steven, Alex, and Hudson are all wearing polo shirts and dress shorts with boat shoes. They all look like they should be at some fancy yacht club instead of wandering around a food festival. Heather is wearing a pair of jean shorts with a silky tank top and wedge sandals. She's got three necklaces on, all different lengths so they're layered over the tank top and I swear that there are at least a dozen gold bangles on her wrist. They keep knocking together and the tinkling is starting to drive me crazy.

I shrug that off too, trying to reassure myself that we'll be able to walk behind them and I can stay close to Hudson, but part of me has a feeling that today is going to suck.

"Ready to go look around?" Hudson asks me, holding his hand out and I take it, feeling at peace as his familiar fingers wrap around mine.

I smile as the sun shines on my face and we cross the road to the festival.

"So, how did the two of you meet?" Heather asks as she walks on the other side of Hudson, her hand brushing a little too close to Hudson's for my comfort.

“She rear-ended me,” Hudson tells her, grinning down at me and I laugh.

“He pulled out in front of me out of nowhere, causing me to hit him,” I correct him and he laughs.

“So, you rear-ended him and then asked him for his phone number? That’s quite a move,” Heather says, scrunching her nose up in disapproval.

“Uh, no. Actually, he asked for my phone number.”

“Right,” she says, and it’s obvious that she doesn’t believe that Hudson would ever pursue me.

I wonder if the two of them were ever a thing. It’s obvious that she wishes that they were now, if the looks that she keeps flashing him are any indication.

We get to the front booth and Hudson pays for all of us. He helps me with the wristband and I intertwine our fingers together as we start to walk around the different booths checking out all of the different foods for sale.

There are so many different honeys with different flavors. We walk past some honey-flavored cheeses and other honey-infused foods. There are honeycombs and even live bees for sale at some booths.

Hudson buys us a few different honey flavor sticks and I try half before I give the other half to him to try. We debate our favorites and I smile as he doubles back to grab me a dozen more of the honey cherry kind.

Alex is over at a different booth arguing with the young boy working there about the bees that made this honey, and I roll my eyes. It’s honey and I don’t see what the big deal is.

I thought today was just supposed to be a fun sightseeing day, but apparently Alex and Steven didn’t get the memo. They stop at every booth and ask the vendor about a million different questions and in the end, they usually don’t even buy anything.

We hit the bakery section and I can’t help but grab some baklava and some honey cinnamon rolls. Heather rolls her

eyes at the baklava, launching into a lecture about how hard baklava is to make and how she wouldn't eat it outside of Greece or top-rated bakeries. I'm determined to not let her ruin my day. I just stare at her as I take a big bite, offering Hudson the other half.

Heather glares at me and if looks could kill, I'd be dead after that move.

Things really go downhill from there.

Hudson's friends are major snobs and, as the day goes on, I wonder how he can stand them. These are the people that he likes and chooses to hang out with?

Maybe I misjudged him, though I've never gotten that vibe from him. Maybe I wouldn't though since he picks every restaurant that we eat at or cooks himself. Maybe I should try to take him to some crappy diner and see how he reacts. I still doubt that he would say anything though.

I stop at another booth as we get ready to head back to the car, grabbing some honey suckers that are shaped like bees, some cookies, jam, and fudge for my friends.

My mom calls as I go to put my wallet back in my purse and I hit ignore. I'm already dealing with a bunch of stuck-up people. I can't throw my mom into the mix now or I'm afraid that I'll snap.

My phone buzzes again and this time it's a text from Sutton. I look up, making sure that Hudson and his friends are all a few booths down before I text her back.

SUTTON: How's the festival going?

Lyla: The festival is good. I just got us some snacks for the next girl's night!

Sutton: YES!

Sutton: And how are his friends? Have they given their stamp of approval yet or whatever?

Lyla: Um...

Sutton: That bad???

Lyla: Yeah. I'm pretty sure that Heather has a thing for Hudson and the other two are just culinary snobs. Well, they're all snobs but Heather is too busy to try to get Hudson's attention to argue with any of the vendors here.

Sutton: Yikes! What are you going to do?

Lyla: We're about to head back to Destiny Falls so I'm going to say I have a headache or something and head home early, I think. I'm not sure that I can handle much more of them.

Sutton: Good luck! Let me know if you need anything! I can call if you need an excuse to leave.

Lyla: Thanks! I'll let you know.

"ARE YOU READY TO GO?" Hudson asks as I tuck my phone back into my purse and I nod.

He takes my hand and all of the bags filled with things that I bought today as we head back to his car.

"Did you have fun?" he asks as we walk a few feet behind his friends and I nod, not meeting his eyes.

I wonder if he can tell that I'm lying. I wonder again if he and Heather were ever a thing. Hudson doesn't even seem to notice the way she acts around him, and I wonder if I should mention it to him. I don't want to look like the jealous girlfriend. Even if that is what I am.

"Are you alright?" Hudson asks, looking down at me with concern filling his eyes.

"Yeah, I'm fine," I say as we reach his car.

"Do you mind if I ride up front? I get carsick if I sit in the back," Heather says and since she's already climbing into the seat, I don't bother to respond.

I end up sandwiched in the back between Alex and Steven, both who apparently have never heard of elbow room because

they've got their legs spread wide and keep digging their arms into mine.

It's a long ride back to Destiny Falls.

I'm about to ask Hudson to drop me off at home, but he's already turning toward his house and I decide to just let it go. I can hang out for a little bit longer before I head home.

We pull into his driveway and Heather leans over laughing at something that she just said and my teeth grind together.

Why does it feel like I'm going to regret this?

SIXTEEN



Well, this is awkward.

I'm sitting at the kitchen counter at Hudson's house, sipping on some wine and watching as everyone else cooks. They keep laughing at inside jokes and speaking in chef shorthand so that I have no idea what they're talking about.

When they found out that I couldn't cook, they had turned their noses up and got to work. I had thought that it wouldn't be that bad to sit and watch them, but now I have to watch as Heather keeps brushing against Hudson and blaming it on the cramped kitchen. I'm sure that that's partly true, but it feels like she's enjoying it a little too much.

I stopped trying to keep up or join the conversation half an hour ago. I've been trying to figure out the best way to excuse myself and head back to my apartment, but it seems rude to leave after they've spent the last hour cooking dinner for everyone.

For his part, Hudson keeps shooting me apologetic looks and trying to change the subject so that I'm included, but that never lasts long.

"So, what do you do for a living, Lyla?" Heather asks and I see Alex and Steven give me curious looks.

"I work at the gift shop of the Mystery Cabin in town," I tell them with a smile.

"How... cute," Heather says with a patronizing smile.

“Yep,” I say, taking a big gulp of my wine as I try to discreetly check the time.

I hate to say it, but I think I would actually welcome a phone call from my mother right now. Anything to get away from this kitchen.

“Are you from here?” Alex asks and I shake my head.

“No, I was born and raised in New York City.”

That at least seems to impress them, but I lose that in the next instant.

“Is that where you went to college too?” Steven asks and I shake my head.

“I didn’t go to college.”

They share a look at that information as Hudson gives me a smile, checking to make sure that I’m alright with being questioned. I force a smile, trying to reassure him, but I think that he can see that I’m not having a great time.

His friends don’t seem impressed by me or any of my answers. It’s obvious that they don’t think that I’m good enough for Hudson, and I wonder if they’re right.

Steven sets some pan on fire, shaking it over the flames and I know that if I tried that then I would probably set this place on fire and burn whatever was in the pan in the process.

They’re making surf and turf. I barely understood all of the ingredients that they mentioned. All I know is that there’s steak, salmon, risotto, bacon glazed green beans, and some kind of fancy sweet potato crème brulee thing and that it all smells amazing.

My stomach growls and Hudson grins at me, passing me a piece of bacon. Heather just glares at me and I don’t think that Alex and Steven heard since they’re busy debating the best piece of meat for some dish that I can’t say.

“What did you do in New York before you got here?” Heather asks and I don’t want to tell them that I did the odd job that never lasted more than three or four months, tops.

“Um, I did a little bit of everything.”

“Yeah, Lyla here has done it all,” Hudson says like he’s proud of that fact.

None of his friends seem to share the sentiment.

“Dinner is served!” Alex says as he finishes plating the food and I’m excited that tonight might actually be close to ending.

We head out onto the back porch to the table there, and I sit between Hudson and Steven. The conversation turns back to some chefs that they know who opened a new restaurant and butcher shop in Detroit.

I sit silently, eating my food in a hurry. I realize too late that my finishing quickly is a mistake. They look at me like I’m an idiot for not savoring every bite and I’m stuck at the table with nothing to do now but listen to them talk.

“Remember when we went out the night after we graduated from culinary school?” Heather asks and I can’t take it any longer.

“I’m going to head to the bathroom,” I say, excusing myself and Hudson reaches out, his hand squeezing mine as I pass behind him.

I head to the bathroom and splash some water on my face. Today did not go the way that I wanted it to go. I was so excited to be meeting his friends and what that could mean for our relationship and now I’m just desperate to get out of here.

One day with his friends and I’m questioning where I stand with Hudson and if I’m good enough for him. One day and I’m back to feeling lost.

My phone buzzes in my back pocket and I pull it out, hoping that it’s Sutton again or one of the girls and I can ask them to call me so that I can leave this dinner party from hell.

It’s not.

HEIDI: You need to answer Mom.

Heidi: Do you have any idea how rude it is to just not respond?

Heidi: No wonder she's so disappointed in you.

THESE TEXTS ARE the last thing that I need right now, and I blink back tears. I don't even know what she's talking about. My mom hasn't tried to call or text me in days and I answered her last message about the dress size days ago.

I can't do this. I can't do any of this.

My eyes sting as I hold back the tears and I pull up my messages so that I can text Hudson that I have a headache and am heading home. I know that I should go out and say goodbye to everyone, but I just can't. I don't want them to see me close to tears and I don't want Hudson to try to stop me.

LYLA: Sorry to eat and run but I have the worst headache. Have fun and tell your friends I said that it was nice meeting them. I'll talk to you later.

Hudson: Are you alright? Want to lie down here?

Lyla: I'm fine. Just too much honey and sun ☺

Hudson: Are you sure?

Lyla: Yeah, I'll be fine.

I HIT SEND AS I grab my purse from the kitchen stool that I left it on and head out the front door.

I debate texting Sutton, Madelyn, and Iris and asking them if they want to grab a drink or talk, but everything feels too fresh and I just want to be left alone.

I climb up the stairs to my apartment, locking the door behind me before I head back to my bedroom. I peel off my clothes, pulling on some pajamas and collapsing in bed.

The tears come then and I cry. I cry for everything that I'm about to lose.

My father always raised me that if you love someone, then you should want what's best for them. I know that I love Hudson, but am I really what's best for him?

I'm not like him. I don't have anything figured out. I don't have a career or some fancy degree. The most prestigious job that I've had was probably working at that law firm and I hated every minute of it.

Shouldn't Hudson be with someone more like him? I can't even cook without burning something. How long before he grows bored with me or realizes that he could do better and breaks up with me?

Maybe I should do us both a favor and end it now before I fall for him any further.

That thought has more tears spilling free and I wrap my comforter around me, curling up in the center of the bed, and crying myself to sleep.

SEVENTEEN



Hudson's friends left today and I have a feeling that means the end of me being able to avoid Hudson anymore.

That thought is proven true when there's a knock on my door.

I stop packing my bags and head over to answer it.

"Hey," I say as he slips past me into the apartment.

"Hey, long time no see."

"Yeah, how was the rest of your visit with your friends?"

"Fine. It was boring without you."

I force a smile, stepping back when he tries to kiss me.

"What's all this?" he asks, noticing my bags stacked up by the door.

"I'm headed to Chicago for my stepsister's wedding."

"I thought that wasn't for a few more days," he asks with a frown.

"Originally, yes, but I have to be fitted for my dress and help with some other things."

He doesn't look like he believes me, and I swallow hard as I grab the first bag. I packed up most of my belongings. I left the furniture and bigger items. None of it was fancy anyway, and I can replace it later when I get to wherever I'm going.

I already told Sutton and Stan that I was going to be gone for a few months and I figured that they would let me go, but

they surprised me by saying my job would be here when I got back.

I'm sure that a big part of that is because it's the slow season, but still, it's nice to know that I'll be missed here and that they want me back here. Part of me wonders if I'll really ever come back though.

"This seems like a lot of stuff for a few weeks visit," Hudson says as he helps me carry the bags down to my Jeep and I nod.

When I look up into his eyes, I can tell that he knows what I'm about to say next.

"Don't," he says quietly, his fingers tightening on the straps of my duffel bag that he's holding until his knuckles turn white. "Don't do this, Lyla."

"I'm so sorry," I sob, turning away to wipe the tears from my face.

"Why?" he demands.

"It's time to get back to my trip," I say, pulling out the envelope of money and passing it to him.

He glares down at it, making no move to take it.

"I have enough to pay you back for the damage to your car. I wasn't going to leave town without paying you back."

"I don't want the money. I never wanted the money. I just wanted you, Lyla."

"It's for you. I owe you."

"I don't want it," he insists.

"I'm leaving, Hudson. It's time for me to take my trip."

"No," he says, taking a step back from me.

He's still holding my bag and I reach out, trying to take it from him, but he holds it out of my reach.

That's it. I snap. This is already hard enough as it is. Can't he see that I'm trying to do the right thing.

I slap the envelope of money against his chest and he reaches for it reflexively.

“It’s over, Hudson.”

“No, it’s not. Why are you running?”

“Why are you doing this? What the hell are you even doing with me?” I half scream and tears start to spill over onto my cheeks.

“What are you talking about?” he asks, looking concerned.

“You’ve got it all together. You’re successful and impressive, and I’m the exact opposite. I have nothing figured out and no plan for the rest of my life. I barely graduated high school, have no idea what I’m doing next week, let alone in five years. I don’t know how to cook, my savings account is at zero and I just don’t know what the hell you could see in me. You’re the whole package and me, well...” I trail off.

“None of that matters to me,” he insists, but I shake my head.

“It bothered your friends. None of them approved of me. None of them think that I’m good enough for you and I think that they’re right.”

“They’re wrong. I don’t even really like them all that much. We were friends in culinary school and we stayed in touch, but I don’t have anything in common with them besides cooking. I hated the way that they treated you on Saturday, and I was this close to kicking them out when you left. I’m sorry, I should have protected you from them, but they’re wrong. You are perfect for me. I love you. I don’t want anyone else. I don’t want someone like me. I pursued you, remember? I can decide what I deserve and what’s best for me and I want you. I need you. I love you, Lyla.”

“Why?” I ask with a cry, swiping at the tears.

“How could I not? You’re a total badass who does what makes her happy. I love your free spirit. I love that you aren’t afraid to make mistakes or admit that you don’t have everything figured out. So many people don’t have the guts to do that.”

“If you love someone, then you are supposed to want what’s best for them, even if it sucks for you, and I am not what’s best for you.”

“Shouldn’t I be the one to judge what’s best for me?” he demands.

“I’m just trying to put you first, Hudson. Please don’t make this harder than it has to be.”

“I loved you, Lyla. I’m in love with you. Just the way you are.”

I want to believe what he’s saying so bad, but I just can’t. Even my mom calls me a disappointment. Hudson just doesn’t know me well enough yet. Soon he will and he’ll regret saying all of this to me.

He studies my face and I can see when he accepts it.

“I love you, Lyla,” he says, stepping forward and cupping my face in his hands. “I’m complete by myself and so are you. Things are just better together.”

I bite my lip, not sure what I should say to that, but I guess I don’t have to.

“I love you, but until you realize just how awesome and incredible you are yourself, then I’ll never be able to change your mind,” he says as he kisses me slowly goodbye.

He pulls me close to him and I wrap my arms tight around his neck. I don’t want to let him go, but I have to.

“One day you’re going to realize how amazing you are and come back to me,” he whispers against my lips and I choke back a sob.

I hope that he’s right.

“Don’t take too long,” he whispers and I close my eyes, tears streaming down my face.

He kisses me once more, this time soft and over far too soon.

He pulls back, taking a few steps, and I close the back of my Jeep, heading for the driver’s seat. I only make it a few

steps before I'm calling after him.

"Hudson! Wait!" I race up to him, staring into his dark green eyes. "I need a longer goodbye than that," I whisper, throwing my arms around his neck.

"Me too," he whispers, squeezing me tight to him.

I hug him, inhaling his masculine scent and trying to memorize it. I get the feeling that neither of us wants to let the other go, but I have to.

I let him go, stepping back and wiping the latest stream of tears from my face. We don't say anything as we break apart this time. I take one last look at his handsome face before I turn and hop into my Jeep.

Backing up and driving out of Destiny Falls and over that bridge that I've loved looking at every day for the past few months feels like someone is stabbing me in the heart.

I can only hope that that feeling fades with time and miles.

EIGHTEEN



I drove straight through to Chicago, even though it took me all day and I showed up at my mom's house looking rumpled and exhausted. I cried on and off for the whole trip, so I'm sure that I looked like a mess. I probably could have stopped for the night at a hotel, but that would have meant using the money that I tried to pay Hudson, and that just didn't feel right to me.

My mom and stepfamily live in a huge palace of a house in a small gated community just outside of the city. It's got marble floors, a gleaming stainless steel kitchen, a huge in-ground pool, and a pool house, which is where I've stayed for the past week.

Being with my mom and stepfamily is exactly like I thought it would be, but I've welcomed their demands. Every second that I spend running errands and helping with the wedding is one less second that I spend missing Hudson.

It doesn't stop me from dreaming about him at night though. I wake every morning with tears on my cheeks, more heartbroken than I was when I went to bed the night before. After seven days, you wouldn't think that was possible anymore.

I kick my feet over the edge of the bed, staring out across the pool at the main house. I really don't want to get up today. Luckily for me, I've got some time since if I show up at breakfast with even one hair out of place, I'll be nagged until I come back here and fix it.

I head for the shower, standing under the hot water until I feel human again. I scrub every inch of myself, making sure that I'm shaved and buffed to perfection before I turn off the water and step out.

My mom took me shopping the first day that I got here. She said that it was us bonding, but I know that she just really didn't approve of my wardrobe of ripped jeans and T-shirts. She took me to a salon that first day too and had them dye my hair back to my natural platinum blonde.

I tug on a pastel purple dress that matches my old hair and find the silver flats that my mom bought me to match. Some mascara, lip gloss, and a quick brush of my hair and I'm ready to go.

I hate this.

I look like a Stepford wife. Like one of them.

I miss my purple hair. I miss my ripped jeans and comfy shirts.

I miss Sutton, Madelyn, Iris, and Flynn.

I even miss Stan and the Mystery Cabin.

Most of all though, I miss Hudson.

This place isn't home. I might share blood with my mom, but she's not my family. None of them accept or love me for who I am. None of them care what I want.

Sutton, Madelyn, and Iris have all sent me messages since I got here. Most of them are asking me when I'm coming back, but I still don't know. They sent me pictures of girl's night, all of them with their masks partially slipping out of place as they grinned at the camera. Looking at that picture, I almost felt homesick.

My phone goes off and I look at the screen as I get ready to go to the main house. I expect it to be Sutton or Madelyn, but it's not. It's Hudson.

I know without reading the message that it's my daily *would you rather* question. He's been sending me one every

day since I left and it reminds me of the notes on my car. The notes that I still have in a box stored in one of my suitcases.

HUDSON: Would you rather watch nothing but Hallmark Christmas movies or nothing but horror movies?

I BITE MY LIP, debating if I should respond or not. I haven't answered any of them yet but the temptation is getting stronger with every passing day. Seeing his name on the screen, it makes me miss him even more, so I shove my phone into the pocket of my dress and head over to the kitchen.

The chef has laid out the usual buffet for breakfast and I grab a plate, filling it up with bacon and pastries before I take a seat at the table big enough to fit twenty.

I'm the only one down here and I'm guessing that everyone else is still asleep or getting ready for the big rehearsal dinner tonight.

"Good morning," my stepdad Fred says as he sits down at the head of the table, at least five seats away from me.

He has his newspaper, and he doesn't even look up at me, so I don't bother responding to what he said.

"There you are. I thought that you were going to sleep all day," my mom says as she comes in to join us.

I don't bother pointing out that I was down here before her.

She grabs a cup of coffee and the chef slides an egg white omelet in front of her. She eats the same thing every day. Egg white omelet with spinach, tomatoes, and mushrooms, one half of an English muffin with exactly one tablespoon of raspberry jam, and a small cup of seasonal fruit.

I know how she takes her coffee, the way that she looks when she's disappointed in something that I said or did, the tone of voice she takes with her fake friends.

I wonder what she knows about me.

“I just can’t!” Heidi half screams, half sobs as she slumps into a chair across the table from me.

“What’s wrong, dear?” Fred asks, not bothering to look up from his phone.

The cynical part of me wonders if he’s texting his mistress.

“I just have so much to get done today. I don’t know how I’m going to get it all done!” she wails and I barely restrain from rolling my eyes.

“Don’t worry about it, sweetheart. This is why we have the wedding planner and Lyla here,” my mother soothes her, and my eyes snap up at that.

That’s why I’m here? Guess that’s good to know.

I can’t say that I’m surprised to hear that she didn’t really want me here to catch up with me.

My phone buzzes again and I discreetly pull it out to check as Heidi continues with her dramatics.

TELLER: Miss you, Lyla. The Mystery Cabin isn’t the same without you here.

Teller: Stan says hi.

I SMILE as I read his messages. I can picture him in the gift shop, Stan trying to read the screen over his shoulder as he types out the words.

LYLA: Miss you guys too! Chicago isn’t that great.

Teller: Come back. Stan says that he’ll give you a raise!

Teller: Okay, no he didn’t and he wants me to make sure that you know I was joking.

I GIGGLE at that and the sound of joy in this house must be so unusual because it catches everyone's attention.

LYLA: **Got it!**

I TUCK my phone back into my pocket and continue to eat my breakfast. My mom is frowning at me and Heidi is glaring across the table. Fred is still busy with his phone, the newspaper folded in front of him.

"We'll get started on the to-do list now," my mom says, nodding to me and I shove the last piece of bacon into my mouth before I stand to follow her.

Ruby, the overworked wedding planner, is standing in the foyer, clipboard in hand, and my mom nods toward her before she turns and heads back to the kitchen table.

I sigh, making my way over to Ruby.

"What can I help with?" I ask and she gives me a grateful smile.

I spend the rest of the morning and afternoon picking up decorations, setting up tables at the venue for tonight, and making sure that everything is ready for the rehearsal dinner. I make it back to the pool house just in time to rinse off and change into my dress for tonight.

It's a poofy pink monstrosity and I pull it out, frowning at my reflection. I wonder what Hudson would say if he saw me in this. I want to take a picture of myself and send it to him, but I know that I can't.

I remember what he said about me being awesome and just needing to see it myself. I thought that I would be happy with family or on this trip, but now I doubt that. I was happy in Destiny Falls with Hudson and my friends.

Did I make a mistake?

I told Hudson that when you love someone, you do what's best for them, you want what's best for them. I still believe

that.

My mom is selfish in love. She married for all of the wrong reasons and she's just as miserable today as I remembered her from when I was a kid.

She always has to get her way, always has to be right, and I don't want to be like her. I don't want to win in love if it means that someone else loses.

"We're waiting on you, Lyla," my mom snaps as she pokes her head into the pool house.

"I'm coming."

"Please try to remember that tonight is your sister's night. We don't need any of your hysterics or fits," she tells me, and my fingernails dig into my palms.

I want to scream at her. I want to tell her that I am here doing a favor for her and that she can't treat me like this. That she shouldn't want to treat her daughter like the help but I know that it won't do any good.

I wonder if it's too late to fake a headache or being sick, but I know that my mom would still make me go even if I wasn't feeling well. She wants me here for the pictures. So that she can show her friends the perfect shiny family.

Even if it doesn't exist.

Maybe I've been chasing the wrong thing. I'll never get my dad back, but I had a great makeshift family in Destiny Falls and I left to find something better.

The truth is that there isn't anything better.

"Let's go," she snaps and I grab my purse, swatting the poofy skirt of my dress down as I make my way out of the pool house and over to the waiting SUVs.

I cram in next to my other stepsister, Holly. She's in the same color dress, but hers is more modern, sleek, and tasteful.

She's ignoring me, busy texting her boyfriend, and I pull out my own phone as the SUV starts to move.

I find myself scrolling through my pictures, smiling as I see the ones of Sutton, Stan, Teller, and I at the Mystery Cabin or of Madelyn, Iris, and Sutton at The Fainting Goat.

I get to the ones I took with Hudson last week and my breath catches as I scroll to one of him smiling down at me.

I can see it then. How much he loves me.

The final piece of my heart breaks as I stare at that picture.

NINETEEN



Hudson: Would you rather stay in during a snow day or build a fort?

THAT WAS the message that I woke up to today. It looks like he sent it around midnight and I wonder if he was headed home or if he couldn't sleep and was thinking about me.

I type out a response, saying that I'd rather make a fort, but I hesitate to hit send.

Last night was rough. I spent six hours with a fake smile pasted on my face as I posed for pictures and made meaningless small talk with the other wedding rehearsal guests.

The wedding rehearsal went well, I guess. Heidi only had two hissy fits, so I guess that can be considered a success. The food was bland, but I'm pretty sure that I was the only one eating it. Everyone else appeared to be drinking their dinner and as the night went on, the vibe changed.

I can't remember how many hands I had to bat away as the party started to wind down. I got slipped at least five business cards, all from men who were married and were there with their wives. I wonder if Heidi knows that this is the life that she's going to have soon. I wonder if she cares or if as long as her husband keeps her in the lifestyle that she wants, she'll be fine with whatever he does. Even if that means cheating on her.

Being around those people last night reminded me of Hudson's friends. They would have complained about the food instead of what everyone was wearing, but it was still the same snotty behavior.

"Get up!" Holly screams as she pokes her head into the bedroom of the pool house.

I jack knife up in bed, staring wide-eyed at the door that she disappeared through. It's six-thirty in the morning, but I should have known that Heidi's wedding day would be the first time that anyone got up before eleven a.m.

The house looks like a tornado went through it. There are people running around, clothes and flowers all over the place. The usual buffet is set up and I snag a pastry as I head over to where the wedding planner is chewing on a fingernail and nervously checking her clipboard.

"Hey, Ruby. How's it going?"

She gives me a look and I laugh.

"That bad, huh?"

"Heidi doesn't like the flowers now because one of the bridesmaids said that they look cheap, so we're scrambling to get different ones put together. Oh, and one of the bridesmaids put on a few pounds so Heidi called her a fat pig and now she's crying in one of the guest bathrooms and we're trying to find a way to let out the dress an inch or so."

"Today is going to suck," I groan and she nods.

"I wouldn't be surprised if one of the bridesmaids dropped," she says and I don't want to tell her this, but I'm thinking of backing out.

I don't even know what I'm doing here. These people don't love me. I don't mean anything to them and if I'm being honest with myself, they don't mean anything to me either. They might be family, but my life is better without them in it.

"There you are! What are you doing standing around? Go get dressed," my mom yells at me as she stomps past me.

I wave goodbye to Ruby, heading up the stairs and into one of the guest rooms where everyone is getting ready.

The king-size bed has been pushed against the far wall so that there's more room for everyone. Garment bags and bobby pins are scattered all over the place and I tiptoe around pairs of high heels as I make my way to the closet where my dress is hanging.

Heidi chose pastel colors for her wedding and I pull out the pastel purple dress. It's just as poofy as the one I was forced to wear last night and I bite back a groan as I pull it off the hanger and head into the bathroom.

The next five hours are like my own personal hell.

I pose for pictures.

I run around in high heels doing my mother and stepsister's bidding.

I don't eat.

That last one might be the worst of all.

By the time we make it to the ceremony, I'm dizzy and light-headed with hunger. I wobble in my heels, clinging tighter to the groomsmen that I'm walking down the aisle with so that I don't stumble.

That move appears to be a mistake because he starts walking closer to me.

"I can't wait to see what's under this dress," he whispers in my ear, and I try not to grimace at his words or the way his breath fans over my skin.

Luckily for me, it's time for us to part and stand on opposite sides of the altar. It doesn't stop him from checking me out and I shiver.

The music changes and the doors open for Heidi and Fred to make their entrance. Heidi looks beautiful and I can't help but look between her and her fiancé, Trevor.

The love and happiness that I expected to see there is missing. Don't get me wrong, they're both smiling, but it

doesn't reach their eyes.

For the first time in my life, I picture my wedding.

I wouldn't want something as big as this one. Just a small, intimate gathering with close friends and family. Maybe I'd have the ceremony on the beach or by the waterfall.

I'm startled when I realize that I'm imagining marrying Hudson in Destiny Falls. I knew that I was in love with him, but I never thought about marrying him.

The ceremony starts and I see my mom glaring at me. She stretches her mouth into a smile, or what appears to be a smile. It looks forced and more like a grimace, but I get the message.

I paste a smile on my face, conscious of the cameras clicking around the room and of the people watching us.

The ceremony drags on and by the time they kiss and are announced as husband and wife, my cheeks hurt from smiling for so long. I loop my arm through the creepy groomsman's and let him lead me back down the aisle and outside.

The sun is starting to set and I'm hoping that we can head over to the reception and I can grab a few appetizers to eat before I pass out from hunger.

No such luck though.

"Picture time!" Ruby says, trying to infuse her voice with energy.

She looks like she's aged five years in the last few hours and I give her a sympathetic smile as I pass her and go to take my spot for the first round of pictures.

"Smile," my mom says, elbowing me as she stands between me and Heidi.

I do as I'm told, counting down the seconds until I can head to the reception and get some food.

"Time for your entrance!" Ruby calls and I'm the first one to line up to head inside.

Me and my groomsman, Ryan, lead the way inside and up to the wedding party table. I take my seat, smacking his hand

away when he tries to grope my leg.

Heidi and Trevor come in and I applaud along with everyone else. They grin and wave as they head up to their spot at the center of the table, and I almost cry when the first round of food is brought out not long after they sit down.

I inhale all of my food and I'm grateful when the dancing starts and I can make my way over to the snack tables set up in the corner of the ballroom.

"You're acting like a pig. Control yourself," my mother hisses at me out of the corner of her mouth.

"I'm hungry. I haven't eaten all day."

"And whose fault is that?" she asks me.

"Yours," I snap back and I think that shocks both of us.

I blame it on the lack of food and the hunger headache mixed with having to fake a smile for the last ten hours. It feels good though. Standing up to her and finally telling her how I think and feel about her.

"Excuse me, young lady?"

"I said it was your fault. You made me run around with Ruby and help all of the other girls. There was no time to eat."

"You don't talk to me like that," she says with a glare. "I'm your mother."

"No, you're not," I tell her flatly. "You're just some bitch that I have the misfortune of sharing blood with."

She glares at me and I glare back.

"I know that you want to ask me to leave, but you can't. Wouldn't want to cause a scene at your precious princess's wedding."

She stomps off and I grab another plateful of food and head outside to call a ride back to her place. It's time that I got out of here and forgot all about these people.

I lean back against the building, staring up at the dark night sky and I frown, feeling sad when I realize that I can't

see the stars like I could in Destiny Falls.

My phone buzzes in my hand as I pull up the app to call a car and I smile when I see that it's a picture from Iris. It's of the three girls, crowded around Madelyn's kitchen island with margaritas in their hands.

IRIS: Wish that you were here!

Lyla: Me too!

I WANT to tell her that I'll be back soon, but I want it to be a surprise. My phone buzzes again and I expect it to be a response from Iris but instead it's a call from Hudson.

It's late, close to eleven, and I wonder why he isn't at work. I stare at the screen, wondering if I should answer it or not when my mom comes out.

"Get inside," she says firmly and I look up.

Her eyes flash down to my screen and her eyebrows lift when she sees Hudson's name and the picture of the two of us that I made as his contact photo on the screen.

"You know Hudson Hayes? You should get him to cater Holly's wedding. You know that she and Samuel are going to be engaged by the end of the year," she brags, and I stare at her like she's an idiot.

"I'm not going to ask him that."

"Why not? Obviously, you two seem close."

"We're not. Things ended... weird."

"What did you do?" she demands.

"I came here."

"That couldn't have been it. What? Did he wake up and realize that he could do so much better than you?" she asks with a humorless laugh.

I stare at her, refusing to answer that.

I don't like how close she is to the truth. She must be able to see it on my face though.

"I'm not surprised. You ruin everything," she says before she turns and heads back into the reception.

My phone dings, signaling that I have a new voice mail and I order the car, wanting to be alone when I listen to what Hudson has to say.

My mom is wrong. I don't ruin everything. Hudson never made me feel that way either. I thought that I was doing the right thing but I can see now that I'm only hurting both of us.

It's time for me to go home.

My phone buzzes again, this time with a text, and I look at it as I slip into the back seat of the car.

HUDSON: Would you rather come back or keep making both of us miserable?

I LAUGH, my eyes starting to tear up as I read his words. He knows me too well. I'm pretty sure that the driver thinks that I'm insane and I tip him well as I climb out of the back seat and hurry over to the pool house.

I remember his voice mail then and I pull it up as I kick off my heels.

"Lyla, fuck, I probably shouldn't be calling you," he slurs and I can tell that he's been drinking. "I miss you, Lyla. So much. Destiny Falls is boring without you here. I just want to wake up with you. I want to see you smiling at me. I want you. I just... please come back to me," he finishes in a whisper and I take a deep breath, blinking back tears.

I want to call him and tell him that I'm coming, but if I start driving right now, I can be back in Destiny Falls tomorrow morning. Maybe I can catch him before he heads to work.

I start packing as soon as possible, throwing everything that can fit into my bags and I haul everything out to my Jeep, throwing it in the back.

I'm headed home. Back to where I belong and I shed a few more tears and I realize that I've finally found where I'm meant to be.

Sure, I still might not have a plan for my future or any idea of what I want to do for a job besides working at the gift shop, but I'm happy and I've found someone who loves me no matter what my plans are. Isn't that more important than some career?

It is to me.

I smile as I stuff the skirt of my poofy dress into my Jeep and pull out of their driveway. It's time for me to go home and get my happily ever after.

TWENTY



I'm exhausted as I pull into Destiny Falls the next morning and I'm headed toward Prim + Proper when I see Hudson's Range Rover in front of me and I get an idea.

The light turns green and I speed up, trying to catch up with him. He slows down as he gets ready to park in front of Prim + Proper and I don't slow.

My front bumper hits him and I grin as he pulls over into the spot and angrily climbs out of his car.

He looks like hell. There are dark circles under his eyes and his mouth is turned down into a frown. He runs his hands through his hair and drags it down his face as he moves to check out the damage.

He looks annoyed as he turns to look at the other driver and I give him a little wave, smiling as he freezes. His eyes widen and I take that as my cue to park in the spot next to him and hop out.

I smooth my damp hands down the skirt of my pastel purple dress as I round the side of my Jeep and Hudson meets me before I'm even halfway to him.

"Lyla," he breathes, dragging me into his arms.

I regret not changing out of the poofy dress now that it keeps me at least a foot away from his body.

Hudson is grinning down at me as he tangles one hand in my hair and cups my face with the other.

“It’s about time,” he whispers and I laugh, happy tears falling down my cheeks.

His lips claim mine then and it is heaven.

He tastes like coffee and sugar and I love the taste. His hands wrap around my waist, pulling me flush against him. I can feel the thick ridge of his cock pressing against my stomach.

I moan, wanting to go somewhere private. I get so lost in Hudson that I forget that we’re in public, standing in the center of downtown Destiny Falls and that it’s the middle of the day.

He pulls away from me, resting his forehead against mine as he breathes me in.

“I love you, Lyla. So much.”

“I love you too,” I tell him as he kisses my cheeks.

“I miss the purple hair.”

“Me too. I’m dyeing it back tomorrow.”

“Good,” he says, trailing kisses across my cheeks and back to my lips.

I wrap my arms around his neck, laughing as Hudson growls and pushes at the skirt of my dress.

“I don’t like this,” he tells me. “I mean, you look beautiful. Prettiest thing that I’ve ever seen, but I wish I could get closer to you.”

“I’m burning it.”

He grins.

“Tell me that you’re here for good.”

“I’m here for good. This is my home now. Here with you,” I say, reaching up and holding onto his wrists as he cups my face in his hands.

“Thank god you realized that. I was about two days from coming and dragging you back here,” he says, trailing kisses up my neck.

I grin up at the bright sunny sky, so happy to see that I didn't ruin this thing that we have.

"I would have killed to see my mom's face when you dragged me away from all of the wedding festivities."

"Do I need to go and have a word with her?" he asks, sounding annoyed that someone might have hurt me.

"No, I told her off and left the wedding reception early. I don't want to have anything to do with her or my stepfamily ever again."

"The trip was that bad?"

"Oh yeah. I forgot how miserable everyone in their world is. It's all about money and status. No one eats anything," I complain and Hudson laughs.

"They sound awful," he agrees.

"They are. I'm glad to be back. I missed you so much."

"I missed you too."

"Lyla!" Madelyn yells as she screams at Flynn to stop the car.

The tires screech as Flynn pulls over and then Madelyn is running over to hug me. Hudson barely lets me out of his reach so Madelyn hip checks him out of the way.

"I wasn't sure that it was you without the purple hair!"

"I know. I need to color it again soon."

"Are you back in town? We can have a welcome back girl's night tonight or tomorrow," she suggests.

"We have plans for tonight," Hudson tells her and she sighs.

"Fine. Tomorrow night then. I'll let Sutton and Iris know about tomorrow night."

She hugs me again and I smile. I didn't realize it before, but my mom and stepfamily never once hugged me while I was home. I guess this is just further proof that my real family is here.

“I’ll see you tomorrow,” I promise and she waves as she heads back to the car.

Flynn waves, calling out that it’s good to have me back and I grin, waving as they take off down Main Street.

I’m sure that news of my return is already spreading throughout town and I turn back to Hudson.

“What now?” I ask him as he takes my hand.

“Whatever you want.”

I grin at him. I’ve got a few ideas.

TWENTY-ONE



Hudson

FIVE YEARS LATER...

I HEAD out of Fender and over to my car. I'm late getting home to my wife and I don't want her trying to put our son's crib together by herself. Knowing Lyla, she's probably got all of the pieces spread out around the room and halfway down the hallway.

Fender is my newest restaurant, the one that I opened up in Lilac Harbor. Fender as in fender bender. I named it after Lyla, after the way that we met. It's meant to be an inside joke, and it made Lyla laugh, so that's good enough for me.

It only takes me fifteen minutes to get back to Destiny Falls and I pass by the Mystery Cabin and see that Teller and Sutton are just leaving too. Sutton is seven months pregnant, a month ahead of Lyla, and the two pregnancies have only brought the two of them closer together.

Iris and Madelyn just found out that they're expecting too and I know that all of the women are excited to have kids around the same age together. They're already planning play dates and the kids haven't even been born yet.

I park in the driveway next to Lyla's new Jeep and hop out. We bought her a new car a few months ago when her old Jeep finally gave out. It had quite a few miles on it, so it was time.

I hurry inside and I'm about to head upstairs when I smell garlic burning in the kitchen.

"Hey," I say, coming into the kitchen and around the counter so that I can kiss her hello.

"Hey, how was work?"

"Good, what are you making for dinner?" I ask even though I can guess.

Lyla has been craving Italian food for the last few weeks, so I've been eating spaghetti, ravioli, and manicotti for weeks, along with a lot of garlic bread. I'm guessing that it's the bread that is burning.

Lyla moved in with me right after she got back to town. I didn't want to let her out of my sight, and it didn't make much sense to have her in that apartment when we were spending every spare second together.

She's gotten a lot better at cooking in the last five years. We usually make dinner together, but I'm guessing that she got hungry or wanted to surprise me tonight. She's mastered noodles, but sometimes when she has to do two or three things at once, something gets slightly charred.

"Spaghetti," Lyla says happily and I discreetly pull the garlic bread out of the oven before it can really burn.

I put the bread onto a plate to cool as Lyla stirs the sauce that's boiling away on the stove.

"How was your day?" I ask and she launches into a story about Sutton crying while watching some commercial on her lunch break and Stan hiding in the kitchen for the rest of her shift.

I listen as Lyla goes on about some of the tourists that they had go through today and I love hearing her sound so happy. She tells me that she walked Bandit this afternoon for Sutton since she had a doctor's appointment. She's been talking about him a lot and I know that she would love a dog. I was planning on getting her one for our anniversary next week but I want it to be a surprise, so I haven't told her yet.

I help Lyla drain the noodles and plate the food before I grab us some milk from the fridge.

“Smells great, Lyla. Thanks for making this.”

She grins happily as she takes a big bite of the garlic bread. I tell her more about Fender. We found a new chef for it the other week and just changed the menu. Lyla makes me promise to bring her home some of the chocolate fudge cake tomorrow and I make a mental note to grab an apple pie from the bakery downtown too since I know that she loves it.

“Ready to tackle the nursery?” I ask as we finish up dishes.

She nods, smothering a yawn and I smile, letting her lean on me as we head upstairs and into the room next to ours.

We already painted and set up the dresser and rocking chair and I lead her over to the chair, letting her sit down while I go and start unboxing the crib.

I let Lyla pick out whatever she wanted for the nursery. As long as Lyla is happy, then so am I, and I know that she put in a lot of research to know what brands were best.

I get started on the crib as Lyla rocks in the chair.

We haven’t talked to her mom or family since Lyla came back to me. Her mom and stepsisters tried to reach out to her after news broke that we were together, but she never returned the calls or texts. When I asked her why, she said that they only cared now because we were together. If they didn’t want her before, then she didn’t want to pretend that they really did now.

Her stepsister, Holly, reached out to me to see if they could get me to cater her wedding. I had declined, telling her that I would still be on my honeymoon then. They hadn’t taken the news of not being invited to the wedding well, but since we never heard from them again, I guess it doesn’t matter much.

We went on an extended honeymoon. I wanted to show Lyla all of the places that she had never seen before, so we traveled around Europe, Australia, Greece, before we went to Hawaii.

Stan had been nice enough to give Lyla the time off. I'm sure that it helped that it was during the slow season. We got back just in time to get ready for Madelyn and Flynn's wedding. We were both in that wedding party and with me opening Fender, we were busy. That's why we decided to put off having kids for a few years.

We joke that there must have been something in the water because Lyla, Sutton, Madelyn, and Iris all got pregnant at the same time. They're all due within a month or two of each other.

I get the crib up and I'm moving to put the mattress in when I notice that Lyla is fast asleep in the chair. I smile, finishing up with the crib before I go over to her to carry her to bed.

She barely stirs in my arms and I smile as I tuck her into our bed and head to the shower to get cleaned up.

I hurry through getting ready for bed, wanting to cuddle with my wife.

I knew that Lyla was meant to be mine from the second that she rear-ended me. While we had a few bumps in the road, I'm glad that we finally got our happy ending.

Lyla rolls over as I slide into bed behind her, blinking sleepily at me as I pull her into my arms. She smiles at me, her eyes falling shut as she falls back asleep and I kiss her forehead, closing my eyes and following her into dreamland.



Curious about the other characters? Check out their books today!

[Sutton and Teller](#)

[Madelyn and Flynn](#)

[Iris and Arlo](#)

Looking for more small town romance books? Then check out the [Honey Peak](#) series and the [Lilac Harbor](#) series

today!

FIGHTING BACK FROM HELL

KINGS GYM

*

She doesn't want a white knight. Good thing he isn't one.

Jameson Quinn was on top of the world.

Then his brother and sister-in-law died, leaving behind his niece.

His niece that he is now the guardian of.

Jameson doesn't know the first thing about raising a kid and he's busy training for the championship fight, so he does what anyone would do and hires a nanny.

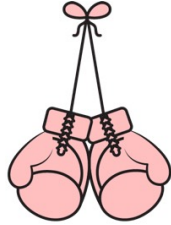
He just doesn't expect the nanny to look like Phoenix Joy.

Now he's fighting out of the ring too, trying to tame his attraction to the feisty redhead.

He doesn't want to mess anything up for his niece. He knows that the kid loves Phoenix.

The only problem is that Jameson is pretty sure that he loves her too.

ONE



Jameson

I NEED to stop staring at her.

I know that, and yet I can't seem to drag my eyes away from Sylvie's friend, Phoenix. I haven't been able to look away since she first walked into the room.

Her dark brown hair, those curves, those dove-gray eyes. I can't stop taking it all in. I've never seen eyes that color before. I didn't even know that eyes could be that grayish-silver in real life.

I don't seem to be the only one either. Faith, my niece, has been glued to Phoenix's side for the last hour. Watching them together has given me an idea about my little problem too.

I've been Faith's legal guardian for close to a year now. My brother and sister-in-law, David and Carrie, passed away close to a year ago and since I was the only family that they had left, I got custody of Faith.

It's been an adjustment for me for sure, but I love my niece and I know that my brother would be happy that she's with me, that I'm the one raising her rather than a stranger.

"What do you think?" Phoenix asks Faith with a smile and Faith jumps up and races into the bathroom to check out the hairdo that Phoenix just finished.

It's twisted up in some kind of elaborate braid that I could never get right. I'm still learning ponytails and I smile as Faith grins at her reflection.

"You're really good at that," I say and Phoenix grins at me.

"I almost became a hairdresser. Then I babysat for this family down the road and had such a blast with their little girl. So, when I went to college a few months later, I decided to major in early childhood education."

She has a degree, experience, and Faith loves her.

She's perfect.

"Where are you working now?" I ask as Faith skips back over to her side and climbs up into her lap.

"I actually just finished a nanny job so I'm here to visit Sylvie before I head back to Michigan to find a new job."

"I'm looking for a nanny for Faith," I blurt out, and her eyebrows rise in surprise at my weirdly worded job offer.

"You could live in Pittsburgh with me!" Sylvie says, wincing as she tries to sit up more in her hospital bed.

"Careful," Finn says, already moving to help his girlfriend get comfortable.

He's supposed to be getting ready for his big fight tonight but I have a feeling that he's not going to leave Sylvie until the very last second.

"We get to hang out more?" Faith asks Phoenix and when she looks up at Phoenix with those big eyes, I know that she's going to say yes.

No one can resist Faith.

I was supposed to start interviewing another round of nannies this week, but it would be awesome to not have to spend any more time trying to find someone.

I've been exhausted trying to juggle Faith, my new role as a parent, finding a nanny, and training for my own fight in a few weeks. Faith hasn't liked any of the other nannies that I've

interviewed and I was starting to think that we would never find anyone.

Kit, my coach and the owner of King's Gym, has been awesome about everything. He knows that my schedule isn't as open as before and that Faith has to come first. Kit's wife, Stella, has even offered to babysit for me too but I know that she's busy with her own kids and the business side of Kings Gym.

"Maybe," Phoenix tells Faith before she looks over at me.

I give her a friendly smile. At least I hope it looks friendly and that she can't tell that I've already imagined kissing my way down her body and then bending her over the nearest available surface.

"I'll talk to your dad about it later," she tells Faith.

"Oh, Jameson is her uncle and guardian," Everly corrects Phoenix.

"Oh... well, I'll talk to him about it later."

"Finn," Kit says as he and Niall step back into the hospital room.

Niall moves over to Everly's side, kissing her and whispering something in her ear. I know that it's about time for us to get ready to leave for Finn's fight.

Faith comes back over to my side and I help her up onto my lap.

"Do we have to go to the fight?" she whispers and I shake my head.

"Not if you don't want to. Do you want to stay here and hang out instead?"

She nods excitedly and I kiss her forehead.

"Can we stay with you guys?" I ask the room and I notice that Finn looks relieved that I'll be here with Sylvie while he's at his fight.

"Of course," Everly says as she walks Niall to the door. "We can have girl time while Sylvie rests."

Sylvie rolls her eyes and I know that she's sick of lying in the hospital bed. She should be able to go home tomorrow. She was in a car accident and luckily, she wasn't hurt too bad.

"I'll be back as soon as the fight is over," I hear Finn promise Sylvie and she nods, tilting her face up for a kiss.

"Ready?" Kit asks Finn and he frowns but nods.

I look away as he kisses Sylvie goodbye and she wishes him good luck on his fight.

"I'll be right back. I'm just going to walk them out," I tell Faith.

She nods distractedly at me and I smile as she turns to start talking to Phoenix about her friend from school.

I take one last look at Phoenix and Faith before I follow Niall, Kit, and Finn out of the hospital room and down the hallway.

Kit is trying to give Finn some last minute advice as we head out to the cars and I fall into step with Niall.

"So, you and Phoenix then?" he asks with a knowing smile and I sigh.

"That obvious, huh?"

"Dude, you looked like you got hit in the stomach when she first walked into the room."

I wince, though that is kind of how it felt too.

"I kept waiting for you to drop down on one knee and propose to her."

"I wasn't that bad," I complain as we step off of the elevator and all three guys turn to give me a look.

Crap. Was I?

"Good luck," Finn says and I glare at him.

"I think that's my line to you," I joke and he claps me on the shoulder.

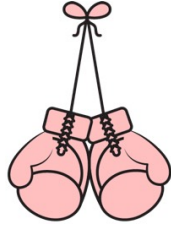
"Keep an eye on my girl," Finn says and I nod.

“Knock ’em out,” I say, giving him a fist bump and he grins.

“I’ll see you soon.”

I watch as they head out to the parking lot before I turn around and head back up to my girls.

TWO



Phoenix

WHEN I FIRST GOT IN my car to come to Pittsburgh, it was just supposed to be a vacation. Sure, everything that I owned was in my car already because my things were still packed from my last live-in nanny job, but I always intended on going back to Michigan.

Then I met Jameson and Faith and now here I am, standing in his kitchen as he finishes giving me a tour of his place.

Sometimes life can be so funny.

“You can help yourself to whatever you’d like,” Jameson says, motioning to the fridge and pantry.

“Thanks.”

“Um, I think that’s it,” he says, putting his hands on his lean hips and I know in that moment that this is a bad idea.

Jameson is too tempting. Never mind that he’s the hottest man that I’ve ever seen in real life with his blonde hair and brown eyes that remind me of melted chocolate. He would look like the all-American boy next door, if only he wasn’t so ripped.

Even in the plain black T-shirt and dark blue jeans, I can see how toned his body is. His muscles have muscles and standing next to him makes me feel like an out-of-shape slacker.

Although, I mean, I kind of am an out-of-shape slacker. The most exercise I get is from chasing kids around, which can be a workout all on its own. It's obvious that Jameson is doing more than chasing Faith around though.

I look across the spacious kitchen toward where Faith is standing by the doorway. She's holding a stuffed rabbit and it's obvious from how worn it is that it's her favorite. She looks so hopeful as she stands there watching me and I know that they're both waiting for me to agree to the job.

It's a bad idea though for a number of reasons.

Reason one. I'm already way too attached to Faith, and it's only been a few days. Leaving her to go back to Michigan or for my next job is going to hurt, so maybe it would be better to just turn it down now.

Reason two. I can't stop thinking about Jameson and his body. I want him and that is a definite problem.

Reason three is this house. It's gorgeous and I can already picture myself living here. Jameson said that I can move stuff around if I want to and that I can bring in any of my furniture too. I know that he's trying to make me feel at home here and I can't have that.

Too bad for me, I can't seem to say no to either of the O'Callaghan family members. Or Sylvie, for that matter. She's so happy to have me close by again and I can't deny that it's been amazing hanging out with her again.

"Okay, I'll be your nanny," I say slowly and they both grin at me.

Seeing Jameson smiling at me like that, his brown eyes twinkling at me, does weird things to my body. My stomach flips and my core clenches. I can feel my nipples pebbling inside of my bra and I clear my throat.

Jameson opens his mouth to say something but Faith beats him to it.

"Want to see my room again?" Faith asks as she tugs on my hand.

“Sure.”

I let her pull me out of the kitchen and back upstairs. The whole way, I give myself a pep talk.

You can not sleep with a client. Under any circumstances. It would be totally unethical. It doesn't matter that he's the first man who has ever made your mouth water or your entire body feel like it's burning up. DON'T DO IT, PHOENIX.

Faith lets go of my hand and skips over to her toy chest. I take a deep breath, turning in a circle to look around her room again and that's when I notice that Jameson is right behind me.

“Oh my god!” I squeak, jumping about a foot in the air.

“Sorry,” he says, taking a step toward me to make sure that I'm alright and I wave him off.

There's no way that him touching me is a good idea, so it must be avoided at all costs.

“You're huge! How are you so quiet?” I ask, trying to distract myself from him being so close to me as my hand goes to my racing heart.

“Training, I guess,” he says with a shrug and I nod.

I stare at him for another minute until I catch myself checking him out. Again.

“Phoenix, do you want to play dolls?” Faith asks and I can't say yes fast enough.

“Sounds good!”

I hurry over to her side and try not to let either of them see just how rattled I am. I'm going to need to keep Faith between the two of us from now on. That way I won't be so tempted.

She hands me a doll and I sit down cross-legged next to her and the dollhouse. Faith launches into playtime and I do my best to ignore the way that Jameson leans on the bedroom wall watching us.

Faith is so sweet though, with such a wild imagination, that soon I'm laughing and totally immersed with playing dolls. I forget about Jameson and my attraction to him. I forget

about my worry for my friend who just got out of the hospital or my student loan bills.

That's why I love being around kids. I didn't have the easiest upbringing. My mom left me with my grandma when I was just a kid and I never knew who my father was. I'm not sure that my mom knew either.

Grandma did her best to raise me and she was the absolute greatest person that you could ever meet. She was so full of life and I know that she loved me. Still though, we never had much money and I know that she was worried about bills and being able to afford everything that we needed. I had promised myself that I would graduate and get a good job so that I could support her for a change and I was close to doing just that.

Then she passed away.

Losing her was like losing a piece of myself. So, I threw myself into work. I took the first nanny job that was offered to me and I've been hopping from one family to the next for the last three years.

I miss having a home though, a permanent one anyway, but finding one when Grams isn't still here somehow feels like a betrayal to her.

I had these big plans to pay off our house and take care of her and it's not fair that none of them happened. Even all these years later, it still hurts.

I know that that's why I accepted so many jobs and why I haven't taken a break since she passed and I graduated. I know that she wouldn't want me to be alone. I know that she would want me to get married and have kids and a family of my own and I know that feeling like doing any of those things is a betrayal to her is crazy, but I can't help but feel that way.

I promised myself at her funeral that I would save up enough money to buy back our house. That way I'll always feel close to her.

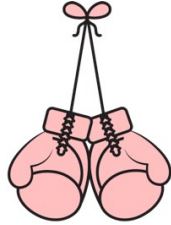
So, I can't get too attached to Jameson or Faith. I can't start thinking of this place as home because it never will be.

After this job, I should have enough saved up and then I'm going back to Michigan. I'm going home.

"Are you hungry?" Jameson asks us and I glance over at him.

His brown eyes meet mine and I swallow hard. For some reason, looking at him while I sit in Faith's bedroom feels a lot like home to me, a lot like how I felt when Grams was still alive.

THREE



Jameson

“SO... HOW’S THE NEW NANNY?” Niall asks with a knowing grin the next day.

I ignore him, grunting as I finish my set, but he doesn’t take the hint and I know that I’m not getting out of this conversation easily. The only good thing is that Finn is still at home with Sylvie, helping her recover and resting after his fight still, so at least I only have to dodge questions from one of them.

“Yeah, I was wondering the same thing,” Kit says as he wanders over and I groan as I rack the bar back in the stand and sit up.

Brooks passes me a towel and I wipe the sweat from my face.

“Things are going fine. Faith loves her and—”

“And you love her,” Niall finishes and I roll my eyes but truthfully, I don’t think that he’s far off.

“And she’s doing great,” I finish and Kit, Brooks, and Niall all share a look.

“So, she’s staying then?” Kit asks and I nod.

“Yeah, she accepted the job and is all moved in.”

“Be honest, is it in your bedroom?” Niall asks and I throw the towel at him as Brooks tries to hide his laugh.

“No, I can’t do that to Faith. We finally found someone that she loves and I’m not going to do anything to mess it up.”

That statement earns me skeptical looks from all of them.

“Sometimes you can’t choose who you fall in love with,” Kit says and I know that he’s thinking about how he met his wife, Stella.

He took one look at her and bam, that was it for him. Of course, it took him a few days to convince her that they were meant to be but now they’re living happily ever after.

“I love Faith. She’s already lost too much. I’m not going to be the reason that she loses another person,” I tell them and the teasing grins slip off both of their faces.

“Alright, get back to work,” Kit says, slapping Niall on the shoulder and heading back to his office.

“You’re allowed to be happy too,” Niall says, tossing the towel back at me and I catch it before it can hit me in the face.

“I know. I am.”

He doesn’t look convinced, but he leaves to head over to the ring and I nod at Brooks before I head in the opposite corner and start working out some of my frustration on the punching bags there.

My friends are right. I want Phoenix. I have since the first moment that I saw her, but every time I open my mouth to ask her if she has a boyfriend or if she wants to stay up and watch a movie with me after Faith is asleep, I remember that I can’t hit on her.

I meant what I said. I can’t be the reason that Faith loses another person. She’s already so attached to Phoenix and it’s been great for me having someone to help out around the house. Phoenix even made dinner for all of us last night, even though that isn’t part of her job description.

Having Phoenix’s help has only shown me just how tired I am. I’ve been working nonstop for close to a year now and I needed a break. I can’t go back to square one if things go south between us.

I hit the bag harder and try to ignore the way that Niall is watching me. He knows that I've never been with anyone before. I've been all about training since I was a kid. David always used to tease me because I acted like the older brother. He said that I was never really a kid. I was always serious and it wasn't until about a year ago that I even thought about starting to date.

Then the car accident happened and everything changed.

Phoenix has been the only woman who has ever tempted me or interested me. Maybe it's because we're opposites in most ways. I'm serious and she's more carefree, though I can sense that we've both lost someone important.

I overheard Faith and her talking about parents. I had been worried and was waiting to see if I should jump in and explain what happened to Faith's mom and dad, but she had done just fine.

"They're in heaven," Faith says, her voice quiet.

"I'm so sorry."

"Do you know anyone in heaven?" Faith asks and I peek around the doorframe to see her staring at Phoenix.

"Yeah. My grandma raised me. She went there a few years ago."

I had left then. It seemed too personal and I didn't want to breach anyone's trust, but it had made me wonder what happened to Phoenix's mom and dad. Why was she raised by a relative too?

My phone buzzes by my water bottle and I stop the bag and bend down to check the screen. My heart starts to race when I see that it's a text from Phoenix.

PHOENIX: Faith's school just called. She threw up so I'm headed to get her.

Jameson: I'm done with training, so I'll meet you at home.

Phoenix: Can you stop and grab some Gatorade on the way?

Jameson: Yeah, see you in twenty.

“ARE YOU LEAVING ALREADY?” Niall asks as he leans on the ropes and grabs his water bottle.

“Yeah, that was Phoenix. I guess Faith threw up at school, so I’m grabbing some stuff from the store and meeting them at home.”

“Let me know if you guys need anything else and tell Faith I said to feel better soon,” he calls and I nod at him as I jog across the gym and into the locker room.

I don’t bother with a shower. I just grab my gym bag, run a towel across my face and the back of my neck and then head for the door.

The store is on the way home and so I’m not surprised that I beat them home. Faith hasn’t been sick since I became her guardian and I’m not sure what to expect. Will she want to be downstairs on the couch so that she can watch TV? Or should I put her up in her room so that she can rest without distractions?

“See? I told you that he would be home,” Phoenix says as she carries Faith inside.

Faith is wrapped around Phoenix, her face buried in her neck and I move forward to help her with the door and her bag.

“Thanks,” Phoenix says as I take her purse and Faith’s backpack from her.

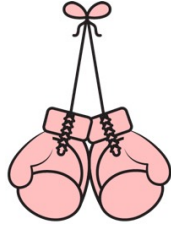
“Do you want to go lay down in your bed and rest?” she asks Faith and she must say yes because Phoenix turns and heads upstairs.

I follow, stopping in the kitchen to grab the Gatorade. As I follow Phoenix upstairs, my resolve to ignore my feelings for her only hardens.

I need Phoenix. Faith needs Phoenix. I can't do anything to mess this up.

Now if only my heart and body could get on the same page as my head.

FOUR



Phoenix

“NO, I think that it’s something going around the school. Jameson and I are fine,” I tell Sylvie as I sort through my laundry.

“I hope that she feels better soon.”

“Me too. Speaking of feeling better... how are you doing?” I ask her and I suddenly feel like a terrible friend for not calling her sooner.

Things happened fast with Jameson and Faith and this job and I was trying to give her space so that she could have some alone time with Finn now that his fight is over and he’s not so busy. Still, I should have called to check in on her before this.

“I’m fine. Finn won’t let me do anything and he keeps treating me like I’m made of glass, but I’m really okay. A little sore and bruised still but that’s getting better every day.”

She half yells the last part and I can picture her doing that because Finn is walking by. I’m sure that it’s not going to change anything. Finn loves to spoil her.

I bite my lip as I think about my own sad love life. I never really got into dating and most of the families that I worked for didn’t want me dating or bringing boyfriends around their houses or their kids, so it made dating a challenge. I never had a problem with it, but now that everyone around me seems to

be settled and so in love, it makes me feel like I'm missing out on something.

Jameson walks past my room and before I can think it through, I pull the phone away from my ear and stop him.

"Hey!"

He stops and smiles as he takes a step toward my bedroom.

"Am I allowed to date?" I ask and his steps falter.

"What? I thought that you were talking to Sylvie," he says with a frown and I frown back at him.

"I am. Why does that matter?"

"Why do you want to date?" he asks without answering my question and I just stare at him.

"Can I? I know that some families don't like it or they don't want me to bring anyone around their place and that's fine with me," I rush to assure him.

"So, you would go to his place?" he asks, his eyes and tone hard.

"Uh, yeah, but only on my days off. It wouldn't affect my work at all."

Why is he getting so upset about this?

"Jameson?" Faith calls from down the hall and the angry look drops, replaced by concern and more than a little fear.

I'm an idiot. I shouldn't be asking him for anything when he's worried about Faith. I'll apologize later and we can talk about me dating a different time.

"Oh my gosh! I wish I could have seen his face right now! Was he mad? I bet he was mad," Sylvie says in my ear and I can hear Finn ask her what she's talking about.

"Phoenix just asked Jameson if she can date other guys," she tells him and I roll my eyes.

"Yeah, I'm sure that didn't go over well," he snorts in the background and I wonder what they know that I don't.

“Why is that a big deal?” I ask, tossing my clean socks in the dresser drawer.

I grab my underwear and bras next, turning to toss them next to the socks when I see Jameson standing in my doorway.

“Jeez! We’ve got to get you a bell, my friend,” I mumble as I try to get my heart rate under control.

He frowns at me, his eyes going from my face down to the brightly colored bras and thongs in my hands.

“Is she okay?” I ask and he blinks.

“What?”

“Faith? Is she alright?”

“Yeah, she wants you,” he says, his eyes going back down to my hands.

“Hey, Sylvie? I’ve got to go but I’ll talk to you tomorrow,” I tell her and she says her goodbyes.

I stuff my clothes in the drawer and try to smile at Jameson as I follow him out of my bedroom and down the hall.

“Hey, I’m sorry about bringing up the dating stuff,” I whisper and he seems to relax at my words. “I know that you have a lot going on right now with Faith and training. I should have brought it up after she’s feeling better.”

And there goes his back again. He’s tense, his whole body frozen as he stares down at me and I smile, trying to put him at ease.

“We can talk about it once she’s all better,” I say before I turn and head into Faith’s room.

“Great,” Jameson mutters as he trails after me.

“How are you feeling?” I ask Faith.

“I’m kind of hungry,” she mumbles, her little face half buried in her pillow.

“Want me to make you some soup? That should be easy on your stomach,” I tell her as I feel her forehead.

She still feels like she has a fever, but she's not as pale as she was when I picked her up this afternoon.

She nods and I smile as I smooth some of her hair away from her face.

"Okay, I'll go make it and I'll let you know when it's ready. Do you want more Gatorade?" I ask when I notice that her glass is empty.

She nods again and I lean over and kiss her forehead before I stand up and get ready to make her something to eat.

Jameson takes my spot when I stand up and leave but I'm not surprised when he joins me in the kitchen a few minutes later.

"Need any help?" he asks as I pull some carrots, celery, and an onion out of the fridge.

"No, I think I've got it. Can you bring Faith up some more of her drink?" I ask him as I grab a pot.

He nods, grabbing the Gatorade bottle and heading back upstairs. I get started on the soup, humming under my breath as I peel and chop vegetables and find some chicken broth in the pantry.

"It smells good. Where did you learn to cook?" Jameson asks as he joins me in the kitchen again.

"From my grandma. She raised me. My mom... wasn't really cut out to be a parent."

"What about your dad?"

"He was never in the picture."

"Shit, I'm sorry."

"It's okay. My grandma was awesome," I say with a grin. "And she was a great cook."

"I'm glad that one of us can cook. We had help growing up, so I never really learned."

"You seemed to be getting by alright before I got here," I remind him and he shrugs.

“I’m just lucky that Faith isn’t too picky.”

“Having a chef must have been nice,” I comment and he shrugs again.

“I know how lucky we were but sometimes I regret it. Not even being able to make something pretty simple can suck. Although my brother, David, did learn eventually, so maybe there’s still hope for me. After our parents passed, I lived with him for a little bit. He would always make me lasagna after a fight,” he says with a sad smile and I reach over and take his hand in mine.

“He sounds like a great guy.”

“He was. He really was.”

I smile as I add some pepper and salt to the soup and give it a stir.

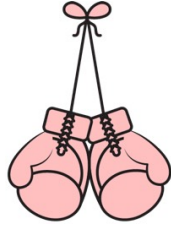
“Is it done?” Faith asks sleepily as she comes into the kitchen, breaking the sad fog that’s fallen over both of us, and I smile at her.

“Almost.”

Jameson helps her up onto the stool and I grab some saltine crackers for her. She takes a tentative bite out of one and I grab the egg noodles and add them to the pot.

I scoop up a bowl for Faith and a bigger one for Jameson and I and when I join them at the kitchen counter, I can’t help but think that this feels so right.

FIVE



Jameson

“SO, I heard that Phoenix is looking to date,” Niall says a few days later.

It’s my first day back in the gym for training and I suppose that I should have expected this. I hadn’t been thinking about Niall and Finn knowing what Sylvie asked me though. I was too focused on getting Faith back to one hundred percent and making sure that Phoenix wasn’t texting any guys.

“What?” I ask, trying to focus on the conversation as I go to steady the punching bag.

“Finn told me that Phoenix asked you if she could see other guys while she was on the phone with Sylvie. Did you say yes?” he asks with a smirk and I grit my teeth.

I have to remind myself that we’re friends so that I don’t punch him in the face.

“No, and she’s not.”

“She told Sylvie she was,” Finn says as he leans against the wall next to Niall.

“Shouldn’t you guys be training?” I snarl at them and they both just grin at me.

“Are you done training?” Kit asks a minute later as he wanders over to the punching bag area.

“We were just checking on Jameson. Making sure that he was alright,” Niall tells him as Stella walks up to join her husband.

“What’s wrong with Jameson?” Stella asks, giving me a look filled with concern. “Oh no, did you get what Faith had? I meant to ask how she was feeling.”

“No, I’m fine and Faith is better. She’s back in school today,” I tell her, and she gives me a relieved smile.

“Then what’s wrong?” Stella asks Niall.

“Nothing,” I grumble.

“Phoenix wants to see other guys,” Finn fills her in and I swear to God both Stella and Kit wince.

“She’s not going to,” I assure them and Niall snorts behind me.

“How do you know that? Are you going to ask her out?” He taunts and I glare at him.

“No, I’m just going to forbid it.”

Stella and Kit look at me like I’m crazy and maybe I am. I didn’t get a lot of sleep the last few nights between Faith getting sick and me worrying about Phoenix trying to date other guys. Then there were all of the dreams about her bras and panties. I’ve been waking up either horny or angry the last couple of mornings, so suffice it to say that I’m not in the best mood this morning.

“Let me know how that works out for you,” Kit says as he starts to steer his wife toward the office.

I frown after them.

Yeah, maybe forbidding Phoenix from dating isn’t a good idea, but nothing else that I’ve been able to come up with has been great either. I thought that I could avoid her and then she couldn’t bring it up again, but I can’t seem to stay away from her. My only saving grace was that Faith was sick and we were both busy taking care of her to talk about much else.

Now that she’s better though...

I'm screwed.

Maybe I should just tell her how I feel.

As soon as I have that thought though, I know that I can't. I need to think about Faith here. Maybe I can pursue Phoenix once Faith is older and doesn't need a nanny anymore.

My will to live seems to take a nosedive as I think about lusting after Phoenix for another ten to fourteen years.

I try to push all thoughts of Phoenix and what I'm going to do about my feelings for her as I get back to training.

I push myself as I head to the weights and then into the ring to spar with Finn. He doesn't bring up Phoenix as we fight, but it doesn't matter. She's never far from my mind and when we leave to head home, I still don't have my feelings under control.

I end up taking a walk around our block once I get home. I'm still not ready to see Phoenix, not when I'm still unclear about what I want to do about my attraction to her.

By the time that I'm back home, I'm dying to climb into the shower, grab something to eat, and pass out. Maybe since I'm so tired today, I won't dream of her tonight.

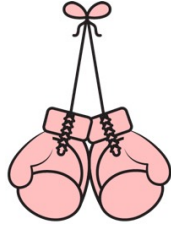
When I walk through the door, Faith comes running and I laugh as I catch her in my arms. She starts to tell me about school and what she did with her friends, and I look up as Phoenix comes into the room. Her brown hair is twisted up into a messy bun with a few strands hanging around her face. There's some flour dusting her cheeks and I wonder what she and Faith are cooking.

She smiles at me, her gray eyes twinkling and that's when I know that I'm in trouble here. That's when I know that I'm going to lose this battle.

I want her more than anything.

But can I risk Phoenix quitting if things go badly between us?

SIX



Phoenix

AFTER TAKING care of a sick kid for the last four nights, you think that I would be exhausted and dying for a night where I manage to sleep all the way through.

Instead, it's just after midnight and I'm wide awake.

My stomach rolls as I stare at the ceiling, and I wonder if I'm getting the same thing that Faith had.

I kick off the covers with a sigh and swing my legs over the side of the bed. The house is quiet and I debate my next move. I should be able to sneak downstairs for a glass of water and maybe if I turn the volume down really low, I could watch some TV without waking anyone else up.

I look down at my pajamas, wondering if I should change or put a robe on. My sleep shorts are just a little too short but I've had them for years and they're my softest pair. I've got on a thin white tank top that molds to my curves and I think it makes me look fat, but it's so hot that I didn't want to put on anything warmer.

I decide to just go in my pajamas. No one else is going to wake up. Not with Faith still recovering from being sick, so I tiptoe over to the bedroom door and then down the stairs to the kitchen.

There's a nightlight on next to the fridge and I use it to light my way over to the kitchen cabinet so I can grab a glass.

I'm standing on my tiptoes when I hear footsteps and I look over my shoulder just in time to see Jameson come around the corner.

He freezes when he sees me, his eyes going wide as they take me in, and now, I'm cursing myself for not changing or putting on a sweatshirt over my tank top.

Great. He's shirtless and looking like a cover model and I'm over here looking like a stuffed sausage.

"Hey," I say weakly as I try to pull my tank top down over my stomach more.

He doesn't say anything. His eyes rove over me and I can feel my face flush with embarrassment.

"I just came down for some water. I didn't think that anyone else was up," I try to explain as I hurry to fill my glass up with water from the fridge.

Jameson makes a hoarse kind of groan and I stop to look over at him.

"Are you alright?" I ask when I see that he's got one hand on the counter and is leaning over.

"Nope," he says more to himself than to me.

"Is it your stomach? Maybe you have what Faith did," I say as I hurry around the kitchen to his side.

My stomach is a little upset too, but it's hard to tell what is from nausea and what's from nerves.

"It's not my stomach," he says and I glance down as he starts to straighten.

"Oh," I say lamely, taking in the way that his cock is tenting the front of his pajama pants.

The plaid fabric of his pants is stretched to the limit, and I know that it can't be comfortable.

"Wait, is that because of me?" I blurt out and he lets out a humorless laugh.

“Of course, it is. You’re wearing that,” he says, his hand motioning to my body. “You look like a siren and I’ve never wanted to be led to my death more.”

My mouth dries at his words and I don’t know what to say.

He thinks that I’m hot? In this? When he looks like that?

I never in a million years thought that Jameson would go for someone like me. He’s got money, good looks, and he’s a nice guy to boot. He’s the total package and I’m sure that he could have anyone that he wanted.

That was partly the reason for me asking if I could date other guys. I was hoping it would get my mind off of my hunky boss.

I know the rules. I absolutely shouldn’t get involved with a family that I’m working for. I’ve never had a problem keeping myself separate before, but with Faith and Jameson, it’s different. They’ve already worked their way under my skin and it’s only been a week.

“I... I’m not,” I start, but I have no idea what I was going to say.

I can’t seem to look away from his chest and abs long enough to form a sentence.

Maybe I should just quit now, before my feelings for both of them get any stronger.

“I need to go,” I whisper, but Jameson steps closer to me.

“I can’t stop thinking about this,” he whispers back, his breath blowing the loose hair around my face a bit.

“About what?”

He doesn’t answer me. He just bends lower and seals my mouth with his.

I moan into the kiss, my hands wrapping around his neck as he presses his hard body against mine. He’s so warm and hard all over. I can’t help but rub myself against him and that earns me a moan. Then his hands are on my hips and he’s lifting me onto the kitchen counter.

I hiss as my bare legs make contact with the cold counter but then Jameson's hands are there, rubbing up and down my thighs and I forget all about the cold.

He tugs me to the edge of the counter, spreading my thighs wide so that he can step in between them, and I look up at him. He's staring down at my body, a ravenous look in his eyes that makes me feel like I'm on fire.

He's looking at me like I'm gorgeous. No one ever has before and I was alright with that. I was the slightly crazy, cute friend who likes to wear bright colors and can never seem to sit still. I'm used to the friendly smiles from guys but Jameson has never looked at me like that, I realize.

"Have you wanted me since I started working for you?" I whisper against his lips and his brown eyes meet mine.

"Since before. Since the hospital. You walked in and knocked me off my feet. I've been trying not to maul you ever since."

"So, when I asked if I could date other guys," I start and he closes his eyes like he's in pain.

"Never talk about that again," he says as he buries his face in my neck and I grin.

"Guess I should take down all of my online dating profiles then, huh?" I tease him and he glares down at me.

"Yes! No dating anyone," he mumbles, giving me a hard look and I giggle.

"I was joking! I haven't signed up for anything."

"Good," he says and then his lips are back on mine.

I open for him this time, wanting to know his taste and he eagerly slips his tongue into my mouth to tangle with mine.

I know that we haven't figured anything out, that us both admitting to our attractions may have just made things worse between us, but I can't seem to care right now.

Not when his mouth is on mine and his fingers are slipping up my leg and under my pajama shorts. Not when he's so close

to that spot that's been aching for him.

"Yes!" I gasp as his finger slides up my core.

Jameson hums against my mouth, his finger working lower and dipping into my dripping wet pussy. I wiggle against him, begging for more, for I don't even know what. I just need him to take this ache away and I somehow know that he's the only one who will be able to do it.

"Yes, yes, yes," I chant as his thumb finds my clit and presses down.

"Jameson?" Faith calls from upstairs.

"No," Jameson and I both groan at the same time and it would be funny if I wasn't so ridiculously turned on right now.

We pull apart and stare at each other for a beat. When Faith calls for him again, he gives me a forced smile and drops a kiss on my lips once more before he adjusts himself in his pajamas and goes to check on her.

I watch him go, trying to get my heart and body under control. There's no way that I'm going to be able to sleep now, but I still grab my glass of water and head upstairs to my room.

Jameson is still with Faith so I slip silently into my room and close the door. I look at the bed, biting my lip, but I know that if I don't come, then I won't be able to fall asleep.

I slip off my pajamas and climb onto my bed. I'm still on my hands and knees, pulling back the covers when the door opens and I hear Jameson curse behind me.

I squeak, diving underneath the covers and praying to God that it was too dark in here for him to make out much.

"Nope, not happening," he growls, tugging the blankets away from me.

"Oh hey," I start and he gives me a hard look.

"I did this," he says, grabbing my knee and pulling my legs apart. He runs one finger up my center and I tense, my nipples hardening to little points. "I get to clean it up."

I barely have time to react before he's dragging me to the side of the bed and dropping down onto his knees. I try to lean up on my elbows but when his tongue drags a path up between my pussy lips, my arms give out.

"Oh!" I cry, trying not to be too loud.

He moans, his tongue circling my clit and I stop thinking after that. I'm nothing but feeling. With every swipe of his tongue, he drives me higher. Every time he circles my clit, I'm that much closer to the peak. When he pushes one long, thick finger inside of me, rubbing that secret spot while he sucks my clit into his mouth, I come.

"Jameson!" I cry, remembering to bury my face in the blankets at the last second so that I don't wake up Faith.

He holds my legs open, licking me through my orgasm and I shiver and shake on the bed, too weak to beg him to stop.

When he stands, I manage to crack one eye open and my mouth waters as I see his cock jutting out from the top of his pajama pants.

"Since I made that, does that mean that I get to take care of it?" I ask and I wonder when I became this bold person.

"Fuck, Phoenix. If you keep looking at me like that for one more second, you're going to have taken care of it," he groans and I smile.

I love how turned on I make him just by being me. He loves my curves and body; doesn't even seem to notice the stretch marks and I love it. I love how beautiful he makes me feel.

"I think I can do better than that," I whisper as I sit up on the side of the bed and reach for his pajama pants.

A wave of dizziness hits me and I take a moment to take a deep breath before I reach for his cock. It's at eye level, the tip red with a clear drop of precum forming there and my mouth waters.

And then it keeps watering.

Without a word, I bolt for the ensuite bathroom and slam the door behind me. I just barely make it to the toilet before I start throwing up. I groan as I hear the door open behind me and then Jameson is there, pulling my hair back and rubbing my back.

“Sorry,” I manage to croak out but he just shushes me.

“I’ll go get some Gatorade,” he says when I flush the toilet and I can only nod.

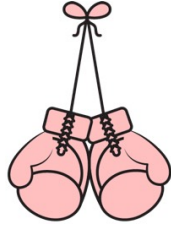
I let him help me to bed and watch as he grabs me a clean sleep shirt from my dresser. He helps me get dressed and I don’t know if I should laugh or cry at the change in plans tonight.

“Sorry about...” I start, nodding to his dick.

“Phoenix, you’re sick. You have nothing to apologize for. I wasn’t expecting anything.”

I smile slightly, my eyes feeling heavy now. I feel Jameson kiss my forehead and tell me that he’ll be back soon, but then sleep claims me and I’m out.

SEVEN



Jameson

I BARELY MADE it through my warm-up run this morning. My eyes are so heavy from barely getting any sleep last night and I'm starting to wonder if I should just call it a day and go home to get some rest.

I head over to the free weights, determined to get at least some part of a workout in. My next fight isn't for another two months, so I have time to really hit training hard.

"How are things going at home?" Finn asks me as we lift weights together.

I grunt, lifting the weights up in a bicep curl. I debate if I should tell him about last night. One part of me thinks that it's a bad idea and that I will never hear the end of it, but the other part of me wants some advice on what to do with Phoenix now that I've told her how I feel about her.

"I kissed Phoenix last night."

Finn almost drops his weights and I instantly regret opening up to him.

"Yeah? How did that go?" he asks after a minute.

"She threw up," I tell him and I watch as his shoulders shake with a silent laugh.

"Do yourself a favor and don't tell Niall that part," Finn advises and I huff out a laugh.

“Yeah, I know. I’m not an idiot,” I grumble and he grins.

“Are you that bad at it then? Need some pointers?”

“No, moron. She has the flu.”

“Sure, she does,” he says quietly.

“She does. I was up with her half of the night.”

“That sounds promising,” Niall says and I realize that he didn’t hear the part about Phoenix being sick.

“Phoenix is sick,” Finn tells him.

We don’t say anything as we go back to lifting our weights. When we stop between sets, I can’t hold back from asking them what’s been on my mind all day.

“How do I do this with Phoenix without messing it up? I can’t have things go bad between us. I can’t have her leaving Faith and me,” I admit to them and for once, Niall doesn’t have a smart comeback for me.

“I think you should take things slow. Get to know her,” Niall says after a minute.

“And be honest with her. Let her know about you not wanting her to leave both of you,” Finn adds.

I nod, knowing that they’re probably right. I need to be upfront with her about my concerns before we start anything.

“Is that why you’re so slow today?” Brooks asks as he comes over to join us and I have to wonder just how much of our conversation he heard.

“Yeah, I barely got any sleep. I think I might actually head out early and take a nap before I have to go get Faith from school.”

“Yeah, tell Phoenix that we hope she feels better. I think Sylvie was going to stop by your place to check on her this afternoon but let me know if you guys need anything.”

“Thanks,” I tell them as I rack my weights and grab my things.

“See you later,” they say with a wave and I nod distractedly as I head for the locker room.

It doesn’t take me long to get my things and head for the door. Traffic is light and I make it home in no time.

“I’m home,” I call, and I hear Phoenix groan from upstairs.

“She’s still throwing up,” Sylvie says with a wince as I poke my head into Phoenix’s room. “I brought over Gatorade, crackers, and some soup.”

“Thanks, Sylvie.”

“I need to head out, but let me know if you need anything.”

“I will, thanks.”

Sylvie grabs her purse and I walk her out before I head back upstairs to check on Phoenix.

“How are you feeling?” I ask as she drops back down onto her bed.

“Like death,” she croaks and I nod sympathetically.

“Can I get you anything?”

She shakes her head, wrapping the blankets around her as her eyes fall closed. I leave her to get some rest and go to my own room to take a shower. I check on her when I get out and she cracks one eye open.

“Do you need anything?” I ask sleepily.

“No,” she says through a yawn, and I sit down on the edge of her bed to feel her forehead.

“What are you doing home so early?” she asks after a minute and I yawn again.

“I was too tired. I’m going to take a nap before I go get Faith,” I tell her.

She nods, moving over in bed and I must not be thinking clearly because I lay down next to her without thinking.

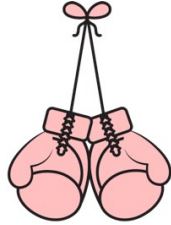
My eyes drift closed and before I tip all the way into unconscious, I reach over and grab Phoenix’s hand.

“When you’re feeling better, do you want to go out with me?” I ask her sleepily.

“Yeah,” she says, just as sleepily and I can’t help but smile as I drift off to sleep.

When I open my eyes later, I’m face to face with Phoenix and I realize right away that this is how I want to wake up from now on.

EIGHT



Phoenix

I MANAGED to keep everything down today, so things are starting to go back to normal. If normal includes a date with my boss.

I'm still recovering and feeling tired so Jameson and I are snuggled down in the living room with Faith between us. *The Lion King* is playing right now and there's a mostly empty pizza box from Faith's favorite place on the coffee table.

"I don't like this part," Faith whispers to me and I snuggle closer to her.

"Me either," I whisper back as Scar leads Simba to the ravine.

We both cry when Mufasa dies and I look over to see Jameson staring at both of us with a bewildered expression on his face.

"How are you not crying?" I choke out and he just shrugs.

"It's a kid's movie... and I've seen it before."

"Monster," I whisper at him and he cracks a smile.

"Shh," Faith shushes us and I bite my own smile.

We settle in to watch the movie and some of my nerves slip away. Having Faith as a buffer definitely helps things, but I can't help but wonder what will happen when she falls asleep.

Another hour goes by and then Jameson leans over and whispers, "I'm going to go tuck her in."

I nod, watching as he gathers her up and carries her upstairs. Something about seeing him care for Faith does something to me. It feels like my ovaries are going to explode. He's so sweet with her, and I can see how much he loves her every time he looks at her.

My grandma would have called him dreamy and been pushing him in my direction this whole time. Thinking about her and how she would have gone on and on about how perfect Jameson is has me smiling. She would have told me to go for him or she would.

Tears sting my eyes, even as I smile and I wipe them away right as Jameson comes back into the living room.

"The movie getting to you again?" he asks as he sits down next to me and I smile.

"No, I was thinking about my grandma and what she would say about you."

"Oh yeah? What's the verdict?"

"She would have loved you," I tell him and he grins.

"Glad to hear that she has good taste."

"Had. She passed away a few years ago," I admit and his smile drops.

"Right... I knew that. Shit, I'm sorry, Phoenix."

I nod, swallowing hard.

"Thanks."

We both forget all about the movie playing on the screen as we shift on the couch to face each other more.

"Were you close with your parents?" I ask him and he gives me a sad smile.

"No, not really. They were too busy being the best surgeons that they could be to pay much attention to their kids. I had my brother though," he says with a shrug and I smile.

“I had Sylvie like that.”

“How is she doing, by the way? I’ve seen Finn around the gym and he mentioned that she was back to work now.”

“Yeah, I talked to her the other day and she said that she was feeling back to normal already. Then I got sick so I haven’t talked to her recently.”

“You’re feeling better now though, right?” he asks, reaching over and feeling my forehead.

I roll my eyes but let him take my temperature.

“Yeah, still tired but the nausea has passed.”

“Good,” he says, his fingers trailing down my cheek and a new awareness snakes through me.

We’re alone. No buffer. Nothing stopping me from doing something that could jeopardize my new job and home.

And yet I don’t care.

“I like you,” I blurt out and he grins at me, his brown eyes melting like chocolate.

“Good, because I like you too. A lot.”

The Lion King plays in the background, forgotten, as Jameson leans forward, capturing my lips with his.

His lips are firm, like the rest of him, but still soft and they mold to mine perfectly. I don’t know when my hands landed on his chest or tightened into fists in his shirt, but I can’t seem to get them to release the worn fabric.

“I’ve wanted to do this since I saw you,” Jameson says as he pulls back to look in my eyes and I nod, my head in a daze that I can’t blame on the flu.

“Me too,” I say and then he’s back, his hands tangling in my hair as he pushes me back against the couch cushions and goes to battle with my mouth.

His tongue licks across the seam of my lips and I eagerly part for him. I’ve been dying to know what he tastes like but I

can't focus on that. Not when his hands tighten in my hair, angling my head just right.

I moan, wrapping my own hands around his neck and letting him take control. One of his hands drops to my waist and then I gasp as I feel his skin against mine at my hip.

When his hand starts to skate up my back, I pull away and suck in some much-needed air.

"I wanted to take it slow with you," Jameson whispers against my lips in between kisses and I hum in agreement.

"We should do that," I half moan as he kisses his way down my neck.

"Uh-huh," he says against my skin.

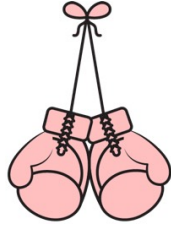
The sound of tiny footsteps breaks through my lust-filled fog and I push Jameson back, using his surprise to sneak out from under him on the couch and leap to my feet. I'm just smoothing down my hair when Faith comes padding into the room.

"Can I have some water?" she asks and I nod.

"Yeah, I'll get you some," I tell her as I take her little hand in mine. "I'm feeling thirsty too."

I see Jameson grin at me over my shoulder as I head out of the living room.

NINE



Jameson

I KEEP CHECKING to see if Faith is asleep as Phoenix reads her a third bedtime story. She's fighting it tonight though which is a problem for me and my plans.

I haven't been able to stop thinking about Phoenix all day. I wonder what would have happened if things had progressed last night past us making out and dry humping on the couch. I'll never be able to watch *The Lion King* in the same way again.

"One more?" Faith asks and I bite back a groan when Phoenix nods and grabs another book.

I manage to make it another ten minutes, but the second that I see Faith fall asleep, I grab Phoenix and drag her out of there.

"I know that I said we should take things slow," I start but she kisses me.

It takes me a second to realize that her hands are already working on the button of my jeans and then we're on the same page because mine start tugging down her yoga pants.

We crash into the closest bedroom door, hers, and both stop to listen for any sound of Faith waking up. When she doesn't stir, I send up a silent prayer and drag Phoenix's shirt off and toss it on the ground.

She kicks off her shoes as I take my shirt and pants off and then my breath stalls in my lungs as I take in the sight of my dream girl wearing just her bra and panties.

“You’re beautiful,” I rasp out and she blushes.

She’s got curves that I know will fit my hands perfectly and all I can imagine is gripping those thick thighs and driving into her.

Her hands go behind her back and then the straps of her bra are sliding down her arms and my mouth is starting to water.

I peel off my socks distractedly, my eyes locked on her jiggling tits. I want my mouth on them. Now.

She takes a step back toward the bed as her bra falls the rest of the way and I’m on her. I lunge, wrapping my arm around her waist as we fall onto her bed. I wish that we had gone to my room. I want to see her in my bed. I want to smell her on the sheets days later, but I’ll have to try to get her in my bed later.

Her legs spread and my hips slide between her thighs, notching there like it’s where they belong. We’re both still wearing our underwear and it’s probably a good thing. Just feeling the heat between her legs is close to driving me over the edge.

I need to distract myself, so I lean down and kiss her. She moans against my mouth and oh god, none of this is helping.

Her breasts smash against my chest and I roll us over so that I don’t crush her. Seeing her sitting on me, her big tits right in my face has my eyes rolling back in my head but when she starts to grind down on my cock, I come back to my senses.

“Need you,” I grit out and she nods in agreement.

“I’ve never...” she starts and I wonder how dumb the men in Michigan are but it doesn’t matter. Their loss is definitely my gain.

“Me either,” I admit and her eyes widen.

“How is that possible?” she asks, her hands roaming over my chest.

“My brother and sister-in-law had Faith young and it kind of freaked me out. I didn’t want to be a young parent.”

The irony isn’t lost on either of us.

“Then I had Faith and well, no one ever tempted me. Not until you.”

She smiles down at me softly and I wrap my hand around the back of her neck, dragging her down until our mouths meet.

My mouth claims hers in a deep kiss as she starts to move above me and even though I’m pretty sure I might die from the exquisite torture of her grinding on my cock like a stripper, I let her. She’s a virgin so she’s not prepared for me to just fuck her. I’m going to need to get her slick and ready for me.

Her gorgeous tits are calling to me so I break the kiss and capture them in my palms. They’re so big that they spill out over my fingers and I moan, finding the stiff peaks of her nipples and rolling them between my fingers. Her back bows, offering me more of her, and I grin.

“So sensitive,” I whisper against her skin and she nods, her eyes at half mast.

I cup her heavy tits in my palms, molding them in my hands before I go back to licking and sucking on her sweet nipples. I keep it up until I can feel Phoenix’s movements starting to grow more and more erratic.

“You want more?” I ask her, and she nods quickly.

I kiss between her breasts once before I grab her hips and flip her over. She gasps as her back hits the bed or maybe it’s because my fingers are already tugging her panties down her legs.

I smile up at her as I crawl closer to her on the bed and then I’m moving lower, shouldering her thighs apart more as I lay down on my stomach between them.

She's drenched, her pretty pink slit glistening for me already, but I can see how tight she is.

"Look at how perfect you are," I murmur, using my thumbs to spread her lower lips so I can get a better view.

Her hole is barely the size of my pinkie, and I know that I'm going to have to work to get my cock in there.

Her little pearl sits above her slit and I lick my lips, not waiting another second to get another taste of her. The one I had before she got sick wasn't nearly enough. I want to know everything about this girl. What she likes, what makes her moan the loudest, or has her thighs tightening around me.

Phoenix almost shoots off the bed when I wrap my lips around the little button and roll my tongue over it. She wiggles, squirming against my face, and I reach up before she can get away from me and wrap my hands around her thighs, pinning her to the bed and holding her in place for my mouth.

She cries out, arching her back, her head thrashing on the pillow and her fingers scrambling in the sheets to find something to hold on to.

"Shh," I warn her and her eyes widen, but I don't hear Faith.

Phoenix still drags a pillow over her face and I grin before I get back to licking her sweet pussy.

My cock is ready to explode just from the sounds that she's making and the taste of her in my mouth. I'm not sure when, but I've started humping the bed as Phoenix rocks and grinds against my face. I reach up, pushing one of my fingers into her and working it in and out as she cries out.

"Jameson!" she shouts as she comes against my mouth, but it's muffled by the pillow.

I wish that I could hear her scream my name, but I know that we can't. Not tonight, anyway.

I lick her through her orgasm, waiting until she's come down before I remove my finger and kiss my way back up her lush body.

My cock lines up at her opening as my hips fit back between her thighs, but I don't push inside right away. I can't hold back the groan when I feel how wet she is for me though and Phoenix is on the same page.

I pull the pillow away from her face so that I can see her face and she blinks up at me, her eyes still slightly glazed from her release.

"Hi," I whisper and she smiles up at me.

"Hi."

"Ready for more?"

"God, yes," she breathes and that is all of the green light that I need.

The head of my cock slips between her pussy lips and I bite back a curse as she moves her hips in a motion so that she's grinding her clit against me.

"Jameson," she whispers my name, her eyes heavy lidded as she stares up at me.

Her hard, pebbled nipples rub against my chest as she tries to rock against me and take more of me inside of her.

"I want you inside me. I want to feel it. Feel you," she pants.

My cock slips inside her snug hole an inch, and we both stiffen. I drop my forehead onto hers, closing my eyes and trying to get myself under control. I have to think about getting punched in the face to stop from coming instantly.

Phoenix apparently doesn't feel the same way, though, or I guess she's not concerned about coming again.

She tries to move beneath me, her tight pussy squeezing my cock like a vise.

"Phoenix, baby, please," I beg her, my voice coming out choked, but she's too far gone.

She keeps rocking those damn hips against me and I can't hold back any longer.

I push all of the way inside her, breaking through her innocence. She lets out a small gasp as her nails dig into my shoulders.

I hate that I hurt her, even a little bit, but the sting of pain from her fingernails helps so that I don't blow my load immediately.

"Good?" I plead as I trail kisses across her cheeks.

"Good," she sighs, staring up at me with those big dove gray eyes that I love so much.

"Good," I say, grinding my teeth as I pull out of her sweet heat only to slowly sink back in.

I move slowly, letting her adjust and get used to us moving together. Soon she's bracing her feet against the bed and raising her hips to meet my gentle thrusts.

She's so slick and wet, like liquid velvet wrapped around my dick and it takes all of my willpower not to come.

Phoenix's mouth is open, her eyes dazed as I grind the base of my cock against her sweet nub.

"That feels..." she trails off, not finishing her sentence.

"Good?" I ask, but she doesn't answer me.

Seeing her so lost in pleasure has my balls drawing up tight and I know that I'm close to coming.

I need her to come with me, so I balance on one hand, reaching between us to rub her slick clit. It just takes a few quick circles before her orgasm hits her.

Her pussy clamps down around the head of my cock, and I remember to cover her mouth with mine before she can scream my name as she comes undone.

I find my own release with her and coming inside of her snug warmth is the single greatest feeling.

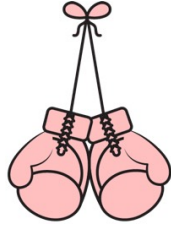
I want to tell her that I love her, but I'm worried that she won't believe me. It's too fast. Isn't it?

I pull out of her and roll to my side so that I don't crush her. Phoenix is flushed and drowsy as she cuddles closer to me and my heart melts as she tucks her hand beneath her chin and closes her eyes.

She's perfect.

And now she's all mine.

TEN



Phoenix

WAKING up in bed next to Jameson the next morning is surreal. His hair is mussed from sleep and my fingers, and I bite my lip as I smirk at what dirty thoughts that conjures up.

He looks so peaceful when he's asleep. Usually, he's always moving. He's either headed out to train, going for a run, or playing with Faith. I don't know that I've ever really seen him sit still, except for movie night.

I raise my hand, intending to run it through his hair, when I hear Faith starting to stir in her own room.

"Oh shit," I whisper, shaking Jameson awake.

"Huh?" he mumbles groggily.

"Faith is awake," I hiss at him and that seems to chase away the sleep from his eyes.

"Oh crap," he says.

Then he's in motion.

He leaps from my bed, grabbing up all of his clothes and running for the door. He changes his mind at the last minute and turns, running back over to me.

"Morning. You look pretty," he says in a rush, and I laugh as he gives me a quick kiss.

He dashes for the door, and I throw my legs over the side of the bed. I need to get dressed before Faith comes looking for me.

I'm just tugging on a clean pair of pajama pants when my door opens and Faith comes in, still rubbing the sleep from her eyes.

"Morning," she mumbles and I smile.

"Morning, sleepyhead."

"Can we have pancakes for breakfast?" she asks hopefully and I grin.

"Of course!"

"With blueberries?"

"I'll have to see if we have any, but I think that I can handle it if we do," I say as I take her hand and lead her down the stairs.

I can hear Jameson moving around in his room, probably getting ready to take a shower and get dressed.

I wince slightly as we head down the stairs. Muscles that I didn't even know that I had protest at the movement and only serves to remind me just what Jameson and I did to each other last night.

I blush as I remember his head between my legs and how gentle he was with me. He had woken me up a few hours later for round two and I had rolled him onto his back and rode him while he played with my breasts.

I never really thought about sex much when I was growing up. I always had more important things to worry about, but I never thought that I would like it so much or feel so confident being naked in front of someone else.

Jameson looks at me like I'm a dream come true though. He makes me feel sexy and desirable.

"Let me help you," I tell Faith as I move to give her a boost up onto the barstool.

I get to work on breakfast and spend the few minutes it takes me to whip up some pancake batter to get myself under control. Jameson is so sweet, but we haven't said anything about what this really is.

I don't want to assume that this is more serious than it is. I know that everything has happened fast between us.

"Morning," Jameson greets us as he comes into the kitchen.

He's freshly showered and I try not to blush as he slips behind me, his hand trailing over my waist discreetly.

"Pancakes this morning?" Jameson asks Faith before he leans down to give her a kiss on the cheek.

"With blueberries!" Faith tells him with a sweet smile.

"Sounds delicious," he says as he takes a seat next to Faith.

His brown eyes meet mine and he gives me a knowing look. I try not to squirm under his heated gaze but I can't resist pressing my thighs together. That same ache from last night is starting in my core and I wonder if I could convince Jameson to come back home after he drops Faith off at preschool. I have a different way that he can get his workout in.

I plate the pancakes and join them at the kitchen counter to eat. Faith devours her pancake and I walk with her back upstairs to help her get dressed for school. Then I head to my own room to get dressed for the day.

When the door opens to my room, I expect it to be Faith asking me if I've seen her shoes or one of her headbands. Instead, it's Jameson slipping into my bedroom.

He beelines toward me right away, his hands cupping my face as his lips crash down onto mine. The kiss is over far too fast, but I know that we have to be careful with Faith still in the house.

"Movie night tonight?" he whispers and I grin.

"It's a date."

He kisses me again, but when we hear Faith in the hallway, we jump apart.

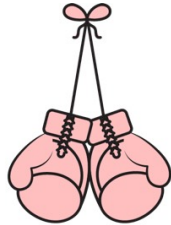
“Tonight,” he tells me and I bite back a smile.

“Can’t wait.”

He smiles as he heads out to intercept Faith. I watch as he takes her down the stairs and they get ready to head to school and the gym.

I watch them leave and I can’t help but wonder if I’m making the best decision of my life, or the biggest mistake.

ELEVEN



Jameson

PHOENIX, Faith, and my routine has been constantly changing over the last few weeks. I've been training for my fight this weekend more and more but I still find time to hang out with Faith and Phoenix every day.

Sometimes Phoenix and I meet for a late lunch and other days I come home just in time to put Faith to bed and read her a story. This fight was so important to me before, and it still kind of is, but I miss spending more time with my girls.

The lights are off when I get home and I wince. I hate these nights the most because it feels like I'm letting Faith down. I sneak up the stairs and into her room, but she's fast asleep, so I just kiss her on the forehead and leave the chocolate bar that I snagged for her at the corner market on my run this morning before I sneak back out.

Phoenix's door is closed partway and I know that I'll be going in there after I grab a shower. I desperately need one after my training session today. It was my last one before the big fight. I'll be home tomorrow and the day after to rest and I'm looking forward to spending some time alone with Phoenix and seeing Faith more.

I strip and take the fastest shower ever so that I can get to bed myself. I'm exhausted from all of the extra time in the gym and another night cuddled up next to Phoenix is just what I need.

I tiptoe across the hall and into Phoenix's room and I can't help but smile when she rolls over and pulls the covers back for me to slip in.

"How was training?" she mumbles sleepily.

"Good. Long."

"Uh-huh," she grumbles and I laugh.

"How was your day?"

"Sleep now. Talk tomorrow," she says as she slides a finger over my mouth.

I kiss the digit and pull her closer against me. Phoenix and I have been sleeping together every night since the first time that we had sex and I always sneak back to my room before Faith wakes up and catches us. That last part is the only downside to this arrangement.

I love sleeping with Phoenix. I never thought that I would love sleeping with someone else but with her I do.

I'm too tired to make love to her tonight and I've learned over the last few weeks that she hates to be woken up for anything, though usually she doesn't mind after I've made her come a few times.

I wrap my arm around her waist and she sighs as she rests her head on my chest. This is how we usually sleep and even though I swear we don't move, somehow, I always wake up with half of her hair in my face.

I've never been happier.

Faith still doesn't know about the two of us but I know that we need to tell her soon. I like to think that she'll be happy about it, but I have my doubts. I know that she's so attached to Phoenix and would be devastated if she quit or left us.

To be honest, so would I.

I'm in love with Phoenix. I've known that I am for a while now but I haven't found the right time to tell her. I think that Faith should know about us first. Then I thought about doing it after my fight when I have more free time, but what if I lose? I

want it to be a special moment so that I can show her just how important she is to me.

Finding that perfect time has been proving harder than I thought it would.

I stare at the ceiling as I listen to Phoenix's even breathing. I want to wake up to her and not have to sneak across the hall to my room. I want her to move into the master room with me. I want us to be public and be a real couple.

I just want Phoenix.

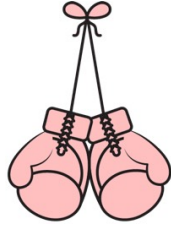
I make a promise to myself then that I'll tell Faith about us after the fight. Then once I know that she's okay with us being together, I'm going to tell Phoenix that I love her and that I want her forever.

She can be Faith's step-guardian. We're already raising her together.

I know that Niall and Finn will be happy and I'm sure that Sylvie will love to have her friend staying in the same city as her.

I smile as my eyes drift shut and suddenly, I can't wait for Saturday night. I'm going to win my fight, and then I'm going to make to win the girl of my dreams.

TWELVE



Phoenix

MY HEART IS RACING as I hold Faith's hand and follow after Jameson down the hallway and to the locker room. It's not even my fight, so I don't know why I'm so nervous. I just know that I don't want to see him get hurt and the thought of it has me acting clingy.

I shouldn't be doing that. Faith still doesn't know about us and I don't think that Jameson wants her to. Not right now anyway.

I get the feeling that he's still trying to figure out what this is between us, but I've known for weeks. I'm in love with him. I know that I didn't set out to find a home here, but being with him and Faith is where I belong.

I haven't said anything to him yet. I didn't want to distract him from the fight or his training, but after tonight, I know that I'll need to sit him down so we can talk. I'm getting tired of biting my tongue around him.

"Are you excited?" Sylvie asks as she catches up to my side in the locker room.

"I think I might throw up," I whisper to her and she laughs.

"I was nervous too, but he'll be okay," she promises me.

"Where's Finn?" I ask her.

I saw them when they first joined us in the hallway to head back here, but there are so many people around and I lost track of her in the crowd.

“Talking to Brooks and Kit outside. I’m sure that they’ll all be in here in a moment.”

I nod, looking over to where Jameson is talking with Niall and Everly. As if he can sense my eyes on him, he looks over to me and smiles.

My stomach revolts and I let go of Faith’s hand to look around for the bathroom.

“I’ll be right back,” I tell Faith and Sylvie and they both nod distractedly, too busy watching as even more people spill into the room.

I weave my way through the crowd and into the back area of the locker room. I head into the shower area and press my back against the cool tile.

“Are you alright?” Jameson asks a moment later.

I should have known that he would follow me.

“Yeah, just a little hot,” I tell him, but he doesn’t look convinced. “You should be worrying about your fight, not me.”

“I’ll always worry about you,” he says, stepping closer and cupping my face in his hands.

“Jameson, I—”

“No!” Faith yells and we both jerk toward her.

She’s standing there looking shocked as she stares between us and I know that she’s going to bolt before she starts to move.

“Faith! Wait!” I yell as she runs back the way she came.

“I’ve got her,” Jameson tells me, but I don’t listen to him.

We both run through the locker room and back out into the hallway.

“I’ll go this way,” I tell him and he nods, taking off in the other direction.

“Have you seen Faith? She took off,” I tell Niall when I run into him and he shakes his head.

“I’ll look this way,” he says and before I can respond, he takes off down the hallway.

If Niall hadn’t seen her, then that means that she must have gone the other way. We should still check in this direction though and so I yell thank you over my shoulder as I turn around and head after Jameson.

I have to push my way through the crowd gathered around the locker room door and then I sprint down the hall, my head turning as I try to spot any sign of her. What was she wearing? Her pink sweater?

I catch sight of it up ahead and skid to a halt when I see that Jameson has her. They duck down a side hall and I walk closer, trying to calm my racing heart.

“You can’t run off like that,” I hear Jameson tell her and I lean against the wall, wanting to give them a moment alone.

“I don’t want Phoenix to go away,” Faith says, and I can tell that she’s pouting.

“I don’t either.”

“What if you break up or get into a fight?” she whispers and my heart breaks.

“Then we’ll work it out. I love Phoenix, Faith. I’ll do whatever it takes to make sure that she stays with us.”

My heart feels like it’s lodged in my throat. Did he really just say that he’s in love with me?

I step out from behind the corner and they both turn to look up at me.

“I love you too. Both of you,” I say.

Faith is the first to react and she runs over to me, wrapping her arms around my waist.

“So, you’re staying. You’re never going to leave ever?”

“Yeah,” I choke out, tears spilling over onto my cheeks. “I’m not going anywhere.”

I hold her to me tighter and look up as Jameson heads our way.

“You love me?” he asks me, a hopeful look in his eyes.

“Of course, I do,” I say on a laugh. “I’ve been trying not to just blurt it out over the last two weeks because I didn’t want to distract you from your training. I know how much tonight means to you.”

“You mean more. Both of you,” he says as he wraps his arm around Faith and me.

Faith hugs both of us back and I bury my face in Jameson’s chest.

“I love you,” Jameson whispers in my ear. “I was going to tell you after the fight. I just wanted Faith to know before we went public.”

“Is this how you imagined her finding out?” I ask him and he laughs.

“Not at all, but I can’t say that I regret it. Not when I have everything that I wanted.”

He takes my hand and I grab Faith as we make our way back to the locker room. Kit meets us halfway there, looking relieved to have found Jameson.

“Fight starts in five,” Kit says and Jameson nods.

“I’ll go get ready.”

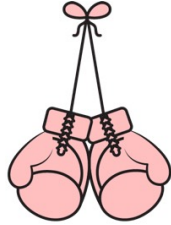
“I’ll show you two to your seats,” Kit says to Faith and me, and I turn to Jameson.

“Good luck,” I whisper and he grins down at me.

“Thanks, baby.”

I kiss him once for luck and then Faith and I are heading toward our seats.

THIRTEEN



Jameson

THE REF HOLDS my hand over my head and I grin down at Faith and Phoenix as they both cheer for me. I just won my fight and while I'm excited to have the chance to get bigger fights and more money, I already felt like I won before the fight even started.

Phoenix loves me and Faith knows about us and is happy about it. What more could I want?

I can't wait to change and go home with them, but first I need to shake a few hands. I know that Kit has lined up a few agents to talk to me after the fight and I need to meet with them before I can go home.

The seats start to empty as everyone gets ready to head home and I climb down, meeting Kit, Niall, and Finn over in my corner. I know that Sylvie and Everly will be able to show Phoenix and Faith how to get back to the locker room.

"Mr. O'Callaghan?" a guy in a suit says as he approaches me. "Congratulations."

I shake his hand and listen as he introduces himself as an agent for a local agency. He's the same one that represents Niall and Finn and I already know that I'll be signing with him if he makes me an offer.

I try to focus on his words as he goes on about what he and his company can do for me, but I can't focus. I'm still too

wired from the fight and I just want to be with my girls right now.

“Sounds good. Can I call you tomorrow?” I ask him.

He seems a little taken aback but nods and shakes my hand again. I have a repeat of the same conversation four more times as I make my way back to the locker room and when I finally push open the door and lock eyes with Phoenix, I forget all about them.

“You did it!” Faith says as she runs and jumps into my arms.

“Congratulations,” Phoenix says as she comes over to give me a hug.

“Thanks. Are you ready to go home?” I ask her and her eyebrows raise in surprise.

“Don’t you have to stick around and talk business?”

“No, I’ll deal with it tomorrow. Right now, I just want to go home and be with my family.”

Faith wraps her arms around my neck and I kiss her cheek as I head over to grab my duffel bag. I’ll take a shower at home. Maybe I can convince Phoenix to join me.

It still takes us close to an hour to make our way out to the car. By then, Faith has fallen asleep on my shoulder and I can tell that Phoenix is getting tired too.

“Did you have fun?” I ask her after I’ve buckled Faith in and started the car.

The lot is mostly empty, so at least we don’t have to battle traffic as we head for home.

“Yeah, it was a lot more nerve-racking than I thought it would be to see you up there, but you were incredible.”

I smile at her praise as I take her hand in mine and bring her fingers to my lips.

“Any idea who you’ll sign with yet?” she asks me and we spend the rest of the car ride home talking about agents and other fights.

I'm excited to have won and to be heading into the next stage of my career, but the high from the fight is starting to fade as we park outside of our home.

"I'll carry her in and get her tucked into bed," Phoenix whispers to me as she unbuckles Faith from her booster seat.

"I can help," I offer.

"No, I've got it. I know that you want a shower and probably something to eat."

She knows me well.

"I was actually hoping that you would shower with me," I whisper against her neck and she laughs.

"Oh yeah? Do you need me to wash your back?" she asks and I pull back to see her grinning at me.

"Among other things," I say as I grab my duffel bag and unlock the front door for us.

"Get yourself something to eat. I'll tuck her in and get the water warmed up for you," Phoenix whispers as she heads up the stairs and I grin as I watch my girls go.

I head into the kitchen and open the fridge. I'm just planning on grabbing something quick to eat so I can get upstairs, but when I open the fridge, I freeze.

There, sitting on the top shelf, is an entire container of lasagna. I look over to the stairs and see Phoenix is still standing there with Faith in her arms. She gives me a small smile and I smile back even as my throat gets scratchy.

She remembered.

I'll be honest, when I first saw Phoenix, I was done for. I never once stopped to think about how my brother, David, would have felt about her and I probably should have since I was bringing her around his daughter.

This though. He would have loved this and I know in that moment that he would have loved and approved of Phoenix too.

I pull the lasagna out, wondering when she had the time to make it. The first bite is bittersweet. It tastes delicious but it only makes me miss my brother even more.

Maybe that's a good thing though.

I finish off my serving and put my dishes in the sink. When the water turns on overhead, I grin. Like always, my girl is ahead of me.

I take the stairs two at a time and grin as I walk into the bathroom and see her stepping beneath the water.

"Now, what did you want me to help you wash?" she asks and I laugh as I start to strip out of my clothes.

"Everything. I want you for everything," I tell her as I join her beneath the spray.

"So helpless," she teases and I laugh.

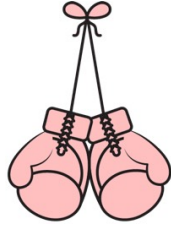
"Just in love."

She melts at that and I cup her face in my hands.

"I love you too."

I smile as I bend down and capture her lips with mine. Then I spend the rest of the night showing her just how much I love her too.

FOURTEEN



Phoenix

ONE YEAR LATER...

I SWING Faith's hand in mine as we make our way down the sidewalk. I just picked her up from her first day of kindergarten and she's excitedly telling me about everything that she did. I listen attentively as I lead her down the busy sidewalk.

We're headed to King's Gym to meet Jameson after his training. He's still riding the high of his last fight and after a week at home with us, he was dying to get back in the routine of training. Kit is still his trainer and he still trains and spars with Niall, Finn, and Brooks.

Not much has changed for us over the last year. He's still training and fighting, we still live in the same townhome. The only real difference is that I'm no longer Faith's nanny. Now I'm her guardian.

Jameson and I got married six months ago in a small ceremony in Michigan. He knows how much that place means to me. He even surprised me by offering to buy my grandma's old house, but when we drove by, a new family had moved in and the kids looked so happy playing on the front lawn that I couldn't do it. I'm glad that the house has another happy family and that's enough for me.

Sylvie, Finn, Everly, Niall, Brooks, and Rae all came for the wedding and we got to spend a few days together in a big cabin there right on Lake Michigan. It was so nice to get to be with everyone for a few days. We're all so busy now that we don't always get to see each other a ton. Plus, it was nice to have a ton of people around to watch Faith in case Jameson and I wanted some time alone.

I got pregnant while we were there. I had been so scared to tell Faith the news, but she took it well. She's excited to be a big sister and she knows that we won't love her any less once the baby is here.

"Do you think we can get pizza for dinner?" Faith asks as we reach King's Gym and I smile.

"Let's see if we can talk Dad into it," I tell her and she grins.

She started calling Jameson dad a few months ago. The first time she did it, we both almost started crying. I know that it means so much to Jameson. He confided in me that he was scared that she was forgetting about David, but I assured him that she never would.

We talk about David and Carrie all of the time and make sure that Faith still has pictures of her parents.

"Dad!" Faith yells, taking off toward Jameson and I blink back tears as he catches her up in a bear hug.

The pregnancy hormones have been so bad with me. I swear that I cry at the drop of a hat. Jameson sees and gives me a knowing smile.

"Hey, baby," he greets me and I lean up on my tiptoes to give him a kiss.

"How was school?" he asks Faith and she launches into telling him all about her day as he picks up some of the weights that he was using.

"Hey, Faith!" Niall calls as he jogs over to give her a hug.

"Hi, Uncle Niall. Is Uncle Brooks here?" she asks him and I have to bite my lip to keep from laughing.

Niall has been trying to be her favorite uncle for the past few weeks but Brooks always brings her candy, so she always asks to see him. Niall just hasn't figured out Brooks's trick yet and I can't wait to see his face when he does.

"No, he just left actually. Had to get home to Rae," he tells her and she pouts.

"Hey, Faith," Finn says, digging a packet of Skittles out of his bag.

"Uncle Finn!" Faith says, giving him a hug before she grabs the candy and I can see Niall putting the pieces together in his head.

"We should go. Faith wants to grab pizza on the way home," I tell Jameson and he nods.

"See you guys tomorrow," he tells his friends and I wave at them as I take Faith's hand in mine again and we head for the door.

"How much candy do you think Niall is going to buy on his way home tonight?" Jameson whispers to me as he opens Faith's car door for her.

I can't help but laugh, but I know that he's right. Faith's dentist is going to love us.

"How are you feeling?" he asks as he opens my door for me.

"Hungry," I groan as I rub my belly.

I'm just starting to really show and I feel like I'm always hungry lately.

"Pizza still okay?" Jameson asks and I smile.

"Only if you really want," I say, knowing that he can't have too much of it since he's getting ready for his next fight.

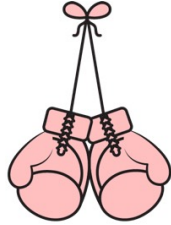
"If my girls want it, then I want it," he says and I smile and he leans in to kiss me.

"Come on, Dad!" Faith calls from the back seat and I grin as Jameson shakes his head and closes my door.

The baby kicks and I smile, smoothing my hands over the bump.

“I know, little one. You really do have the best dad.”

FIFTEEN



Jameson

FIVE YEARS LATER...

“ARE YOU SURE?” Kit asks me and I nod.

“Yeah, it’s time,” I tell him and he gives me a smile and a clap on the back.

“I can’t complain. It’s going to be nice to have you all around here more often,” he says as we start to walk out of his office at King’s Gym.

I’ve just signed on to be a new coach and trainer here along with Niall, Brooks, and Finn. Finn will just be volunteering now and then, but it’s nice to have the gang back together again.

I’ve been boxing professionally for the last five years, but now that Phoenix is pregnant again, and with twins this time, I know that it’s time for me to be at home more.

I won my last fight, so I’ll be going out on top and I’m hoping that that helps me get a few more clients here.

“Plus, it will give you more free time to spend with Stella,” I tell Kit and he just grins.

He’s been asking us all to come work for him since we started talking about retiring and I know that he’s glad to be

able to see more of us, but I'm sure that being with his wife more is also a pretty big draw.

"Speaking of wives," Kit says, nodding toward the front of the gym and I turn to see Phoenix walking in.

"I'll talk to you later," I tell him and he just claps me on the shoulder again as I go to make my way over to my wife.

"What are you doing here?" I ask her as I bend down to give her a quick kiss.

"I was in the area," she says and I grin.

"That new barbeque place around the corner?"

"Yeah," she sighs and I laugh. "It's not my fault! It's all that your kids want!"

I bend down, giving her swollen stomach a kiss and a rub before I stand up and take her hand in mine.

"Let's get you all some barbeque then," I say and she leans against my side.

"Where's Irene?" I ask.

"With Sylvie. They're all having a playdate," she tells me and I smile.

Sylvie and Phoenix have only grown closer over the years and now our kids are best friends too. Everly and Rae hang out with them sometimes too but they're usually busy during the weekdays with work.

We named our daughter Irene, after Phoenix's grandma. She's starting preschool in a few months and I can't believe how fast time has gone. It seems like just yesterday I was holding her in my arms and we were bringing her home from the hospital.

Phoenix and I have already talked about it and after the twins are here, we're done with kids. The townhouse will be a little cramped with all six of us living in it and I know that it's probably time to get something bigger, but I love our place.

It's the home that I started with Faith all of those years ago. It's where I fell in love with Phoenix, where we raised

Irene and conceived the twins. It has a lot of history for us and it's going to be hard to say goodbye.

As long as I have Phoenix though, I know that we'll all be okay.

She's our compass, the glue that holds us all together. She's the best thing that ever happened to me, and I can't wait to see what this next chapter has in store for us.

"I love you," I tell her as we head toward the new barbecue place.

"I know."

"And..." I say, nudging her with a playful glare.

"And I love you too," she says with a grin as she turns to face me on the sidewalk. "So much."

I'm about to tell her that I love her more when she leans up and presses her lips to mine. I smile against her mouth.

I don't need to tell her that. I'm sure that she already knows.

LOOKING for the rest of the [Kings Gym](#) series? You can read it here!

DO you love tough alpha heroes? Then be sure to check out the [Fallen Peak: Military Heroes](#) series or the [Knight Security](#) series!

HARVEY

EYE CANDY INK: SECOND GENERATION

*

Harvey Warner might have lost it.

His mind, that is.

His heart he just willingly gave away as soon as his eyes landed on the curvy chef working in her food truck outside of Eye Candy Ink one night.

In his defense, he's never been great at talking to women, but now that he's met the girl of his dreams, the stakes are higher than ever, so blurting out his name and the cheesiest pick-up line ever isn't a great start to their relationship.

The only saving grace is that the voluptuous chef seems to find his clumsy attempt at flirting endearing.

The pick-up lines shouldn't work on anyone, but somehow Coraline seems to kind of dig it.

Will pursuing Coraline ruin everything? Or will he finally get the happily ever after that he's been dreaming about ever since he first laid eyes on her?

ONE



Harvey

“DO you want us to wait and walk you out? Banks is still here but he’s got another hour or so with his client,” I tell Maxine as Rooney and I lean against her office doorframe.

“No, that’s okay. Ames drove me to work this morning and he just texted to say that he was almost done grabbing groceries and he’s going to swing by and pick me up.”

“Alright, I’ll see you tomorrow,” I say before we both wave and head toward the front door.

We pass Ames as we head out and he nods, giving both of us a light punch on the shoulder.

“Hey, guys, how’s it going?” he asks.

“Pretty good,” I say, shifting the backpack in my hands to my shoulder.

“Is Maxine almost finished up in there?” he asks and I shake my head with a grin.

“I doubt it. The computer went down around lunch, so she’s working on getting caught up with that,” Rooney tells him.

“Great,” he groans and I laugh as I head out the door.

“I’ll see you tomorrow,” I call as Rooney and I head down the sidewalk toward my parked car in the lot across from Eye Candy Ink.

Rooney has been my best friend since birth. Literally. Our parents are best friends and we were raised together. We're also roommates and so I drive us to work most days. Rooney has gotten more than his share of tickets and he's also terrifying to ride around with, so it works out for both of us.

The two of us could probably pass as twins with our lanky frames, messy dark brown hair, blue eyes, and dark tattoos. That's where the similarities end though.

I'm the dreamer of the two of us and Rooney is the prankster. We balance each other out since I tend to take things too seriously sometimes and Rooney hardly ever does.

We're almost to my car when the wind shifts and the scent of fried meat and spices hits my nose. My stomach growls, and I look over to Rooney. Without saying anything to each other, we both change directions and head over to the far side of the parking lot.

There's a food truck parked there that I've never seen before but if the smells coming from it and the line of people waiting to order are any indication, I'll be stopping here every night after work.

We stop at the back of the line and scan the menu on the side of the truck. It looks like this place serves fancy comfort food and while I don't know half of the ingredients listed on the board, it all sounds good. Tonight's special is chicken and waffles, and my stomach growls again as a customer walks by with a takeout box.

The food truck is called The Culinerdy Cruiser and the name is stretched across the side of the pale blue truck, done to make it look like it was graffitied in bright bold colors. The artist in me likes it and I laugh at the name, looking up right as the girl working inside of the truck turns around.

My heart stops for one brief second and then takes off like a shot. She's passing the customer a takeout box and she gives him a smile. She looks up, her eyes locking on mine for just a minute and I almost lose my balance.

Oh shit. Is this it?

I grew up listening to my dad tell me that he took one look at my mom, Darcy, and just knew that she was it for him. My Uncle Mischa used to tell us that falling for his wife, Indie, just snuck up on him. I always used to wonder how I would fall. Would it be like my dad or like Uncle Mischa?

Looks like it's going to be like my dad.

My food truck girl, she's gorgeous. Even flushed from the heat, she's perfect with her platinum blonde hair twisted up into a messy bun and sticking out of the back of her baseball hat. It's hard to tell how tall she is with the truck window only showing her from mid-torso and up, but she seems petite.

Her eyes are the clearest blue and they twinkle in the lights from the nearby streetlights. She gives me a little nod, a shy smile on her lips before she turns back to the grill and I think if I hadn't fallen in love with her at the first look, I definitely would have after that.

"Rooney. She's mine," I whisper and he straightens next to me, looking over at the girl who has captured my attention.

He knows without me elaborating what I'm talking about. I guess growing up together and being best friends will do that. We're like an old married couple who don't need words to communicate.

"Are you sure?" he asks, studying my girl, and I nod.

"Positive."

I spend the rest of my time waiting in line, studying her. She's efficient, taking orders and making food like she was born to do it. By the time it's my turn, I've already run through a million different opening lines.

Maybe that's why it's so disappointing when I get to the front of the line and open my mouth only for "Hi, I'm Harvey. What's your name? And are you a fan of shotgun weddings?" to come out.

"Oh my god," Rooney groans, taking a step away from me like he's afraid that he might get second-hand embarrassment.

The girl blinks at me and then to my, and I'm sure Rooney's, complete surprise, throws her head back and laughs. The sound is rich and wraps around me like a blanket leaving me feeling warm and at ease.

"That was a good one, Harvey. It's definitely the most creative pick-up line I've ever heard before."

"Oh my god. She's just as crazy as you," Rooney mumbles to himself and I want to glare at him but I refuse to take my eyes off my girl.

"I'm Coraline and this is my truck. What can I get for you two?"

Rooney hurries to order tonight's special and I ask for the same thing then step to the side and watch her as she works.

"Did you just open this truck? I haven't seen you around here before," I ask, trying to strike up a conversation. I want to learn everything about her.

"Yeah, I used to be over in New York but my best friend just moved here and she convinced me to come up here too. This is my first night that I'm opened over here. I used to park over by Phipps Conservatory but there wasn't that much foot traffic there late at night. This seems to be a better spot."

She passes Rooney and I our takeout boxes and Rooney thanks her and then steps over to grab some napkins from the little condiment section on the side of the truck. I hesitate, not wanting to leave her just yet.

"I'll see you around, Harvey. I hope that you stop by again soon."

"We work over there at Eye Candy Ink so I definitely will, Coraline," I promise.

She moves to take the next customer's order and I head over to join Rooney.

"It's really good," he says around his bite of food and I open my own box, taking a bite of the waffle and nodding.

"We'll have to come back again," he says and I nod.

I know that I'll be back again. Probably every night.

We finish our food and I reluctantly follow after Rooney as we head back to my car. I can't help but take one last look over my shoulder as I climb behind the wheel. Coraline's eyes meet mine and I smile as I head out of the lot and toward my apartment.

Maybe I'm not the only one who caught feelings tonight.

TWO



Coraline

I'M a sweaty mess the next morning, bent over the grill and scrubbing everything until it sparkles and looks brand new. It's only ten in the morning but I've already been up for a few hours. I hit up the farmer's market first thing and grabbed some more produce for the rest of the week.

I had grown used to ordering supplies for when I was on the other side of town and I almost ran out of ingredients last night. The traffic is a lot higher over here next to the clubs and I'll need to prepare for it from now on.

"Hey, boo!" my best friend Sayler says as she climbs into the truck, scaring the crap out of me in the process.

"Hey, Say. What are you doing here?" I ask her.

Sayler has been my best friend since grade school. When she moved up to Pittsburgh a few weeks ago, I had come with her, wanting to stay close to the last bit of family that I had left.

Sayler works as a freelance graphic designer and website developer. She's always been good with computers and is a phenomenal artist. I had asked her to draw a design for The Culinerdy Cruiser and she knocked it out of the park. I'm pretty sure it's the reason why I get half of my business.

She also designed a website for me and helps with my social media and in exchange, I cook for her. She gets free

food from the truck whenever she wants it. Which just so happens to be most nights.

“Just thought I’d see if you needed any help. You left this morning before I could ask how last night went,” she says as she grabs an extra sponge and starts to wipe down the front counter.

“Thanks. Last night was busy. I got like triple the customers over here, so I had to run to the farmer’s market right when it opened. I was so tired that I didn’t clean as well as I should have last night.”

She hums, scrubbing at a particular spot by the front window.

“Are you going to hire some help soon?” she asks as I move from the grill to the prep counter.

“I wish. Right now, I’m still barely making enough to cover all of my expenses and share of the rent. Maybe after a few more weeks over here on this side of town, I’ll be able to swing it.”

“I can cover your share of the rent for a bit,” she offers but I’m already shaking my head no.

I know that Sayler would do anything to help me out, but I don’t want to take advantage of her. Her parents are loaded, both lawyers, but they tend to try to buy her love and she’s sick of it. That was part of the reason why she moved to Pittsburgh. She wanted to get away from them and stand on her own two feet and while I know that she’s doing better than me, she’s still growing her business too.

“I’ll be fine,” I promise her and she just sighs, shaking her head in exasperation.

She’s used to me refusing help. I’ve always been independent. That probably stems from a lifetime of having to do everything myself. My mom and dad were always too wrapped up in their drama or latest argument to remember that they had a daughter most of the time.

They were like that for as long as I can remember. Miserable, tearing each other down instead of working

together. They should have gotten divorced, hell, they never should have been together in the first place. They were way too toxic and growing up in that environment certainly left me with more than one hang-up about relationships. That's probably why I've never tried to date anyone before.

"Have any interesting customers last night?" Sayler asks and my mind flashes back to the hot tattooed guy.

"Yeah, this one guy who works at that tattoo shop over there. Said his name was Harvey. He was pretty entertaining."

"Yeah? Does he have tattoos?" Sayler asks curiously.

"Yeah. He asked me what my name was and if I'm a fan of shotgun weddings," I say with a laugh and Sayler cracks up.

"Marry him."

I laugh at her and she grins at me.

"I'm being serious!"

"Yeah, yeah," I say as I move onto the last stretch of counter.

"I can't wait to meet him. Was he hot?"

I don't answer her right away but I think my blush answers that question for me.

"So, you've met the tattooed love of your life then? You lucky duck."

I roll my eyes, cleaning up the last of the cleaning supplies and storing them in the back of the truck. Sayler is the romantic of the two of us. She also knows that I'm not interested in guys or settling down right now. I just got out of culinary school a year ago and I need to make my little food truck a success and hone my craft. Or better yet, get a job working in a restaurant so that I don't have so much on my plate.

That's always been my dream but I couldn't find any restaurants hiring a chef, or even a sous chef, back in New York. I've applied to a few places here in Pittsburgh but

haven't heard anything back yet. That's why I'm still working at The Culinerdy Cruiser.

Sayler meanwhile has been dreaming about her happily ever after since we were kids. Too bad she'll never get it since her parents have been planning her wedding to their rich friends' son, Trevor, since before she was born.

I pull some of the vegetables from the fridge and get to work prepping some of the food for tonight.

"What's tonight's special? I'll put it up on the website and your social stuff while you cook."

"Since it's Tuesday, I'm going to make crispy pork belly tacos with my chili lime sauce. I'll also have regular tacos and burritos with my homemade guacamole and queso sauce."

"Ugh that sounds so freaking good," Sayler says, pretending to wipe drool off of her chin.

"I'll make some for you right now," I tell her, firing up the grill.

I make the pico de gallo and set that back in the fridge before I move onto the chili lime sauce. Sayler hums some pop song to herself as she updates all of my accounts and I reach over her, turning on the little fan I have clipped to the top of the food truck window so that we both don't die from heatstroke.

We work for the rest of the afternoon. Her on some new client work that she has due soon and me on prepping everything for tonight. I make my own guacamole and queso, then move on to making taco shells.

It's starting to get late and Sayler puts her laptop away and pulls over the iPad and little card reader that we use to collect payments.

"Are you staying to help?" I ask her and she nods.

"Yeah, I have a feeling that you'll be busy. Besides, maybe your tattooed hottie will come by and I can see if he has any friends."

She gives me a wink and I laugh, passing her another taco as our first customer of the night comes up to the counter.

THREE



Harvey

“IT LOOKS SO HOT, RIGHT?” Sally, or Susan, asks as I finish up with her lower back tattoo.

“Totally,” I say unenthusiastically.

Sharon, or whatever her name is, giggles, wiggling slightly and I try to hold in my sigh as I stop tattooing her yet again. This girl, whose name I could swear starts with an S, can’t stop moving. She whined and shifted for this whole freaking session and when she wasn’t whining, she was trying to flirt with me.

I’m used to this.

I’ve never been that interested in dating. Being a tattoo artist always attracts the girls looking for a fling with a “bad boy” and working at a tattoo shop called Eye Candy Ink might actually encourage it more. I know that most of the women that walk through the door are only interested in a fling and I didn’t want that. I want the real thing. I want love.

I finish the last of the shading and turn off my tattoo machine, grabbing the ointment and bandages so that I can get what’s-her-name out of here.

This is my last client and I can hear the other tattoo artists getting ready to close up and head home too. I drove Rooney and I to work again today so I know that he’ll be hanging

around until I'm done. I wonder if I can convince him to grab some dinner from The Culinerdy Cruiser.

I haven't been able to get Coraline out of my mind. Her food had been delicious but it had been my reaction to her that had stuck with me for the last twenty-four hours. I even dreamed of her last night.

"You're all set," I tell my client as I snap off my gloves and stand from my chair.

She takes her sweet time standing up from the table and gathering her purse from the chair in the corner. She bends over, giving me a good look at the bandage above her ass and I roll my eyes, turning away from her and stepping out into the hallway.

Rooney, Gray, and Banks are all cleaning up the front waiting area and I lead my client up there, hurrying through the payment process. Gray offers to walk her to her car for me and I give him a grateful smile as he leads her out.

Rooney and Banks follow me down the hall to my room and lean in the doorway as I clean up the mess from my last tattoo.

"Did she ask for your number?" Rooney asks as I wipe down the table and I roll my eyes.

"No."

"Did she offer you hers?" Banks asks and I flip him off as he laughs.

Banks, Rooney, and I have been friends since birth. Our parents are all super close and they all worked at the original Eye Candy Ink tattoo shop. Uncle Mischa, Rooney's dad, and Uncle Nico, Banks' dad, still work over at the other location.

Banks' real name is actually Zeke but with our uncle Zeke, it got too confusing. We used to tease him, asking him if he was the street artist Banksy. We could never prove it either way and since we needed a nickname, Banksy was shortened to Banks.

I finish cleaning my room and grab my backpack, trailing after Rooney and Banks as we head up front. Gray is back, typing away on his phone. He's probably texting Nora, his roommate and best friend. Those two are inseparable... and perfect for each other, although neither of them seems able to see that.

"You guys want to grab a late bite to eat?" Banks asks as he digs his keys out of his pocket.

"Yeah, I'm headed over there," I say, pointing across the street to the food truck.

"To see your girl or to grab something to eat?" Rooney asks and I grin at him.

"Can't it be both? You know how I love to multi-task."

Everyone laughs at that. I'm a notoriously horrible multitasker. I just like to concentrate on one thing at a time so I can make sure that I've done it perfectly. It does make things hard though. I mean, I can barely walk and talk sometimes.

"I'm in. I'm starving," Gray says as he continues to text on his phone.

"Me too," Banks says and we all take off across the street.

There's another line and I see that the special has changed to tacos. My stomach growls as the scent of spicy meat and zesty lime hits me. Coraline is working the grill and there's a new girl taking orders. She's pretty with pitch-black hair and big green eyes but she does nothing to me.

Only my Coraline can do that.

"What are you guys going to get?" Gray asks and I pull my eyes away from Coraline to answer him.

"I'm going to try one of those pork belly tacos and then get two of the regular."

We both look over to Rooney and I'm surprised to see him staring at the food truck with a dumbstruck look on his face.

I look over and see that he's staring at the girl taking orders and I start to grin. Then a thought hits me. *Did I look*

that lovestruck when I saw Coraline last night?

“Nora says to grab her some tacos. She must be working late.”

I roll my eyes at Gray, biting my tongue before I can point out that he should just take her out on a real date instead. I know that it wouldn't do any good.

Rooney is silent, in a daze, until it's our turn to order and then he steps in front of Gray and me and gives the girl he's been staring at a wide smile. Gray looks surprised and I realize that he must have missed the looks Rooney has been giving this girl.

“Hi,” Rooney says and the girl leans on the counter, giving him a grin.

“Well, hey there,” she says with a grin.

Coraline must hear her because she looks over her shoulder and our eyes lock.

“Hey! Shotgun wedding!”

“What?” Gray and Banks ask at the same time, both sounding confused and maybe a little alarmed.

“I'll explain later,” I mumble as I step up to the window, trying to elbow Rooney out of the way.

“Back for more?” Coraline asks as she passes a takeout box to the last customer.

“Yeah.”

“Well, what can I get you all?” Coraline's friend asks.

“How about your number?” Rooney says smoothly and I want to kick myself for not saying something like that last night to Coraline.

“How about we start with your order, boo?” she asks with a laugh.

“If you want to take this slow, then I can do that. I'll take two of the pork belly tacos and two of the beef ones,” Rooney

says before he steps aside and Gray steps past him to place his order.

“I’ll take six of the beef tacos and four pork belly ones please.”

Banks goes next and then it’s my turn.

“Two beef and a pork belly, please,” I say last, elbowing Rooney to pay.

He rolls his eyes at me but passes over his debit card.

“Rooney Jennings, huh?” the counter girl asks as she reads his card.

“Yeah, what’s your name?”

“If I tell you, are you going to say something cheesy like it would sound better with Jennings at the end?”

“Maybe...”

She laughs and then relents.

“I’m Sayler.”

Gray starts humming the theme song to Sailor Moon almost instantly and I want to ask him how he knows that but my eyes stray to Coraline, and I get distracted.

Rooney is busy doing his best to flirt with Sayler and I tune them out as I watch Coraline cook. She has a soft smile on her face and I wonder if it’s because she loves to cook so much or if Sayler and Rooney’s conversation is really that amusing.

When she starts to box up all of our tacos, I know that my window to talk to her is rapidly closing and I straighten, determined to make this time count.

“Here you go,” Coraline says, sliding our boxes over to us.

Gray and Banks take theirs and step over to the side. Gray is busy texting Nora on his phone and Banks has already started to eat his. Rooney thanks Coraline and then goes back to flirting with Sayler.

There's no one in line behind us so I lean against the food truck window and try to give Coraline my most charming smile.

"No pick-up line tonight?" she asks with a laugh as she leans on the counter and I search my brain for a good one.

"I wish I were cross-eyed so I could see you twice."

"Jesus, you're bad at this," Gray says, giving me a horrified look.

Banks and Rooney snort out a laugh, used to how bad I am at talking to women. Coraline laughs too and I try to think of another one.

"Do you like raisins?" I ask her and she gives me a wide grin.

"Sure."

"How about a date?"

She laughs hard at that one and I grin, feeling more at ease.

"That was a good one," she says as she giggles and I vow to hear that sound every day for the rest of my life.

Sayler is looking between the two of us like she's never seen what's happening before and I wonder if that's a good sign.

"Oh! I've got one," Coraline says excitedly and I lean closer. "If you were a chicken, you'd be impeccable!"

I laugh at how bad it is and Coraline almost doubles over.

Fuck, she's adorable.

I look over to see Gray, Banks, and Rooney staring at the two of us like we're insane but I don't care.

Some more customers come up to the window and I'm forced to step to the side.

"See you around, Harvey," Coraline says with a wave as she goes back to her grill and I wave, wishing that I had gotten her number or something.

“Bye, Rooney,” Sayler says, sliding him a piece of paper before she turns to help the next customers.

The three of us turn and head across the parking lot and Rooney flicks the paper at me. I flip him off and he laughs.

“You guys are the worst,” Gray grumbles as we head toward our cars, and Rooney and I crack up.

Banks laughs and Gray flips us off as he climbs into his car and takes off out of the lot.

FOUR



Coraline

THE RUSH HAS FINALLY SLOWED and I take a break, leaning against the counter with the fan blasting at my face. It's got to be close to ninety degrees out and it's even hotter in the food truck with the grill and fryer going.

Tonight's special is an aioli burger with aged sharp cheddar cheese, applewood smoked bacon, caramelized onions, tomato, lettuce, and a roasted garlic aioli. I was surprised when almost every customer so far has ordered it. It comes with a serving of fries and I'm glad that I portioned those out earlier today so that I just have to dump them in the fryer and then I can work on the burgers.

My eyes stray across the parking lot toward the neon pink glow of the Eye Candy Ink tattoo shop and I wonder if Harvey will be stopping by again tonight.

As if my thoughts have conjured him, he steps out of the shop and our eyes lock from across the street. I raise my hand and wave and he grins, jogging across the street.

"Hey, Coraline. Did you just come out of the oven? Because you're hot," he says with a mischievous smirk.

"Hey, Harvey. What can I get you?" I ask with a laugh.

"I'll take the special. I've been smelling it for the last hour and it smells delicious."

My face flushes from the compliment and I give him a smile before I turn and get started on his order. I dump an extra serving of fries into the fryer and get started making the best burger of my life. I want him to think that I'm the best chef that he's ever had cook for him. I want to give him a reason to keep showing up every night, although I suspect that he would do that even if my food was shit.

"How has tonight been?" he asks after a beat.

"Good. Pretty steady crowd over here. If it wasn't so hot, it would be perfect," I joke, fanning my face.

"Want me to grab you a cold bottle of water or something?" he offers and my heart melts at how sweet he is.

"No, I've been sticking my head in the cooler every few minutes, so I'm alright," I joke and he laughs.

I finish his order and pass the box over to him. He looks inside and smiles.

"Extra fries, Coraline? You better be careful or people are going to think that you've got a crush on me."

"It's not that. I'm just trying to fatten you up. You're so skinny and it looks like the last time you ate was sometime in the nineties."

"I've got to give the ladies what they want."

"What ladies? I don't know anyone who is searching for this look," I say with a grin, eyeing him from his shoes up to his messy hair.

"I took a poll. Tall and lanky is hot right now."

"I think maybe you should retake that poll," I tease.

"Haha. You know, if you really wanted to fatten me up, you could give me a slice of that cheesecake," he says, pointing to the dessert menu for tonight.

I take a step closer and lean over the food truck window.

"I can't do that, Harvey. People might get the wrong opinion and think I have a crush on you or something."

He throws his head back, laughing up at the dark sky and I join him. I've never had this kind of easy relationship with a guy before. I'm used to sexist pricks or fuck boys. No one like Harvey.

Culinary school was filled with a bunch of cocky guys and even if I had been interested in one of them, it was too competitive to really nurture any kind of relationship. Before that, I was busy trying to keep a roof over my head and save up for school. I didn't have time for boys or dating.

I technically still don't.

I need to get this food truck off the ground or find a chef position at a restaurant around here. I need to hone my craft and become the best chef that I can possibly be. The best chef in Pittsburgh.

A few more customers head my way and my mood sours. I don't want to help them right now. I just want a few more minutes with Harvey.

That's how I know that he's dangerous.

Sayler couldn't stop talking about Harvey and Rooney last night and she kept up that conversation long after we had shut down the truck and gone home. I know that she's already started planning double dates out in her head and I hate having to tell her that I don't have time for dating right now. I know that she'll try to get me to change my mind.

"Hey, um, I was wonder if maybe you'd—" He's cut off by the arrival of the next round of customers and he gives me a sad smile, shifting out of the way slightly.

"I'll see you tomorrow night?" he asks as he steps out of the way more and I nod, giving him one last smile.

I try not to watch as he crosses back to the shop and heads inside. He stops when he reaches the door and looks over his shoulder.

For one brief moment, our eyes meet and cling. Even in the dim light and with the distance, I can see the fire burning in his eyes and it calls to me. I want to go to him. I want him

to wrap those lanky arms around me. I want to feel his lips on mine, his body on mine.

I force myself to look away and paste on a smile as I take the next round of orders and get back to work.

Sayler shows up a few minutes later and I give her a grateful smile as she takes over the counter. We work for half an hour before we get another break and I know what she's going to ask before she opens her mouth.

"Has Harvey been by yet?" she asks and I nod.

"You just missed him. He came by right before you got here."

She frowns and I pass her a water, aiming the fan at her for a few minutes.

"Did he ask you out yet?" she asks and I shake my head.

"I think he was going to tonight but we got interrupted."

"Maybe next time. It's obvious he's into you. We just need to get the timing right."

She scrunches her nose and I swear I can almost see her doing the math in her head of when would be the ideal time to run into Harvey.

"It's not like it matters. I can't go out with him."

"What? Why not?" Sayler demands, frowning at me.

"I've got this truck and I need to get my business off of the ground. I don't have time to worry about guys right now."

Sayler sighs and takes a drink of her water.

"You can't always predict everything, Cora. Especially not when you'll meet 'the one.'"

"I know. It's just like you said. I just need our timing to be right."

Sayler frowns, not liking me using her words against her but we get another few customers then and I'm saved from her arguments.

Still, as I turn back to the grill to get cooking, I can't help but steal one last look at the front doors of the Eye Candy Ink shop, hoping to get one last look at Harvey before I push him from my head once again.

FIVE



Harvey

TODAY IS my last night of work for the week and I'm exhausted. I've been looking forward to stopping by Coraline's food truck before I head home and pass out. It's been a long week, filled with back-to-back clients and I'm desperate to catch up on some sleep.

I step out of Eye Candy Ink, locking the door behind me before I look across the street to The Culinerdy Cruiser. There's a long line tonight and I smile, happy that people seem to be recognizing how talented my girl is. As I get closer though, I realize that something is wrong.

Everyone in the line seems a little annoyed and when I glance up to the truck window, it looks like the guy ordering is yelling at my sweet girl. He's leaning over the ledge, gesturing to the takeout box and I can see that Coraline is trying to calm him down. I can also see that she is trying to hold back her tears and I react without thinking.

I head up to the food truck door and knock. The guy who was yelling at Coraline has stormed off and I don't have to wait long for Coraline to open the door for me.

Her cheeks are flushed, her eyes shiny with a sheen of unshed tears, but her face seems to relax a bit at the sight of me.

“Thank god. I thought you were another customer coming to yell at me.”

“Has that been happening a lot tonight?” I ask carefully and she nods, her eyes still a little glassy.

“Apparently the Cajun Chicken Gnocchi isn’t a big hit,” she says, trying to make a joke but I can hear the pain in her voice and I can’t stand it.

“Well, it smells really good.”

“It’s too spicy. That’s been the complaint all night but I marinated the chicken last night and I can’t really change that now. I’d have to make more of the cream sauce to go with it to tone it down a bit but I can’t leave to go get more ingredients.”

“Let me help. I’ll text Rooney to run to the store. You cook and use more of the cream sauce for now and I’ll help you make more once Rooney gets here.”

“You don’t have to do that, Harvey. I know that you’ve been working all day.”

“I want to help you, Coraline.”

“Why?” she asks as the crowd starts to grow more annoyed.

“Because I like you and I can’t stand to see you upset. Now, what does Rooney need to get?”

She eyes me for long seconds and then she rattles off a few ingredients and I text Rooney. He tells me he’ll be there in twenty minutes and I climb into the truck and head to the window. The checkout system is pretty easy and I pick it up quick.

We were together in unison, making a good team as we clear the line. We’re just finishing with the last customer when Rooney pulls up and heads over with a few grocery bags. I let him in and hurry to show him how to work the credit card machine before I move to help Coraline at the back counter.

I wash my hands, sliding on a pair of gloves and a baseball hat before I take my spot next to her at the counter.

“Can you keep stirring the sauce? I don’t want it to burn. I’ll cut up the onions and green peppers.”

I take the spoon from her and start stirring, watching as Coraline quickly slices and dices the onions and green peppers. She’s a master with that knife, the blade moving so fast that it starts to blur. She adds the vegetables and some herbs to the pan that I’m stirring and then has to get back to work when a few more customers walk up.

We finish the sauce and I start helping Coraline box up the food. The three of us work together in tandem for the next two hours. I didn’t realize that her busiest hours seemed to be right as Eye Candy Ink was closing. There’s more people out, club hopping or heading to bars and so there’s a lot of hungry, slightly drunk club goers out and they all seem to gravitate to The Culinerdy Cruiser, probably drawn by the delicious smells.

We don’t close down until one a.m. and by then I’m beat. I don’t know how she does this every day. And by herself most of the time.

“Thank you so much for helping me out tonight,” she tells Rooney and me, and we both nod.

“Anytime,” I tell her, leaning over and giving her a side hug.

“Do we need to clean anything up? I was trying to wipe down the counter when I could,” he says, looking around the truck.

“Oh, you don’t have to do that. I can take care of it later.”

“Let us help you,” I tell her. “Then we’ll walk you to your car.”

She nods, giving us a grateful smile before she asks us to take care of the condiments outside of the truck and to wipe down the counters. She cleans the grill and Rooney heads outside, so I grab a towel and start to wipe down everything in sight.

By two a.m., we’re finally done and I follow Coraline outside and wait while she closes the truck door and locks up.

“You know, if you want to work later hours, for less pay, I can totally hire you two.”

Rooney and I laugh and then Rooney yawns, I can tell that he’s exhausted too and I definitely owe him one for spending his night inside the food truck with us.

“See you later, Coraline. See you at home, Harvey,” Rooney says before he waves and heads toward his car.

I turn with Coraline and head in the other direction toward an older model Ford Edge.

“Thanks again for helping me out tonight,” she says sweetly and I nod.

“Anytime, Coraline.”

We reach her car and she digs her keys out of her pocket. We both shift and I like to think that it’s because we both don’t want to say goodbye to each other.

“Do you ever take a night off?” I ask.

I’m sick of dancing around how I feel for this girl. I need to ask her out. I need to make her mine.

“Yeah, I take Monday and Tuesday nights off.”

“Maybe I can take you out for dinner then? You can let someone else cook for you for a change,” I ask and she gives me a smile that looks slightly brittle around the edges.

“I’d love to Harvey, but I can’t. I’m just too busy here and I need to make the food truck a success before I worry about anything else.”

I try not to let my disappointment show as I nod and shuffle my feet.

“No worries.”

“I really am sorry,” she says and I nod again. “I’ll, uh, I’ll see you later,” she says, unlocking her car and I nod again, feeling lame and more awkward than I ever have before.

“See you later,” I echo as I hold her car door open for her.

She slides inside and I close the door, waving one last time before I head across the parking lot and climb into my own car. I wait until after Coraline has driven out of the lot and turned onto Main Street before I rest my head on the steering wheel and let out the groan that I was holding in.

SIX



Coraline

HARVEY HASN'T BEEN by for the last two nights and I wonder if I scared him off or upset him when I turned down his date. I know it has only been a few days since I met him, but he's already become a part of my daily routine.

Most of my days are just filled with work, but seeing Harvey was a bright spot in them. He could always make me laugh, make me feel better. Now that I haven't seen him for a few days, I can see just how boring my days are.

I miss him.

I can't help but glance over to the Eye Candy Ink tattoo shop. I've been stealing looks in that direction all night, hoping to catch a glimpse of Harvey's lanky frame.

Sayler clears her throat and I jerk my eyes away from the tattoo shop to meet her laughing eyes.

"Looking for something? Or should I say someone?" she asks with a sly smile and I can tell that she's onto me.

"Nope," I say, turning my back on the shop and wiping down the counter for the tenth time in the last half hour.

The weather is a little overcast tonight so foot traffic and customers have been slow. Normally I would be grateful for the break in the hot weather but the downtime has only given

me more time to think and wonder if I made a mistake the other night in turning Harvey down.

“Do you want to talk about that person that you’re not looking for?” Sayler asks and I snort out a laugh at the way she worded that question.

“There’s not much to talk about. He asked me out. I don’t have time to date right now, so I turned him down,” I say but the words sound sour to my ears and I have to swallow hard around the lie.

“Maybe you’ll get one of those chef positions that you applied for.”

“Then I’ll have even more to do to get an entire kitchen used to me and the way I run things.”

“So, basically you’re just never going to date anyone,” Sayler says dryly and I sigh.

“Guess so.”

She gives me a hard look and I turn away. I know that it won’t stop her from saying whatever is on her mind.

“What are you so afraid of? That you’ll get hurt? Or that you will find out that you were wrong this whole time. I know that you like to think that everyone is just better off alone because of your parents. But you’re alone right now and are you really happy. The only time that I’ve seen you smile lately is when Harvey is around. I think that means something.”

I know that she’s right, that I’m making excuses, but I can’t help it. I don’t have the best example of a healthy relationship. My parents fought constantly. They made each other miserable and I never understood why they stayed together just to be angry all of the time.

Sayler’s parents are still together and they argue nonstop. They say that it’s just because they’re both lawyers but Sayler and I stopped buying that excuse years ago.

Her parents just aren’t great people and part of me wonders if they corrupted each other, or if they only wound up together

because they both were corrupt. Either way though, isn't that proof that you'll just end up being happier alone?

"Not every relationship ends in disaster, Coraline. You're not your mom and I highly doubt that Harvey is like your dad."

Her words hit home and I know that I shouldn't be surprised. Sayler knows me better than anyone and she's well versed in all of my hang-ups and issues.

"I know. In my head, I know that, but I still just can't seem to find it in me to pull the trigger and take that leap."

"That's what you have me for! You just have to say yes and then we double date. I'll be there to help you in case he turns out to be a jerk and vice versa. It's the Meyers and Jones girls against the world!" she says excitedly, holding her closed fist out to me.

I laugh, fist bumping her and then go back to cleaning the counters as I mull over her words.

Maybe it's time that I started dating. I never had much interest in dating or men before, but there's something about Harvey that draws me in. It feels like he's already under my skin and I'm not sure that I want to get him out.

By ten p.m., the truck is spotless and it's starting to rain so we close up the truck and get ready to head home. Sayler has work to do still, so I offer to make us something to eat and stay up with her.

She loves my truffle macaroni and cheese and I'm planning on making it for the truck sometime this week so I figure that I'll practice now.

I start the water to boil and then move over to my own laptop. I need to update my expenses and check my email. I've been applying to a few chef positions over the last few weeks. Owning a food truck was never really my plan. I liked the freedom of it originally but it's a lot of work. Besides, I want the notoriety of running my own brick-and-mortar place. I want people to line up for a chance to dine at one of my tables. Not to stand in line at my tiny truck window.

I open my email first and my heart drops when I see the name on the first message.

Maxwell Schultz.

Maxwell is a huge name in the restaurateur business. He's even bigger here in Pittsburgh. Working for him would be a dream come true and while I had applied, I never thought that I would get even an interview.

I hurry to open the email and my breath stalls in my lungs.

"Oh my god," I whisper and Sayler looks up at me.

"You alright?" she calls from the couch and I turn wide-eyed to stare at her.

"I got an interview for the new restaurant that Maxwell Schultz is opening."

"Woohoo!" Sayler screams, vaulting over the back of the couch to almost tackle me in a hug. "That's my best friend! Kicking ass!"

I laugh with her, jumping up and down in the center of our tiny kitchen. I only stop when the water for the macaroni and cheese starts to boil over.

"That's awesome, Coraline! Maxwell is going to hire you as soon as he takes a bite of your food. You're going to kill it and be rich and famous and everyone will be dying to eat your food."

Sayler has always been my biggest supporter and I grin at her now, adding the macaroni to the pot and stirring it.

We stay up for hours talking about the interview and what I'll be making. Sayler is already making plans for how to sell the food truck and how she's going to have to insist that she has a standing reservation every day.

It's after three in the morning when I head to bed with a smile on my face but the last thought that I have before I fall asleep is that I wonder if Harvey would come and see me at the restaurant.

SEVEN



Harvey

“HEY,” Ames says as he drops down onto the spare chair in my tattoo room.

“Hey, what’s up?” I ask him as I go back to finishing up the sketch that I’m working on.

“I have a question for you,” he says with a grin and I groan, already knowing what’s coming.

The whole shop has been asking me if I’m a fan of shotgun weddings ever since Rooney spilled the beans about my first conversation with Coraline. They also keep trying to give me pick-up lines to use on her.

News also spread to my entire extended family and my uncle Mischa keeps trying to send me dating articles. My mom and dad keep asking when they can meet her.

Meanwhile, I can’t even get my girl to let me take her out to dinner.

“Is Mischa still sending you those dating articles?” Ames asks and I nod, ignoring him when he starts to laugh.

Gray wanders into my room, hopping up on top of my table and I nod at him.

“I have a question for you, Harvey,” Gray starts and Ames cracks up.

The sound draws Rooney, and I groan as he comes into my room too with his usual maniacal grin stretching his lips.

“I thought of another one,” Rooney says and I toss down my pencil. It looks like I won’t be finishing this sketch right now.

“What?” I ask.

“Did you just come out of the oven? ‘Cause you’re hot,” he says, grinning wider.

“Good one,” I say dryly.

He just laughs and Ames rolls his eyes. Gray is busy texting on his phone and if I had to bet money, I would say that he was talking to Nora.

Ender wanders by my door and when he sees everyone hanging out, he stops and leans against the doorframe.

“Hey, man,” I say.

Ender has been here for close to a year now and I still feel like I know nothing about him. He’s super quiet and he doesn’t usually hang out with us. He does his work and then disappears.

“Hey,” he says, his deep voice making mine sound like I haven’t gone through puberty yet.

“Are you here to give me shit about my way with the ladies too?” I joke and he shakes his head, crossing his big arms over his chest.

“Are you here for some tips yourself, Ender?” Rooney asks, wiggling his eyebrows at him.

I think Rooney might have a death wish. Ender is at least twice his size and looks like he could snap Rooney in two. Ender’s lips twitch and I breathe a sigh of relief that the guy has a sense of humor and isn’t going to kill my best friend.

“Listen, as the only guy here with a girlfriend,” Ames starts and Rooney rolls his eyes.

“How do you know you’re the only one?” Gray asks and we all look at him with interest.

“Did you finally pull your head out of your ass and realize that you love Nora?” Ender asks and I’m shocked that he knows about Gray and his best friend and roommate.

“No,” Gray says. “I meant that I saw the way Rooney was looking at Sayler the other night.”

“I’m surprised that you caught that since your face was glued to your text messages with Nora,” Rooney mumbles.

“Hey, are any of you working?” comes a voice from behind Ender and we all jump, turning to see Zeke standing there.

“I was trying to, Uncle Zeke,” I say, sucking up to our boss and the other guys boo me.

“We were trying to work but Harvey’s lack of a love life distracted us,” Rooney says.

Uncle Zeke tries to cover his smile but I still see it and roll my eyes.

“Is that why you’re here too?” I ask Zeke and he shakes his head no.

“I came to grab the bank deposit from the office so Maxine doesn’t have to do it later. They’re talking about your love life over at the other Eye Candy Ink location too and I thought that I would give you a heads up. It seems Mischa has found some new tips, so you have those to look forward to later,” he says with a laugh and my phone buzzes on my desk.

“Great.”

“You’re just in time, Uncle Zeke! Ames here was just about to tell us all how he was able to win your daughter Maxine over,” he says with a shit-eating grin and I see Ames wince and Gray grin. Ender looks like he’s trying not to laugh as Zeke levels a death glare at Ames.

Ames had a one-night stand with Maxine a few months ago and then found out that she was the daughter of his new boss, Zeke, right after. To say that it was a terrifying mess would be an understatement but everyone seems to be getting

along well now. Well, until Rooney starts to push people's buttons again.

"Get back to work," Zeke says, turning to head back to the office. "Good luck with your girl, Harvey!" he calls over his shoulder and I sigh, turning back to the guys.

They wait until Zeke has left before they turn their attention back to me.

"In all seriousness, what are you going to do?" Gray asks me curiously.

"Yeah, do we need to take you out to a club or something? You can get drunk and forget all about Coraline," Ames suggests.

"Max's club?" Ender asks, sounding interested and I wonder why he cares if we go to my uncle Max's club.

"Sure," Rooney says with a shrug, looking at Ender curiously and I can see the wheels turning in his head.

"I'm in," Ender says and even though I don't really want to go to a club, get drunk, or forget about Coraline, as if I ever could, I still feel like I have to say yes.

"I don't want to forget about Coraline but I'm up for a guy's night," I tell them and they nod and start to make plans for tonight.

We still have a few hours until the shop closes and they all have at least one client left to do today so they head back to their rooms soon after. Ames stays back a beat and closes my door slightly.

"If you really like her, then you should wait for her. Ask her out again and if she still tells you that she's too busy right now, then tell her that you're willing to wait for her. She'll either say okay and then maybe you really do have a chance with her, or she'll let you down easy again and you'll know that it's not meant to be."

His advice is surprisingly romantic but it makes sense. I nod, giving him a grateful smile.

"Thanks, Ames," I tell him honestly.

He just smiles and nods before he heads back to his own room.

I turn back to my desk, picking up my pencil and getting back to work on my design. I already know that I'll be stopping by The Culinerdy Cruiser tonight to see Coraline and I'll ask her out again, just like Ames suggested.

And if she says no again, then maybe I really will be getting drunk tonight.

EIGHT



Coraline

I'VE BEEN BUZZING all day thinking about my upcoming interview. I swear that I haven't stopped smiling since I read the email. Sayler is here tonight at the food truck running the counter for me.

We've been trying to brainstorm ideas for me to cook for my interview but I think that she's really here tonight because she knew that I was making my truffle mac and cheese. She's already had two bowls and I know that she'll be grabbing a slice of the cinnamon cheesecake that I made for dessert soon.

I'd never admit it, but I've been looking out for Harvey all night. For some reason, I can't wait to tell him my news about the interview. I'm not used to wanting to share things with other people, besides Sayler of course. I know that if I told Sayler about wanting to see Harvey, that she would only push me to go out with him.

I've been mulling over her words for a while and I know in my heart that I want to go out with him. It's my head that I'm having a problem with.

"Hi, what can I get you?" Sayler asks and I look up to see two older couples standing outside the window.

"We'll all take the special," one of the women says, her eyes locked on me and I give a small smile.

I get to work on their order, trying not to be obvious as I sneak glances across the street to Eye Candy Ink to see if I can spot Harvey.

As if my thoughts have conjured him, I look up and see him headed across the street. A few of the other guys who work at the shop are locking up the front door and I wonder if they'll be stopping by to grab something to eat too.

"Mom? Dad?!?" Harvey asks, sounding shocked and a little embarrassed to see his parents crowded around the food truck.

"Dude, this must be so embarrassing for you," Rooney says with an evil chuckle as he rounds the side of the food truck and I see Harvey nudge him, nodding over to where Sayler is standing inside the truck taking orders.

"That's your parents right there," Harvey points out and he flushes beet red.

"Mom and dad! What are you doing here?" He asks, hurrying over to their side.

"We were just in the neighborhood and we're hungry," the woman who ordered says innocently but no one seems to be buying that.

"It's nine pm! You guys should be in bed," Rooney argues, trying to herd his parents to their car.

"We can still party," one of the guys protests with a frown.

"Yeah! We're hype, we boogie."

"Oh my god," the guy and Rooney say at the same time only the guy is grinning at his wife and Rooney looks like he wants the earth to open up and swallow him whole.

"We just wanted to meet your lovely lady," Harvey's mom says, giving me a warm smile and I look past his parents to see that Harvey seems to have relaxed now that he sees that I'm okay with them being here.

"Well, we better go," Harvey's mom says and I give them a little wave as they take their food to go.

They stop and say something to Harvey and Rooney before they wave and head towards their car.

“Sorry about that,” Harvey says with a wince and I laugh.

“They were sweet.”

We’re silent for a minute until Harvey breaks the tension.

“Do you have a Band Aid? I just scraped my knee falling for you.”

“Good one, Harvey,” I say with a laugh as he gives me a wide smile and leans over the window.

“Hey, Sayler,” he says, waving at my friend as she steps aside to chat with Rooney. “It smells awesome.”

“Truffle mac and cheese,” I tell him and he reaches for his wallet, placing an order.

“Where are you guys headed tonight?” Sayler asks him as I get started boxing up his food.

“To Seven,” he says, naming a popular nightclub down the road.

Max Schultz owns that place too and it’s the perfect opening for me to tell him about my interview.

“Are you sure that you can get into that place?” I tease him and he chuckles.

“My uncle Max owns the place so fingers crossed.”

My stomach drops when he says that Max is his uncle.

“Did you tell him to give me an interview?” I blurt, my voice coming out accusatory.

Harvey’s brow scrunches and he looks confused.

“What? What interview?”

“I got an interview for the new restaurant that Max is opening. Did you ask him to give me one?” I ask.

“No, I haven’t talked to Max for a few weeks. And I don’t really keep up with his business ventures. That’s awesome about the interview though! You’re going to kill it!”

He seems so sincere that I know that he's telling the truth. My shoulders relax and I can see Sayler grinning between the two of us.

His friends are approaching now and he swallows hard before he blurts out, "Maybe I could take you out to dinner to celebrate."

"I wish I could, but I need to keep this place running and prepare for my interview."

Even as the words leave my mouth, I know that I'm making a mistake.

"It's okay. I can wait, because I know in my heart that you're it for me. You're worth waiting for, Coraline."

He says it so quietly that I want to pretend like I didn't hear him but I can see the honesty in his eyes and I don't want to hurt him.

"Okay," I whisper and his eyes widen.

"Okay?" he asks and Sayler leans forward, her whole body hanging on our every word.

"Okay, I'll go to dinner with you."

"Really?" he asks, sounding surprised but happy.

"Yeah, does Monday night work for you?" I ask with a laugh.

"Yeah, yes," he says right away, pulling out his phone. "What's your number?"

I rattle it off as his friends join us and Harvey gives me a smile.

"You said yes?" Rooney asks as he stops beside Rooney and I nod. "Are we still going to Seven?"

"Yes." A tall man standing slightly apart from the group says and Rooney eyes him for a minute.

"Alright then," Rooney says slowly.

Sayler only has eyes for Rooney as he orders his food and I try to give them some privacy as I box up the food and hand

it off to her.

I want to say more to Harvey and as if he heard my thoughts, my phone buzzes in my pocket and I pull it out to see a message from an unknown number.

UNKNOWN: **You look beautiful.**

I LOOK OVER MY SHOULDER, biting back a grin when I meet Harvey's eyes.

CORALINE: **Thanks**

I ADD the kiss face emoji and hit send before I slide my phone back in my pocket, wash my hands, and get back to work.

A few more customers walk up and so we say goodbye to the guys and get back to work. As I work, I wonder if I'm more excited and nervous for the interview with Max or for my date with Harvey.

NINE



Harvey

I'VE NEVER BEEN this nervous in my entire life. I know that it's just a date, and while I've never actually been on a date before, they never seemed this freaking scary. I guess maybe I should have paid more attention to the tips that Rooney, Ames, and Gray were trying to give me last night.

We went to Se7en after we left The Culinerdy Cruiser and even Banks came out to hang out with us. I have a feeling that Rooney called him and told him where to meet us because he showed up at our table with a grin on his face right as the other guys started to tease me about Coraline.

Cat, Max's daughter and the manager of Se7en, even joined us for a round and as soon as I saw the way that Ender was looking at her, I figured out why he wanted to go to the club so bad.

I'm supposed to be picking up Coraline in like fifteen minutes and she lives a few blocks away, so I take one last look at myself in the mirror before I head for the door. Luckily for me, Rooney is at work so he's not here to give me shit before my big date. I mean, he's still been texting me, but those I can ignore.

I try to give myself a pep talk the whole way over to Coraline's apartment. She lives a few blocks away from me, close to Eye Candy Ink. I manage to nab a parking spot right

out front and I jog up the stairs to the fourth floor and knock on Coraline and Sayler's door.

I dry my palms off on my dark jeans as I wait for someone to answer the door. I don't have to wait long and I swear I almost swallow my tongue when I get a look at Coraline.

She's dressed in a pair of black leggings that mold to her legs and lush hips. She's got a lacy tunic with a pale pink tank top underneath and it gives me just a hint at the curves hiding beneath. Her pale blonde hair is pulled up into a high ponytail and she's got something dark and smoky on her eyelids that almost make her blue eyes seem bigger and bluer.

"Whoa," I whisper and Coraline laughs.

"Thanks, you don't look so bad yourself," she says as she steps out into the hallway and pulls the door closed behind her.

"Ready to go?" I ask her, reaching over and grabbing Coraline's hand in mine.

She nods, ducking her head to hide her blush and seeing the pink stain on her cheeks puts me at ease. It means that I'm not the only one who's feeling nervous about tonight. *That has to mean that she has feelings about me too, right?*

I open the car door for her and Coraline smiles at me as she slips inside. I planned for us to go to an escape room before we head to Il Tettoo, a rooftop restaurant in downtown Pittsburgh. It was the most romantic place that I could think of with its tiny twinkling string lights and the view of Penn Avenue. The food is supposed to be great too which is a major plus. Coraline cooks for people all of the time, so I want to take her out someplace good.

"Where are we headed?"

"Have you ever been to an escape room?" I ask her.

"Uh, no... but quick question."

"Sure," I say with a smile.

"Um, should I be worried that for our first date you're taking me someplace where I'll literally be trapped with you?" she asks with a laugh and I join her.

“I hadn’t thought of that,” I admit. “It just sounded like something fun and I’ve never been before, so maybe it would be a new experience for both of us.”

“It sounds cool. Are we grabbing food too?”

“Yeah, I made reservations at Il Tetto at seven-thirty so hopefully we’re out of the escape room by then.”

Coraline laughs as I pull into the parking lot of Dido’s Escape Rooms and hurry out of the car and around the hood to open Coraline’s door for her.

“You look gorgeous, Coraline,” I whisper in her ear as I lean past her to close the car door.

I could swear that she shivers at my words and my confidence grows. These feelings can’t be one-sided.

I take her hand again as we head inside and get checked in. Our escape room is designed like a prison and we listen to the instructions before the energetic employee locks us inside and starts the timer.

“Where do you want to get started?” Coraline asks me, and I look around the small room.

“Those shelves over there?” I suggest and we start to search the room for the first clue.

We only have forty-five minutes to find all of the clues and the key and get out. It’s fun to watch Coraline get competitive. She’s so cute and smart. She finds most of the clues and we make it out of the room with five minutes to spare.

Coraline high fives me as we head up to the front counter and I grin. I’ve never seen her so happy and carefree and I love that I was able to put that look on her face. I want to do it again and again every day of my life.

Things are easy between us as we drive the few blocks to Il Tetto and ride up to the rooftop in the elevator. Coraline’s eyes widen in wonder as she looks around the cozy restaurant.

Twinkling lights are strung criss-cross around the space and small tables are set up all over the rooftop. There’s some

low music playing and the soft murmur of other couples talking adds an intimate feeling to the space.

“The view is incredible,” Coraline murmurs as we take our seats near the edge of the roof.

You can see most of the Pittsburgh skyline from here and the traffic from down below is just a distant hum.

“I’ve never been here before but it is pretty. I’m glad that you like it.”

“I do. I’d love to be the chef at a place like this,” she says, looking around the space once more.

“You don’t like running The Culinerdy Cruiser?” I ask her.

I thought that the food truck was her dream, but I should have realized when she mentioned she had an interview with Max.

“Not exactly. I love being a chef but I want my own brick-and-mortar place. I couldn’t find that in New York and, so far, I haven’t found it here in Pittsburgh either. The food truck was the next best thing.”

I mull this over as we both look over the menu. I love learning new things about her and I want to help her achieve all of her dreams.

The waitress comes by to get our orders and as soon as she’s gone, I start asking Coraline more about herself.

“Do you have any brothers or sisters?”

“No, I was an only child, although Sayler feels a bit like a sister at this point. What about you?”

“I’m an only child too, but it’s the same way with me and Rooney. Actually, all of the kids are like that. I grew up with my uncle Zeke, Nico, Mischa, and Aunt Sam. They own the Eye Candy Ink shop and all work together over at the other location. All of us kids basically lived at each other’s houses and we took family vacations and all that together.”

“Sounds like a tight-knit family,” Coraline says with a smile but I can see something in her eyes. Some kind of pain

or longing.

“What about you? Did you have a big family?”

“No, just me and my parents.”

“Are they back in New York?”

“No, they’re dead,” she says flatly and I can tell that she doesn’t want to talk about them anymore.

“I’m sorry for your loss,” I murmur.

The waitress comes over and drops off our drinks and we move on to lighter topics.

“What kind of restaurant would you like to run? Would you still make your fancy comfort food?” I ask her and her smile brightens.

Her whole face lights up as she talks about menu and different food and drink combinations. I listen to her chatter about food for most of the meal and I love it. She glows when she talks about her passion, her whole body growing more animated and she somehow looks lighter.

“Sorry, I just blabbered on like that,” she says as I pay the bill and we stand from the table.

“I loved it. I’ll have to let you order for us on our next date.”

“You think there’s going to be a next date?” she asks as we step into the elevator and I crowd her against the back wall as we start to descend.

“I hope so.”

Coraline smiles, tilting her face up to me and I take her invitation, our lips meeting in a soft caress that’s over far too soon.

The elevator doors open and I step back, taking Coraline’s hand and leading her outside to my car.

“Are you nervous for your interview?” I ask her as I merge with the late-night traffic and head back toward her apartment building.

“A little. I really want it, so I feel like there’s more pressure on it. I’m interested to hear what Mr. Schultz’s vision is for the new place.”

“I wish I could tell you more, but I haven’t seen him in a few weeks. He’s been busy getting the new place set up.”

“It’s okay, I want to do this on my own,” she says, giving me a warning look and I hold up my hands.

“I told you before. I stay out of his business. When you get the job, it will be because he realizes that you’re the best chef ever.”

Coraline smiles, ducking her head but I can see her reflection in the passenger side window and I smile.

We pull up to her place a few minutes later and I open her door, helping her out of my car and up the stairs to her place.

“I had a lot of fun tonight,” she says shyly and I grin.

“Me too. Does that mean that you’ll let me take you out again?”

“Yeah, I’d like that.”

“Good,” I say, closing the space between us and sealing our lips together.

She sighs, leaning into me more and I wrap my arms around her, molding her to me. I lick along her lips and she opens for me. She moans as our tongues tangle together and I press her harder against her front door.

Coraline runs her hands up my arms and I shiver as her short nails scrape along my skin.

“Coraline,” I whisper against her skin as I kiss a path down her neck.

She arches, giving me more access to her neck and that’s when the door opens behind her and we both stumble into her apartment.

“I’m so sorry! I thought I heard something and I didn’t even think that it would be you,” Sayler says, looking apologetic.

“It’s okay,” Coraline says and I give Sayler a nod, making sure that Coraline is steady on her feet before I step away from her a bit.

“Well, good night,” Coraline says, obviously ready for me to leave and I give her a smile.

“See you later,” I say, leaning in and brushing my lips against hers once more.

I pull back to see a red blush staining her cheeks and I grin.

“Have a good night, ladies.”

My lips tingle the whole way home.

TEN



Coraline

I TAKE a deep breath before I open the front door of the address that Max emailed me. He's waiting for me in the empty dining area and my heart starts to race. I've always dreamed of working in a restaurant like this but as I walk through the front doors and get my first look at the still-unnamed restaurant, it feels more real.

I need this job. I want to run this place.

"Hey, you must be Coraline," Max says, holding a hand out to me.

I shake it, taking in his button-down shirt and jeans. He's dressed more casually than I had expected but it puts me at ease. He's got dark salt and pepper hair and warm blue eyes and the friendly look in them also help me relax.

"It's so nice to meet you," I tell him with a smile and he nods.

"Kitchen is this way."

He points out the bar area and the hallway that leads to the back office. The kitchen door is right next to the hallway and I follow him inside, almost weeping when I get a look at the pristine kitchen.

It's a chef's dream and only strengthens my resolve to nail this job interview and become the chef of this place.

“My daughter, Cat, loves your food truck. I think she eats there at least four times a week,” he says with a grin and I try to remember any regulars that I have/

“Does she have purple hair?” I ask him and he grins.

“I think it’s teal now, but yeah, it was purple for a while.”

I smile as I head around to the other side of the counter and look at some of the ingredients that are laid out.

“So, I haven’t thought of a name yet, but we’re narrowing it down and I’m hoping to be open for business in a month. I did interviews all week and you’re actually the last one. I’m hoping to make a decision in the next few days.”

“Do you have the rest of the kitchen staff hired yet?” I ask, wondering about the process.

“No, I want to leave that up to the chef since they’re the ones who will be in charge of this domain.”

I nod, running my fingers over the stainless steel countertop.

“My vision for this place is to be different from my other restaurants. I have Abernathy Brewery, which is more of a pub or bar, Salitos, which is tapas, Risel, which is more upscale, and then this place. I want it to be more of a comfort food menu and more laid back than Risel.”

I nod. That’s my sweet spot and what I want to cook too, so it’s a perfect fit. Now I just need to make the best meal of my life to show Max that.

“That’s what I make at The Culinerdy Cruiser. Americana comfort,” I tell him with a smile and he nods.

“Love the name. If you become the chef here, maybe I should let you name this place too,” he says as he leans back against the opposite counter.

“I’ve got a few ideas,” I say with a grin as I get my chef knives out and a few of the other supplies that I brought with me.

“What will you be cooking today?”

“I thought I would make my truffle mac and cheese, my Americana burger, and my bacon-wrapped meatloaf.”

“Sounds delicious.”

I get to work laying out my ingredients and it’s easy to get into the zone then and do what I love to do. I talk with Max as I cook and he tells me more about some of his restaurants and how he found his way in the business. I tell him more about my food truck and moving up here.

“Ready for the first course?” I ask him and he nods, pulling up a barstool and taking a seat.

“It smells delicious,” he compliments me and I beam.

“Thanks,” I say, sliding the plated truffle mac and cheese over to him.

I watch him take a bite before I tell him more about what’s in it.

“So, this is my truffle mac and cheese with my special goat cheese cream sauce, truffle oil, some fresh herbs, and finished off with toasted bread crumbs on top. I would have this be an entrée on the menu since it’s so heavy that it would be hard to pair with something else. Another option is that we could offer to add chicken or shrimp or some other protein to it.”

He nods, taking another bite and I take that as a good sign.

I finish up the burger while Max makes a few notes on the first dish. I made my Americana burger with garlic parmesan fries to go with it.

“This is one example of a burger that we could make. It has white cheddar, crispy fried onions, Dijon aioli, tomato jam, and hickory smoked bacon on one of my homemade buns. For the side, I made garlic parmesan fries.”

I watch as Max takes the first bite and he nods before he takes another bite. I smile, turning around to plate the final dish.

Things seem to be going well as I finish plating the mini bacon-wrapped meatloaf.

“Here’s the mini bacon-wrapped meatloaves with mashed potatoes and crispy sauteed green beans and scallions.”

I set the final plate in front of him and wipe my hands off, watching as he takes a bite of each item on the plate.

“I added my own zesty BBQ glaze to the meatloaf but I thought we could add it to the menu with different options. Maybe a honey BBQ glaze and a spicy one.”

Max nods, finishing off the meatloaf.

“The mashed potatoes have cheddar and chives added and then the garlic sauteed green beans with crispy fried scallion on the side.”

“It’s delicious, Coraline,” Max compliments and I grin.

“Thank you.”

I clean up while Max finishes eating and making notes. I’m just packing up my dishes, leftover ingredients, and knives as he sets the barstool back by the kitchen door and comes back over to me.

“Thank you so much for coming in, Coraline. I’m going to go over my notes and then I’ll let you know my decision in the next few days.”

“Thank you. It was an honor to even be considered for this position,” I tell him as I shake his hand and follow him back to the front door.

“Thanks again,” I tell him as I nod and head outside to my car.

I set my bag into the back seat and then climb behind the wheel, pulling out my phone to text Sayler and Harvey about how it went.

It isn’t until after I hit send that I realize that I never even hesitated to tell Harvey my good news. I’ve only known him a few weeks and already he’s become so important to me that he’s one of the first people that I want to talk to.

That thought should make me nervous. I should be worried that I’ll become like my parents and we’ll get so miserable that

we'll destroy each other, but somehow, the panic never comes.

Harvey is the sweetest man that I've ever met and I know that he would rather die than hurt me. He's funny and goofy, and so supportive.

He's not my father. He's not going to make me miserable.

I think he might just be the man of my dreams.

ELEVEN



Harvey

IT'S a week after our first date and while I've been going to The Culinerdy Cruiser almost every night to grab dinner and see her, it's not the same as getting to be with her one on one.

I worked an earlier shift today, so I'm leaving Eye Candy Ink to head to her place. I park outside of Coraline's apartment and head up to her floor. She must be waiting for me because she opens the door a few seconds after I knock.

"Hey, you look beautiful," I tell her and she grins up at me.

"Thanks," she says, rising up on her tiptoes and brushing a kiss across my lips.

It's over far too quick for my liking and I promise myself that I'll rectify that later in the night.

We're both dressed casually which fits perfectly for what I planned for our date tonight. I take Coraline's hand and lead her down the stairs and out to my car.

As soon as we're both buckled up and I'm headed across the river to Allegheny Commons Park, I ask her more about how her interview with Max went.

"I think it went well. He seemed to like what I cooked," she says and she seems excited about it.

I ask her more about what she cooked and what her plans would be for the menu if she got the position. She's so happy,

so animated, as she describes everything that she wants to do. I love seeing her so excited and I relax and let her tell me all about her big plans as we drive.

I park close to the entrance of Allegheny Commons Park and hurry to get Coraline's door. We're going to get dinner later, but for right now, since the weather is so nice, I thought that we would grab some shaved ice from the cart by the entrance and take a stroll through the park.

We both choose cherry and I take her hand once more as we start to walk.

"I've never been here before. This place is beautiful," Coraline says and I'm glad that I could experience another first with her.

We walk over a little pedestrian bridge and take in the view of the Pittsburgh skyline as we finish off our shaved ice.

"How was work today?" she asks after we toss out our trash.

"Good. Busy, but we're always busy."

"Yeah, I heard that you guys book like a few months out," she says, letting me intertwine my fingers with hers.

"I don't keep up with the schedule. Maxine handles all of that and just hands us a list each week with our clients on it and what they want done."

"Good system, I guess," Coraline says with a smile and I grin.

"Yeah, I don't really want to be in charge of the admin stuff but Maxine excels at it. Plus, she's Zeke's daughter and he owns the shop, so it's nice that it's all been kind of kept in the family."

I tell her more about my family and extended family. She asks how I got into tattooing and I tell her that it's kind of a family thing. She asks more about tattooing and the process and I love that she's taking an interest in what I do and what I love.

“Ready for some dinner?” I ask as we make it back to the entrance to the park and she nods.

“What would you like to eat?”

“Pizza,” Coraline says right away and I’m surprised that she didn’t say something more upscale or fancier.

“From Basic Kneads?” I ask, naming a local favorite pizzeria.

“Duh,” she says with a laugh as I open her car door and I laugh too, falling a little more in love with her.

Basic Kneads is only a few blocks over from my place and when I see that it’s packed inside, we decide to get the pizza to go and head back to my apartment.

Rooney is still at work, thank god, so we sit on the couch and eat. It’s only six p.m. and when Coraline’s phone buzzes as we’re cleaning up, I tell her to take it. I’m loading the dishwasher when I notice how still she is.

The first thing I think is that something is wrong. I’m on my way to her, to console her or help in any way when she says thank you and spins around to face me with a huge smile on her face.

“I got the chef position!” she screams, launching herself at me.

I catch her, letting out a whoop as I spin her around.

“I’m so happy for you. You deserve this,” I tell her, dropping a kiss on her lips before I hug her tight to me.

“Thank you,” she murmurs, wrapping her arms around my waist.

“Are you going to get rid of The Culinerdy Cruiser then?” I ask and she nods against me.

“No sense in keeping it.”

“It’s going to be weird to not be able to walk across the street every night to see you.”

“The restaurant that I’m working at is a block away from Eye Candy Ink,” she says and I laugh.

“Alright, I can make it a block.”

She laughs, pulling back to smile up at me.

“Are you sad to get rid of the truck?” I ask, brushing some loose hair away from her face.

“A little, but I’m not going to miss the heat or having to do everything by myself,” she says with a small chuckle.

“It was super hot in there,” I admit, remembering the night that I helped her out. “Still, it was your first successful business venture.”

“That’s true. Maybe I’ll get a tattoo to remember my time with the Cruiser.”

“I’ll do it for you,” I offer right away.

“Alright I’ll call tomorrow to make my reservation,” she says with a laugh.

“I’ll fit you in before or after we open so you don’t have to wait that long. Just let me know when you want to get it done.”

She smiles up at me and I can feel the attraction between us grow. I’m not sure who moves first but one minute we’re grinning at each other and the next our mouths are locked together and we’re making out hot and heavy.

Coraline presses closer to me, her lush curves molding to me and I moan, loving how soft she is everywhere. My hands slip under her t-shirt and my fingers graze over her smooth skin, leaving goose bumps in their wake.

Coraline squirms against me, her fingers diving into my hair and holding me close to her. I’m surprised since normally this is the part where we get interrupted or she pulls away.

I’ve been letting her set the pace between us because I know that she’s it for me and I don’t want to do anything to mess this up with her. I smooth my hands up and down her

spine as our lips continue to move together, waiting to see what she'll do next.

Her hands slip down my front and my cock rises, dying to feel her hands on every inch of me.

“Should we, um, go to the bedroom?” Coraline whispers against my lips and I pick her up and almost run to the bedroom.

Coraline giggles as I kick the door closed behind us and set her on her feet next to the bed.

“Are you sure about this?” I ask her, wanting to make sure that she's comfortable before we go any further. “We don't have to do anything toni—”

Coraline's lips land on mine, cutting me off and I pull her closer to me, letting her grind against the stiff ridge in my jeans. Her fingers dip under my shirt and I step back, helping her pull it over my head before I reach for the hem of her shirt.

She seems to grow a little uncertain, a little self-conscious, as soon as the shirt is off, and I frown.

“You're perfect, Coraline. Every inch of you is a fucking dream come true. You're my dream come true.”

She relaxes at my words, giving me a small smile as she slowly lets her hands drop to her sides so that I can look my fill. She reaches behind her and unhooks her bra and my dick hardens even more as her ripe breasts are revealed to me.

The round globes are topped with cherry red nipples that have my mouth watering.

“Fuck, Coraline.”

She's emboldened by my words and lustful gaze and I watch, mesmerized as she tugs down her black leggings, taking the lacy black panties with her.

Then she's naked in front of me and I've never seen anything prettier in my entire life.

“You're a work of art, Coraline. So fucking pretty.”

“Your turn,” she says with a sexy little grin as she runs her fingertips down my naked chest.

I hurry to tug my jeans and boxers down and then we’re wrapped around each other once again. It’s even better feeling her full curves against me, skin to skin.

I take a step back, not realizing how close we are to the bed and we both go tumbling down onto the mattress. Coraline giggles against my mouth and I grin.

“I’m so smooth,” I joke.

Coraline laughs before she kisses her way down my neck. My hand finds her breast and I roll my thumb over her stiff nipple. She moans as it hardens against my fingers and I can’t hold back any longer.

I move between her legs, my mouth finding her stiff peak and I suck her nipple into my mouth, loving it with my tongue and teeth.

“Harvey,” Coraline sighs and my cock pulses at the sound.

Her hips are lifting off the mattress, desperate for something, some friction, and I’m eager to give it to her.

I move between her legs, gritting my teeth when the soft slick flesh brushes against the tip of my cock, leaving me panting. My balls are drawn up tight against my body, my teeth clenched, and I have to think about baseball to keep from coming right then and there.

“You drive me so crazy,” I murmur against her skin as I kiss my way down her round stomach and settle between her thick thighs.

Her honeysuckle scent hits me as I lean in, taking one long slow lick up her dripping center. She’s so small, so tight, and I know that she must be a virgin. I’m going to have to loosen her up before I try to fit my dick inside of her.

I take another lick, rolling my tongue over her clit until her back arched off of the bed and she lets out a needy moan. That sound does something to me and I moan too, suddenly ravenous, and bury my face in her slick folds.

“Harvey!” Coraline calls, her fingers tangling in my hair as her legs clamp down around my head.

She holds me to her but she doesn’t need to. I’m not going anywhere until she comes all over my face. Until she’s screamed my name so many times that she’s hoarse.

It doesn’t take long.

Coraline has a hair-trigger and I lick her to two orgasms before she’s tugging on my hair, urging me up her body.

“I want you,” she says, her voice low and sultry and I’m powerless to deny her.

I line my cock up with her snug opening and kiss her as I start to sink in slowly. I can feel her stretch around my length as I push inch after inch inside of her. I reach her cherry and push my tongue inside her mouth as I pop it and bury the last few inches inside of her.

I have to close my eyes and bury my face in her neck to keep from coming right then and there. Coraline mewls, her fingernails scratching my back as she wiggles under me, trying to get me to move.

“Fuck,” I moan, giving her what she wants.

I pull out slowly, my face still buried in her neck, her honeysuckle scent filling my nose as I start to make love to her.

“Oh my god,” Coraline moans, starting to move with me and soon we’re settled into a rhythm.

“You feel incredible,” I tell her, my lips moving against hers as we rock together.

“I’m-I’m coming!” she screams and her pussy clamps down around my length, triggering my own orgasm.

“Fuck!” I shout, coming with her.

Her fingers dig into my back and I love it, pounding into her harder until both of our peaks have passed.

“Whoa,” Coraline says as I slowly ease out of her.

“I know. It was even better than I imagined.”

“You imagined having sex with me?” she asks, sounding surprised.

“Only every day since I met you. I told you before, Coraline. You’re the girl for me. You and I are forever.”

She smiles up at me, giving me a soft kiss and I roll onto my side, gathering her up in my arms and wrapping around her.

Her breathing evens out a minute later and I say the words that have been on my tongue for weeks.

“I love you, Coraline.”

TWELVE



Coraline

I DON'T SEE Harvey again for another week. I cleaned out the food truck and sold it this morning to someone who's going to change it into a BBQ place. I'm glad that I was able to sell it so fast, but seeing it go hit me harder than I thought it would.

Sayler took me out to a late dinner to celebrate me starting my next chapter in life and then dropped me off at Eye Candy Ink so that I could meet Harvey. He's supposed to be giving me my tattoo today since I'll be crazy busy for the next few weeks getting the restaurant and staff ready.

I've been talking to Max almost every day and I love that he's letting me give so much input into this place. He even let me name it and the sign and logo for Wild Thyme should be ready next week. We're working on finalizing the menu and arranging for interviews for staff next week too and then it will be time to order supplies and everything else that we need. It sounds overwhelming but I'm still so excited for this opportunity.

Rooney is just walking out when Sayler pulls up outside the front door and we both wave at him as I climb out of the car.

"Hey, Coraline! Congrats on the new restaurant," Rooney says, sounding happy for me and I smile.

“Thanks, I’m excited.”

“Hey, Sayler,” Rooney says and Sayler grins and waves at him.

“Hey, Rooney. How’s it going?”

“Good,” he says and things seem a little awkward between them.

I’ll have to ask her what’s going on between them later.

“I’ll see you later,” I tell them both as I head inside, and Sayler waves at both of us before she merges back with traffic and heads back to our apartment.

I open the tattoo shop door, turning to see if Rooney is following me in, but he’s staring after Sayler’s car, a look full of longing on his face. I don’t want to interrupt him, so I just head inside the shop.

There’s a front waiting area and then a hallway leading to the back of the building and so I head down the hallway, peeking into a few of the rooms until I find Harvey in one of the last ones.

“Hey,” I say, stepping inside his room.

He’s sitting at a crowded desk next to the door and he spins around in his chair at my voice and gives me the biggest smile. I love seeing him smile like that.

He stands up and pulls me into his arms, dropping a sweet kiss on my lips before he smiles down sweetly at me.

“How was your day?” he asks and I sigh.

“Good. Harder than I thought that it was going to be.”

Harvey nods, looking concerned and I want to put him at ease.

“You’ll just have to make sure that my tattoo is perfect so that I can always remember my little food truck era,” I joke, trying to lighten the mood.

“I will. It’s going to be perfect,” he says, kissing my forehead before he steps back over to his desk and grabs some

papers.

He passes them over to me and my breath catches as I study the design that Harvey has drawn for me.

It's perfect.

I knew that Harvey had to be talented if he worked at Eye Candy Ink. I mean, the place is a legend and they have that insane waiting list. I heard that they even tattoo celebrities sometimes, so they have to be incredible artists.

"I love it," I tell him, taking one last look at the miniature version of my food truck.

"Good. Where did you want it?" he asks and I mull it over.

I don't want it to be visible, so it has to be somewhere under my clothes or something that I can hide easily.

"How about right here?" I ask, rubbing the spot on my side over my ribs, where my bra lies.

"I can do wherever you want it. It might hurt a little bit going over your ribs," he warns me and I nod.

"I want it there."

Harvey gets to work then, asking me to take off my shirt and bra and lie on the tattoo table. He does something with the tattoo, transferring it onto a different kind of paper and lining up a few cups of ink, gloves, ointments, and paper towels.

I climb up onto the table and wrap one hand around my breasts, covering them and moving my arm out of the way so that he has room to work.

"Alright, I'm going to get it in place and then you can take a look at the stencil on you before we get to work. Sound good?"

"Yeah."

He takes his time lining it up on my side and I love how focused and patient he is. He hands me a mirror and I check it out, nodding when I see that it's exactly where I wanted it.

He pulls on a pair of black latex gloves and fits a needle into his tattoo machine before spinning around to me.

“Here we go,” he says, giving me a reassuring smile and I try not to tense as he starts to outline the tattoo.

We’re silent for the first part of the tattoo, Harvey because he’s concentrating on getting the lines perfect, and me because I’m trying to get used to the sting of the needle.

“Are you getting everything set for the restaurant?” he asks me after a few minutes.

“Yeah, we finalized the menu, and the sign and logo for the menus and social media stuff should be here soon. We just have to hire staff, order supplies, and then train everyone.”

“Oh, is that all?” he jokes and I laugh.

“I know, but I love it and it doesn’t seem like work. You know?”

“Yeah,” he says, finishing up the outline.

The tattoo is small and won’t take him long to finish up. The Culinerdy Cruiser is written in a circle around the pale blue food truck. He added some stars along the circle and then a fork and spoon above the truck so that it looks more like a logo.

He stops the machine and trades out colors, dipping his needle into the light blue color.

“Are you doing alright?” he asks as the needle moves along my skin.

“Yeah, I think I’m starting to get used to it.”

“Is it making you want to get more?”

“Maybe,” I say, looking at him with a grin.

“I’ll tattoo you any time that you want.”

We talk more about the new menu as he works and soon, he’s all done. He grabs the ointment and wraps up the tattoo.

“You’re all set,” he tells me as he helps me sit up on the table.

We're eye to eye and he leans in, dropping a kiss on my lips.

"You did great."

"Thanks. It wasn't as bad as I thought it was going to be."

I wrap my arms around his waist and my core starts to tingle in my leggings. We haven't had any alone time since last week. Living with roommates makes it hard to find time where we're the only ones there. Plus, our work schedules can be rough to navigate. Sure, we text and talk on the phone every day, but it's not the same as seeing him face to face.

"I missed you," he tells me, our lips getting closer and closer together.

"I missed you too," I say and then our lips meet and I get lost in my man.

I'm already half undressed and I need to feel his skin on mine, so I tug at his shirt. He picks up on what I want and pulls his shirt off over his head. His lips land back on mine but I want more. I'm dying to feel him moving inside of me again.

"Can we... do it here?" I ask, my fingers trailing down to the button of his jeans.

"God yes."

I laugh as Harvey scrambles to undo his jeans and strip. I slip off the table to pull my leggings and panties down and then I'm dropping to my knees in front of him and taking his thick cock in my hand.

I look up at him, feeling like a queen as he stares down at me with such reverence.

"You don't have to," Harvey says as I lean forward and take a small lick up the underside of his dick.

Harvey groans and I grow more confident, licking another path, my tongue tracing the vein there.

"Fuck," Harvey grits out, his finger tangling in my hair as I open my mouth wide and take as much of him as I can.

I moan, my head bobbing as I lick and slurp along his length. Harvey moans, his fingers tightening in my hair with each pass I make along him.

“I need you,” Harvey says and then he’s reaching down and picking me. I gasp as he lays me down on the tattoo table and then Harvey comes down over me and I spread my legs, desperate for what he does to me.

He’s about to drop to his knees but I stop him.

“Trust me. I’m wet enough. I need you inside of me.”

“One lick. I need one taste.”

He’s between my legs a second later and I moan, squirming on the table as he eats me out.

“Harvey!” I scream as an orgasm crashes down on me.

He’s standing a second later and pushing into me. We both moan long and low as he seats himself fully inside of me. Then we just act on instinct, moving and grinding together as we both chase our release.

“Jesus, Coraline. You’re my everything.”

I can only moan, the wave of pleasure rising up inside of me.

“More, more,” I chant as my nails dig into his arms.

Harvey’s pace picks up and he pounds into me as the wave finally breaks, spreading through my body. I come and then come again as Harvey continues to rut into me.

“Fuck, Coraline. Fuck. Jesus, I love you,” he says as he finds his own release.

Hearing him say those three words sends a shockwave through my system. I should probably be freaked out that it happened so soon, but all I feel is excitement. I want to say it back but then the doubts hit me.

Did he just say that in the heat of the moment? Did he really mean it?

I open my mouth to say something, but the words won't come and I hurry off the table, grabbing my clothes as my phone rings.

"I should get this," I tell him, tugging my clothes on. "Thanks for the tattoo."

I turn and jog toward the door then, ignoring Harvey when he calls after me. It isn't until I'm outside in my car that I start to panic.

What the heck do I do now?

THIRTEEN



Harvey

“I TOLD Coraline that I loved her,” I blurt out as soon as I walk into Eye Candy Ink the next day.

Rooney drops the case of Clorox wipes that he’s carrying to the back office. Gray and Ender both just stare at me blankly, while Banks looks confused and I realize that I haven’t seen him in a few days so he’s probably behind in gossip. Ames doesn’t even look up, he’s too busy nuzzling his fiancée, Maxine’s, neck.

“Congratulations, Harvey. Does Aunt Darcy and Uncle Atlas know yet? I know they were telling my dad that they still haven’t really met her. They’re super upset that Uncle Max and Aunt Cat have already talked to her a bunch and they haven’t.”

I groan, knowing that I’m going to be hearing more about that from my mom and dad, probably tonight.

“She didn’t say it back,” I tell the room before this conversation can get too far off the rails.

“Oh,” Gray says with a wince.

“Bummer,” Banks says and I think he’s still trying to keep up with the conversation.

“Maybe she didn’t hear you?” Maxine suggests and I shake my head.

“She definitely did. She ran out of here afterward like the place was on fire.”

“Maybe she just needs more time,” Ames says, wrapping his arms around Maxine’s waist.

“Yeah, you did just meet her like three weeks ago. You probably freaked her out,” Rooney chimes in and I glare at him.

“So, I shouldn’t have told her how I felt?” I ask the group and everyone looks around.

“I think that you should have,” Ender finally says and I’m surprised that he was the one to answer.

“Yeah, maybe she just needs time to process it,” Maxine suggests, shuffling the papers in her hands.

“Maybe you scared her off,” Rooney says and I see Banks shoot him a glare.

“I don’t think you should take any of Rooney’s advice. It’s not like he has a girlfriend,” Banks says and Rooney eyes him.

“And you do?” Rooney asks and we all turn to look curiously at Banks.

He squirms in his chair and looks away and I know that Rooney is never going to let this go now.

“What’s her name?” Gray asks.

“And when do we get to meet her?” Rooney asks with a wicked grin.

“You? Never.”

“So, you do have a girlfriend?” Maxine asks as she heads behind the front counter to boot up the computer there.

“Not yet,” Banks mumbles and I take mercy on him.

“So back to me and my problems.”

“Just go talk to her. Tell her that you love her again but that you recognize that it might be too soon for her,” Ames says and I nod.

“That could work.”

I wonder when I'll have time to see her. She's been super busy with opening the new restaurant and I have a feeling that she might be avoiding me now after last night.

I couldn't sleep last night. I just kept going over and over what happened in the shop. Maybe I should have just kept my mouth shut but I couldn't hold the words back any longer.

But now I rushed things and could have pushed her away. I don't know what I'll do if she breaks things off with me over this.

"Thanks, Ames," I say, getting ready to head back to my room.

"What about me? I offered you advice too!" Rooney calls after me.

"Your advice sucks!"

He laughs and I hear him follow after me and head into his room. A second later, he comes into my room and tosses me a bottle of Clorox wipes.

"Thanks."

"No problem."

He hops up on my table and I eye him for a second but when he doesn't say anything, I go back to working on my tattoos for today.

"Are you going to talk to Coraline?" he asks a few minutes later and I nod.

"Yeah, I can't lose her."

"I know," he whispers and I stop drawing to turn and look at him.

"You do?" I ask him and my mind flashes back to the way that he was looking at Sayler. "Did you ask Sayler out?"

"Yeah," he admits after a minute.

"Cool, man. When are you going out?"

"We aren't."

"What? Why not?"

“She turned me down. It’s just... I could swear that she wanted to say yes.”

“Do you want me to ask Coraline about it?” I ask him and he nods, not looking at me.

“Yeah, if you don’t mind. I just, I can’t stop thinking about her and if it’s something that I can fix, then I’d do it for a chance with her.”

I nod, knowing the feeling well.

“I’ll talk to Coraline,” I promise him and he gives me a grateful smile before he hops off the table and heads back across the hall to his room.

My first client is supposed to be here soon, so I push thoughts of Saylor and Rooney and Coraline from my mind the best I can and get to work.

A knock at my door has me looking up and I smile when I see my mom and dad standing there.

“Hey! What are you guys doing here?” I ask them as I get up to hug them.

“We haven’t seen you in a few days and we were in the neighborhood.”

“Yeah, I’ve been busy.”

“We heard,” my dad says and I know that he’s talking about Coraline.

“When do we get to meet her?” my mom asks and I know that that’s why they were really here.

“I don’t know. I’ll have to ask her and we can grab dinner sometime soon.”

My mom nods and I start to relax, glad that they aren’t going to push the issue. My parents have the perfect marriage, the perfect relationship. My dad worships the ground that my mom walks on and they have always been close.

Maybe that’s why I don’t share my girl trouble with them.

I catch up with my parents for a bit but then Eye Candy Ink opens a few minutes later and my parents say they'll call me soon as they leave and I turn to get back to work. My first client arrives a few minutes after that and I get to work, eager to get lost in tattooing.

It doesn't quite work. I'm distracted all day, planning out what I'll say to Coraline when I go to see her tonight. By the time Eye Candy Ink closes, I've got everything set in my head.

Now I just need to go find my girl and make things right with her.

FOURTEEN



Coraline

I'M CHECKING things off on my clipboard when the kitchen door opens and Harvey pokes his head in.

“Hey,” I greet him with a nervous smile.

I’ve been thinking about how I freaked out and ran away from him all day and I was just about to stop for the night so that I could go talk to him. I need to tell him how I feel and apologize for running away from him. I just hope that he doesn’t think I’m too much of a weirdo for freaking out like that last night.

“Hey, you got a second? Am I interrupting anything?” he asks, looking around the dark, empty kitchen.

“No, the staff just left for the night and I was just finishing my nightly checklist.”

“Cool. It looks really good in here,” he says.

“Thanks.”

I shift anxiously on my feet, wanting to bring up last night but not knowing how.

“How’s the tattoo?” he asks, giving me the perfect opening.

“Good, I love it.”

I could swear that he winces at those words and I want to smack myself.

“I’m glad that you stopped by. I was about to come find you when I was done.”

“You were?” he asks, sounding surprised and I nod.

“I’m sorry about last night—”

“I shouldn’t have rushed you,” he cuts in and I shake my head.

“No, you should never have to apologize for how you’re feeling. I just, well I haven’t heard those words a lot in my life and I thought that maybe you just said them in the heat of the moment. I didn’t want things to be weird if you didn’t mean them, but then I ran away and made it weird anyway.”

“I didn’t just say it in the heat of the moment. I meant it, Coraline. I love you.”

His words warm me like a good cup of coffee or a shot of tequila and I smile shyly at first but soon I can’t stop my lips from stretching wide.

“Say it again,” I ask him and he swallows and takes a step toward me.

“I love you, Coraline. I love you more than anything.”

“I love you too, Harvey. So much,” I tell him as he wraps his arms around me and our lips crash down on each other.

His tongue pushes into my mouth and I open for him greedily. He tastes like mint and something that is all Harvey. His lips mold to mine and he backs me up until I hit the counter. I know that we would be breaking about a million health code violations if we did it in here but I still find myself reaching for the hem of his shirt.

And that’s when Max, my boss and Harvey’s uncle, walks into the kitchen.

Harvey and I jump apart and I can feel the blush heating my face.

“Hey, Uncle Max. Looks good in here,” Harvey says and I can see Max trying to hold back his smile.

“Thanks, Harvey. I just came to see if I could walk Coraline to her car before I left for the night but I see that you’ve got that covered. I’ll see you two crazy kids later,” he says with a smile as he waves and heads back out the kitchen door.

“Oh my god,” I groan and Harvey laughs.

“Why don’t you let me take you out to dinner and then we can head back to my place and I can check on your tattoo.”

“Right,” I say with a grin and he laughs.

“Alright, take me home, shotgun wedding.”

Harvey wraps his arm around me, laughing as he leads me out of the restaurant and over to his car and I sink into him. Into the man that I love.

FIFTEEN



Harvey

ONE YEAR LATER...

I GRAB the last few bags of groceries before my fiancée can. She glares at me slightly and I just lean over and kiss her quickly before I head up the stairs to our apartment. Coraline is still the most independent woman that I've ever met but she's starting to learn that she can lean on me and other people more.

"Can you grab the door?" I ask her and she steps around me, pulling open the apartment building's door.

I follow her up the stairs to the apartment that we just moved into. My lease was up with Rooney and now that he's living with Sayler, Coraline and I decided to move in together. Sayler and Rooney live next door and as I head toward our front door, I see Sayler pop her head out and grin when she sees us.

"Did you get it?" she asks Coraline and my fiancée nods, scurrying into the apartment with Sayler hot on her heels.

"Get what?" I ask her but she just gives me a sly smile and grabs one of the bags for me.

It just had some cosmetics and shampoo in it and I frown after her confused as she and Sayler giggle and head into the

bathroom. I let them go and head into the kitchen to put the groceries away when there's a knock on our door.

"Hey!" I say when I answer and see my mom, dad, Aunt Indie, and Uncle Mischa standing there. "What's going on?"

Uncle Mischa and Aunt Indie squeeze their way inside and I laugh, hugging my mom and dad.

"We were in the neighborhood and wanted to see if you and Coraline wanted to go out to dinner with us?"

"Rooney is supposed to be home soon too, right? We were going to ask him and Sayler too," Aunt Indie says as I start to close the apartment door.

"Hey!" Rooney says, sounding outraged as I close the door in his face.

"Sorry, didn't see you there."

He glares at me but I was being sincere.

"Is Sayler here?" he asks and I huff out a laugh.

"Coraline is home. Where else would she be?" I joke.

Coraline works crazy hours as a chef which means that when she's home or has a day off, the girls are usually together.

"Hey guys," Rooney says as he greets our parents and heads over to open the fridge.

He pulls out the potato salad that I just put away and grabs a spoon from the drawer and I roll my eyes.

"We wanted to take you and the girls out to dinner," my mom tells him and he shoves the spoonful of potato salad into his mouth before he puts it back.

"Where are we going? And where's my girl?" he asks.

"Bedroom with Coraline," I tell him as the girls come out of the bathroom.

They're both smiling from ear to ear and they smile wider when they see our parents standing there.

“Hey,” Coraline says, hugging my mom and dad before she switches with Sayler and hugs my aunt Indie and uncle Mischa.

I smile. My parents, my whole family, loves Coraline and Sayler and I’m glad that the girls have the family that they deserve now. A family who loves them and just wants them to be happy.

“What are you two so happy about?” Rooney asks as he hugs Sayler to him.

“We have some exciting news,” Sayler says, sharing a look with Coraline.

“What’s going on?” I ask, pulling Coraline into my side.

She smiles up at me and I get lost in her eyes for a minute.

“We’re pregnant!” Sayler screams and I gape at Coraline.

“We are?” I whisper and she nods, tears in her eyes.

“Yeah, we are,” she whispers back and I wrap my arms around her, crushing her to me before I panic and loosen my grip.

“Congratulations!” my mom and Aunt Indie cry, swarming us and wrapping the girls up in a hug.

Our dads are next and then I’m pulling Coraline back into my arms.

“How are you feeling?” my mom asks and I hold my girl close as my mom and aunt bombard the girls with questions.

I smile through it all.

This is everything that I wanted in life. My family, the love of my life, and now we’re going to have kids of our own.

“Let’s go eat and celebrate,” Uncle Mischa says and I take Coraline’s hand as we head down the stairs.

“Are you happy?” she asks me as we follow everyone outside and I squeeze her hand.

“I couldn’t be any happier. I love you, Coraline.”

“I love you too,” she says, leaning up on her tiptoes and brushing a kiss across my lips.

SIXTEEN



Coraline

FIVE YEARS LATER...

“YOU NEED to behave for Grandma and Grandpa,” I tell my kids as I help them with their overnight bags.

Our son, Graham, and our daughter, Lila, both nod at me as they skip after each other and I sigh, knowing that they’re going to be hyper most of the night. They’ve been excited about having a sleepover at their grandparents’ house all week and I know that Atlas and Darcy are just as excited to spend time with their grandkids.

Harvey and I are headed out for dinner and a night alone for our anniversary. We’ve been married for four years and since we had our kids, we don’t get as much alone time as we’d like.

Both of our hours are crazy and we’re usually rushing in the morning to get the kids ready for preschool.

We still live next door to Rooney and Sayler, although both of us had to move to a new apartment building with bigger apartments. They had two kids too, both boys and they’re best friends with our kids.

It’s Sayler and Rooney’s anniversary today too. Sayler and I actually shared a wedding. It was Sayler’s big dream and

since I never pictured my wedding, I was more than happy to let her plan it for the both of us. My only contribution was the food and liquor.

“Hey!” I greet Darcy as she opens the door for us and she grins at me.

“Hey guys! Go ahead and go in. Grandpa is setting up the living room so we can have a movie night tonight,” she informs the kids and they take off.

“Bye guys! I’ll see you tomorrow!”

They yell bye back and laugh.

“They’re very excited about tonight.”

“Oh, we are too,” Darcy promises and I smile.

Darcy and Atlas are the parents that I wish I had growing up. They are so supportive and loving and I swear I’ve never seen them argue.

“Thanks again for watching them. We’ll be back tomorrow morning with breakfast.”

“Sounds good! Have a good night, honey,” she says as I wave and head back to my car.

I still work for Max Schultz at Wild Thyme and over the last five years, I’ve turned it into one of the hottest spots to eat in all of Pittsburgh. I have a great sous chef who covers for me twice a week so that I can be home with my family. Harvey always takes the same two days off at Eye Candy Ink so that he can be home with us too and I love how into family he is.

He’s a great husband and an even better dad. He’s the one who helps them get dressed and ready for bed. He reads to them every night before bed and takes them to the park most mornings. Him and Rooney even have play dates most weekend mornings before Sayler watches them for the rest of the day.

I hurry back to the apartment and pull up just as Harvey does. He had to work today but he must have finished with his client early if he’s home already.

“You ruined my surprise!” I tell him as he comes over to open my door.

“Want me to wait in my car for a little bit?” he asks, passing me a bouquet of flowers and a box from my favorite bakery.

“Cinnamon roll cookies?” I ask him and he nods.

“And those macarons that you love.”

“You’re the perfect man,” I say with a sigh and he grins.

“I try.”

He takes my hand and I let him lead me inside and up to our apartment. I had planned on being home before him. He’d come inside and I’d be wearing that lingerie that I picked out last week. We’d end up ordering dinner later. Hopefully much later.

“Where did you want to go to dinner?” he asks as I set the flowers down on the kitchen counter.

“I’d like you to give me five minutes and then I’ll tell you.”

“Alright,” Harvey says with a confused smile on his face.

He takes the flowers from me and grabs a vase and I kiss his cheek.

“Be right back,” I promise him.

I hurry into the bedroom and then grab the lingerie and hurry to get dressed. I fluff my hair and apply another layer of mascara before I take one last look at myself in the mirror.

I look hot. The purple lace and silk hugs my curves and I know that Harvey is going to go crazy when he sees me in it.

I head out into the kitchen, my high heels clicking on the hardwood floor but Harvey doesn’t look up from the flowers.

“Know what you’re hungry for yet, babe?” he asks me and I lean against the kitchen doorway.

“I’ll let you decide. What are you hungry for?” I ask and Harvey finally looks up at me.

His mouth drops open and I can see his eyes heat from across the room.

“You,” he murmurs. “I’m hungry for you.”

I giggle, letting him pick me up and carry me to our bedroom where he lays me out on the bed and devours me.

Did you miss the original Eye Candy Ink series? You can read the complete series [here](#).

Ready to fall in love with Rooney? You can read his book [here](#)!

CLAIMING HIS FOREVER

*

Emma Fawn has fallen on hard times.

Her mom, unable to support them both, had kicked her out when she turned eighteen and she's been bouncing from town to town and job to job for a few years until she finally lands in the tiny town of Thorp, Washington.

She's trying to stay positive but she's run out of money, has nowhere to live, and no real options. She's so desperate that she applies to any job that she can find that's hiring and finally gets an interview at Stratton Lumber.

She's pretty sure she won't get hired as a lumberjack but she still shows up for the interview. When she first walks in, she thinks she's found a Sasquatch but she quickly realizes that it's actually her new boss, Heath.

She should be scared that she's now living with a man that she just met but there's something so sweet and unexpected about the giant wounded man that just keeps drawing her in.

He's sick of the jokes and looks so he prefers to spend time alone but one look at Emma and he knows he can't let her go.

When Heath first tastes the food that his new live in housekeeper makes, he realizes that she lied about her skills. Somehow though, he thinks he would choke down her cooking everyday for the rest of his life if it meant that she would stay with him.

When it's looks like Emma is going to leave him, he panics. Will Heath be able to let Emma go? Or will he do whatever it takes to claim his forever girl?

*Warning: This lumberjack alpha is growly and head over heels in love with his feisty girl. Are you looking for a short, sweet, instalove story? Then hit that button cause this book is for you!

ONE

Heath

I DUST MY JEANS OFF, trying to brush off all of the sawdust as I make my way up to the front office. We're in the height of our cutting season here at Stratton Lumber and I just had two guys up and quit. I put a flyer up and an ad in the local paper and I'm supposed to be interviewing someone any minute now. My shoulders tense at that. I hate meeting new people.

Everyone always gets the same look on their faces when they first see me. I'm a giant, a freak some people say. At 7'3" I'm well over average height. I'm also built like a brick house with muscles on top of muscles, most of which I got from chopping down trees every day for the last fifteen years. I've heard all of the names over the years but ever since I opened Stratton Lumber and built my cabin in the woods, the one name that's stuck is Sasquatch. I roll my eyes just thinking about it.

I know that I am tall and my shaggy hair and beard probably don't help me put a stop to the nickname but I stopped caring about appearances a long time ago. There wasn't anything that I could do about my height and I think that I let my hair grow out longer so that I could hide behind it. Now, I'm used to it. Besides, I don't have time right now for a haircut.

My parents and I lived in a small town just west of here in Washington state when I was a kid. They were good parents, loving and patient. I learned how to cut down trees from my dad and we would do it every year to stock up on wood for the fireplace in the winter. They were killed in a car accident when I was twenty and I've been on my own ever since.

I started Stratton Lumber when I was twenty-two. Back then, it was just me chopping wood by myself, but over time I grew it into one of the biggest lumber yards in the pacific northwest.

I round the corner, nodding at a few of my workers as they head back out to the forest after their lunch break. The sun is in my eyes as I take the stairs up to the tiny office. That's the only excuse I have for missing the girl standing next to the front door.

I almost run right into her and she shifts, smiling up at me as she tucks a stray lock of pale blonde hair back behind her ear. Her dark navy-blue eyes twinkle up at me as she raises her chin and sticks her hand out to me.

"Hi, I'm here to interview for a position with Stratton Lumber."

The idea of this girl cutting down a tree is laughable. She's tiny, so tiny, and I doubt that her feet would even reach the pedals if I asked her to just operate one of the machines. Still, my hand reaches out and wraps around hers, shaking once before I force myself to let her go. I open the door of the office and wave her in ahead of me, wondering what the hell I'm doing. I'm too busy for this. I should just tell her no and get back to work but there's something about her that has me hesitating.

She has a backpack swung over one shoulder and she's wearing blue jeans that have seen better days, a thin almost threadbare shirt under her jacket, a jacket that I notice is too thin for her to be out in this chilly weather for too long. She shifts and I see that her shoes are worn, holes forming in the thin canvas on the sides. Her blonde hair is pulled back into a ponytail and I don't think she's wearing makeup. Her cheeks

and the tip of her nose is red and her lips are a little chapped. Even though she obviously needs help, her head is still held high and there's a stubborn glint to her eyes.

I don't have time for this but something still has me leading her inside the office. I look over my shoulder and see a few of my guys practically salivating as they watch her walk into my office. I glare at them and they scurry away.

I shut the door after us and lead her over to my messy desk in the corner of the trailer. I cram myself into the chair behind it as she takes a seat across the desk from me. My eyes trail over her once again, taking in her small curves before I meet her eyes and take a deep breath. Her sweet honeysuckle scent fills my lungs and a shiver runs down my spine. Something tells me that this girl is going to be my undoing.

TWO

Emma

I DON'T THINK that I've ever seen a lumberjack in real life but the man before me most certainly fits the stereotypical version that I had in my head. He's rugged and built like a mountain. His plaid shirt looks like it might rip at the seams if he just flexed a little bit and he's about as tall as one of the trees that he probably cuts down every day.

I shift in my chair when my thoughts turn dirty and clear my throat. The guy hasn't said a word to me since he ushered me into his office and I look around the cluttered space. There isn't much to look at though and soon my eyes are back on the rugged mountain man before me.

"My name is Emma Fawn by the way," I say when I realize that I never officially introduced myself.

"Heath," he grunts out, his voice coming out like sandpaper. My nipples harden inside my shirt at the sound and I cross my arms over my chest to hide them.

He seems a little irritated and cranky and I wonder if that's just him or maybe he missed lunch. I have a granola bar in my bag and I debate giving it to him but if I don't get this job then I'm going to need to eat it.

I've been homeless for two weeks now and I ran out of money and options two days ago. I've applied to every job I could find in this little town and so far, this is the only one to

call me back. I *need* this job, or I don't know what I'll do. I shift in my chair again, blinking rapidly to try to stem the tears that threaten to escape when I think about the turn my life has taken in the last few weeks.

"I'm sorry, but I can't hire you. This is no place for a little thing like you to be working."

"That's sexist," I say.

He eyes me skeptically, his expression unamused.

"Pick up that axe," he says, nodding to where one is leaning against the wall by the door.

I stand confidently but as I get closer, I realize the thing must weigh almost as much as I do right now. I've skipped a bunch of meals this last week and I know that I have to have lost at least ten pounds. I still have to try though.

I bend down, gripping the smooth wood of the handle and lift. It raises off the ground an inch before it drops from my grasp. I lean it back against the wall, taking a moment to compose myself. My eyes feel hot and itchy and I really don't want to cry in front of this guy.

"I'm sorry," he says quietly and, in his defense, he does seem sad to have to tell me that, and I did know that this was a long shot since I have no experience in the field, but I'm desperate.

"Please, Mr. Stratton. I really need a job," I say, ready to plead my case. Maybe he needs someone to clean his office or answer phones.

"I'm sorry, but you have no experience and you're too small to do anything around here."

His eyes cut away from me and he stands quickly, walking around the desk. I walk over and grab my backpack off the ground, hanging my head as I follow him out. He opens the door for me and I step through, turning to ask him if he knows if anyone is hiring in town before I leave.

"Thanks for taking the time to interview me. You wouldn't by chance know of any other places hiring?" I ask, craning my

neck all the way back so that I can meet his eyes.

“I’ve got a few positions for you,” I hear some guy say behind me and hope sparks to life inside me.

“Really?” I ask, spinning around to see who said it.

“No!” Heath growls behind me and his hand clamps down around my arm.

The next thing I know, I’m staring at his back as he stares down the guy who said he had a position for me.

“Don’t you have work to get to, MacCallan?” Heath growls and I peek out around him.

“I wouldn’t call it work, boss,” the other guy says as he locks eyes with me.

He winks at me and disgust fills me when I realize what work he had in mind for me.

“GO!” Heath roars and I jump, scurrying out from behind him and heading down the stairs.

“Not you,” he says, reaching out and catching the collar of my coat to stop me. He takes my elbow, steering me over to a nice black truck parked on the side of the office.

“Where are we going?” I ask, trying to keep up with his long strides.

“Home. I have some work you can do for me,” he says as he opens the passenger door and lifts me inside.

My mouth drops open but strangely I don’t feel the same disgust that I did when the other man had talked about sleeping with me.

THREE

Heath

“WHAT WILL I BE DOING?” She asks suspiciously as I crank the engine and we take off down the road toward my cabin.

An image of me pinning her beneath me and rutting into her slick pussy springs to my mind but I shake it away. There’s no way she would be into that and I’m not the kind of guy to force himself on a girl.

“I need a housekeeper and someone who can cook me a few meals,” I lie.

My place isn’t that big and I’m perfectly capable of keeping up with it by myself but I can’t have this little girl running off with another man, one who might hurt her.

“And you want me to do that?”

“Yep,” I growl, my hands tightening around the steering wheel as she turns to face me.

“Really?”

“Yeah,” I say, wondering why she seems hesitant to accept a job offer all of a sudden. *Maybe she doesn’t want to be alone with me?*

“It’s just that you didn’t seem that excited to hire me just a minute ago.”

“I’m not going to let you wander off with some strange guy,” I grit out.

“Right,” she says, drawing the word out and giving me a dry look and I realize that she technically did just wander off with a strange guy. Me.

The steering wheel creaks in my hands as I think about her going off with one of the guys who were checking her out at work. Luckily for my truck, we pull up out front of my cabin a minute later and I leap out, circling the hood and opening the door for Emma.

“I’ll show you around really quick before I have to head back to work.”

I lead her up the front steps and unlock the front door. The cabin itself is only two bedrooms and one bathroom with an open layout kitchen and living room. I give her a quick tour, showing her the kitchen, living room, and the guest room. I point out the bathroom and my bedroom, watching her face the entire time to see what she thinks about my home.

I built the place myself and it’s all made out of wood and stone. The place is kind of small and plain but it suits me just fine. The log cabin is set back off from the road in the middle of the forest and a small stream runs along the back. My furniture and appliances are probably a little dated, but it all works just fine and since it’s just me out here I’ve never minded. I wonder if Emma does though. I want her to like it here.

I should probably stay and make sure she gets settled in okay but seeing her so close to a bed already has me feeling on edge. I reach up, tugging on the long hair of my beard as I start to back out of the room and down the hall. She turns and smiles at me and my heart races in my chest. I need to get out of here before I do something to embarrass myself, like ask her to marry me.

“I’ll leave you to it. I’ll be home at 5:30,” I say as I grab my truck keys and head out the front door. I pause as the door closes after me and turn, locking the front door after me before I can think over my actions.

FOUR

Emma

I STARE at the front door after Heath leaves, frowning. I can't figure the man out. One minutes he's ushering me out the door and the next he's throwing me in the truck and telling me he has a job for me.

Men.

I shrug as I turn and look around the cabin once again. It's pretty small but I'm not complaining. That just means less work for me to clean it all and to be honest, I'm just excited to have a place to stay and food to eat.

I've been on my own since I turned eighteen. My mom is still alive but she's not doing much better than me financially and she wasn't able to help out. She's still back in Branson, Missouri, where I grew up. Growing up poor taught me to be self-conscious. Kids in my class would always look at me weird because most of my stuff was worn or had holes in it. Over time, I've learned to not care about them or what they thought of me. I think seeing more of the country helped with that too.

I've bounced all over since I graduated high school and moved away. I was a housekeeper at some run-down motel for a couple of months, then I moved to California and worked as the receptionist for some high class yoga studio in Malibu. I worked at an art gallery in San Francisco after that, then I pushed carts at Walmart in Seattle.

It was there that my car broke down and things started to turn sour. I bought a bus ticket and kept traveling north but there weren't as many job opportunities up here and I ended up in Thorp, Washington. Now, I'm here in this cabin, working for Heath.

I think about what I'll be doing for Heath. Just housekeeping and making a few meals. The housekeeping should be easy enough. For a big guy, Heath's place is actually kind of small. The thing I think I'll have trouble with is the cooking. My stomach growls as I think about making dinner and I head into the kitchen, looking for a snack and trying to think of something I can make for us to eat.

I had a job as a short order cook in this drive thru diner outside Seattle and I ended up getting fired. I bite my bottom lip, remembering how my boss said I was a terrible cook. Maybe I've improved since then? Here's hoping because I really need this job. Thank god Heath didn't ask if I could cook. I would have had to lie and I'm a terrible liar. My skin gets all red and blotchy and I can't stop biting my fingernails. He probably would have fired me on the spot.

I find some bread and make myself a sandwich, eating it quickly as I poke through the rest of the cabinets. I find some spaghetti and some sauce and I smile. No one can ruin spaghetti, right?

I set that on the counter and then find a loaf of French bread that looks homemade. I'm sure Heath won't mind if I use some of this and make some homemade garlic bread. I use my phone to try to find a recipe on Pinterest for garlic bread as I boil a pot of water. It's already getting late and I wanted to have dinner done by the time Heath got home. I search through his spices until I find the garlic powder and then dump the noodles into the boiling water before I turn back to make the bread.

I'm just setting the last of the dishes onto the little table in the corner when the front door opens and Heath stomps inside. My heart rate picks up at the sight of him and I try to convince myself that I'm just worried that he won't like my dinner and

he'll fire me. He hangs his jacket up and I take just a second to admire his large form before I pull myself together.

"Hey! I made spaghetti," I say, pointing to the bowl of it sitting in the middle of the table.

"Is something burning?" He asks, his tone gruff like usual.

"Shoot! The bread," I say as I bolt for the oven.

I spent so long on it and then forgot to set a timer. I pull open the door, bracing to see a burnt loaf of bread but it only looks slightly overdone. *This will be fine. I'll just scrape off the bottom that got burned.*

I hurry to get the bread done too, burning my finger in the process before I carry that over to the table too.

"There! Bon Appetit!" I say, trying to appear confident in the silent room.

My smile wobbles as Heath just stands there watching me and my stomach sinks. Is he going to fire me just because I burnt some bread?

"Looks great," he says after a moment and I watch as he takes his seat and dishes himself up some of the noodles and sauce. He grabs a piece of bread next and I relax, easing into my seat as he takes his first bite.

FIVE

Heath

EMMA CAN'T COOK.

Emma, the girl I hired to keep the house clean and cook, can't cook. I learned that after my first bite. Somehow, she managed to overcook half of the noodles and undercook the rest. How is that even possible? The bread is just a little crispy and would have been fine if she hadn't dumped what I can only assume is half a container of garlic powder on top. I try to cover up my cough after I take a bite of the bread.

"How is everything?" She asks and I look up into her dark blue eyes.

She looks so hopeful and maybe a little scared that I'll fire her and I don't have it in me to hurt her.

"Great," I lie, trying to force myself to swallow the bite of garlic bread in my mouth.

"Really?" She asks and her whole face lights up.

Fuck, no way can I take that look off her face.

"Yeah, it's great."

I somehow manage to choke down the whole plate, swallowing some bites whole so that I don't have to taste it that much. I sit back when my plate is clear and look across the table to Emma. She's still watching me but this time she has a somewhat mischievous glint to her eyes.

“Did you want seconds?” She asks sweetly.

No.

“Sure,” I find myself saying and I want to kick myself but the way she jumps from her chair, a smile stretching her lips makes it worth it.

I clear my plate again and then stand up to help her clean the table off.

“You’re not going to eat anything?” I ask when I realize that she had just watched me eat dinner.

“God no. I tried a bite and it was terrible. I don’t know how you ate all of that.”

My mouth drops open as she heads past me to the sink and starts to do the dishes. *That little minx.*

We stand side by side at the sink doing the dishes and it’s hard not to notice how small she is compared to me then. She comes about halfway up my torso, the top of her blonde head reaching a little past my belly button. I try not to think about the other thing, slightly lower than my belly button that is starting to stir as I dry off another plate.

“How was the rest of your day?” She asks, breaking the silence and I start slightly.

It’s going to take some time for me to get used to living with someone and having her around here all of the time. Normally, when I come home it’s just me and my thoughts and the silence but I have a feeling that Emma is going to change all of that.

“Fine.”

She watches me like she wants me to elaborate but I don’t know what else to say. I’ve never been a great conversationalist. Most people don’t want to talk to me. They’re usually too busy ogling my size.

“Whoa, don’t throw so many details at me. I can’t keep it all straight,” she deadpans and I narrow my eyes at her.

“Hilarious.”

She smiles at that as she hands me the last dish to dry and tries to smother a yawn with her other hand.

“I think I’m going to turn in,” she says softly. “It’s been a long few days.”

I set the last dish in the cupboard before I turn and head down the hallway.

“Temperature is supposed to dip tonight. I’ll get you another blanket and build up the fire in your room.”

“Thanks,” she says as she follows me down the short hallway to her room.

I stack some logs into the fireplace as she grabs some clothes out of her backpack and disappears into the bathroom. I get the fire going and then duck into my room, grabbing an extra blanket out of the closet. I’m just spreading it over her bed when she pads back into the room.

“Thanks for all of this,” she says and I turn to tell her it’s no problem but my mouth dries when I see what she’s wearing and I’m not sure that I can talk right now.

She’s got on a pair of pale purple pajama pants that mold to her legs and I wonder if she knows that they’re see through. I can see the tiny scrap of black lace that’s covering her pussy and I jerk my eyes up but her top isn’t much better. It’s a dark navy blue but so threadbare that spots are see through and that’s almost worse. The worn spots tease me, giving off just a hint at the silky-smooth skin and curves beneath.

My cock feels hot and heavy in my jeans and I can feel it pushing at the zipper, wanting out and into her and I know that I need to get out of here.

“No problem. Goodnight,” I say before I practically bolt out of her room and into the bathroom.

“Shit,” I hiss from between my teeth as I release my cock from my too tight jeans and take it in hand.

Three strokes and I’m spilling into my palm. I collapse back against the wall and look up into the mirror at my reflection. I need to get it together. There’s no way that a little

minx like Emma would want to be with a quiet, stoic, freak like me. Not to mention, she's obviously all alone and in a tough spot. I'm not going to take advantage of that, of her. I just need to get myself under control.

I grit my teeth as I stuff my still hard cock back into my jeans.

SIX

Emma

I STRETCH IN THE BED, wrapping the quilted blanket tighter around me as I sigh. I haven't slept that good in a while and part of me never wants to leave this bed. Thinking that makes me remember where I am and my mind goes to Heath. I blink my eyes open, listening for any sound that he's awake and moving around but the place is silent. Sun streams through a crack in the curtains and I jerk up in bed.

"Crap."

I toss the blankets back, wondering how late it is and how fast I can make something for his breakfast and lunch. I jerk the bedroom door open and freeze when I see that his bedroom door is wide open. His bed is made and I can tell that he's already left for work.

Oh man, he's going to fire me for sure.

I scurry into the kitchen. Maybe I can make him a big lunch and bring it to him and he'll forgive me for this. I find a paper grocery bag in the pantry and start throwing things in. I remember how much food he ate last night and he's such a big guy that he's probably always hungry. I throw in a bag of chips and a granola bar before I go to the fridge and pull out some stuff to make him a couple of sandwiches. There's a yeti water bottle on the counter and I fill that up and add it to the bag before I rush back to my room.

I change my clothes quickly, stuffing my feet into my worn tennis shoes before I heft the bag and head out toward the road. I don't remember the exact route back to Stratton Lumber but the town isn't that big so it can't be that hard to find.

My old shoes kick some loose rocks as I hurry along the side of the road. I've only made it about a half a mile or so when an old pickup truck pulls up alongside of me. I haven't seen many cars since I started walking. Probably because Heath lives so far out in the middle of the forest. His driveway alone took me at least five minutes to walk down.

"Hey there, little miss," a deep voice says as the passenger window rolls down.

I stop and see a friendly older looking man inside. He's wearing a worn looking plaid shirt and a gentle smile.

"Hi."

"Where are you headed? Can I give you a ride?"

"Oh, I'm just headed up to Stratton Lumber," I say, shifting the heavy paper bag in my hands.

"That's where I'm headed. Hope in. I'll give you a ride."

I hesitate for a second. I know that I shouldn't but he seems friendly and he looks a little familiar. I think I actually did see him at the lumber yard yesterday when Heath was dragging me to his truck.

"Thanks," I say as I open the door and slide up onto the old seat.

"No problem."

He waits until I have my seatbelt on before he hits the gas and we take off down the road. I sit close to the door but Glen, my driver, seems genuinely kind and nice. He makes small talk as we drive the short way to the lumber yard, telling me about his wife and kids and grandkids. He's going to see them this weekend and I can tell that he's excited to spoil the grandbabies.

“Here we are,” Glen says as we pull up outside the front office. I grab the paper bag, intending to thank Glen before I get out but before I can say anything the passenger door is ripped open and I’m dragged out.

I look up into Heath’s face, taking in the scowl and the glare that he aims at Glen as he takes the paper bag from me and pulls me after him up the stairs and into the office. He slams the door closed behind us and I spin around to face him.

SEVEN

Heath

“WHAT THE HELL are you doing? Why were you in that truck with him?”

“Glen? He gave me a ride. I brought you your lunch,” she says, pointing toward the paper bag in my hand that weighs about ten pounds.

I send up a silent prayer that it's not more of her spaghetti from last night. I'm not sure that I could stomach any more of that. When I woke up this morning, she was still fast asleep so I had left her. I made myself breakfast and packed my own lunch, making sure to add in lots of snacks so that I could eat them before I went home and had another meal made by my little minx.

“How did he know to give you a ride? Was he at the house?” I demand, growing anxious.

“No, I was walking down the road and-”

“And you just got into a truck with a strange man?” I roar.

“It was fine. Glen is nice. You don't need to worry about me. I can take care of myself.”

I set the paper bag down and start to pace around the small office. This girl is too stubborn, too trusting. She needs a guy like me looking out for her so that she stays safe.

“Are you going to fire me?” She asks behind me, her voice coming out small.

“Never,” I say, spinning around and crossing the distance between us. “You’ll have a job with me for as long as you want one,” I promise.

She surprises me then, closing the distance between us and wrapping her arms around my waist, hugging me. Her cheek rests against my stomach and I try to think about chopping wood to get my own wood to stay down.

“Thank you, Heath,” she whispers into my shirt and my heart trips in my chest at the sound of my name coming from her lips.

She pulls back just as abruptly, wiping her cheeks as she stares at her shoes. I make a note to order her some new clothes as soon as I can.

“Come on. I’ll drive you home,” I say when she pulls back.

I lead her out to my truck and help her inside.

“You can’t just get into cars with strange guys,” I tell her, trying to get her to see reason as I climb behind the wheel.

I look over at her and see she’s giving me a pointed look. “It seems to have worked out fine the last time. This time too since Glen was nice. He saved me from walking all this way.”

“It was fine with me because you’re mine but there are other guys out there who want you and wouldn’t mind hurting you to get you.”

“What do you mean I’m yours?”

My mind blanks and I start the truck up, making the short drive back home in silence. I can feel her eyes on me as I drive and I try not to twitch under her stare. We pull outside our house a few minutes later and I get her door for her, helping her down and up to the front door. She walks ahead of me into the house and I follow after.

“Just... stay here.”

“No more rides from strangers. Promise.” she says as she toes off her shoes.

“Good,” I pause there in the doorway, my hand gripping the doorknob. “And, uh, thanks for lunch.”

She beams at me and I know that I need to get out of here before I take her to the ground and peel those tight blue jeans off of her.

“I’ll see you for dinner,” I say before I turn around and head back to my truck, trying to adjust my stiff cock in my pants.

EIGHT

Emma

HEATH SEEMS to have gotten used to me over the last seven days. He doesn't tense when I walk into a room anymore or when I touch him. It kind of became like a game. He would come home from work and help me cook dinner and I would brush against him. At first it was an accident, but when I saw how he reacted I kept doing it.

He always says he'll see me at 5:30 but he's always home before then. He's helped me make dinner every night since that first night and I've found that I love cooking with him. He's really good at it and he teaches me something new every night.

After dinner we do up the dishes and then I make him watch some show with me on Netflix. We've already gotten through part of Gossip Girl, but he said that show was boring. Now we're onto The Punisher. It's a little dark for my taste but I like how close Heath sits to me when I put it on and I love how he moves closer every time a violent scene comes on the screen.

I like him. I like his company. I know that together we probably look weird since I'm so short and he's so tall but he's the best man that I've ever met. He's kind and loyal, surprisingly funny, although I don't think he means to be, and he seems to genuinely care about me and my wellbeing.

I'm not sure how he feels about me. Is he just being nice and looking out for me because I work for him and he feels responsible for me? I debate this as I make breakfast. Pancakes today and I smile as I look over at the stack I already made. Some are burnt but isn't that what syrup is for? I hear Heath coming down the hall and pour some more syrup on his plate, smiling when he finally comes into the kitchen.

"Morning!" I say, smiling brightly as I set his plate down in front of him.

"Looks good," he says as he takes his seat and starts to dig in. I turn around to flip the last set of pancakes and sigh when I see these are really burnt. I'll just throw them away. I can have some cereal like I usually do.

I do up the dishes really quick while he finishes breakfast and then stop him before he can head to work.

"We're going to need some more food soon."

I got up early and saw that we were out of a lot of stuff. I've been making a list of things that I think I could make all morning but I don't know how I'll get the groceries home.

"I'll come home at lunch and we can run to the store."

"Perfect. I'll finish making a list. How do you feel about meatloaf?" I ask, looking at the recipe I found online. It doesn't look too hard to make but I know some people don't like the stuff. Heath freezes as he pulls on his boots and gets a weird look on his face but it's gone before I can decipher it.

"I don't really like it but I'll eat it if you do."

"No, that's okay. I'll find something else to make."

I cross off meatloaf on my list and start to run down the rest of it.

"I'll see you at noon." Heath says as he grabs his keys and heads for the door.

"I'll be ready!" I wave at him as he leaves and then go back to my list.

I wonder how hard Chicken Cordon Bleu is to make?

NINE

Heath

I MAKE the quick drive to work, my mind on Emma the whole way. A shudder runs through me when I think about her making meatloaf. I actually love the stuff but I'm too afraid that I'll have to eat undercooked meat to risk having her make it. I've been trying to get home earlier and I tell myself it's so I can help her make something edible for us to eat but I can't deny that I practically skip out of work with a smile on my face, excited to head home to my little minx.

I like having Emma around. I thought that it would take a while for me to get used to living with someone but that wasn't the case. Not with Emma anyway. Now I can't imagine my life without her in it and I would gladly eat her burnt or undercooked food for the rest of my life if it meant that she never left.

Every night we make dinner, watch some TV, and then she goes to bed and I go to the bathroom. I've been jerking off more than I ever have in my life but it's the only way for me to get even a hint of relief. I'm around Emma all of the time and she smiles and cuddles into me on the couch but I know the truth. Pretty girls like her don't go for grumpy, loner, freaks like me.

I need to get myself under control. I try to give myself a pep talk as I drive us to the grocery store in town. Usually I only go grocery shopping once a month. That way I don't have

to deal with people or their weird looks, but with Emma living with me I have a feeling that we'll be going more often.

I park the truck toward the back and then head around the hood to help her out. Her small hand fits in mine and feels warm and soft as I make sure she gets out alright.

"You wanna push the cart while I grab stuff?" She asks once we get inside and I glare over at the carts. I can see that Emma's list is about a mile long and it's going to take us a while to get everything. I'm way too tall to comfortably push those things but I think I'd do anything to make Emma happy.

I grab one of the carts, hunching over to grip the bar as I follow after her dutifully. I ignore the looks I get from the other shoppers and I can't help but smile when I see Emma glare or roll her eyes at anyone who looks in my direction for too long.

I trail after her like a puppy as she goes down one aisle and up the next until we've hit every one in the store. She couldn't read her hand writing on part of the list and so she just grabbed random stuff and said she was sure it would be fine. I was sure that we were going to get food poisoning one of these days but I kept my mouth shut. I'll just head home even earlier so I can supervise the cooking.

We load everything onto the belt and I ignore the checkout clerks' lingering look as she rings us up. Emma gives her a hard stare until the girl looks away. I hurry to pay and put everything into the cart before Emma notices everyone looking at me like the giant freak that I am.

I lead Emma outside, squinting when the sun blinds me momentarily as we head to my truck. Emma's head is bent and she's going over her list, double checking that we didn't forget anything and I'm busy watching her. Maybe that's how I miss the woman staring down at her phone and heading straight for us. She runs into me, bouncing back and tripping in her high heels as she struggles to hold onto her phone.

"Uh, excuse me! Hey Sasquatch, why don't you watch where you're going? Shouldn't you be able to see for miles

way up there?" She sneers and I just roll my eyes, as I continue walking.

I've heard all of the tall jokes before and they don't bother me anymore but that is apparently not the case for Emma.

"Hey! Screw you. You were the one who wasn't looking where you were going," she says, darting around me and pushing the girl's shoulder. They narrow their eyes on each other and I spring into action before this can turn into a full-on fight.

"Jesus," I mumble under my breath as I grab Emma, throwing her over my shoulder and heading for my truck.

I toss her in the passenger seat before I hurry to put the groceries in the back and put the cart back. When I slide behind the wheel she's still fuming and somehow, she looks even cuter pissed off.

"You can't be picking fights like that," I say as I back out of the parking spot and head home.

"I was just sticking up for you. That bitch was in the wrong and then she had the audacity to make fun of you. She deserved to have someone yell at her."

She twists around in her seat like she's looking to go after her again and I push down on the gas more.

"It happens all the time. I'm used to it. You don't need to defend me."

She turns to face me, her big blue eyes scanning my face and I try not to give anything away as we drive away from the store and toward home.

TEN

Emma

MY HEART BREAKS when Heath says that he's used to being made fun of. I know that he's tall and looks like a giant but under all those muscles is a good man. Sure, he's a little gruff and he doesn't really say that much, but he's shown me with his actions that he's a kind man.

We drive back to the house in silence and I try to think of how to make him feel better. When we pull up out front, he parks and then comes around to get my door for me, just like every other time. I smile at him as he helps me out and he returns it softly but his forest green eyes still have that sad glint to them.

We carry in all of the bags and as I watch him start to put everything away, an idea comes to me. I sit down on the couch and hurry to pull off my socks and shoes.

"What are you doing?" Heath asks as I wrestle with my sock, tipping over sideways on the cushion.

"Come here," I urge him, patting the spot on the sofa next to me.

He pauses a second, staring down at the pile of groceries still to be put away on the counter but then he heads my way, cramming his large frame onto the cushion next to me. I finally get my socks off and shift on the couch, setting my feet in his lap and wiggling my toes at him.

His whole body tenses when my feet land in his lap and his large hands hover in the air like he's not sure what he should be doing.

"See?" I say, smiling at him.

"What?" He asks and his voice comes out deeper than usual.

He clears his throat, looking away from me and I sigh, trying to get his attention again. When he finally looks back at me, I wiggle my toes at him again.

"Look," I say pointing at them.

His forest green eyes trace over my jean clad legs until they get to my feet that are still in his lap.

"See wh-"

His voice cuts off when he sees my toes and I wiggle them again, showing off the webbed skin between.

"See, I'm a freak too."

Heath just stares at them for a moment in silence and I watch him.

"Everyone is weird, Heath. At least your weird thing is useful. You're strong and can reach all of the tall stuff that I can't. What are my toes going to do? Help me swim faster?" I joke.

He doesn't laugh, just watches me as his hands finally land on my feet. He strokes down to my toes, analyzing the little webbing between them. I sit perfectly still as his hands keep rubbing along my skin. He digs his thumb into my heel and I moan. My feet hurt from walking in my crappy shoes around the grocery store and a foot massage would be amazing right now. He pushes in the same spot, rubbing a small circle and I moan again, louder this time.

Before I know what's happening, his hands are wrapping around me and he's dragging me into his lap and up to his mouth. His beard tickles my face as he pulls me closer.

“I can’t,” he murmurs a second before his lips land on mine.

ELEVEN

Heath

I CAN'T RESIST her anymore. She's too sweet, too goddamn perfect and I can't hold myself back any longer. I grab her hips, dragging her into my lap until she's straddling me before my mouth crashes down on hers.

I know I should be gentle with my little minx but I've been holding back for too long and having her sweet curves pressed up against my hard body is sending me over the edge. I try to slow down but then Emma moans into my mouth. My last threads of control snap then and I roll her under me on the couch.

Her legs wrap around my waist and I settle into the v of her thighs as I come down over her. My brain kicks in then and I worry that I might be crushing her, but when I go to pull back Emma wraps her arms around me tighter. It's then that I realize that she's wrapped around me just as much as I am around her.

Her hips rock against me, seeking friction, and she moans into my mouth as she drags her jean covered pussy along my cock. I growl, putting more weight onto her and pinning her against the couch. I take over then, humping her in deep strokes. She's pressed deeper into the cushions with every one of my thrusts and our lips cling to each other as I dry hump her.

“Heath,” she pants, throwing her head back as my lips move down her neck.

I nip her skin, wishing that I had ripped every stitch of clothing off of her before I pinned her under me. I want to feel her skin against mine. I want to lick every inch of her and then I want to spend days worshipping that sweet treasure she has between her legs.

She pants my name, her voice coming out low and husky and I can tell that she’s teetering on the edge. I move my mouth lower and nuzzle my lips against her tits as I grind my cock against her and she starts to splinter apart underneath me. Hearing her soft cries and the way she moans my name has my balls drawing up as I start to come in my jeans.

“Emma,” I whisper against her skin as I come all over myself.

The sticky seed covers my boxers but I can’t stop moving against her. I want to wring out every ounce of pleasure for her and it’s only when she relaxes fully against the couch that I slow and then stop my movements.

I pull back, looking down at her and wondering what expression I’m going to see on her face, but instead I find her passed out under me, her eyelashes resting daintily on her cheeks and a small smile curving her lips. With her flushed cheeks and her blonde hair fanned out around her head like a halo, she looks like an angel resting beneath me.

I need to get her to bed so she can rest better and I need to clean myself up. I stand and carefully scoop her up in my arms, resting her head on my shoulder as I head toward the bedrooms. I pause outside the guest room but then continue on to my bedroom.

I lay her out on my mattress and cover her up with a blanket before I go to the fireplace and get it going again, making sure that she’ll be warm enough while she sleeps. I take one last look at her before I grab some clean clothes and head into the bathroom to get cleaned up.

I'm about halfway through my shower when I realize that I never got around to putting away the rest of the groceries.

TWELVE

Emma

IT TAKES me a second to realize where I am when I wake up. The sheets smell like Heath and I smile as I roll over in bed. My heart sinks when I see that he's not in the bed with me. I fall back against the pillows and smile up at the ceiling as I remember how he had rubbed against me out in the living room. I'm still wearing all of my clothes, except my socks, and an idea pops into my head.

I want more of what we did earlier but I don't want clothes to separate us this time. I strip, dropping my clothes in a pile by the side of the bed before I take a deep breath and open his door. I pad quietly down the hallway, listening to him move around in the kitchen. My cheeks burn but I want this. I want Heath. So I take a deep breath and square my shoulders as I stroll into the kitchen.

He spots me right away and almost drops the pan that he's holding when his eyes land on me. I smirk at that, loving the confidence I feel when he stares at me like that. I love that little old me can bring a man like Heath to his knees.

He sets the pan down and his hands grip the edge of the counter so tight that his knuckles turn white. He drinks me in, his gaze heated as his eyes trace over my curves, lingering on the apex of my thighs. He licks his lips, his tongue darting out, and I swear I almost come from the sight.

“There’s one more thing that makes me a freak,” I say, backing up slowly.

“You could never be a freak,” He rumbles, stalking me across the living room until my back hits the wall next to the hallway.

“I’m a twenty-four-year-old virgin,” I rush out and then hold my breath for his response.

I don’t have to wait long. He’s got me over his shoulder before I know what hit me. His hands caress the backs of my thighs, stroking upward as he carries me into the bedroom and over to the bed. He lays me down gently, resting his hands on either side of my head as he stares down at me.

“I think I have you beat. I’m a twenty-eight-year-old virgin.”

He looks embarrassed to say that, the tops of his cheeks over his beard flashing pink, but I think it just makes me love him more.

“Let’s fix that,” I say as I wrap my arms around his neck and pull his head down.

Our lips meet and cling as Heath slowly puts more of his weight on me. It doesn’t take long for things to grow heated between us though and soon we’re both pulling at his clothes, tossing them and rolling higher on the bed. He pulls his shirt off and I roll him onto his back, straddling him. I grind down on the bulge in his jeans and he growls, tossing the shirt aside and reaching for me.

He drags me up his stomach and chest until my mouth is hovering an inch above his mouth.

“Grab the headboard,” he orders, his hands curling around my thighs and holding me in place.

His beard tickles the skin on my inner thighs as I lean forward and wrap my fingers around the wooden headboard. The wood is smooth under my palms and I wrap my fingers tighter, holding on tight as Heath’s fingers wrap around my thighs and he drags me down to his mouth.

I moan loudly at the first swipe of his tongue through my soft folds. My body tips forward and I brace myself harder against the headboard as he starts to double his efforts. His lips bump over my clit and I jerk, pulling away. Heath growls, his fingers digging into my thighs as he pulls me back down to his mouth. His beard scratches against my sensitive core and I shiver. He holds me more firmly, parting my folds with his tongue before he growls against my drenched flesh. He's acting like I'm trying to take away his favorite toy or something.

I hold on for the ride as Heath uses his tongue and lips and teeth to drive me out of my mind. He licks every single inch of my quivering flesh as I rock above him. When he wraps his lips around my clit and sucks, I grind down on his mouth. My head tips back to the ceiling as my eyes fall closed and my mouth opens in a silent scream as I start to come.

I start to tip over as spots dance in front of my eyes but Heath catches me, wrapping his arm around my waist and dragging me down to the mattress next to him.

THIRTEEN

Heath

SHE'S flushed and gorgeous as I roll her under me. Her sweet tangy honey is still in my mouth and I lick my lips, wanting to savor that sweet taste. I can still smell her on my beard and I never want to shower again. Not unless I can put it back on right after.

Emma smiles up at me, rubbing her calf up my leg and hooking around my waist. She tries to pull me closer to her and I willingly go, resting my body on top of her smaller one. Her feet are around my knees but the rest of us lines up perfectly. My cock grinds down against her slick pussy as I settle into the v of her legs. Her breath catches in her throat as I rub against her, her eyes going hazy and I want to beat my chest. I love that I can make this little minx feel like this.

"Are you ready for me?" I ask, my voice coming out even deeper than normal.

"Oh yeah," she says with a saucy grin as her hips rock against mine.

I bite back a moan as she wraps her arms around my neck and pulls herself up until her lips meet mine. She pushes her tongue into my mouth, moaning as she tastes herself on my mouth.

My hips continue rocking against hers until she tilts her hips up. The tip of my cock slips inside her and we both

freeze.

“Fuck, you’re so tight,” I grit out.

“Maybe you’re just too big. Did you ever think about that?” She says, her fingernails digging into my arms as I start to slowly push more into her.

We both take a deep breath when I reach her virginity and I kiss her deeply, slipping my tongue inside her mouth to tangle with hers as I break through her barrier and I don’t stop until I’ve buried myself inside her completely.

“You’re mine now, Emma.”

Emma gasps for breath, her eyes wide on me as she struggles to get used to my size stretching her.

“Say it, little minx,” I order, holding myself still inside her as she meets my eyes.

“I’m yours,” she breathes out, her pussy clamping down tight around me as she says the words.

“Mine. Only ever mine,” I say as I start to pull out of her and she moans, her hands gripping me tighter.

She’s so tight and wet and wrapped around me so snugly. It’s even better than I ever imagined and I close my eyes. I want to remember this moment, our first time, for the rest of my life.

Emma’s legs hike higher around my hips and I sink even deeper inside her. It’s then that my control snaps. I grab her thigh, holding her steady as I start to thrust into her harder.

“Heath,” she gasps when I pass over a certain spot inside her and I pick up my pace, making sure to hit that spot with each pass.

Her legs tighten around my waist and her pussy feels like a vise around my cock, getting tighter with each thrust. I grit my teeth, trying to hold back. I don’t want to come until she does.

“Say you’re mine. Just mine,” I demand, pounding into her.

“I’m yours!”

“Say it again.”

“Heath! Fuck, I’m going to come.”

“Who do you belong to?” I ask, the pressure in my body expanding as my own orgasm starts to ignite inside me.

“You! Just you!” She shouts as she goes off.

Her juices flood my cock and her back arches off the mattress as she comes all over my cock. Seeing her like that sends me over the edge and I bury my face in her neck, her name falling from my lips over and over as I come with her.

I fill her up with my come and I can feel some of it dripping out of her as she goes lax beneath me. Her legs fall from around my waist and her breathing starts to even out. I’m about to push off her when I hear her whisper something that has my heart tripping in my chest.

“I love you,” she says, her voice dreamy and soft.

“I love you too, Emma,” I say, pulling back to look her in the eyes.

I look down at her and see that she’s fallen asleep with me still buried to the hilt inside of her. I want to laugh but this fits Emma so much. She’s been derailing my plans since she first showed up to interview for a job with me.

I pull out of her slowly and go to the bathroom to get a washcloth to clean her up. When I get back I see my come slipping out of her and I realize that we didn’t use protection. That should terrify me but as I wipe the traces of blood and cum from her thighs, my cock rages back to life. One thought keeps running through my head.

I wonder if she has my baby inside of her already.

FOURTEEN

Emma

I WAKE the next morning feeling sore but well rested and I smile as I remember everything that Heath did to me last night. I blink my eyes open and smile when I see that I'm curled up next to him and he's still sound asleep.

I've never woken before him before and I crane my neck over my shoulder to see what time it is. 5:14 am glows at me from the alarm clock on his bedside table. His alarm won't go off for another half an hour and I know that I should get up and make him his breakfast and lunch. You know, do my job, but I would much rather explore the man in bed next to me.

He got to touch every inch of me last night so it's only fair that I get to do the same. That's what I tell myself as I pull the sheet and blanket back and slowly slide underneath. His chest is hairy and for a second I smile. The sasquatch name kind of fits but I love it. I love how big and strong he is and I can't understand why anyone would make fun of him for it.

I crawl between his legs, lying down on my stomach between them so that I'm eye level with his stiff cock. He's huge and for a second, I can't believe that I was able to fit him inside me last night. I have a feeling that I won't be able to take all of him in my mouth, but damn if I don't want to try.

I wrap one hand around him but my fingers still don't touch so I wrap both hands around his length, gliding them slowly up and down. A small drop of liquid appears at the tip

and I smile, leaning forward and licking it up. I hum, enjoying the salty flavor. I'm going in to wrap my lips around the tip when two strong hands appear under the blankets and I'm dragged up.

Heath rolls us, kneeling my thighs wide before he thrusts inside me. I gasp, my fingers pulling at his hair as he starts to roughly fuck me into the mattress. Heath's eyes are barely open as he moves over me. He dips his head, his beard tickling my neck as he bites my shoulder lightly, soothing it with his tongue before his mouth moves lower and he nips at the tips of my breasts.

I moan, arching into his mouth and his pace picks up. His hand slides lower, hooking around one of my thighs and pulling until my ankle is resting on his shoulder. I'm open to him this way and he leans back, slamming into me.

My hands slide against his arms as a thin layer of sweat coats us both. I can feel my orgasm starting in my veins and my pussy tightens around Heath's cock. He growls above me and something about the sounds sends me over the edge.

I come, his name falling from my lips like a prayer as my fingernails dig into his arms. My eyes fall closed as Heath swears, his pace growing erratic as he starts to find his own release. I feel his warm seed spill into me and I realize that we didn't use protection either time. I smile at that thought.

I wonder what it would be like to have Heath's babies? To belong to him and be his wife and partner. I blink my eyes open when he slows his pace and stare up at him.

HEATH IS BRACED on his hands, his eyes wide as he looks down at me with a slightly horrified expression.

"Good morning," I say with a cheeky smile.

"Fuck. Emma, I'm so sorry. I thought it was a dream. Are you okay?" He asks, hurrying to pull out of me.

I wince a little and he curses under his breath but I sit up, wrapping my arms around his neck.

“I’m great,” I promise, leaning in and brushing my lips against his.

I run my fingers along his beard, tugging on the ends as I look up at him from under my eyelashes.

“Are you going to make me breakfast now?”

He blinks and then throws his head back, laughing as he carries me from bed and into the kitchen.

FIFTEEN

Heath

"I'LL SEE YOU FOR DINNER," I tell Emma and she pouts at me but slowly unravels her legs and arms from around me.

We've been all over each other and I know that I need to let her rest. She has to be sore but she hasn't complained. She actually seems as desperate for me as I am for her and that thought blows my mind.

"I'm going to make chicken cordon bleu for dinner tonight," she says as I head out the door and I grin.

"I'll make sure I'm home early so that we can avoid that food poisoning," I tease and she laughs, her dark blue eyes glinting at me in the early morning sun.

"See you soon," she says, leaning against the doorframe.

She's just wearing one of my t-shirts and my mouth waters at the sight. She gives me a flirty look and I want nothing more than to rip that shirt off her and pin her to the wall, stuffing her full of my cock and fucking her there until she comes all over me. *Let her rest*, I remind myself and I grit my teeth. I never want to hurt her. I will always put Emma's needs before my own.

I get in my truck and wave goodbye to her one last time before I head to work. I make sure things are running smoothly there before I climb back in my truck and head into town. I park outside the jewelry store and wipe my hands off

on my jeans. I can already hear what the people of this town will be saying when they find out that Sasquatch bought an engagement ring but I want Emma. She's the one for me.

My life was boring before she came into it. Sure, she's definitely a handful and she might kill us both with her cooking but I've had more fun teaching her how to cook and watching dumb TV shows with her than I've had doing anything else in my life. I want her to be my wife. I want her to have my children. My cock hardens as I think about the fact that she could already be carrying my child inside her.

Before I can go too far down that trail, I kick the truck door open and head inside the store. It doesn't take me very long to find the perfect ring and soon I'm striding back to my truck. My plan had been to wait until tonight to ask her, but as soon as I saw the ring I knew I wasn't going to be able to wait. It belongs on Emma's finger and I can't wait any longer to see it there.

I turn the truck toward home and try to plan out my speech in my head the whole way. I've never been great with words but I'm willing to try if it means that Emma is mine.

I pull up out front and head inside. I open the door to find Emma dancing around the living room. She's still in just my shirt but she has her phone in the shirt pocket and her headphones are in. She's singing, her voice loud as she tries to be heard over the vacuum cleaner. I grin at the sight and for just a second, I wonder if I should wait until tonight. I could get flowers, chocolate and candles and make this perfect. Then I think about Emma.

Neither of us is perfect and we're both okay with that. Emma embraces her quirks and we laugh at our mistakes. I want our whole life to be like that so as she shimmies around the coffee table, I sneak up behind her and get down on one knee.

It takes a moment for her to turn and see me there and when she does, her mouth drops open and she hurries to turn the vacuum off.

“Emma Fawn, I love you. You’re the best thing that ever happened to me. I love you, I love your webbed toes, I love all of your quirks and I want to spend the rest of my life loving you. Will you marry me?” I ask, opening the ring box to reveal the emerald cut, emerald ring nestled inside.

Her eyes tear up slightly and I watch as she reaches up and pulls her headphones out.

“I didn’t hear any of that but it looked so sweet.”

My mouth drops open and then we both start laughing.

“Marry me, you freak,” I say, grabbing her hand and sliding the ring on.

She grins at me, wiggling her finger so that the light shines off the stone.

“I love it.”

“I love you,” I say seriously and she grins up at me.

“I love you too, you big freak.”

Her lips land on mine and I lay her out on the couch. As we pull at each other’s clothes, one thought runs through my head.

I wonder how quick I can get her to walk down the aisle.

SIXTEEN

Emma

SIX WEEKS LATER...

HEATH and I have been married for six weeks now. We got married at the courthouse the Monday after he asked me, with just my mom there. She had seemed shocked that I was getting married all of a sudden but luckily, she's been nothing but supportive since we told her.

Heath took me to a cabin in Alaska for our honeymoon. I had joked that we could have stayed in Washington to do that. He had offered to take me somewhere else but by then it had started to snow and planes had been grounded. We ended up getting snowed in for the whole week but neither of us minded.

I started feeling sick two weeks ago and I had a feeling I knew what it was that was causing it. I had tried to sneak a pregnancy test when Heath and I went grocery shopping but my husband notices everything about me and he spotted it as soon as I put it in the cart. I swear he almost picked me up and ran out of the store after we had paid.

He had waited while I took the test and then held me as we waited to see how many lines would show up. When the second line became visible, he had grabbed me and kissed me. I've never seen him look so happy before.

Heath called and made me a doctor appointment right after we found out I was expecting but it had taken another week before they could get us in. We're finally here for the appointment now and I smile as Heath grips my hand tighter, his knee bouncing erratically as we wait for the doctor to come in and see us.

"Hey, It's going to be okay," I say as I try to calm him.

"I'm going to be the best dad, Emma. I promise," he says and I smile at him.

I never had any doubt that Heath would be a fantastic father. He's already the world's best husband and I know that my mom will be around to help. She's already talking about finding a place closer so that she can see the grandkids more. Heath even mentioned that we could build her a little place on our land.

I run my fingers down Heath's beard, tugging on the ends so that he leans down and kisses me.

"I love you, Heath. You're going to be the best dad."

He swallows hard, his green eyes going a little glassy as he stares back at me.

"What did I do to deserve you, little minx?"

"You're a freak just like me."

He grins, leaning over and kissing me but we have to pull away when the door opens and the doctor walks in. I love that I can make him smile when he hears that word now. I love that I can make him feel like he's not alone.

Heath looks over and his eyes meet mine. He smiles softly at me, giving my hand a squeeze and I squeeze back.

I just love him. My giant, grumpy, lumberjack husband.

SEVENTEEN

Heath

TEN YEARS LATER...

I PARK my truck in front of our house and smile as I kick the door open and grab the flowers off the seat next to me. I left work early today, anxious to get home to my family.

A lot has changed around here since my minx came into my life. I've cut back on my hours at work, handing off more responsibilities to my foremen. We built on to our cabin and then kept building on each time that Emma got pregnant.

After our fourth baby, we both decided that we were done. All of our kids were big and the pregnancies were hard on Emma. I was nervous every single time and when she said she was done I had been relieved. I would never deny Emma something that she wanted but part of me was glad that I wouldn't have to see her go through labor again.

Emma is still my little minx and she still can't cook. I even signed us up for a couples cooking class but she hasn't improved much. Luckily the food usually turns out cooked now but it's either over seasoned or burnt. It's become a joke though and I know that Emma loves cooking with me so I make sure that I'm home in time to make dinner every night.

I head up the front steps and swing the door open.

“Daddy!”

I smile as four little bodies launch at me at once and catch them all.

“Hey guys. What have you been up to?” I ask as I kick off my boots and carry them over to the couch.

“Mom’s cooking,” our youngest, Beth whispers at me, her eyes going wide as she says the words and I laugh.

“Uh oh. How’s she doing?”

Our oldest son, Ryker, collapses backward onto the couch, pretending he was poisoned and I grin. Our other son, Michael and our daughter, Rose, join in and I can’t help but laugh.

“Guess I better go help her then, huh?”

They nod at me and I tickle them as I grab the flowers off the coffee table and head off to find my wife. I walk into the kitchen and smile when I see her standing there covered in flour.

“Hey, little one.”

She spins around, her blue eyes wide as she stands in the middle of the kitchen. It looks like a bomb went off around her and I just grin.

“I thought I could surprise you and have everything done by the time you got home. I think I actually got it right!” She says, spinning around and pulling the pie pan off the stove.

I set the flowers on the kitchen table and walk over to inspect the dish. It looks like she made a quiche and it actually doesn’t look too bad. The tops of some broccoli are a little burnt but the eggs look cooked. I grab a fork and take a bite, popping it in my mouth as she waits with a hopeful look on her face. It reminds me of the first time I ate her cooking and just like then, I can’t take that look away from her.

I love Emma and just like then, I would eat burnt, terrible, bland food for the rest of my life if it meant that she was here with me.

“Not bad,” I say, reaching for a glass of water.

“Really?”

“Yeah,” I lie, wrapping my arms around her and pinning her between me and the wall.

My lips meet hers and she smiles against my mouth, wrapping her arms around my neck as I deepen it. When we finally pull apart, we’re both out of breath and she’s grinning at me.

“So, are we ordering pizza then?”

“Yep.”

She laughs and I can hear our children cheering in the living room. She’s not perfect, but she’s mine and I’m so glad that she came to interview with me.

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HIS TOUCH

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Bianca St. Pierre has a problem.

She's afraid of commitment. She's been trying to find her knight in shining armor.

Instead, she winds up with a stalker.

Bryson Thatcher has a solution.

He's wanted Bianca since the moment that he saw her and now is finally his chance to get close to her and show her that they're meant to be together.

He just needs to come up with a way to show her what she means to him. To show her that she's his everything.

When these two are together, sparks fly, but will that be enough to get both to move past their hang ups?

**Warning! This book alpha is over-the-top, head over heels in love with his girl. If you're looking for a steamy insta-love story then this book is for you!*



CHAPTER 1

Bianca

I watch as Lincoln wraps his hand around his fiancée's waist. Adeline smiles up at him, completely content. I'm so happy for her, for her and our other friend Aspen. They've both found their happily ever afters and I watch as they both cuddle further into their men. A pang of jealousy hits me and I turn away, looking around the party for the one man that I can't seem to get off my mind.

My eyes land on him and I'm not surprised to find him already staring back at me. It seems like he always knows when I'm looking at him. Or maybe he's just always watching me. Bryson Thatcher. He's a 6'2" blonde hair, blue eyed, Viking hunk.

I met him two weeks ago when I called Lincoln asking for help with my stalker. There's this guy, Brad Mikales, who used to come into the coffee shop and ask me out. I said yes once and we went on the most boring, unbearable date ever. All he did was brag about himself and how wealthy his family is. The date ended, finally, and I never called him again. The problems started when he tried to get me to go out with him again. I politely turned him down and then the politeness wore off and I told him flat out that I would never go out with him ever again. He really didn't like that and that was when he started showing up everywhere I went. Walking down my street and staring up at my apartment at random times. I saw him take pictures of me and I'm a little afraid that he bugged my apartment.

One night, I had the worst cold and ran out in the middle of the night to get some medicine when I saw Brad following me out of the corner of my eye. I know I only live a block away but I was too scared to walk back home by myself. I remembered that Adeline's boyfriend was in security and had called her phone but Lincoln ended up answering. I explained the situation and he had sent Bryson to walk me home.

I remember staying on the phone with Lincoln until Bryson got there. He had shown up only five minutes after I called Lincoln so he must live close. I have a nice apartment in the Upper East Side only a couple of blocks over from Adeline and Aspen's places. It's close to the coffee shop where both Aspen and I work. Aspen's new husbands are both ridiculously wealthy so she doesn't need to work there anymore but she says that she gets bored sitting at home all day.

I don't need to work either but I don't tell a lot of people that. My family is one of the oldest, richest, families in New York and I grew up with the proverbial silver spoon in my mouth. I had been happy like that until I turned fifteen. That was when I learned what was expected of me. My parents wanted me to graduate high school, go to an all-girls college and then marry a man of their choosing. Anything less than that would be disgracing our family's name, they said.

Ever since, I've been living off my wages at the coffee shop and the inheritance that my grandma left me. She had married into the family but she did it for love and she never agreed with what my parents tried to force me into. She wanted me to be happy and to have my own life so when she died, she left everything to me. That only pissed my parents off even more. I ended up using most of the inheritance to buy my apartment and to go to college at NYU.

My parents have tried everything to get me to bend to their will. Adeline and Aspen always tease me about going out on first dates but never seconds, but what they don't know is there's a reason for that. My parents bought the only serious boyfriend that I ever had. They offered Jonathon money to pay off his student loans if he would just encourage me to listen to my parents and then break up with me. He did it and I've shied away from relationships ever since, afraid to be burned like that again.

A touch on my elbow jerks me back to the present and I look up to see Flynn's brother, Ryan, trying to get my attention. I smile at him as he comes to stand in front of me.

"Bianca, right? I think we met at Aspen's wedding."

“Yeah, how’s it going, Ryan?”

“Pretty good. You enjoying the party?”

“Yeah, it’s been fun.” I say with a small smile.

Suddenly, I feel him. I look to my left out of the corner of my eye and see Bryson inching his way closer to me. He’s glaring at Ryan as he crowds me, sandwiching me between his body and the wall.

He’s always doing things like this. I understand it when we’re in public and he’s trying to keep me safe from Brad, but he does it at other times too. Like here. We’re surrounded by friends and family and there’s no threat to me but instead of enjoying himself and joining in the celebration, he’s glued to my side and trailing after me like a lost puppy. I smile to myself. I’d never admit it but I like his eyes on me or knowing that if I just look over, he’ll be there.

That reminds me about my new puppy who’s at home all alone. I check my watch and see how late it’s gotten. I look around the room and see that most of the guests are gone or packing up to leave. It’s almost one in the morning and I know that I should be getting ready to head home too. I have to open the coffee shop tomorrow morning and I already know I’m going to be dead tired.

I look up at Bryson as he looms over me.

“You ready to go home?” I ask.

He just nods before he puts his hand on the small of my back. I say goodbye to Ryan and Bryson just nods at him before we make the rounds, saying goodbye to Aspen, Roman, and Flynn before we make our way over to Adeline and Lincoln. We congratulate them once again and I hug them both while Bryson shakes Lincoln’s hand and tells him he’ll talk to him tomorrow.

Finally, we make our way to the door. Bryson puts his hand on my back once again as he leads me down the stairs and into the night.



CHAPTER 2

Bryson

WE WALK the two blocks back to her apartment in silence. I'm a pretty quiet guy normally, preferring to listen and take everything in, but Bianca is livelier and I know the reason she's not talking my ear off right now is because we're both on the lookout for her stalker, Brad. I keep close to her as we hurry down the sidewalk, my eyes peeled for any sign of a threat.

I've been staying at her apartment for the last two weeks. At first, it was for protection. She thought that someone had bugged her apartment and she was right. I found cameras and speakers hidden in her bedroom and once I removed them, I was worried that whoever had put them there would try to break in and replace them. So far there hasn't been any sign of him and I wonder if I scared him off.

I want Bianca to be safe, of course, but I also like staying with her. Living by yourself can be lonely. That's why I spend most of my time at work. I have my own place, a one-bedroom apartment downtown, but there's really just a bed there and it's never quite felt like home.

Bianca's place feels like home. She's got a plump couch that you can sink into and so much color everywhere. There are pictures on the walls and end tables and knick-knacks from her life on bookshelves. It's lived in and loved and it makes

me sad to think about going back to my place after we've dealt with Brad.

Maybe it's not the stuff in her place that I'm drawn to though. I think it's her. From the moment that I walked into the corner market to walk her home; I was attracted to her. She was sick, with a red nose and Kleenex clutched in one hand when I first introduced myself to her. She had told me her name and thanked me about a hundred times for coming to do this and I thought her stuffed up voice was adorable. Her blonde hair was twisted up into a messy bun and her blue eyes looked a little watery but I still thought that she was the most beautiful woman that I had ever seen.

I had walked her home that night and helped her take some medicine before I asked her some questions about her stalker and what was happening with him. We talked for a little bit and I stepped out to make a phone call. When I came back inside, she was fast asleep, curled up on the couch. I tucked her in and then sat in the chair facing her. I fell asleep at some point too because I woke up to a sore neck and her eyes watching me. I apologized for falling asleep there but she said it was ok, that having me there made her feel safe and that's how I ended up spending every night over there for the last two weeks.

I had called Lincoln with an update the next day and told him that I would take over the case. He was dealing with a hungover Adeline so the call was short. I spent the rest of the day combing her apartment for bugs and running down to the store to get her some soup and some more Kleenex.

I got back to her apartment and found Lincoln and Adeline there. Bianca had adopted one of the puppies they were taking care of and they wanted to drop her off and tell her that they were engaged. I got there right when they were leaving and I offered them both my congratulations before heading inside.

The puppy was cute. A mix of some kind and it was climbing all over Bianca when I walked in. She was laughing and trying to avoid the puppy's excited licks. She saw me standing there watching them and smiled at me. My heart

flipped over in my chest and I think I fell in love with her right then and there.

There was just something about her. She was so sweet and full of life and I was drawn to it. I wanted to protect her and keep her safe from Brad and anything else that wanted to hurt her. I had never wanted a wife or girlfriend, they were more trouble than they were worth I thought, but watching Bianca wrestle with her puppy, Naia, I thought that maybe she would be worth it.

I've spent the last two weeks trailing after her as she goes to work or runs errands. I say it's for her protection and that's partly true but a bigger part is that I just want to spend time with her, get to know her. I've learned a lot about my pretty girl in that time.

One, she's a hard worker. She opens the coffee shop with Aspen five days a week and she works through the busy morning without complaint. I usually sit at a table in the corner and watch her. I'm there to make sure that Brad doesn't come back in and harass her but we haven't seen any sign of him since I started protecting her.

Two, she's smart and funny. She has customers and her friends laughing most of the day with her sense of humor and quick wit. She can make anyone feel welcome and at home and I'm sure that's why she's always on the register while Aspen makes the orders.

Three, she doesn't let many people get close to her. She has Adeline and Aspen but other than that, she seems to keep to herself. Sure, she's really friendly but I've noticed that when she talks to people that she doesn't really tell them anything important about her. I've seen guys ask her out but she turns them all down. I'm not sure if it's because of Brad or if maybe she feels my eyes glaring holes into the backs of the guys and she's worried about their safety. *Maybe she feels something for me too.* That's probably wishful thinking, but whenever anyone asks her on a date, her eyes always flick over to me. It's only for a second but I always catch it. It's her tell.

I've heard Adeline and Aspen both tease Bianca about her dating history. Apparently, she goes on a lot of first dates but no one has ever made it to a second. What I can't figure out, is why? Surely someone must have been worth a second date.

We make it back to her place and I wait while she unlocks the door. I step in first, doing a quick sweep to make sure that the place is empty. She makes her way over to a chair, collapsing down into it as she kicks her shoes off and stretches. Naia makes her way over to her and I watch as Bianca picks her up, cuddling her to her chest.

"Do you need to go outside, Naia?" She asks and I see her look back at her shoes. She's been wearing heels all night and I'm sure that her feet are tired.

"I'll take her." I offer.

"Are you sure?"

"Yeah, it's no problem." I say already grabbing the leash by the door.

Naia runs over to me as soon as she sees what's in my hand and I hook it to her collar before I grab my key off the counter.

"Lock the door behind me." I order.

She nods and I walk out, standing on the other side of the door until I hear the lock click.

I walk Naia outside and she does her business. I walk her around the block once before we head back upstairs. I unlock the door and let Naia off her leash. She rushes over to Bianca who scoops her up.

"Ready for bed?" She coos at the dog and I wish that she was asking that to me instead.

"Thanks for taking her. I'm tired. I'm going to head to bed." She yawns.

"Ok. You open the shop in a couple hours, right?" I confirm.

"Yeah." She says as she makes her way back to her room.

“Goodnight, Bryson.” She whispers.

“Goodnight, Bianca.”



CHAPTER 3

Bianca

I WAKE the next morning and go through my usual routine. Shower, pull on jeans and my coffee shop shirt, brush my hair and teeth before shoving my feet in my sneakers. I'm dragging a little today after having stayed out late at Adeline's engagement party. I head for the door and see Bryson sitting up on the couch already dressed. He's been sleeping in the guest room but he's always awake before I am in the morning.

"Morning." He says when I walk into the living room.

"Morning. Did you eat?" I ask as Naia jogs out of the bedroom with me.

"No, just some coffee."

"I'll make us some eggs after I take Naia out." I say, already heading for the door.

"I'll come with you." He says, bolting up from the couch.

Sometimes I forget that the only reason that Bryson is here is because of Brad. We walk to the elevator and ride it to the ground floor, walking outside for Naia to go to the bathroom. We circle the block twice before we head back to the apartment. I let us in and then head to the kitchen to make us something to eat.

Bryson sits at the counter and watches me as I make us eggs with bacon and some toast. I put on a new pot of coffee

as I flip the eggs. Bryson gets up and sets two places at the counter as the toast pops and I butter them, tossing them on the plates as he holds them out for me. He carries the plates over to the counter as I pour us each a cup of coffee, adding milk to his and sugar to mine. I join him at the counter, handing his cup to him as he slides my plate in front of my chair.

“We’re getting good at this.” I say as we dig in.

I love how we move like a team already, knowing where the other will be before they’re there. We eat in silence; Bryson isn’t much of a talker and it’s too early for me to try to carry a conversation with him. We finish breakfast and he walks me to work like he does every day.

I open the coffee shop and watch as he helps me take the chairs down off the tables and sits in his usual spot in the corner. I asked him once why he chose that spot when there are other more comfortable chairs and he said that it was the best spot tactically. Apparently sitting with his back to the wall meant no one could sneak up on him and he had clear sight lines to the front entrance and the employee entrance. He could keep an eye on me and all of the entrances at once.

Bryson spends my shift watching me and working on his laptop. I bring him some coffee and a pastry when the crowd dies down and I’ve taken to spending my breaks with him instead of sitting outside alone. I try to talk to him, flirt with him a little but he is always so stoic. It’s hard to see past that but I’ve caught him checking me out on several occasions. Staring at my ass or legs as I walk by or my tits when he thinks that I’m not looking. I know he must be interested in me but he hasn’t tried to make a move. It’s sad, but I think trying to get him to drop that blank mask he wears and watch me with lust clearly written all over his face has been the most fun I’ve had with a man in a long time.

I clock out at the end of my shift and Bryson meets me at the door with his backpack already slung over his shoulder. We say goodbye to Aspen and he walks me home as I talk about some of my customers today and a funny story that Aspen told me about her first night with her puppy, Mowgli. He listens to me silently as I chatter on. It used to bother me

that he never talked to me much but then I saw him around Lincoln, Flynn and Roman and realized that he just doesn't talk much period.

I walk closer to him as we reach my block, letting the back of my hand graze against his. I watch out of the corner of my eye as he tenses for a beat before continuing on like nothing happened. I've been doing this the last week as we walk home. Just light teasing touches to see how he would react. It's always been the same, just a brief pause before he continues walking. Just once I want him to reach for my hand, to feel his calloused one wrapped around mine.

We're almost to the door when my phone starts to ring. I fish it out of my back pocket along with my keys as Bryson holds the door open for me. I check my phone and see that it's my mother calling. My body tenses. I really don't want to answer but I know if I don't, she'll just keep calling me. I take a deep breath before I slide my finger across the screen.

"Hello?"

"Bianca, it's your mother."

I don't know why, but she always answers the phone that way. It's like she doesn't know that everyone has caller id nowadays.

"I know, mom. How are you?"

She sighs deeply before she answers.

"Well, your father and I would be better if our only daughter would quit these childish games and stop embarrassing the family name. Honestly Bianca, a coffee shop?" She says with a shudder in her voice. "It's time that you grew up and stopped acting like such a brat. We showed your picture to a family friend who has a son a couple of years older than you and we think that he would be an excellent match. I'm calling to tell you that they're coming over for dinner on Friday and they're excited to meet you."

"I'm not meeting any of your friends' sons, Mother. I want to pick my own husband and I can promise that it won't be anyone you try to set me up with."

“We will see you on Friday, Bianca. 6 pm.”

With that, she hangs up the phone and I want to scream. I follow Bryson into the elevator and I can see him watching me but I’m too upset right now to say anything. Why do they keep doing this? I’ve told them over and over again that I don’t want the life they seem determined to force on me but they just keep pushing. Maybe if they called me for more than just to order me around, then I wouldn’t be so against a dinner or two. Sadly, the only time I hear from them is when they have a new friend who would be perfect for me. Someone suitable with the right pedigree and bank account.

Bryson lets us into my apartment and Naia runs up to greet us. I need to take her for a walk but Bryson beats me to it.

“I got her. You go relax.” He says.

I nod as he puts Naia on her leash and they leave. I go over to the door, locking it before I make my way into my room and then into the bathroom. I want to soak in a nice hot bath and then I want to order pizza and watch movies all night.

I hear Bryson come back into the apartment when I’m getting out of my bath and I wrap a towel around me as I open the door and walk out into the living room. He’s bent down, putting Naia’s water bowl back down on the ground when I walk out and I see his eyes snap to me when I make my way over to him. Water drips down my legs and he seems fascinated by it. I clear my throat as I lean against the counter.

“I was going to order some pizza. Do you want anything?” I ask.

“Yeah, pizza sounds good.”

“Pepperoni ok?”

He just nods as his eyes dip back to my legs. I turn and walk back to my bedroom to grab my phone and I can feel his eyes on me the entire way. If I wasn’t still upset about my mom’s call, then this new attention would definitely thrill me.

I pick up my phone and order the pizza, adding some breadsticks and drinks before hanging up. I slip on some yoga pants and a thin blue tank top that matches my eyes before I

pad out to the kitchen. Bryson is still standing in the kitchen with Naia and his eyes lock on me as I walk out. I notice the way they dip down, snagging on my chest and I look down at myself to see that this tank is so worn that my nipples are almost visible. I look up to see Bryson still staring and he licks his lips. I can feel my nipples tighten into hardened peaks at his obvious arousal and I could swear I hear him groan as he tears his eyes away.

The doorbell rings and I grab my wallet as I walk to the door.

“Whoa!” Bryson says as he grabs my elbow and spins me around to face him. He drops his hand immediately, taking a step back as I stare up at him.

“What?” I ask.

“What are you doing?”

“Getting the pizza.” I say, like he’s an idiot.

“Not like that.” He says cryptically as he steps around me and opens the door. He steps out into the hall for a minute before he walks back in carrying our food. He closes and locks the door behind him before he drops the food on the counter and looks back at me. His eyes drop to my chest once again and I realize what he meant by “not like that.” He didn’t want anyone else to see me dressed like this.

I smile to myself as I grab some food and curl up on the couch. I turn the TV on, putting on some comedy that I find on Netflix. Bryson comes over after a couple of minutes and sits a few feet away. I want to laugh at the distance he puts between us but I manage to keep it in.

We finish our food and settle back in before he pounces.

“Did you want to talk about the phone call?”

I thought maybe he forgot and he wasn’t going to ask me about it but I should have known he was just waiting for the right time to strike.

“Just my mom. She has some great guy for me to meet and I’m expected at dinner on Friday.”

He's silent for a minute and I go back to watching the movie before he speaks again.

"Are you going?" He asks quietly.

"Absolutely not."

I watch as a small smile curves his lips and I could swear that the tension in his shoulders eases at my answer. I shake it off and sink back into the couch. We're silent then as we both get lost in the movie.



CHAPTER 4

Bryson

I WAKE the next morning to Naia licking my face. I blink my eyes open to see that I'm still on the couch. I must have fallen asleep during the TV show last night. I feel something heavy on my chest and I look to see Bianca's mess of blonde hair fanned out on my shoulder. Her head is resting on my chest with one arm draped across my stomach. I can feel one of her legs entwined with mine and the other is thrown over my hip and dangling off the side of the couch. At some point, we both must have fallen asleep and ended up cuddling up with each other.

I look down at her face. Her pale lashes are resting against her cheeks which are flushed with sleep. Her ruby red lips are parted and I watch as her chest rises and falls with her breaths. My cock stiffens even further as she shifts and rubs against me. I bite back a groan and screw my eyes shut to try to calm myself down. I used to be able to control myself better but it's been a while since I've been with anyone and there's something about Bianca that just gets me hotter than I've ever been in my life.

I've spent the last two weeks trying to hold myself back from throwing her down on the nearest surface and making her scream my name until she's hoarse. She hasn't been helping. She's always flirting with me or teasing me with her body. I know she thinks that I don't know what she's doing, but I do. I look forward to her flirting with me on her breaks at the coffee

shop or the way she brushes her hand or body against mine when we're walking home or moving around the apartment.

It's driving me crazy. I want her so bad but I want more than just a one-night stand with her. That would be a bad idea anyway since I'm still here to protect her. From everything that I know about Bianca, she isn't one for commitment. I don't know why that is yet, but I do know that I can't just ask her out. Even if she said yes, it would only be for one night. I want a lifetime of nights with her so I've been trying to take things slow.

Bianca starts to stir on top of me and I watch as she blinks sleepy eyes up at me. She smiles down at me as she moves to straddle my hips. I think she's going to slip off of me but instead, she sits atop me. Her hands come to rest on my chest and she rocks lightly on top of me. My hands tighten on her waist, trying to hold her still but as soon as she can't rock her hips, she just switches to grinding down on my raging cock.

I can't hold back my moan then and it spills out as she leans over me. She braces herself on my chest as her hair falls in a curtain around our faces. Her lips are so close to mine that if I just leaned up, they would be touching. I can feel her warm breath on my face as she leans down even lower. Her full tits press against my chest as her mouth finally brushes over mine. The kiss is featherlight, just a whisper of her lips on mine before she leans back.

She moans before she buries her face in my neck. She starts to rock against me again and this time I let her. She nips at my neck before soothing her tongue over the little bite. She moans as her rhythm picks up and she starts to suck on my neck. I know that I'll have a mark there but it only turns me on more. I love knowing that she's marking me.

Her breath is coming in little pants now and she's grinding down on me hard, I try to hold back but I can feel the familiar tingle at the base of my spin and I know I'm going to come soon. Suddenly, something soft jumps on top of us and Bianca freezes. She pulls away from me quickly, climbing off me and the couch as Naia continues to jump all over me. I forgot that she was the one who woke me up before this all started.

Bianca stares down at me with wide, surprised eyes.

“Oh my god, Bryson. I’m so sorry.”

She turns and bolts into her room and I want to go after her but my cock is still hard and pulsing in my pants and I’m not sure I can move right now. I scrub my hands down my face as I hear her moving around her room. Naia crawls up on me and licks my face and I finally calm down enough to get up. I look at Bianca’s door but decide to give her some space. I head into my room to get ready. I already know it’s going to take a very cold shower for me to lose my hard-on and I sigh as I turn the handle and step under the icy blast.



CHAPTER 5

Bianca

I can't believe I just did that, I think as I collapse back against my bedroom door. I had been half asleep when I first realized what I was doing but by then I was too turned on to think to stop. He felt so big and solid under me and he was hitting right where I needed it the most. Then Naia jumped on us and I was jerked back. I can't believe I basically attacked him like that and my face flames as I remember that he barely touched me.

I'm supposed to meet Aspen and Adeline this morning for breakfast and then we're going to do some wedding planning. *I need a cold shower*. I strip off my sweats and tank from yesterday before I step under the cold spray. It does the job and by the time I step out, I'm cooled off and wide awake. I blow dry my hair and apply some mascara and lip gloss before I grab some clothes. I pull on a pair of skinny jeans and a loose-fitting shirt before I grab my sneakers.

I have to psych myself up before I open my bedroom door and step out. Bryson is already dressed and waiting in the kitchen. He looks up at me when I walk out and offers me a small smile.

"You look nice." He says.

"Thanks. Are you ready to go?" I ask.

He nods and I hook Naia up to her leash before we leave, making sure to lock the door after me. We make our way silently down to the lobby and we're about a block from the café where we're meeting everyone when I finally can't take the silence anymore.

"I'm really sorry. I didn't mean to attack you like that." I blurt.

"You didn't." He says, clearing his throat, "I liked it."

I gape at him as he leads me to the outside table where everyone is already sitting. That's when I notice the hickey that I left on his neck. Normally I'm not into that kind of thing but something about seeing my mark on Bryson really turns

me on. I compose myself as I say hi to everyone and hug Adeline and Aspen. Bryson ties Naia's leash to his chair and I watch as she jumps all over her two brothers. Adeline brought Quiche and Aspen brought her puppy, Mowgli. It's nice out and we knew we would be sitting outside so we thought they could have a little puppy playdate.

We order brunch and talk about everything we need to plan for the wedding. We're going to look at wedding dresses next week but we still need to find a venue, caterer, and cake. We already got the photographer and DJ out of the way.

We finish brunch and head back to Adeline's house. I walk alongside Bryson and his words from early play on a loop in my head. *I liked it, I liked it.* I peek at him out of the corner of my eye. He's walking Naia as he talks with Lincoln about something from work. I move closer to him, letting my hand brush against his. I've done this about a hundred times in the last two weeks and every time, he does nothing, but today he surprises me. Instead of acting like nothing happened, he does it back. The back of his hand brushes against mine and I look up to see him watching me. He stares at me like he's daring me to make the next move.

Challenge accepted.

I stare forward as we reach Adeline's block and brush my hand against his again, only this time I stretch my fingers out, trailing my index finger along his palm. I scrape my nail against his sensitive skin and his hand jerks, trying to clench around my fingers and I smile as I slip away and follow the girls into the house. I grin at him over my shoulder as he follows me up the stairs and butterflies erupt in my stomach when I see the heat in his eyes.

Game On.



CHAPTER 6

Bryson

I follow Bianca into Lincoln and Adeline's townhouse. I watch her ass as it sways gently back and forth and I remember holding those hips just this morning while she ground on top of me. I clear my throat and bend over to let Naia off her leash and to try to hide my growing erection.

The girls go into the kitchen immediately crowding around the kitchen table as they talk about different venues that they could have the wedding at. Adeline pulls out her laptop and they lean over it together as they look up different places.

I stand with Roman, Flynn, and Lincoln in the living room and I notice that we're all watching them. Roman and Flynn are staring at Aspen like she hung the moon and Lincoln is watching Adeline with a dopey smile on his face. I wonder if I look at Bianca like that. I have a sinking feeling that I do and I hope that no one has noticed.

Just as I think that Lincoln turns away from the girls and looks over at me.

"So, you and Bianca, huh?" He asks with a pointed look at my neck.

I know the hickey is visible and a small smile curves my lips. I look at him out of the corner of my eye but don't say anything as I take a seat on the couch. Roman and Flynn sit down in the two chairs and Lincoln takes the spot next to me. We sit in silence for a minute, watching the puppies chase after each other.

I still can't believe that Lincoln rescued eight puppies. I know that he did it for Adeline though and as I think about it, I realize that I would have done the same for Bianca. I rub my hand through my hair as I think about how wrapped around her finger I already am.

I've known Lincoln since the Navy. We both enlisted at the same time and went through boot camp together. We ended up in the dorms on the same base together and we've been close

ever since. He told me he wanted to get out about four years ago and I agreed that it was time. I was starting to lose myself more and more with each deployment. Lincoln wanted to start a security company, really use the skills that we had and I agreed, giving him half of my savings to start our company. It's paid off and now I'm set for life.

I listen to the girls talk in the kitchen. They're contacting different places and scheduling when they can go see venues or try out cakes. I smile when I hear Bianca laugh at something Aspen says and I see Lincoln give me another pointed look. I smooth out my features, adopting the blank mask that I usually walk around wearing. Suddenly, I hear my name mentioned and my ears perk up.

"You and Bryson seem pretty close." Adeline whispers. She's talking just loud enough that I can still hear every word they say though and I strain my ears to catch Bianca's response. Before Bianca can respond though, Aspen interrupts.

"Please tell me that you're not going to do your usual one date disappearing act with him. He seems like a good guy and besides, you're guaranteed to run into him again."

"That's true." Adeline pipes up. "I think that Bryson could be the one to finally break the one date streak. You guys will date and fall in love and then we'll be planning your wedding next." She says dreamily.

Sounds good to me.

The dogs start barking and I look at my watch to realize that it's been two hours.

"Bryson, you ready to head home? I need to get some stuff done there."

I nod as I stand from the couch, saying goodbye to everyone before I grab Naia and follow Bianca out of the house. We take the long way home, letting Naia stop to sniff everything on the way. I think over something that has been bugging me for a while.

"Why do you never go on second dates?"

Bianca stares at the ground, thinking over my question as we continue walking in silence. I never understood that. Bianca is beautiful, smart, funny, loyal; she should have been snapped up by now.

“I had this boyfriend in college. He was my first serious boyfriend ever and I was in love with him, or at least I thought I was.” I frown at hearing her say she loved someone else.

“It was about six months when he started acting weird. Wanting me to see my parents more or encouraging me to answer their calls. I have a bit of a rocky relationship with them. They want me to be this perfect socialite daughter who marries a man from an equally respectable family and does all of the right charities and functions like them. I never wanted that and we just fought about it constantly so I stopped spending any time with them. They cut me off but I have an inheritance from my grandma so I do ok without their help.”

Her parents definitely wouldn’t approve of me then. I grew up in a poor family from the wrong side of town.

“Anyways, I finally broke down and we went over there for dinner one night. It was awful. Turns out they paid him to talk me into seeing them again and then paid him more when he broke up with me. They had another guy waiting to take me out, someone with a better pedigree.” She spits bitterly.

“What an idiot.” I mutter.

“Yeah, I should have known better. They’ll never accept me for me.”

“No! I didn’t mean you. I meant your boyfriend and your parents. You’re amazing just the way you are, Bianca. They must be blind or stupid to not be able to see that. You don’t need them. You’re better off without them.”

I see her watching me as we turn the corner and she has a speculative look in her eyes. We stop for the crosswalk light and she reaches over, gently squeezing my hand once. She drops my hand after that and we make our way across the street.

“So, you think that other people are going to do that too. Take their money and leave you behind.” I say as I realize that’s why she never goes on a second date.

She nods her head as we make our way down the sidewalk.

All of a sudden, the hairs on the back of my neck stand on end. My eyes immediately scan the area, looking for threats. We’re almost to her building and as I look across the street, I finally see him. Brad Mikales. He’s leaning against his fancy sports car across the street and his eyes are locked on Bianca. She seems to pick up on my tension because her head snaps up and she follows my line of sight to see him too. She steps closer to me as her breath catches in her throat.

“Breathe, Bianca.” I whisper.

“What do we do?” She asks.

“We keep walking. We’re going to go right down to the police station and file a restraining order against him. He’s on the coffee shop video surveillance footage harassing you at work and now this.”

“That will stop him?”

No.

“It’s a start.” I say instead.

We continue walking past her building and down the three blocks to the police station. Brad follows behind us the entire way and I see his eyes narrow and harden when he sees where we’re going. I help Bianca and Naia inside and ask for one of my friends who is on the force. He appears a couple of minutes later and we follow him back to his desk.

Bianca sits there, stiff and silent, as I fill him in on what’s happening. He looks him up in his system and I’m not surprised when he tells us that this isn’t the first time that he’s stalked someone. His family is well off and his dad is a judge though so he keeps getting off.

“Do you still want to go through with this?” He asks her and I turn to look at her too. Her eyes meet mine and I can see

that she's scared and worried. She keeps her eyes on mine as she answers, "Yes."

I sit with her while she tells them what happened on their date, how he wouldn't take no for an answer and has been following her. I tell them about the recording devices I found in her apartment and about the footage of him at the coffee shop. I can tell that Bianca is tired after having to defend herself for hours and explain what was happening over and over. Even I wanted to hit some of the cops who questioned her and tried to make it sound like this is what she wanted. She stayed firm though and promised that it wasn't and eventually, we have the whole story recorded and are granted a temporary restraining order. We'll have to go to court to get a permanent one but that will have to happen on a different day.

I wrap my arm around her as I hold Naia's leash with the other hand.

"Let's get you home." I say. Comforting and caring for her is now my life's new top priority.

She just nods her head as I lead her home.



CHAPTER 7

Bianca

I LEAN on Bryson as he practically drags me back home. We get in the apartment and he lets Naia off her leash before he scoops me up in his arms. I rest my head against his shoulder as he carries me into my room. He sets me down on the bed before he slips my shoes off. His fingers hesitate over my pants and he looks up into my eyes, silently asking permission. I nod slightly and he snaps the button before pulling my jeans down my legs quickly. He tucks the blanket around me as soon as they're off before he bends down and picks them off the floor. Folding and placing them on my dresser.

“Are you hungry?” He asks.

I shake my head no. “I just want to go to bed.” I say weakly.

The anxiety from seeing Brad outside my place and then the frustration and fear of being interrogated by the cops and them seeming to not believe me has completely drained me. I feel Naia jump on the bed to cuddle me as my eyes drift shut. Sleep claims me instantly but I could swear that I feel Bryson's lips brush across my forehead before I'm under.

MONDAY IS my day off at the coffee shop so I sleep in, only waking when I hear Bryson talking on the phone outside my door.

“That’s not good enough. I don’t care who his father is, he can’t keep getting away with this. I have proof that he is stalking her and there’s no way that any judge would rule that he wasn’t. There’s video from the coffee shop of him harassing her at work and I’m sure he’s on surveillance outside of her apartment building. I’ve seen him following her and I have pictures of it.”

There’s a pause and my ears strain to hear what he has to say next.

“I’ll cover the expenses. I’ve already hired the best goddamn lawyer in the city to represent her. There’s no way this prick is getting off again. I’m going to make sure that he’s locked up and he never comes near my girl again.”

His girl? My chest warms at hearing him call me that, especially when he’s being so protective. I remember the way he took care of me yesterday and how we had been flirting and teasing each other before we saw Brad. I told him things that I haven’t even shared with Aspen or Adeline. *I trust him.* I know that he would never hurt me. I know I’ve only known him a few weeks but there’s no denying that I’m attracted to him.

Aspen and Adeline were right. He is a good guy and there’s no way that I could ghost him after one date. I’m not even sure that I would be able to stop dating him after the first one. He gets to me like no one ever has before, worming his way into my thoughts, replacing the guys in my fantasies.

He’s attracted to me, I know, and if him calling me his girl is any indication, then he wants more than one date with me too. The question is; am I ready for that?”



CHAPTER 8

Bryson

It's been a week since the temporary restraining order was set in place and there's been no sign of Brad. The police are still building their case against him but with all of the evidence that I provided them, I'm sure it won't be long before he's arrested. There's not much point in me still staying with Bianca. I don't think that Brad is stupid enough to break the order or try to contact her but she hasn't said anything about me leaving and I haven't brought it up either.

She's been more comfortable around me the last week. She went from occasionally teasing or flirting with me to doing it all of the time. She's always bending over at the coffee shop when she brings me a new coffee or pastry. She pauses like that, making sure that I can see down her shirt to her ripe tits. I thought it was an accident the first time but I looked up into her eyes to see her grinning devilishly at me. She likes to brush her fingers down my arm whenever she walks past, or brush a stray lock of hair off my forehead.

She constantly finds ways to brush up against me or touch me. She's taken to wearing thin tank tops at home without a bra on every day with sleep shorts so tight and short that they're practically underwear. I've been stuck taking cold showers and jerking off every day, always picturing her beneath me as I spend into my hand.

She cuddles up next to me on the couch every night when we watch TV and it's both the best part of my day and absolute torture. Every time I look at that damn couch, all I can see is her writhing on top of me. She likes to lay with her head on my shoulder or in my lap while I play with her blonde locks. I love feeling the silky strands slip through my fingers but hearing her moans while her mouth is that close to my cock is hell. My mind fills with dirty fantasies every time she does it.

Then there's the flirting. She keeps making comments on my appearance; how big my arms are in my shirt or telling me

my jeans make my ass look amazing. That last one always makes me blush but I can't say that I don't love when she says shit like that to me. I love that she notices me like that and seems to appreciate how I look. The last few days she's moved beyond that though, turning to sexual innuendos. It started off subtly and I would have to look after her every time she said something, wondering if she meant it that way. She's got more pointed in the last day or two though, making it obvious that she is trying to be sexual.

In short, she's driving me out of my mind.

My dick has been in a constant state of arousal for the last week and I don't know what to do about it. I want her, god do I want her, but I want more than just one night with her and I need to be sure that she wants that too.

I'm seated on the couch in my usual spot, waiting for Bianca to join me. She's still in her bedroom though and I wonder what's taking so long. She's been in there for a while. *Maybe I should check on her?* As soon as I think that, the door opens and out saunters Bianca.

She's wearing a pair of short plaid sleep shorts with a thin white tank top and her hair is still wet from her shower, soaking her shirt and turning it see-through. I bite back a groan as I try not to stare at her pert nipples that are clearly visible through the damp fabric. I sit back on the couch, trying to discreetly adjust myself as she makes her way over. I expect her to sit next to me, like usual, but she surprises me by placing one knee over me and straddling me.

I can't hold back my moan this time and my hands instinctively go to her hips to steady her. She sits down fully on my cock, grinding slightly and my hands tighten on her waist. My breath is coming in pants as I try to hold myself back from throwing her down on the cushions and fucking her. She brings her mouth close to mine and I can feel as her warm breath feathers across my lips. I lick my lips as I stare down at her mouth, willing her to close the distance between us. I want to feel her lips against mine, to know their texture and taste. She stops just short of my mouth though.

“Why haven’t you taken me yet?” She asks, surprising the shit out of me.

“What?” I ask dazed.

“Brad is gone, you’re officially done with protecting me, I know you want me and I thought I had made it clear that I wanted you too. So, why haven’t you fucked me?”

I look up into her clear blue eyes that are clouded with lust and I have to fight myself not to take what she’s offering. My hands curl into fists in her thin top, pulling it even tighter across her chest. I close my eyes and take a couple of deep breaths before I look back at her.

“I want you, but I want more than one date with you, Bianca. I want forever and until you tell me you like me and want more than just one night with me; I won’t take you.”

She studies my face from where she remains perched in my lap. I stare back at her, trying to show her how serious I am. I know she can feel my thick erection where it pulses between her legs and she wiggles on it as she watches me. I suck in a breath as I continue to meet her eyes. Finally, she smiles at me.

“We’ll see about that.” She says with a smirk.

I’m not sure if I should be excited about what’s to come or terrified.

“The teasing and flirting? It’s not going to be one-sided anymore, Sweets. You want me and I bet I can make you break before I do.”

She eyes me with hesitation before she grinds down on me once more.

“Game on then.”



CHAPTER 9

Bianca

It's been two days since Bryson started trying and I hate to admit it but I'm already close to breaking. I've never been so on edge or turned on in my life and it seems like nothing I do helps to ease the ache between my thighs. I thought I had more self-control but apparently, when it comes to Bryson, I'm weak. He's far better at playing this game than I thought he would be. It doesn't matter what I do, he always seems to be able to turn around and one-up me.

The first day, I spent half my shift at the coffee shop "accidentally" dipping my fingers in the frosting on the pastries and having to lick it off. He retaliated by working out in the apartment shirtless. I was practically drooling watching his muscles tense and the sweat drip down them. That night I walked around wearing lingerie and I smiled as I saw his hands curl into fists as he tried to stop himself from grabbing me. I thought I had won that round but a few minutes later he came out of his room completely naked and the image of his hard cock has been burned into my mind ever since.

The next day was my day off and while he took Naia for a run with him, I slipped off my clothes and climbed into his bed. He came in to take a shower and found me lying there naked, touching myself. I thought I had him then, with the way his eyes darkened with heat and he took a couple of steps forward. He didn't touch me though, just stood at the foot of the bed, watching as I ran my fingers through my soaked folds. I brought one hand up to tease my nipples and he bit his lip as I slowly pushed one finger inside my tight pussy.

He took a step toward the bed then and I tensed, willing him to break and fuck me, but he held himself back. I brought my finger up to my hard clit while he licked his lips and watched me. I started to imagine that it was his hands on my body, twerking my sensitive nipples and teasing my drenched flesh. I pictured him dipping his head and sucking my hard button into his mouth and that was all it took. I came, writhing in his sheets as I called out his name. When I finally came

down from my orgasm, I opened my eyes to see him turn sharply on his heel and march into the bathroom. I could see his erection as it tented the front of his athletic shorts and I called after him, offering to give him a hand with that.

I heard the water turn on a second later and I strolled into the bathroom after him, stepping past him and into the shower.

“You don’t mind sharing, do you?” I asked.

“Not at all, Sweets.” He said as he stripped off his sweaty clothes and stepped in after me.

I made room for him under the spray of water and my body heats as I feel his wet skin brush against mine. He leaned one hand on the wall next to my head, caging me in. *This is it.* I smile up at him as he leaned down closer to me. He’s finally going to kiss me and take me. I knew I could make him break first.

“Bianca.” He moans and that’s when I realize what he’s doing.

I gasp as I look down at his hand gliding along his stiff cock. He continues to jerk off as the water falls down on us and he cages me between himself and the wall. I pressed my thighs together, trying to ease the ache at my center. I came not even five minutes ago and I’m horny and desperate to come again already. A moan slips from my lips before I can stop it as I watch him pleasure himself.

His strokes speed up and I can’t stop my hips from rocking in time with his hand. I wish he was inside me so bad, filling me, stretching me and making me whole.

“Spread your legs.” He rasps.

I do as he orders immediately. My breath comes in pants as my eyes stay glued to what his hand is doing. I spread my legs as far as they can go and watch as he leans down, making his dick level with my drenched center. He grunts and I hold my breath as the first spurts of come shoot from him, landing on my stomach and clit. I moan and a mini orgasm rolls through me as more spurts from his cock cover me. My eyes fall closed as I lean back against the wall. I feel him move closer and then

his cock is there, teasing between my legs and over my clit. I jerk, my eyes flying open and he pulls back, giving me a devilish smirk.

“Think you can get my back?”

I stormed from the shower back to my own bedroom. I just need to think of something else to get him to just fuck me already. To be honest, I’m ready to admit that I like him. Hell, I more than like him, I’m pretty sure I’m in love with him, but this game we’re playing is just too good to give in quite yet. I smile as I see his come still coating me and know that I’m not ready to break just yet.



CHAPTER 10

Bryson

My bed still smells like her. Every time I come into my room or get ready for bed all I can picture is her masturbating and screaming my name as she came all over my sheets while I watched. I've never seen anything hotter in my life and I was so close to breaking and falling on top of her to rut between her thighs but I reined myself in, reminding myself what was on the line here.

I need her to break first and admit that she likes me and wants to be with me. I remember jerking off in the shower with her until I came all over her. She had walked out and I had needed to jerk off all over again. I don't think my cock has gone down in fucking weeks. He knows what he wants and it's not my hand, it's that paradise between her legs. I don't know how to get her to break first though. I can tell that she's close, but my girl is stubborn.

She worked this morning and I took the time while she was working to plan a surprise for her. The sexual stuff doesn't seem to be doing it so I'm trying a new route.

Romance.

Too bad I have no real experience in this area. I've been googling how to be romantic all morning and so far, all I've come up with are the usual; flowers, chocolate, and candles. Bianca deserves something more creative than that. I finally figured it out around lunch and told her I had to run a few errands while she was at work. I made it back just in time to walk her home.

I follow her to her apartment door and wait while she opens it and sees what I've done. Her reaction doesn't disappoint. She gasps and her eyes go wide as she takes in the blanket fort I made in the middle of the living room. I pushed all of the furniture out of the way and hung it off the ceiling fan. There's more pillows and blankets inside, with a picnic basket full of takeout from her favorite Chinese place. Tiny twinkling Christmas lights wrap around the outside creating a

softer atmosphere. I had to go to three different stores to find them but as I watch her eyes soften, I know that it was worth it.

Naia runs up and greets us and I take Bianca's hand in mine and lead her over to the living room. She still hasn't said a word or even looked at me but she's letting me hold her hand so that has to be a good sign, right? We walk up to the opening and she sees the movies I laid out on the TV stand.

"You did this for me?" She whispers.

"Yes. I'd do anything for you, Sweets."

Her eyes start to water as she looks up at me. She searches my face for a minute and I take her in my arms, wiping away a stray tear as she leans against me. She pulls away after a minute and clears her throat.

"Did you want to watch a movie? I grabbed Chinese food and thought we could eat and watch one of those chick flicks you love so much."

She laughs at the disgusted look on my face when I say chick flicks. I'm strictly an action guy, but for Bianca, I'll make an exception. She picks out one of the movies and I put it in while she crawls into the fort with Naia hot on her heels.

"I already walked her." I say before she can ask.

I turn to see Bianca with her mouth open, ready to ask just that I'm sure and she smiles at me as I look at her. *Fuck, she's beautiful.* I crawl into the fort and get comfortable next to her while she pulls out the food and plates. She tells me about her day while we split up the food and grab drinks. I laugh at one of her usual customers who always acts like they're going to try something new and then ends up ordering the exact same drink.

"He went on and on for like five minutes, asking me what a mocha tasted like and stuff and meanwhile there's a line of customers behind him that's basically out the door. Finally, Aspen just slams his usual coffee down in front of him and says it's on the house." She laughs as she remembers his face.

"Did he say anything?"

“Nope, just took it and left.” She laughs.

We start the movie then, *Legally Blonde*, as we lean back against the pillows and cushions. She scoots closer to me and rests her head on my chest and I immediately lift my hand to run it through her hair. She makes a contented sound and I continue to do it, massaging her scalp as I go.

We’re about halfway through the movie when she tilts her head up to look at me. I gaze down at her and slowly she stretches up so that her mouth is a breath away from mine.

“Hey, Bryson?” She whispers across my lips.

“Yeah?” I whisper back.

“I like you.”

My eyes snap away from her lips and up to her eyes. *Is she serious?*

“Are you serious?” I ask, my body already tensing, ready to pounce.

“Yeah. I like you and I want more than just one night with you.”

“I love you and I want forever with you.” I counter.

She throws her head back and laughs.

“Just had to outdo me, huh?” She asks as she smiles at me.

Before I can respond her lips are on mine.

“I love you too, Bryson.”

I swear my heart stops in my chest as I just stare at her. How did I get so lucky? I have no clue but I say a general thank you to the universe for bringing me the girl of my dreams.

She throws a leg over my waist and straddles me. My hands grip her hips as I look up at her. I watch as her fingers trail down my shoulders and chest, across my abs, and finally, stop at the hem of my shirt. She raises her eyebrow at me as her fingers continue to dance under my shirt and along my skin. I let her tease me for a minute before I reach behind my

head, grabbing my shirt at the neck and tugging it over my head. I throw it to the side as her fingers come back to my chest and I stare up at her as her eyes rake over me, following the same path as her fingers.

My hands grip her hips again and I start to slowly push her shirt up and she lifts her arms in the air, helping me tug the shirt off. I take in her dark blue bra until she leans forwards again and my attention is once again riveted to her face.

She brings her mouth down to mine and I tense, wanting her lips on mine. I get my wish this time and her soft lips graze mine lightly before coming in for more. She gasps when my tongue slides along the seam of her mouth asking for her to open. She parts her lips and I get my first real taste of her. I moan into her mouth as her tongue meets mine in an erotic dance.

I feel her hands slip down until they're at the button of my jeans and we both pull away to watch as she pops the button and slowly lowers the zipper. She has to wiggle down my legs so that she has enough room to open them and tug them down my thighs. She pulls my boxers down with the jeans and leaves them both wrapped around my knees before she sits back and takes me in.

My cock is hard, pointing up to my belly button and I watch as she licks her lips. She leans forward and has me buried in her mouth before I realize what's happening and my hands curl into fists, fingernails biting into my palms as I tense, trying not to spill down her throat as the wet hot heat of her mouth envelopes me.

She moans around my length as she takes more into her mouth. One hand comes up to play with my balls while the other wraps around my length. She works me in time with her mouth, taking more of me each time while she moans around me.

"Jesus, fuck!" I shout when she takes me into her throat and swallows.

She does it again and again and I can feel the familiar tingle racing up my spine.

“Bianca, Sweets, shit! I’m going to come, Sweets.”

She doubles her efforts then and I stop trying to hold back, coming with a shout as I erupt in her mouth. She swallows my come down before she gives my dick one last kiss, sitting up on my thighs as she smiles down at me.

I’m a panting mess laying in the pillows but I recover quickly, grabbing her and rolling her under me while I kick off my boxers and jeans. I dig one hand into her blonde locks as my mouth meets hers in a punishing kiss. We’re both hungry for it and I’m glad that she’s just as keyed up as I am.

I unhook her bra and she pulls it off while I kiss down her chest, taking one of her pert nipples in my mouth and sucking hard. My hand finds her other nipple and I rasp my palm around it in slow circles. I tease and lick and bite each nipple in turn until they’re cherry red and swollen. Bianca has been trying to rock her hips the whole time but I’ve got her pinned beneath me.

I run my hands down her sides to her black leggings and panties and start to tug them down. She lifts her hips to help me and I tear them off, leaving her bare beneath me. I sit back on my heels and look down at her, running my hands up her calves, then thighs, stopping at her bikini line before they trail back down. She whines as I continue that path over and over, teasing closer to where she needs me most each time.

I look between her legs and smirk down at her when I see how wet she is. She glares at me and I go to lean forward and finally give both of us what we want most when she catches me off guard. She pushes me rolling us so that she has me flat on my back again. She kneels on either side of my head and I swear I almost come again. Seeing her above me, spread open over my mouth and knowing that she’s taking what she needs from me gets me so hot. I grip her hips, tugging her down on my face and we both moan as my tongue licks through her folds for the first time. Her tangy sweetness hits me and I’m instantly addicted. I hold her to my mouth as I lick and nip along her folds. My tongue jiggles her little nub and I feel her cream as it runs along my face.

She starts to rock her hips, riding my face now and I have to reach down and tug on my balls to stop from coming all over myself. I look up at her to see her head thrown back, lost in her pleasure. I slip my tongue into her hole, fucking her with it like my cock wants to. I lift my hand to bring it to her center but once again Bianca is pulling away from me. She doesn't go far though, flipping around and leaning over me, taking my dick back in her mouth and moaning around it as her pussy hovers over my face.

Fuck, I love this girl. I bury my face back in her pussy, sucking on her clit while she sucks my cock. She tries to rock her hips but I hold them steady while I devour her. Her moans start getting louder and I can tell that she's close. I flick her clit once, twice, and that's all it takes. She screams around my cock, setting off my own orgasm as her cream pours out of her and onto my face. I try to lick up as much as I can as I come over and over again in her mouth.

She rolls off of me and I tug her up, sealing my mouth over hers. I can taste my release on her lips and I wonder if she can taste hers on mine. I roll her onto her back and hover over her, kneeling her thighs open wider so I can settle between them.

"I owe you another orgasm." I say before my mouth latches onto her pussy once again.

She moans and her legs come up, clamping around my ears, while I use my fingers and tongue to pleasure her. It doesn't take long and she's screaming my name while I drink down her orgasm once again. My cock is rock hard and I kiss my way up her body until my erection is nestled between her slick folds. I rub it back and forth over her clit until her hips are lifting, begging me to fill her.

I look down at her, silently asking if she's ready. She nods her head up at me and I bring my lips to hers as I slowly push into her. She's so tight and I would be worried about hurting her if she wasn't so completely soaked. I keep kissing her until my balls finally press up against her ass. I hold myself inside her fully, letting her get used to my size as we continue to eat at each other's mouths.

She pulls away, gasping as my hips stay locked against hers.

“Move, Bryson.” She begs and I can’t hold back any longer.

I pull my hips back, sliding out of her snug warmth before I slam back in. She slides up the blankets and I keep a tight grip to her waist as I fuck her into the cushions and pillows. She moans and gasps under me as I continue to rut into her. Sweat drips down both of our bodies as we rock together over and over. I can feel the familiar tingle start in the base of my spine and I know I won’t last much longer. I need her to get there first though.

I bring my thumb up between us, jiggling the sensitive ball of flesh at her center and she goes off like a rocket, wrapping her legs around my waist as her back arches and she comes all over my cock. I follow her over the edge, coming deep inside her.

I collapse on top of her, quickly rolling us so that she isn’t crushed. I wrap her up in my arms and throw a blanket over both of us as she drifts off to sleep on my chest.



CHAPTER 11

Bianca

It's been a month since Bryson and I admitted how we felt about each other and he finally fucked me. We dropped the pretense of him staying with me because of Brad, who was finally arrested, and he moved in with me. He basically already had but now all of his things are in my room, sorry, *our* room. I've never lived with someone before. My college boyfriend, Jonathon, had lived in the dorms like me. I had worried that it would be weird but I should have known better. Everything with Bryson has come so easily.

I grab my bridesmaid dress and head for the door where Bryson is already waiting for me. He smiles when he sees me coming his way and holds his hand out to me. He's going to drop me off at Adeline's so I can get ready with them. I'll meet him at the wedding and I already can't wait.

He takes the dress bag from me as we make our way to Adeline's. He holds my hand with his and we talk about the party the night before. Adeline and Lincoln had held a joint bachelor/bachelorette party and I had to laugh. I should have known, there was no way Lincoln was going to let Addy out of his sight.

Bryson walks me to their door and says hi to Adeline and Aspen before he and the guys make their way across the street. They're getting ready at Aspen's house. I kiss him goodbye and he smiles at me before he leaves.

Adeline chose to have a simple wedding like Aspen's and she decided on this cool renovated warehouse that was now a restaurant with the most amazing garden on the roof. I had gone with her to see it and fallen in love with it. *Maybe Bryson and I will get married there.* I have to shake that thought from my head. We've only been together for a month, that's way too soon to be thinking about marriage. Isn't it?

I look around the room at my friends, both of whom were married to their men in under two months and are now happier

than ever. I was jealous of that but ever since I met Bryson, I realize that I haven't been. He's my happily ever after.

I'm pulled out of my thoughts as Addy and Aspen start giggling at something. I focus back on Addy and her special day as the hairstylist and make-up people that Lincoln hired make us beautiful. We laugh and snack on the catered food as Addy talks about how excited she is. They finally decided on a honeymoon location, Rome, and Aspen and I promised to watch Quiche for her while they're gone.

We pull our dresses on and we all cry when we see Adeline in her dress. It's white with a lace overlay and a long white cape attached to her shoulders. Her hair is twisted up and she's wearing flowers tucked into it like a crown.

"You look gorgeous." Aspen says, wiping tears away.

"Absolutely perfect." I say as I smile at them.

Aspen and Adeline have been family since they were kids and I'm so lucky that they took me in too. They're the sisters that I never had and I love them so much. There's a knock at the door and I peek out to see it's the limo driver. We grab up our flowers, purses and anything else we might need before making our way out the door. Lincoln has Quiche, he's going to be the ring dog, so we don't have to worry about him.

We settle into the back of the limo and make the trip to the venue. When we pull up, the guys and guests are already here. We just have to walk inside and each walk down the aisle. The guys are already standing at the front waiting for us. It's a small wedding, with just some of Addy's friends from the shelter, Lincoln's, Roman's, and Flynn's families in attendance. Luckily, I have already met everyone else since they were at the engagement party. I smile as I make my way down the aisle and see Bryson standing next to Lincoln up front.

His eyes take in my maroon Grecian style dress as I make my way towards them and I grin when I see the way his eyes heat as they meet mine. He looks delectable too in his black tux with the crisp white shirt underneath. I smile at him as Aspen steps up beside me and then it's time for Adeline to

walk down the aisle. We all turn and see her glide down the aisle. Her dress and the cape fan out behind her and she beams at Lincoln like he's her entire world.

I turn to Lincoln to see him staring back at her the exact same way, like she hung the moon. My eyes drift to Bryson and I'm surprised to see the same look on his face. He stares at me and I stare back as Lincoln steps forward to take Adeline's hand. The ceremony starts then and I tear my eyes from Bryson to watch. I can feel him watching me the entire time though and I feel warm inside knowing he loves me just as much as I love him.

The ceremony is quick and before I know it, they're saying I do and kissing. We all cheer as they make their way back down the aisle as husband and wife and I smile as I watch Adeline grin up at Lincoln. She's got her hand tucked in his and her other hand holding Quiche's leash. The puppy is jumping up and down, excited by all of the noise.

I smile as I link my arm through Bryson's and follow them up the aisle. The food part of the reception is going to be downstairs and then we'll come back up to the garden on the roof for dancing. First though, pictures. I stand by Bryson for most of them, his arms wrapped around my waist as we smile for the camera. We do some with just the girls and then stand while Adeline and Lincoln take some of just the two of them. Finally, we make our way downstairs.

I snag a drink as soon as we walk in and we make our way to the front table, all taking our seats. I'm next to Aspen and Bryson is on the other side of the table with the guys next to Lincoln. He leans back and smiles at me as we take our seats and I grin back at him. We eat and then the dancing starts. Bryson pulls me into his arms after the bride and groom have had their first dance and I laugh as he twirls me around the dance floor. He's not much of a dancer but he can slow dance just fine.

I dance with Roman, Flynn, and Lincoln before Bryson pulls me back into his arms. He growls at Ryan, Flynn's brother, and I want to laugh at that but if some girl was hitting on him, I know that I would have the same reaction. The party

finally winds down and we watch as Lincoln carries Adeline out to their waiting limo. We all cheer and offer our congratulations one last time before we watch them drive off.

Flynn grabs Quiche and we take the other limo back to their place, dropping them off first before we head to our apartment.

“I wish we lived closer to them. Would be so much more convenient.” I say as the limo pulls up in front of our building and I try to smother a yawn. Bryson smiles as he helps me out and up to our place, unlocking the door before he carries me into bed.

We both change before we collapse onto the bed and I sigh as he moves closer, wrapping an arm around my waist before he kisses my neck.

“Goodnight, Sweets.”

“Night, Bryson.” I whisper back before sleep drags me under.



CHAPTER 12

Bryson

I take Bianca out to dinner a week later. We've been watching Quiche for Lincoln and Adeline for the last couple of days but Aspen and her guys have him again tonight. Lincoln and Adeline should be back from their honeymoon in a couple of days and I know everyone is excited to have them back.

I wrap my arm tighter around Bianca's waist as we make our way to her favorite Indian restaurant. I listen to Bianca as she tells me about how happy Naia was to have Quiche around to play with.

"Maybe we should get her another friend. I wonder if one of her brothers or sisters is still up for adoption."

"We can look into it tomorrow." I say as I hold the door open for her to walk in first.

We let the hostess lead us over to a table in the back and I pull Bianca's chair out for her before I take the one across from her. We order a bunch of different things to share and I hold her hand across the table as she talks about how jealous she is of Lincoln and Adeline's honeymoon and says that maybe we should go on a vacation soon too. Images of Bianca prancing along the beach in a tiny bikini fill my head and I warm to the idea instantly.

"Where would you want to go?" She asks me.

"Wherever you want, Sweets. I talked to Lincoln and he said Rome was cool, but I like the idea of chilling on a beach somewhere with you too."

"We'll have to look up places." She says as our food is delivered.

We eat and chat about possible vacation places and I smile as I realize how far she came from never wanting a second date to living together and planning a vacation. I pay the bill and she leans on me as we make our way back home. We step off the elevator laughing but Bianca's laughter cuts off as her whole-body tenses. I look up too and see an older couple

standing impatiently in front of our door. From the blonde hair and similar facial features, I gather that these are her parents.

“Mom, Dad, what are you doing here?”

“So, it’s true then?” Her mother asks, sounding outraged.

“What is true?”

“That you’re with this, this man.” She sneers.

“Bryson. His name is Bryson and yes, we’re together. Did you need something?” Bianca asks as she stares them down.

Her mother frowns at the both of us while her father joins the conversation.

“How much will it take?” He asks, looking at me.

“I’m sorry?”

“She deserves to marry someone from a proper family, with the right background. So, how much money will it take for you to walk away from our daughter?”

I stare at them like they’re crazy. I can’t believe that they’re doing this shit again. Her college boyfriend was an idiot and I would never make the same mistake that he did.

“Bianca is the best thing that’s ever happened to me and nothing will ever get me to leave her.” I answer honestly.

Their frowns turn to glares and I glare back at them.

“Your daughter is incredible and the fact that you can’t see that and continue to push her away blows my mind. We have nothing left to say to you, so if you’ll excuse us.” I say pushing past them to open the door. I lead Bianca inside and she grips my hand, walking past them with her head held high. She closes the door in their faces and I’m not sure what to expect.

Is she going to be upset? Or cry? I set my keys down and turn to face her right as she launches herself at me. I catch her as she wraps her legs around my waist and tunnels her hands in my hair as she fuses her mouth to mine. I kiss her back as we stumble further into the apartment. My legs hit the back of the couch and we fall onto the cushions.

She rips her mouth from mine after a minute and jumps off of me, running into our bedroom. I sit up, wondering if I should follow after her but she's back before I can decide. She runs into the living room and stops in front of me. I reach up, ready to pull her down into my lap but she steps back before I can grab her. She clears her throat and suddenly looks a little nervous.

"So, I've been thinking a lot about us lately and um, well,"

I stare up at her as she clears her throat again. She wipes her hands on her dress before she gets down on one knee in between my legs. I gape at her as she picks up one of my hands in both of hers.

"Bryson, I need you, I trust you, and I love you. You make me feel safe and cherished and even before you told off my parents, I knew that you would never leave me, not for anything. I want you in my life forever. Will you marry me?" She asks as she opens her palm.

There in her palm is a plain gold band. I stare at it and then I start to laugh. She stares up at me with a confused look on her face. I reach into my pocket and pull out the diamond ring I had picked up just this morning.

"You beat me to it, Sweets." I say as I hold her ring in the palm of my hand.

She stares at it for a beat before her eyes meet mine. Slowly, a smile stretches across her face and she looks up.

"Well, I asked you first."

"Yes, Bianca, I will marry you."

I lean down then and pull her into my lap as I seal my mouth over hers. We kiss for a minute and then I feel the sting of the diamond as it presses into my palm and I pull back.

"I believe this is yours." I say as I pick up her hand, sliding the ring onto her finger.

She admires it for a minute before she does the same for me. She brings her mouth back down on mine after that as we slowly pull each other's clothes off. I carry her to our bedroom

and lay her down, spending the rest of the night worshipping her body.

I wonder how fast we can plan a wedding. She did a lot of stuff with Aspen and Adeline's wedding so I'm hoping that we can have a short engagement. I have one more surprise for her but that will have to wait another couple of days.



CHAPTER 13

Bianca

One Year Later...

I RUN down the stairs and across the street to Adeline's house. Bryson bought us a townhouse right next to Aspen's and surprised me with it a couple days after I proposed. We sold both of our apartments and moved in right after that.

We got married a month after I proposed and left for a two-week honeymoon in Bali right after that. I still work at the coffee shop with Aspen and Bryson still does half of his work out of the corner table. My life might not have turned out anything like what my parents wanted but it's perfect for me. I've never been happier.

Brad Mikales was arrested and the trial was just last month. We had enough evidence from my case to convict him and another four girls came forward with evidence that he had stalked them too and that his dad, the judge, had helped him cover it up. His father was investigated and found guilty for helping to bury their cases and his son was convicted as well. He'll be in jail for the next five years and he'll have to take some rehab courses to learn how to act properly.

I run into Adeline's house and greet Quiche before I head up the stairs to her bedroom. I run straight to her bathroom and find Aspen and Adeline already there.

"Did you get it?" I ask excitedly.

"Yeah." Aspen says with a nervous smile on her face.

"Are you ready? I've been drinking water all morning so I am more than ready to go." Adeline says with a smile as she dances from foot to foot.

I laugh at that, giddy with excitement and nerves.

"Who wants to go first?" I ask as Aspen passes out the pregnancy tests.

“There’s three bathrooms. Why don’t we go at the same time then we can all check the results together?” Aspen says.

“Dibs on this one!” Adeline says.

I look at Aspen and we both bolt into the other bedrooms to their bathrooms.

“Ok, ready?” Addy shouts.

I laugh as I rip open the test. “Ready!” Aspen and I call back.

We do the test and then all run back into the master bathroom with the sticks, placing them side by side on the counter. Addy set a timer and we shift from foot to foot anxiously as we wait for it to go off. Finally, it goes off and Addy stops it. We all look down at the tests before we look back at each other.

“Same time?” I ask.

They nod and we each grab our test stick.

“One.” I say,

“Two.” Says Aspen.

“Three!” Adeline says.

We flip the tests over and I hold my breath as I look down. We got the Clearblue ones that say not pregnant or pregnant with how many weeks along you are. I look down at the screen.

Pregnant. 2-3.

I grin as I look up to Addy and Aspen.

“PREGNANT!” We all scream at the same time.

“Ah!” We scream as we hold each other and jump around.

We must have been screaming when the front door opened because I never heard them come in but suddenly there’s several sets of feet pounding up the stairs and yelling our names. Our guys burst into the room, wide-eyed, as we jump around in the bathroom.

“What’s going on?” Flynn asks curiously.

“We’re pregnant!” We all yell at the same time before we run over to our respective husbands. Bryson wraps me up in his arms as he stares down at me in wonder.

“Pregnant?” He asks.

I nod, showing him the test as I beam up at him.

He grins down at me before he crushes me to his chest, crushing his lips down on mine. We pull apart when we hear someone clear their throat and Bryson tucks me into his side, whispering that he loves me.

I turn to smile at my friends, my family and realize that my life couldn’t get any better. I have everything that I need right here in this room.



CHAPTER 14

Bryson

Six years later...

IT'S my son's first day of kindergarten and I watch as my wife leans down to hug him goodbye. She has a death grip on him and I already know that I'm going to have to pry her off of him. He's been trying to tell her goodbye and that he'll be fine for the last five minutes. Adeline and Lincoln's little girl and Aspen, Roman, and Flynn's twins are all standing next to us, waiting on Roland, our son, before they go inside.

"Sweets, you have to let him go now."

She nods her head yes but doesn't make a move to release him. I sigh as I step forward and Roland looks up at me, widening them in a help me look. I nod as I wrap my arms around Bianca and slowly pull her back.

"We're going to pick him up in a couple of hours, Sweets. He'll be fine." She nods as she wipes the tears from her eyes.

"Ok, have fun, Roland."

"I will. I love you, mom." He says before he runs into the classroom with his friends.

I knew this would be a big adjustment for my girl. For the last five years, she's been a stay at home mom, having play dates almost every day with Aspen and Adeline. We all still live next to each other and we've grown even closer over the years. We've taken vacations together and we each babysit for the others.

Aspen and her men had twin boys, Theo and Harley, and now she's about four months pregnant with a baby girl. Adeline and Lincoln had a girl, Lila, and then immediately had a little boy, Liam. Bianca and I decided we wanted to wait a little bit longer before we had another one and I think now that Roland is in school, it might be the time.

I wrap my arm around Bianca's waist as she leans on me and lets me drag her away from the classroom. Lincoln is corralling Liam as Addy walks behind them laughing. Roman and Flynn have one arm wrapped around Aspen and we all file out of the school.

"Let me take you home, Sweets." I whisper and she sniffs but nods her head before she rests it on my shoulder.

I lead her back to our car, helping her in before I slide behind the wheel. We wave goodbye to our friends before heading back to our place. I take her hand in mine as I drive us through traffic.

"So, I was thinking. Maybe now that Roland's older, it would be the right time to try for another baby," I suggest.

I never thought that I would want kids or a wife, figuring that they would just be distractions but then I met Bianca. I didn't realize how bland and empty my life was until she stepped into it and filled it with color and laughter. Now I love being a husband and dad.

"Well," She says before she trails off, twisting her fingers in her lap.

I glance at her before looking back to the road.

"What? What is it?" I ask.

"We kind of already did."

My eyes snap to her stomach and I reach over to place my hand on it.

"Are you serious?"

"Yeah. I took the test this morning. I was going to tell you tonight." She says.

I grin at her.

"God, I love you, Sweets."

"I love you more, Bryson." She says, leaning across the console and sealing her lips with mine.

I know that another baby will be a big adjustment. We got lucky and Naia loves the kids just as much as they love her. I know that Roland will have to get used to a younger brother or sister but he's so good with our friends' kids that I'm not too worried. No matter what, I know that as long as I have Bianca by my side, I'll be able to get through anything.

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MINE TO PROTECT

*

He would do anything to keep her safe.

Aaron has had his eye on his little next door neighbor for months.

He's close to twice her age though, so he's been holding himself back from claiming her.

That hasn't stopped him from watching over her and making sure that she's safe.

When he finds out that someone else is trying to take her from him, he decides that it's time to step up and let the world know that she belongs to him.

He's going to stake his claim and show that Annalise is his to protect.

**Warning! This book alpha is over-the-top, head over heels in love with his girl. If you're looking for a steamy insta-love story then this book is for you!*

ONE



AARON

The feeling of the bed dipping slightly wakes me up. I smile to myself, already knowing who it is. Annalise. She moved in next door to me about nine months ago when her mom got remarried. From what I heard it was a quick courtship and it wasn't long after the marriage license was signed that her mother passed away. A heart attack one night and she was gone leaving behind a daughter and husband and one hell of a mess.

The first time I saw her she was walking down her driveway with her head down. She was kicking a loose rock while she walked. She had the hood of her sweatshirt up so I couldn't see much of her face but there was just something about her that made me want to take a second look. I stopped walking and just watched her, hoping that she would look up at me.

My patience was rewarded a few minutes later when she stopped and glanced up at me. Maybe she felt my eyes on her or maybe it was just fate. She was gorgeous. Light blonde hair flowing above her shoulders and framing her face with big blue eyes that seem to take up most of her face.

She stared back at me and something inside me shifted and seemed to just click. I had never felt this kind of connection with anyone before and I needed to see where it would lead. As I went to take a step towards her though, a woman opened the door and yelled for her to come inside. I learned two things that day. That her name was Annalise and that she was mine.

I spent the next two months trying to get close to her. I would wait for her to come home from school and when she would start to walk down the driveway I would smile and wave at her. After a couple of weeks of this, we managed to work up to actually stopping and talking for a few minutes.

I can still remember the day that she sought me out and it will always make me feel ten feet tall. It was about three months in and she hadn't had school that day, some teachers in-service school day, so she had come over to my house. We had sat on the back patio and talked for hours and it is still the best day of my life. The more time that I spend with her, the more I fall in love with her. She's so sweet and smart and beautiful and she deserves someone better than me but I'm selfish and I know that I can take care of her. I will always protect her.

The first time she came to my house in the middle of the night I had let her in and tried to get her to tell me what was wrong but she wouldn't say. I put her up in my guest room and when I woke the next morning, she had made me pancakes and left them on the counter for me but she was gone.

Two days later I woke up to another knock on my door in the middle of the night and she had finally told me what was wrong. I had given her a key that same night and she started to sneak over and sleep at my house a couple of times a week. Annalise has been sneaking into my house now for about six months. It had been getting more and more common in the last couple of weeks to the point that she was here every night.

She had started sleeping in my bed about a month prior. Having her so close and being able to wake up with her wrapped around me has been the sweetest torture but I already know that I will never ask her to stop.

Tonight must be another bad night. My smile fades as I think about why she's sneaking into my bed at midnight. Her new stepfather, Conrad Walker, likes them young as evidenced by the twenty-one-year age difference between him and his new wife but it seems that he may like them even younger. He's been trying to get into my Annalise's panties for months now. She's mine though and he will never get to put his hands

on her. In a week she will turn eighteen and I will make her mine in every sense of the word. She is mine and I will do anything to keep her safe. She is mine to protect.

TWO

ANNALISE

I insert my key into the lock and push the door open to Aaron's house. I had to get out of my stepfather's house. Again. It's getting worse at home and I know that I need to come up with a plan to leave. I turn 18 in a couple of days so I'm going to leave and get my own place. I've been saving up my allowance so I should be able to put down a down payment and pay the rent for a couple of months while I look for a job.

As I climb the stairs, I think about how much I owe Aaron and how I'm going to miss him so much once I turn 18 and graduate in a few days. I've been apartment hunting and I narrowed it down to two, both in the city. I'm excited about leaving but I really don't want to leave Aaron. What started as a silly crush has blossomed into love.

I know that Aaron would let me stay here but I would never want to leave then. I need to move on and get away from him so that I don't embarrass myself by admitting my feelings for him. The man is almost a decade older than me. I'm sure that he's not interested in me like that. I think he just sees me as the little kid from next door. He probably would never have let me stay over here if he didn't know about my stepfather, Conrad.

Aaron is a good guy and I'm lucky to be living next door to him. I'm lucky that he's so nice and that he was willing to help me out and let me stay here when things get too bad at home.

The first night I came to his house in the middle of the night I was so scared and I didn't know where else to go so I

had run across the yard and knocked on his front door. He had sleepily opened the door but when he saw me standing there close to tears, he had seemed wide awake. He let me come in and offered me his guest room.

I had snuck back over to his house the next night and knocked on the door again, this time explaining to him why I was there and so upset and when I woke the next morning there had been a spare key on his kitchen counter for me with a note telling me the guest room was all mine and to come over whenever I wanted.

I never liked my stepfather but I never could exactly explain why. My mom had been sick when she met him but had been able to hide it. I think that she only married him because he had a lot of money. She wanted me to be taken care of after she left in some way. I think that he only married her because she was beautiful and twenty years his junior. He was never abusive or anything to us and we had anything that we could ever need thanks to him but there was still this feeling.

Even before they were married, I would catch his eyes on me and start to feel uncomfortable. He would stare for a little too long or at places that weren't appropriate for him to be looking at on his new stepdaughter. I would bend over to get something and look over to see him staring at my ass. It got worse after my mom died. She had been sick for a while and the heart medication wasn't helping so I knew it was coming. Didn't make her passing any easier though.

CONRAD ONLY GOT WORSE after my mom was gone. It got to the point that I would try to spend as little time at home or around him as I could. He moved past just looking at me to touching me. His hands would linger for too long or his grip would be too tight and I just knew that something worse was coming. I didn't feel safe there at night so I would sneak out.

I stop at the top of the stairs and look over to Aaron's door. It's cracked open slightly and I can see just inside the room to his bed. The lights are off so all I can really see are shapes and all of a sudden, I have the strongest desire to go into his room

and sleep with him. This may be one of my last chances to be close to him I realize. I'll be leaving in less than a week so what's the worst that could happen? He tells me to get out of his room? I think that the embarrassment from that would be worth it if I was able to know what it was like to lay next to him. To feel his arms wrapped around me or to rest my head on his chest.

Not giving myself time to second guess my decision, I push his door open further and pad over to his bed. He's lying on the left side so I walk over to the right and gently pull the covers back. I slide my jeans down and take my bra off so that I'm just in my shirt and panties and then slide under the covers. I hold my breath and try to remain still as I wait to see if he wakes up.

After a few minutes, I release my breath and roll over onto my side to face him. It's still too dark in his room to see his face but I don't think that he woke up. He must be a heavy sleeper. I let myself relax into the mattress and as my eyes fall closed, I think about how laying there surrounded in his smell and listening to his steady breaths is the safest I have felt in a long time.

THREE

AARON

I lay in the dark and listen to her breathing even out before I open my eyes and roll over to face her. I can't believe she's in my bed. I've spent every night since I met her wishing that she would one day be where she is now. Wishing that I could fall asleep every night with her next to me and wake every morning to see her face on the pillow next to mine.

Having her sleep in the room across the hall from mine every night was its own kind of torture. I loved knowing that she was here and that she was safe, that she felt safe here, but I wanted her to be in my room, not the guest room. Now she's here and I don't know what to do with myself.

I was planning on waiting until she turned 18 and was legal before I asked her to move in with me for real. She would get away from her stepfather and I would get to spend all of my time with her and know that she was safe and that she had everything that she might need. I would also get to try to make her fall in love with me like I had fallen in love with her.

Only three days to go, I think to myself as I watch her sleep. I need to figure out a way to get her to stay. Maybe I could find a different place. I know she doesn't want to live next door to her asshole stepfather. I know that she's been looking to leave. She uses my computer sometimes and the last time she did I checked the search history and saw that she was looking for apartments in Austin. I could live in Austin. I could live anywhere as long as she is there with me.

I don't even know if she's planning on going to college or not. Maybe we'll have to find a place close to campus. This old farm used to belong to my parents before they passed away and while it has some good memories in it, I'd rather make new ones with Annalise than be apart from her or make her live next to someone she fears.

Now, I just need to get her to fall in love with me and agree to move in with me. I have three days before she turns 18, graduates, and leaves. That doesn't leave me much time but I think that I can do it. She already feels safe around me or no way would she have come here looking for protection from her stepfather. She must feel something for me or she wouldn't have crawled into bed and pressed her tempting body up against mine while she slept. I see the way she looks at me sometimes. How her eyes roam over me and I've caught her staring at me on several occasions. The blush that follows after is always my favorite part.

If I can't get her to fall in love with me, there are other ways to tie her to me and make sure that she always stays with me and stays safe. I think about making a baby with her. We would always be in each other's life then and I feel myself get hard just thinking about sliding into her virgin pussy. I picture her belly swollen with our child and I can feel the cum leaking out into my boxers.

I roll over and take one last look at her in the dark room before I close my eyes. *Three more days*, I think as I drift off to sleep.

FOUR

ANNALISE

I blink my eyes open when the alarm on my phone goes off and am confused about where I am for a second. Then, I feel Aaron's arm wrapped protectively around my waist. I smile to myself before I remember that I need to leave and get ready for school.

I wiggle out from under his arm but when I turn to look at him, I see that his eyes are already open. My face flames as my eyes meet his but he just gives me a gentle smile and tells me good morning. I go to say it back to him when my second alarm goes off and I realize if I don't leave now, I'll be late for school.

"Got to go!" I yell as I grab my clothes off the floor and run down the stairs and out the door.

I run across the grass and into my house, not stopping until I have slammed my bedroom door behind me. I throw my clothes from yesterday into the hamper and hurriedly pull on clean clothes before I run a brush through my hair and tie my shoes.

I pull the bedroom door open and almost run right into Conrad but luckily, I'm able to pull up short.

"Well, hello there Annalise. Running late for school?"

"Yes. So, if I could just get by." I say as I try to squeeze between him and the door frame but he blocks my way again.

"You know, you probably wouldn't be running so late if you were to actually sleep in your own bed."

I freeze as I realize that he knows I've been sneaking out and spending the night at Aaron's. The realization that he came to my room looking for me in the middle of the night makes my skin crawl and I take another step back from him and into my room.

Luckily for me, he doesn't say anything else and just leaves me standing in my room watching him head down the hallway. I want to throw up thinking about what could have happened if I had been here last night and I know that I can't come back here again.

Spinning on my heel I head over to my nightstand and pull open the second drawer and reach my hand in the back to find the envelope with the money I've been saving. I can take this and some clothes and stay at Aaron's house for two more days before I graduate and leave town.

I reach my hand into the back of the drawer and freeze when I can't find it. I pull the whole drawer out and my heart sinks when I realize that it's gone. He took it. And now I'm trapped here.

I can't stay here though or he'll get me so I open my backpack and shove in as many jeans and shirts that will fit. I grab the frame from my dresser with the picture of my mom and me and shove that in as well before I head for the door.

I take one last look inside to make sure that I haven't missed anything important before I pull the door closed behind me and make my way down the stairs. I don't see Conrad on my way out. He must already be in the barn. I thank my lucky stars that I won't have to see him again before I sneak out the front door and make my way back over to Aaron's house.

I'll have to skip school today but seeing as we graduate in two days, I don't think I'll be missing much. Today was the last day anyway so I would have gotten out at noon. I pick my way across the shrubbery between the two houses and breathe out a sigh of relief when I emerge on Aarons property.

I make my way back inside and look up as I hear Aaron come around the corner of the kitchen. When he sees me

standing there with my backpack stuffed full, he just smiles at me and nods his head towards the stairs.

I give him a grateful smile and make my way up to the bedrooms. At the top of the stairs, I turn and look back towards his room. I remember the way it felt to sleep next to him last night and I want more than anything to go back in there and put my stuff away but I don't want to push it, so with a heavy sigh, I head into the guestroom.

FIVE

AARON

I watch as Annalise makes her way up the stairs. I love that she's back home but I hate the defeated look I saw in her eyes when she walked past me. I hope that she's putting her bag and things in our room instead of the guest room and it takes everything in me not to run up the stairs and make sure that that's what she's doing. The thought of her things hanging next to mine in the closet and of falling asleep holding her every night has my cock straining against the zipper of my jeans.

I adjust myself quickly when I hear Annalise making her way back downstairs and take a second plate down for her. I dish out some eggs and sausage onto each of our plates and turn just in time to hand her one as she comes into the kitchen. She thanks me as she makes her way over to the kitchen table.

I take a seat across from her and watch as she takes a bite of the eggs. I debate whether or not to bring up why she's here with a bag full of stuff but I can already guess the reason why. Conrad did something shitty and she left. I can only hope that this time she left for good. Her birthday and graduation are tomorrow so there's not really anything keeping her in that house with him.

I decide to stick to less complicated topics and ask her about her birthday as she takes the last bite of her breakfast.

"So, any big plans for your birthday tomorrow?"

"Not really. I have my graduation at noon and then I was going to get a bus ticket."

My fork clatters to my plate when I hear her say that.

“What? Bus ticket to where? Where are you going?”

My tongue can't keep up with my brain and I'm panicking thinking about her leaving me. I don't think that I could survive without seeing her every day.

“I was thinking about going to Austin. I could get a job there and save up some money and then hopefully enroll in classes in a year or two.”

I don't like the thought of her leaving me and I notice something like pain flash in her eyes when she mentioned saving money. I make a mental note to figure out what that was about later. Right now, I need to focus on her leaving me.

“You can't leave on your birthday! We have to celebrate!”

“Oh, we don't have to do anything special.” She tries to tell me.

“No, I insist. We can have dinner out or I can make something here. We'll have to celebrate your graduation too.”

The back door bangs open and in walks my foreman, Tim. He tips his hat to Annalise and then looks to me.

“We still branding those calves today, Boss?”

“Yeah. I'll be right out Tim.” I say as I take my plate to the sink and rinse it off.

“Go ahead and leave your dishes in the sink and I'll take care of them tonight.” I tell her as I sit back down at the kitchen table and pull my boots on.

“Oh, I can do them.”

“You don't have to. Just take some time for yourself and relax a little bit. You can go ahead and get settled in upstairs too.”

I stand up and walk over to where she still sits in her chair, bending down I place a soft kiss on her forehead before I make my way out the back door to get to work. I'm going to have a busy day on the farm but I know my thoughts won't stray far from my girl.

SIX

ANNALISE

I watch Aaron head out the door before I get up and set my dishes on the counter. I fill the sink up with hot water and the dish soap that I find under the sink. He said not to worry about the dishes but it's literally the least that I can do. Besides, I don't have anything else to do today anyway.

When I had said that I was going to leave tomorrow I was surprised at how strongly Aaron reacted to the news. I don't really want to leave him and the thought of having only enough money in my wallet for a bus ticket and not much else is a little terrifying. If I get to Austin and can't find work I would be screwed.

I don't want to stay here though either. The thought of living next to Conrad makes a chill run down my spine and I just get depressed thinking about Aaron letting me stay because he feels bad for me.

I want him to want me like I want him. I fell in love with him months ago when I first looked up and saw him standing there watching me. I was so shy and afraid that I would embarrass myself that I barely talked to him for the first month. My mom used to tease me about my obvious crush on the neighbor man.

When she got really sick, towards the end, I used to sit next to her bed and tell her about the little conversations that we would have or how I caught him working outside without his shirt on. I didn't really have any friends so it was nice to be able to tell someone about how Aaron made me feel and I

think that my mom liked the girl talk and seeing me so excited about something.

Thinking about my mom causes a pang in my heart and I absentmindedly rub my hand over my chest to try to dull it. My mom was the best and not a day goes by that I don't miss her terribly. She was so beautiful and sweet with the brightest smile that anyone had ever seen. She was charming and smart and she loved me more than anything.

I think that the only reason that she married Conrad is so that I would have something after she was gone. She knew that she didn't have much time left and Conrad had money and lots of it. With that, I could go to college or whatever. What she didn't realize was that Conrad was a creep with a roving eye. I have a feeling that he would give me the money for college but I wouldn't like the strings that came along with the money.

The thought of college doesn't bring with it the excitement that it probably should and I know that it's because if I leave, I will probably never see Aaron again.

I head upstairs to grab some clothes to throw in the washer. I don't have much so I head into Aaron's room to grab his hamper too. By the time I've cleaned the kitchen and bathrooms and done the laundry, I realize that I'm starting to get hungry and it's almost lunchtime. I finish putting the last of my clothes back in my backpack before I grab Aaron's folded clothes to carry them across the hall and put on his bed. Then I head downstairs to make some lunch.

Just as I reach to open the fridge, Aaron and some other men step in through the back door and head over to the sink to wash their hands. Aaron pauses when he sees me and instead heads in my direction.

"Go ahead and help yourself to the fridge boys. I'll be right back." He says as he grabs my hand and pulls me from the kitchen.

I can feel tingles from where his hand wraps around mine and I'm sure my face is starting to turn pink. He pulls me into the living room before he stops to turn back towards me.

“Everything going ok?” He asks.

“Yeah. I was just about to grab something to eat if that’s ok?”

“Yeah of course. Help yourself.”

“Ok. Thanks.”

“What have you been up to?”

“I cleaned up the house a little bit and did some laundry. I didn’t want to mess with your things too much so I just left your clothes on your bed.”

“You didn’t have to do that, Sweets.”

I blush at the nickname but manage to tell him that it’s no big deal before one of his men yells a question at him from the kitchen.

“They’ll be out of here soon.” He says as he heads back towards them.

I nod but decide to wait them out. A lot of people tend to make me nervous, especially a bunch of big strange men.

I wander over to the bookshelf in the corner of the room and browse through the titles before I land on *Pride and Prejudice* by Jane Austen. It’s a favorite of mine and I pull it off the shelf and make my way over to the couch. I plop down and open the book, thinking I can get a chapter or two in before the kitchen is empty.

I only get a page in though before Aaron is walking back into the living room with a plate in each hand. He sits down next to me and hands me one of the plates filled with a sandwich and some chips. I thank him before taking a big bite of the sandwich. Yum. Turkey and Swiss, my favorite. I moan around the bite and I can see Aaron stiffen out of the corner of my eye.

I turn to see him frozen with his own sandwich paused halfway to his mouth. He’s just staring at me and I start to panic that I’ve got some food on my face. I bring my hand up to swipe across my mouth, trying to wipe off any crumbs that might be stuck there.

I look back at Aaron and he's still staring at me. Finally, I can't take it anymore.

"Do I have something on my face?"

"What? No."

"Oh. Cause you were kinda just staring at me."

"Sorry, Guess I was just daydreaming for a second."

It didn't really look like daydreaming to me but I decide to let it go.

"So, any ideas about what you want to do tomorrow for your birthday? I know you have your graduation at noon but we could go to dinner afterward if you want?" He asks.

"Oh, we can just make something here if that's ok? I don't really care for birthday's so something low key would be awesome."

"Sure, Sweets. Whatever you want." He tells me with a smile.

I can feel myself start to blush and I frantically search my brain for something else to say but he beats me to it.

"Can I come to your graduation?" He blurts out.

"What?" I'm shocked that he would want to go to that.

Sitting in a hot gym with three hundred other kid's families for a couple of hours doesn't sound like that much fun to me.

"It will be hot and boring. It's not like it's that big of a deal. You don't have to come." I try to tell him but he's not having it.

"Of course, it's a big deal! I would love to come. Get to see you in your cap and gown walking across the stage." He leans over and nudges me with his shoulder and he gives me a big smile.

"Um, ok. If you want to, I guess you can come. I have the tickets in my backpack."

"I'll be there." He says right before one of the guys in the kitchen pokes his head around the corner and asks if he's ready

to get back to work.

“Yep, I’ll be back out there in just a minute, Tim.”

Tim nods his head before he disappears and I hear the other men file out the back door before it closes leaving us alone.

“I need to get back to it, but I’ll see you at dinner?”

“Yeah. Should I make something?”

“If you want to, that would be great. It will just be you and me.” He says before he grabs his empty plate and stands to leave.

He pauses before he takes a step though and turns back to me. Bending down, he places a quick kiss on my cheek.

“See you around 6.” He says before straightening and leaving me frozen on the couch staring after him.

SEVEN

AARON

I walk out the back door with a smile on my face and my lips still tingling from where they pressed against her cheek. Tim, my foreman, gives me a knowing look when he sees me walking back towards the corral where we've been branding calves all morning. We've got another couple of hours left and then I can call it a day and get back to my Annalise.

She said that she was going to make dinner for us and I can't wait to be alone with her for the rest of night. She seemed surprised when I first asked if I could go to her graduation but I saw the way her eyes lit up when I said that I really did want to go. I can't wait to see her walk across the stage and then get to spend the day with her celebrating.

I also like that she'll be eighteen and finally be legal for me to take her and make her mine. I've had fantasies about flying her to Vegas and marrying her tomorrow night and then spending the rest of the night putting a baby in her and tying her to me for the rest of our lives.

I don't want to trap her though. I want her to choose me and to choose a life with me. I want her to be happy. I'll just have to show her how our lives could be if she were to be mine.

I WIPE the sweat from my brow as we finish up for the day. I'm anxious to get back to Annalise but I still have to finish

some stuff up around the farm. I spend the next few hours helping Tim and the rest of the guys repair a down fence and put out hay and water for the animals and making sure they have everything to bed down for the night.

I say my goodnights to the guys at the barn and practically run back up to the house. As I get closer to the back door, I can smell garlic and tomato sauce. My stomach starts to growl as I push the back door open. I step inside and see Annalise at the stove stirring something in a pot and humming to herself.

“Something smells delicious.” I say as I walk up behind her. She jumps a little and whirls around with the spoon still in her hand.

“Jeez! You scared me.” She says as she relaxes and turns back to the stove.

“Dinner just got done actually so your timing is perfect.”

“Ok, I’m just going to go clean up really quick. I’ll be right back down.” I say as I brush past her.

I pause though before I can walk past her and lean around to press another kiss on her cheek. I hope that she will get used to me kissing and touching her like this. It feels natural already and I hope that she feels the same way.

I make my upstairs and into my room as quick as I can. I want to take a shower and get back down to my girl as fast as possible. I’m peeling my clothes off before I even make it to the bathroom and I turn the shower handle all the way to the left then step in before the water can even warm up.

I take the fastest shower of my life and I’m dressed and back in the kitchen in five minutes. I walk in just as Annalise is putting the plates down at the table. I grab two glasses and fill them with milk before I join her at the table.

She’s made spaghetti and meatballs with garlic bread. I smile at her as I take my first bite and as soon as the bite hits my tongue, I think I’ve gone to heaven. She’s a phenomenal cook.

Dinner is over far too quickly and once we are standing at the sink doing the dishes together I realize that we barely

spoke during the whole meal. I was so hungry and the food was so good that I didn't even realize that we were both silent. I want to kick myself for wasting precious time with her that I could be using to make her fall in love with me.

She finishes drying the dishes and before I can think of something to say to get her to stay down here with me, she is already turning to me and telling me that she is going to head up to bed.

For a brief moment, I have this vision of heading to bed myself and seeing her waiting for me there beneath the covers but I know that she won't be. She had put all of her stuff back in the guest room.

I go around the house locking all of the doors and making sure the lights are off before I head up to my own room. I need to come up with a plan for tomorrow. I only have one more day to get Annalise to agree to stay with me and to give us a chance. I stay up half the night before I realize that I'm just going to have to lay my cards out on the table and tell her how I feel and hope that she feels the same.

EIGHT

ANNALISE

I barely got any sleep last night. Being near Aaron but not being able to be with him is killing me. I feel so drawn to him and the way he was brushing against me and kissing my cheek. I want to tell him that I love him and beg him to love me back and then to make love to me but if he doesn't feel the same way then I would be so screwed.

I think that maybe I should just leave. Move to Austin and try to forget about Aaron. Maybe I'd be able to forget about him and meet someone else. Be happy.

I promised Aaron that I would stay for my birthday dinner tonight and I know I won't be able to go back on that. I roll over and glance at the clock. I almost have a heart attack when I see how late I have slept in. I need to be at the high school to get ready for graduation in forty-five minutes.

I spring out of bed and rush into the hall. I need to find Aaron and see if he is ready to go yet. He told me that he would drive me to school since I don't have a ride.

I pause at the top of the stairs to see if I can hear him in the kitchen or downstairs but I don't hear anything. I make my way over to his room and knock lightly before I push the door open. He's not in his room but I can hear the shower running in his bathroom. I make my way across the room to the slightly open door. I just mean to yell into him to let him know that I'm awake and that I'll be ready in 15 minutes but before I can get the words out, I hear him.

"Annalise."

I hear him moan and my whole-body freezes. Did I really just hear him say my name? I creep closer to the door and peek around the door. I know I shouldn't be spying on him but I'm desperate to know if I really heard him say my name.

I finally manage to get close enough to the door to see inside. My breath catches in my throat as I see inside the steam-filled room. Aaron is standing in the shower with the water running over his body and his fist wrapped around his cock. His very large, very hard, cock. I shouldn't be staring at him like this but the knowledge that he is jerking off while thinking about me has me more turned on than I've ever been in my life.

I never really had much of a sex drive. Everyone I knew seemed to be sex crazy but the bug had never really gotten me. Then I met Aaron. He has starred in every single one of my fantasies since I've met him. I never thought that I would be in his fantasies too, though.

I watch as his hand glides up and down his shaft and I can't pry my eyes away. His whole body is hard, with bulging biceps, six-pack abs, that cock that I know I will see whenever I close my eyes, and strong thick thighs.

"Annalise. Fuck, just like that baby. Take it all the way in. Fuck. So good, Sweets."

I can feel myself getting wet and I know there will be a spot on my panties after this. He's jerking off to thoughts of me and I'm getting off right along with him. I should be getting ready for my graduation but this is way more important.

I shuffle further into the doorway so that I can get a closer look and accidentally hit the door causing it to swing open further. The action catches Aaron's eye and his head swings towards me. His shocked eyes meet mine and I can feel my face start to flush and turn tomato red.

"I-I-I just wanted to-to let you know that I'll be r-r-r-ready in 15."

I manage to stammer that out before I turn and bolt from the bathroom and his room and back towards the hall to my room. I slam the door closed behind me and grab some clothes from my bag before sprinting into the bathroom and slamming the door behind me. I turn and lock the door before I turn the shower on and strip out of my clothes. I take the quickest shower of my life and pull a comb through my hair before I throw my clothes on.

I pause before I open the door though. How do I face him now? He probably thinks that I just walked in and was surprised that he was naked. I doubt that he saw me before then so hopefully, this won't be too awkward.

I slowly open the door and make my way down the stairs and into the kitchen to grab an apple from the bowl on the counter before we leave. Aaron comes down the stairs right as I take a bite.

“Hey, Hi, Morning.”

He seems nervous and that helps to put me a little bit more at ease.

“Are you ready to go? We have to leave here in just a couple of minutes.”

“Yeah, I'm ready when you are.” He says. Then he motions for me to lead the way.

I walk ahead of him out to his truck and climb in. The drive to my high school is quiet and mercilessly short. As soon as we get there it's a mad rush to get my cap and gown and to find my place in line. The actual graduation ceremony is dull and drags on. I can't believe that Aaron would want to be here for this.

I glance around the auditorium to try to spot him. I see him in the bleachers closest to me about halfway up. I am surprised to see Conrad just a few rows up from him. I didn't give him a ticket to get in so I'm confused as to how he was able to get in. I really don't want to see or speak to him and I'm hoping that I will be able to find Aaron as soon as this is over so we can get out of here.

After what feels like an eternity, my name is called and I make my way across the stage to grab my diploma and shake the Principals hand. I pause for the photographer and then make my way back to my seat. After that, it's not long before we're standing and moving our tassels on our hats and then throwing them into the air.

I immediately turn to find Aaron and see him standing and clapping while he stares right at me. When he sees me looking at him, he gives me a bright smile and a quick thumbs up.

We file out of the gym and before I even get a chance to look for Aaron, he is coming up behind me.

"Congratulations, Sweets." He whispers into my ear.

I blush as I turn to face him.

"Thanks, Aaron."

He leans closer and gives me a hug and a kiss on the cheek. I look up and see Conrad over Aaron's shoulder. My body stiffens and I pull away from Aaron.

"Can we get out of here?"

He seems surprised but grabs my hand to lead me back to the truck. He opens the door for me and helps me in before he rounds the hood and hops in himself.

"Did you want to go out to eat? I'm sure everywhere will be busy but I don't mind waiting with you."

He's so sweet but the last thing that I want to do is wait in a crowded restaurant. I can't stop thinking about what I saw this morning and after seeing Conrad at the graduation I have realized that I will need to leave. I don't feel safe in this town with him.

I've also decided that I need to tell Aaron how I feel. If I leave town without at least trying to tell him how I feel about him and see if he feels the same way then I know that I will regret it for the rest of my life.

As soon as we get back to the house, I'm going to tell him how I feel about him. Best case, he tells me that he feels the same way and we make love for the rest of the night. Worst

case, he lets me down gently and I pack my bag and leave first thing in the morning.

The drive back home is over much too fast and I haven't worked up all of the courage that I need to have this conversation. Aaron rounds the hood again and helps me out of the truck but he doesn't let go of my hand right away. We end up standing there, holding hands and staring into each other's eyes. I don't know how long we stand there before I realize what we're doing.

I pull my hand away and clear my throat while I look down at the ground. I try to gather my thoughts and realize that I need to do this conversation now before I totally lose my nerve.

"Can I talk to you inside for a minute? There's something I need to tell you."

He looks panicked for a minute before he runs his hand over the back of his neck and indicates that I should lead the way.

He follows me into the house and I walk into the living room instead of the kitchen. There's Kleenex in here, just in case this goes badly.

He sits down on the couch next to me and clears his throat nervously.

"So, what's up?"

"I uh, saw you this morning. In the shower, I mean."

I watch his face start to pinken and hurry to finish what I have to say.

"I liked it!"

Why, oh why, did I just blurt that out. He starts to open his mouth but I need to get this all out.

"I like you, Aaron. Well, more than like you. I love you. I've always loved you. You don't need to say anything. I just wanted you to know."

I go to stand because I don't think that I can sit here and look him in the eye after laying everything out like that but before I even get off the couch, Aaron is grabbing my hand and pulling me down onto his lap. Next thing I know his lips are on mine.

I dreamt about what it would be like to have Aaron's lips pressed against mine since I first laid eyes on him and it's finally happened. It's even better than I had imagined. His lips are pressed passionately against mine and I feel his tongue run along the seam of my lips. I open my lips for him and he wastes no time pushing his tongue into my mouth.

Our tongues move together as our lips keep coming back together and I move my legs to straddle his. He pulls me closer to him and I can feel his erection pushing against the seam of his jeans. I start to rock myself against him as we continue to attack each other's mouths.

We finally pull apart and we're both left gasping for air. I continue rocking my hips against his bulge but it's not enough. He reaches up and grips my hips to stop me and I can feel him growl against my shoulder.

"Wait, Sweets."

I don't want to wait but his grip on my hips is too tight for me to be able to move.

"I love you, Annalise"

That stops me.

"Really? Cause you don't have to say that just because I did."

"I'm not. I love you. I've loved you since I first laid eyes on you but I wanted you to be able to grow to feel the same way about me. Then, with everything with your mom and Conrad, not to mention you were underage, it just seemed like it wasn't the right time."

I sit there trying to process everything that he is saying when he lifts me off of his lap and places me onto the couch next to him before he rises from the couch and races up the stairs.

I sit there dumbfounded but he's back just as fast as he left. He has something in his hand but I don't get a look at it before he's back in front of me. He drops down onto his knee in front of me and my mouth drops with him.

"Annalise, I love you. I have loved you since the moment that I first saw you walking along your driveway. I want to spend the rest of my life with you. I want to make you happy and keep you safe. I know that you probably don't want to live next door to that monster and if you want to go to college, then I can move with you there. We can do whatever you want to do. I'll do anything, go anywhere, as long as we're together. Please, will you do me the honor of becoming my wife and making me the happiest man in the world?"

I can't believe that this is happening. Never in any of my craziest daydreams did I picture him proposing to me. I realize that he's still kneeling before me and holding a ring that I didn't even notice before now. It's beautiful. And huge. It's an oval diamond in a simple silver band lined with smaller diamonds. Finally, my brain and mouth seem to connect.

"Yes!"

"Thank god!"

He says before sliding the ring onto my finger and pressing his lips to mine again. He pushes me back onto the sofa as he crawls on top of me. This is the best day of my life.

NINE

AARON

Yes. She said yes! I still can't believe that she said yes. Or that she loved me. This is the best day of my life. Annalise, my sweets, said that she loved me and she is going to be my wife. This is the happiest that I have ever been in my life.

I push my hips harder against hers to try to get some relief from my raging cock. The seam of my jeans is starting to get more and more uncomfortable the longer I lay against her but I can't bear to pull away from her.

Finally, I realize that I might be crushing her and I pull my lips from hers. I rest my forehead against hers and we both grin like fools at each other and try to catch our breaths.

Our moment is broken by the doorbell going off. I reluctantly pull away from Annalise to go see who is interrupting us. My whole body tenses when I see who is on the other side of the door.

Conrad.

And he looks pissed. I pull the door open and then step onto the porch with him, closing the door shut behind me so that Annalise doesn't see him.

"Where is she?" He demands.

"She's mine. She lives here now and she is no longer any of your concern."

"Excuse me?" He sputters, his face turning bright red with anger.

“She loves me and I love her. I proposed and she said yes. Since she is an adult now, she doesn’t need your permission and since you’re not important to her or me, we don’t need your blessing. Now, if you will get off my property and never step foot on it again, then we won’t have any problems.”

He stands there glaring at me for a long minute before finally spinning on his heel and storming back to his car. I have a bad feeling that this won’t be the last of our problems with him.

I watch him speed down the driveway until he’s out of sight before I head back inside to my girl. I find her sitting on the couch still, staring at the ring that I just put her on finger. Pride swells in my chest when I see how happy she looks.

I should probably tell her that Conrad was here looking for her but I don’t want to ruin this moment or this day for her. I’ll tell her later, right now I just want to lose myself in my fiancée.

She looks up and sees me standing in the doorway and her smile turns even brighter before she launches herself at me. Laughing, I catch her and twirl her around before leaning her up against the wall and pressing my lips against hers. Now that I’ve kissed her, I don’t want to stop. She doesn’t show any signs of wanting to stop either.

I wrap my hands under her ass and lift her higher on my body before I turn and make my way up the stairs and into my room. Our room. I can’t wait to see her things hanging against mine in the closet or lining the counters. I can’t wait to have a life with her.

I lay her down on the bed and hover over her.

“We don’t have to do anything today; I just want to hold you and soak this up.”

“I want you. I’ve been dreaming about this for months, Aaron. Please, make love to me.”

That’s all I need to hear before I’m pulling at her clothes and I can feel her pulling at mine. Luckily, she’s just as frantic and eager for this as I am and we end up naked within

seconds. I pause as she falls back onto the bed and I take a moment to marvel at her naked form before me.

She's breathtaking. All pale, creamy skin laid out before me. Her tits are a perfect handful tipped with little rosy nipples. I can't wait to have my lips wrapped around them while I move in and out of her tight channel.

I let my eyes trail down over her stomach to the perfect patch of curls between her legs. She starts to try to cover herself but I hold my hand out to stop her.

"You're the most gorgeous woman that I have ever seen." I tell her honestly.

She starts to blush and I watch as it travels down her neck and covers her chest. I lick my lips as she squirms before me and that's all it takes before I have to taste her.

I lean down and trail my lips from right below her ear, down her neck, and to her chest. I wrap my lips around her nipple and begin to lave it with my tongue. She moans and writhes beneath me as I continue my assault on her nipple, switching between both nipples while she winds her fingers into my hair and pulls me closer.

I pull back and look down to see my work. Both of her nipples are stiff peaks that have turned red from all of my hard work. I trail my lips down her stomach and shoulder her legs further apart so that I can fit between her legs. I lay on my stomach between her spread thighs and get my first up-close look at the heaven between her legs.

She's soft and wet and pink all over. I can see her arousal glistening on her lips and my mouth starts to water as I continue to look at her. I can smell her arousal and I swear I must be drooling.

Annalise raises up on her elbows to look down at me and I make eye contact with her as I lean forward to take one long lick up the seam of her lips. She falls back against the pillows with an "Oh god!" and I smile as I hear the need in her voice.

The taste of her hits me then and I moan before I dive back in for seconds. I use my fingers to spread her lips apart until I

can see her hard nub sticking up for me. I circle my tongue lightly around her until she starts to rock her hips up against my face. I use my other hand and press it against her waist to hold her in place so I can continue my ministrations.

I run my tongue down to her opening, gathering her liquid before bringing it back to rub against her hard clit. She starts to get louder and I can feel her body starting to tense as she gets closer to her release. I don't think my cock has ever been this hard and I can feel cum leaking out of the tip and onto the bed. She cries out above me as her legs tense around my shoulders. I drink down all of her juices as they pour out of her and I use my tongue to wring out all of her pleasure.

When she finally comes down from her high, I give her one last lick before I crawl up her body and press my lips against hers. She moans into my mouth as she tastes herself on my lips and tongue.

I line my cock up with her opening and pull back to look at her.

"You want this? If you don't, say the word and we can't stop right now."

"Don't stop, Aaron. I need you."

Her breathy admission is the best thing that I've ever heard and I press my lips to hers again as I slowly start to push in. I don't want to hurt her but I know that it is inevitable. She's so tight that it's almost painful for me but really, it's the best thing that I have ever felt in my life. I've found heaven.

I'm about halfway in now and I can feel her barrier. I reach down and rub her clit as I slowly push through her virginity. She tenses and cries out but relaxes quickly. I slowly push in until I bottom out inside of her. I close my eyes as I feel her velvety wetness wrapped around me like a fist.

I want to come inside her right now but I need to make this good for her. I start to rock in and out of her slowly until her hips begin to rock up to meet my thrusts.

"Harder, Aaron. Please"

Hearing her beg me has my balls tightening up and the base of my spin starts to tingle. I thrust into her harder and her moans and cries get louder as our hips slam together. I keep rubbing her clit until I feel her begin to tense against me again.

She throws her head back and screams my name as she comes all over my cock. I thrust into her one final time before I follow her over the edge. Her cream is pouring out of her and running down my cock and balls. I keep coming as I thrust into her and her greedy pussy is clamping and massaging the cum straight from my balls.

Once I've given her all of me, I roll us over so that she is draped over my chest while we both catch our breath. After a few minutes, she tilts her chin up to look at me. I stare at her flushed face and feel myself harden all over again when she asks, "When can we do that again?" I tell her I love her as I thrust up into her once more.

TEN

ANNALISE

It's been a week now since my graduation and birthday and we've been busy making plans. I decided that I didn't want to go to college. It sounds exciting to see a new place but the thought of sitting in classes and doing homework instead of spending my days with Aaron sounds awful. To be honest, school was never really my thing anyway and I don't want to spend the next few years doing it.

Aaron was happy that I wanted to spend my time here with him. He said that he would go with me but he loves this farm and house so I know that he was happy to stay here. He did promise to take me to see anywhere that I wanted. He said it could be our honeymoon. He was determined that we would have a short engagement and since I don't have anyone to invite anyways, we decided on a simple ceremony out in the barn. We filed the paperwork and waited the three days and now tomorrow is going to be my wedding day.

I stand in front of the floor-length mirror in our bedroom and smooth my hands over the simple white dress that I chose for tomorrow. It is tight through the bodice before it flares out at my hips and ends a couple inches below my knees. I found some lace flats to go with it and a short veil completes my wedding day look. I feel beautiful in it and I can't wait for Aaron to see it as I walk down the aisle to become his wife.

I hear the door open downstairs and know that Aaron will be up to grab me for dinner any minute so I have to get changed quickly. I dash into the closet already pulling off the veil and kicking my shoes into the back. I pull the dress over

my head and hang it back up before hiding it in the back of the closet for tomorrow.

I pull a shirt over my head and slide some jean shorts on before I race out of the closet and slam into a chest. I pull back to smile up at Aaron but my heart freezes in my chest as I see that it's not Aaron.

It's Conrad.

I don't know how he got in here or what he wants but judging by the menacing look on his face, it's not good. I think about what to do. If I try to scream for help, then I doubt that anyone will hear me. Everyone is still outside and out in the barn. Too far away for anyone to hear me or my screams for help.

I could try to get past him but when I look, he's blocking the doorway. That's my only way out. I decide to try to make it to the bathroom. I can lock myself inside and call Aaron for help.

I give Conrad one last look before I spin on my heel and run as fast as I can for the bathroom. I don't make it, though. About three steps away, Conrad's arms wrap around my waist and he lifts me off the ground. I open my mouth to scream but before I can, he places a rag over my mouth.

The sweet scent confuses me and I inhale more before I realize what it probably is. Chloroform. By the time that my brain catches up to that, it's too late and I feel my body sag towards the ground as I blackout.

ELEVEN

AARON

I stomp my boots on the doormat before opening the door and calling for Annalise. She doesn't answer right away but I'm not too worried about it. She's probably still upstairs and maybe if I hurry up there, I can catch her before she leaves the bedroom.

I take the stairs two at a time and call Annalise again as I walk into our bedroom. I don't see her and a moment of dread slides down my spine. I look for her in the bathroom and the closet but I already know that she's not in here. She would have heard me call for her and answered me by now if she was in here.

I wonder if maybe she took the car I bought her as a birthday gift and ran to town. That must be it, I think as I go back downstairs to the kitchen to see if she left me a note. I look all over the kitchen and then the living room but I don't see any note. I look out the front window and see her car still parked in the driveway.

I'm panicking now. I run to grab my cellphone off of the end table and I try to call her cell but it goes straight to voicemail. I hang up and call again but with the same result.

I run my hands through my hair as I try to remain calm so that I can think what to do next. She wouldn't have left me. We were happy and she loved me and knows that I love her. She wouldn't just leave. That means that something must have happened to her, someone must have taken her.

As soon as that thought enters my mind, I know who it was. Conrad. He came over here all pissed off last weekend looking for her and I had a feeling it wasn't going to be the last time that he showed up here. The whole town has been buzzing with how fast mine and Annalise's relationship has progressed and how short our engagement was. Conrad must have heard the news and realized that she really was going to be mine and that there would be nothing connecting her to him anymore.

I dial my phone again, calling my buddy from high school. He works on the police force now and I know that he'll be able to help me. I already know that I won't be able to file a missing person report since she hasn't been gone 48 hours and I won't be able to get on Conrad's property without getting arrested myself because I know that if I see him right now I will kill him.

"Sergeant Jefferds." My buddy answers on the second ring.

"Bobby. It's Aaron. I need your help man."

"What can I do for you, Aaron?"

"It's Annalise. She's missing. I think that Conrad took her."

"How long has she been missing?"

"Probably only about half an hour. Maybe an hour."

"Are you sure she didn't just run to town or something?"

"She wouldn't just leave without leaving a note or letting me know. Plus, her car is still here."

"What makes you think Conrad has her?"

"HE WAS HERE A WEEK AGO, pissed, and looking for her. I wouldn't let him see her and he wasn't too happy with that. He has her, Bobby. I know he does."

"Well, he was her stepfather for a couple of months. Maybe they're just catching up?"

“No. He wants her. He wants what’s mine. She used to sneak over here at night to sleep because he would come into her room. She’s afraid of him so she wouldn’t go anywhere with him and definitely not alone.”

“He touched her?” Bobby asks and I can hear the anger start to leak into his voice at the question.

“No, but he tried to. The last few months she’s been sleeping over here every single night so he hasn’t had as much of an opportunity. We have to go get her.”

“This isn’t enough for a warrant, Aaron. I can go over there and poke around a little though. See if I can find any signs that he’s keeping her there.”

“He has her. Just find her, Bobby.” I plead before I hang up.

I pace across our room but I can’t just stand here while he has her. He could be touching her, hurting her right now. I pull on some dark clothes and make my way over to the gun safe I keep in the back of the closet. I pull out my revolver and check to make sure that it’s loaded before tucking it in the back of my jeans.

I leave out the back door and sneak through the shrubs bordering our yard. I can see the flashing lights from Bobby’s police cruiser playing out against the side of Conrad’s house in the dim light. The sun has almost set and I’m hoping that I can be in and out before Bobby is done talking to Conrad.

I wait until their backs are turned before I sneak up onto the back porch and let myself inside.

TWELVE

ANNALISE

I wake up feeling groggy. I try to move my hands but I get about an inch before I get caught on something. I look up and pull again at my wrists but I see that they are tied to the posts of a bed. A bed that I vaguely recognize. It's the same one my mom laid in when she was too sick to get up.

It comes back to me then. Conrad. The rag. Blacking out.

He kidnapped me and tied me to his bed. I'm freaking out and trying to pull at my ankles and wrists but I can barely move and I can feel the rope starting to cut into my skin. Tears slide down my cheeks as I think about what will happen when Conrad comes back.

I need to stay calm. Aaron will find me. He'll be back soon and he'll realize that I'm missing. He knows how I feel about Conrad and how Conrad felt about me and this will be the first place that he'll look. I just have to stay calm and be strong. I can fight off Conrad long enough for Aaron to find me and take me away from Conrad and this miserable house.

I close my eyes and take deep breaths so that I can clear my head and save my strength for fighting off Conrad. I don't know how long I lay there for when a noise at the door has my body tensing.

I hold my breath as the door creaks open slightly and the breath comes out in a rush when it's Aaron's head that peeks in and not Conrad's. Relief floods me and I start sobbing.

"Shh, baby, shh. You have to be quiet so I can get you out of here, ok?"

I nod my head frantically as he quickly crosses the carpet over to the bed. He pulls a knife out of his back pocket and makes quick work of cutting the rope from my ankles and wrists. He pulls me into his arms and I cry into his shoulder while he wraps his arms around my waist and pulls me closer.

“Baby, take a deep breath for me, ok? You need to calm down so we can get out of here without them finding out because technically, I’m trespassing.”

I nod my head and take several deep breaths before I’ve calmed down enough for him to let me go. He grabs my hand and pulls me after him as we sneak down the hallway and then the stairs. We make our way through the kitchen and out the back door where we run into Conrad and some man I don’t recognize. It takes me a second before I realize that he’s wearing a police uniform. Relief floods my body at the sight of him.

Both Conrad and the officer freeze with shock when they see me and Aaron coming from the house. Conrad’s face is turning an alarming shade of red and he lunges toward me, catching all of us off guard. His momentum propels me back, ripping my hand from Aarons, as he pulls my body into his. I’m caught off guard but before I can try to twist and pull away from Conrad and run to Aaron, Conrad has a knife to my throat.

I freeze and look to Aaron, not knowing what to do. I can see the fear turn to pure rage take over his face as he stares at Conrad and me. The police officer has pulled his gun and is aiming it at us. The officer is saying something, probably telling Conrad to drop the knife and let me go, but I can’t hear him. The adrenaline coursing through my body has me blocking out everything but Aaron. He’ll keep me safe. I know he will.

“Drop the knife, Conrad. Drop the knife and let her go or I will shoot you. This is your last warning.”

My body tenses when I hear the officer say that. He’s going to shoot? While I’m standing in front of Conrad? I look

to Aaron again. If this is how it ends, his is the last face that I want to see.

He has a strange look on his face and I realize how powerless he must feel right now. Conrad pulls me back tighter against him and I feel the knife start to dig into my throat deeper and something warm starts to slide down my throat. Before I can start to freak out over the blood or comprehend the pain I'm starting to feel in my neck, I hear a loud bang and my body freezes.

THIRTEEN

AARON

BANG!

The gunshot jolts my body and I'm almost afraid to look. Annalise has to be ok. We're supposed to be getting married tomorrow. We're going to spend the rest of our lives together. I know that Bobby wouldn't have fired unless he had a clear shot.

I blink and nearly sag with relief when I see Annalise standing up while Conrad remains motionless on the ground. Blood is already pouring out of a small hole in his forehead. Seeing Annalise stumble towards me jolts me out of my paralysis and I run towards her. I wrap her into my arms and hold her tight against me.

Relief. Pure relief rushes through me at the feeling of her wrapped into my arms and pressed tight against my body. The feeling of her, so solid and real and alive, is the best thing that I have ever or will ever feel.

"You're ok. Right? You're ok."

"Yeah, it's just my-my neck."

She stammers out and I remember Conrad pressing the knife into her throat. I had to stand there while he had his hands on my girl. While he threatened her and hurt her. I'm glad that he is dead because if he had lived, I would have killed him myself.

"Come on, Sweets. We'll get you taken care of. Wrap your arms around me, ok, Sweets?"

I wrap my arms under her legs and lift her up so I can carry her over to the Ambulance that is already pulling up in front of his house, along with several more police cars.

Bobby directs the cars on where to park while I set Annalise down next to the ambulance. Already the paramedics are rushing out and over to our sides. They pull Annalise away from me and begin to look her over while I hover next to them, making sure that they don't hurt her and that she really is ok.

IT'S hours later before we make our way back home. We had to go to the hospital to get Annalise checked out and then answer all of the police questions and tell them what happened over and over again.

When I heard about how Conrad drugged my girl, I wanted to punch someone. Annalise seems to be handling this better than I am. She seems calm about everything and she holds my hand the whole time that we are going through everything.

Once we've been given the all-clear and are free to go home, I load Annalise into the truck and drive us home. We're both drained and once we pull up to the house, I help her out of the truck and carry her inside and up to our room.

"Are you hungry? I can make you something."

"No. I'm just tired. Can we go to bed?"

"Of course, Sweets. Whatever you want."

"I was so scared, Aaron. I woke up and was tied to that bed and I was so afraid of what he was going to do to me."

"Shhh. It's ok, I've got you now. I'll keep you safe. Always."

"I know. After I calmed down, I realized that you would never let anything happen to me. You love me and I love you and we belong together. You'll always come for me and I know that. I love you, Aaron."

“I love you too, Annalise. I don’t know what I would do without you.”

“So... does that mean that we’re still getting married tomorrow?”

“Absolutely.”

She smiles sweetly at me as she burrows her face against my neck. I rest my head on top of hers and breathe her in. We fall asleep like that, wrapped around each other and breathing each other in.

FOURTEEN

ANNALISE

Epilogue...

AARON and I have been married for a month now. It's been the best month of my life.

Aaron ended up adding a whole new security system to make sure no one could get into our house without him knowing. He ended up buying Conrad's land too and we demolished that awful house. We've been working on setting up an animal rescue over there. I love taking care of all of the dogs and cats and goats that we have already taken in and Aaron just loves that I'm happy. I get to spend my time with the animals and the man of my dreams and my life couldn't get any better.

I've been feeling tired all of the time lately though. My breasts have felt tender and I've been having trouble keeping things down. I have a feeling I know what that means but I managed to sneak into town yesterday and grab a pregnancy test. I've been waiting for a chance to sneak away and take it all morning.

Aaron had to run out to the barn to check on something so I ran upstairs and into our bathroom as fast as I could. Now, I'm just impatiently pacing across the tile in the bathroom, waiting for the time to be up.

I check my phone timer one more time to see I only have a couple more seconds. Right as the timer goes off, I hear the

door close downstairs and know that Aaron is back already. I flip the test over and let out a scream when I see the results.

Footsteps thud up the stairs towards me and I hear him call my name in a panic. Before I can answer him though he's bursting into the bathroom and I'm launching myself at him. He catches me easily and pulls me out of the bathroom, still looking around for the reason I was screaming.

"What's wrong, Sweets?"

"I'm PREGNANT!" I scream as I shove the test in his face.

He freezes, still holding me, and looks between me and the test before his eyes finally land back on mine.

"Pregnant?"

"Yeah. Pregnant."

I watch as a slow smile tips the corners of his lips up until he is full out and out grinning at me.

"PREGNANT!"

He shouts before he crushes me to him and spins me around.

"We're going to have a baby." I tell him.

He smiles at me as his lips land on mine once more and they don't leave for a long, long, time.

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