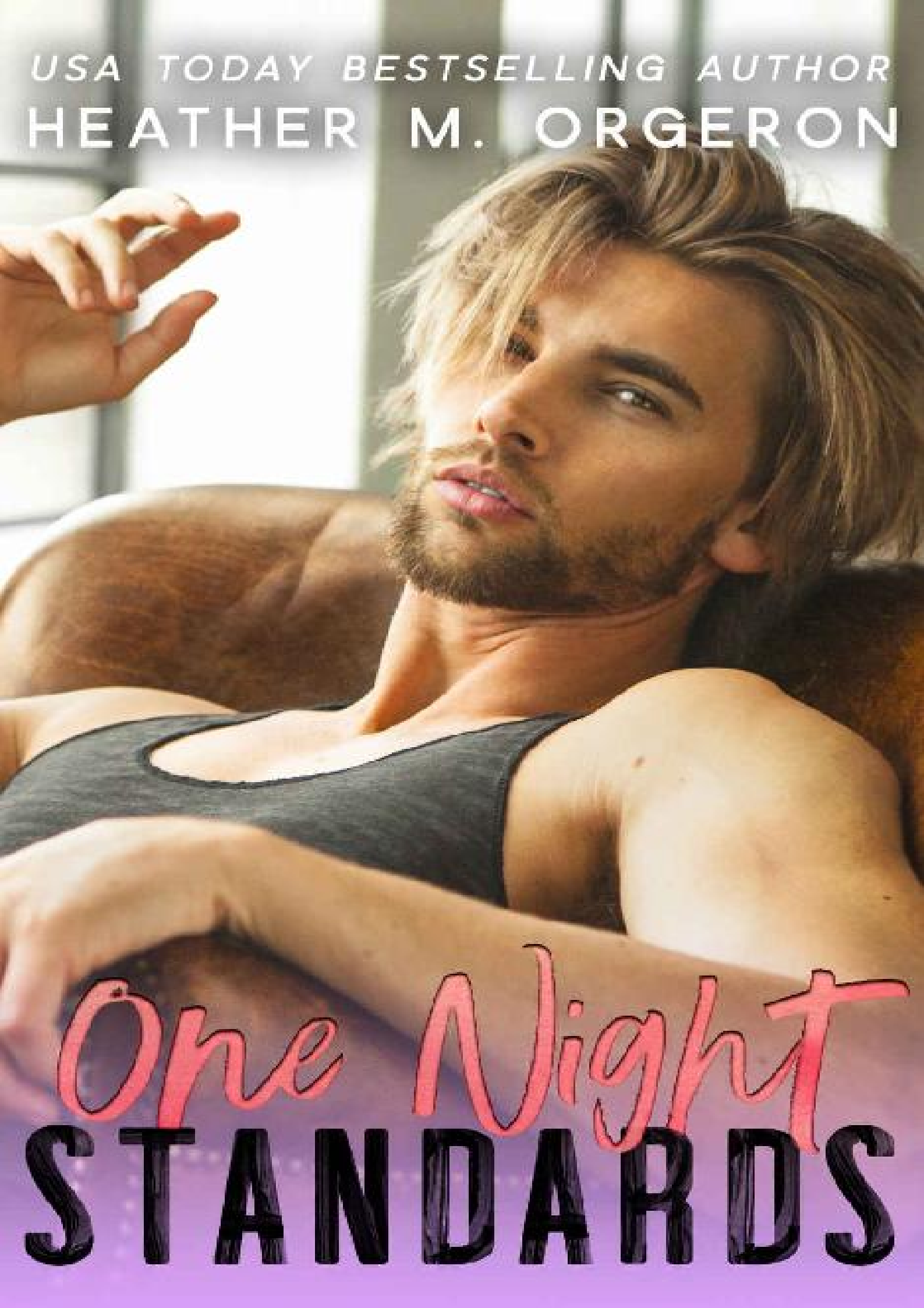


USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
HEATHER M. ORGERON



One Night
STANDARDS

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For Gabby.

*The love you and your daddy shared touched me deeply.
To witness him walking you down that aisle was an honor—
and a moment I will never forget.*

*Thank you for allowing me to pay tribute to your story with
this book.*

*And for Sammi, for whom the heroine was named.
Thank you for your unwavering love and support. But most of
all,
thank you for being the most amazing friend a girl could ask
for.
I love you!*

Prologue



(Five years ago)

“Sammi?” I whisper-shout into the dark night as I approach our secret hideaway, a little alcove hidden in the rocks beneath her parents’ fishing dock.

The wind is really whipping tonight, making the trek down a challenge.

Her sullen voice sounds as my feet slip and slide on the wet rocks near the shallow opening. “I’m here.”

“Why’d you run away from my party, Jailbait?” I bend at the waist, resting my hands on my knees to catch my breath from the jog over.

Her ocean blue eyes roll up and she sniffs, rubbing the end of her sleeve beneath her dripping nose. A humorless chuckle pushes through her pouty lips, and she shrugs.

“Tired of pretending.”

I exaggerate a gasp as I collapse beside her, nudging an elbow into her ribs. “Thought you’d be happy for me. Getting

signed with The Rhett Taylor Band, and at 19, no less, is a huge deal.” And that’s putting it mildly. In recent months, they’ve taken country music by storm. I knew she’d be upset that I’d have to leave, but she must see what an incredible opportunity this is for me.

“Yeah? Well, you thought wrong.” Not only is she not excited—she’s pissed.

I snort, tilting her face up so her eyes meet mine. “That’s a childish thing to say, Li’l Bit.”

Her throat bobs on a hard swallow. “Well, at sixteen, you love to remind me I’m nothing more than a child.” She clears a bit of emotion from her throat and rasps the nickname I coined for her four years ago, “Jailbait.”

“Don’t put words into my mouth, Sam. And never assume where we’re concerned. You’re so much more to me than just a kid, and you know it.”

“Do I?”

I give her a hard look. “You damn well better. Every minute I’ve spent beneath this dock with you, I’ve risked everything. My reputation. My best friend. And a fucking felony charge.”

Teeth clenched, her jaw warbles. “I just...I don’t want you to go.”

Without thought, I kiss away the plump tear that spills from her right eye. “Los Angeles isn’t more than an hour’s drive from here. It’ll be like I never even left.”

She stares up at me, eyes wide with shock. “You...you kissed me.” Sammi brings the fingers of one hand to rest on her cheek.

“I shouldn’t have done that. It was nothing,” I lie, actively denying the tingle I still feel in my lips. The heat coursing through my veins. The aching mass of dread forming in my throat.

“Why do you always do this?” she says with a sob.

“Don’t cry, Li’l Bit.” I scrub a hand over my face. “Not because of me. I can’t bear it.”

“Stop pushing me away.”

The moonlight makes her appear ethereal. She’s so damned beautiful it hurts to look at her. Because I know, no matter how badly I want to run my tongue over every inch of her creamy skin... To taste her lips... To drown in her scent... To give in to the temptation that’s plagued me for far longer than is decent... I can’t. Not yet.

“Only a few more years...”

She pulls her lower lip between her teeth and nods in defeat.

“Hey,” I say, moving to crouch in front of her. “Maybe with me out of the way, you might actually be ready to date a few boys your own age.”

The thought churns in my gut. But it’s something I really want for her. I hate that she’s wasting her high-school years pining away for me. She should be out with her friends, experimenting and experiencing life. And, selfishly, it’d make me feel a hell of a lot less guilty for the girls I hook up with.

“Maybe,” she agrees, shocking me to silence when she doesn’t put up her usual argument. “Okay,” Sammi says, scrubbing her palms over the front of her jeans, “I’ll date... On one condition.”

“Name it.”

“I want you to be my first—”

“Goddamn it, Jailbait! You can’t ask that of me.”

“Kiss,” she amends with a devilish smirk. “My first kiss.” Her hand darts out to cup my cheek, the pad of her thumb gently running back and forth over my days-old stubble.

“You’re playing with fire, Li’l Bit.”

She winks up at me. “Damn sure trying.”

“Come here.” I grip her around the waist and pull her into my lap as I plop down in the wet rocks. It’s the first time I’ve

held her. Really held her. I don't ever want to let this girl go. "I'll come back for you, you know." I swoop an errant tuft of long blonde hair behind her shoulder. "You'll always be my girl."

"You've had plenty of girls, Lyle," she huffs. "You claim to care about me...to—to want me. Yet, I'm the only one you won't touch." Her eyes shine with the pain she no longer tries to conceal. "Do you have any idea what that does to me?"

"But I love you." The words rush out before I have the chance to overthink them. "Only you."

Her head jerks back in shock. "You—you do?"

I nod, cupping her chin in my hand. "You're the only girl I've ever had any real feelings for. And if the timing were better—if it wouldn't land me in jail or six feet under at the hand of your father—I'd have laid claim to you so long ago."

Her tongue slips out to lick the tears from her lips.

"It's not our time yet, Li'l Bit... but it will be. Someday in the not-so-distant future when we finally have our moment... Fuck, babe. It's gonna be explosive."

"I'm going to explode now, if you don't kiss me."

I bury a hand into the back of her hair, pulling her close and pressing my lips to her forehead. Every cell of my body comes alive as I take a moment to breathe her in. It's like I can actually hear the universe screaming at me to stand up and take notice. She's the one. The only one.

"Lyle," she whimpers, grinding into my lap. "I want..."

"Me too." I cut her off, trailing kisses along her temple and cheek before finally landing on her lips. I rest there for a beat, absorbing her soft mewls and committing to memory the feel of her. The salty taste of her tears. The rapid beat of her heart.

Our breath mingles, and I feel the cosmos exploding. Cheering. Screaming that this is right.

It's when my tongue darts out and licks the seam of her lips—when hers ever so hesitantly brushes mine—that I force

myself to pull away.

“Please don’t go,” my love begs.

“I have to,” I say, backing toward the exit. “Fuck, Jailbait. Now more than ever. I—”

Her head shakes as tears blindly spill from her desolate eyes. “But I love you too.”

Fuck. I bring a hand to my chest. “I’m coming back for you, Li’l Bit.”

“Lyle, don’t go!” Her desperate cry hangs in the night air as I stumble back down to the shore.

“Live your life, Sam. Just don’t give away my heart.”

Chapter ONE



What the fuck am I doing?

I ask myself for the umpteenth time as I damn near pace a hole into the brick floor of the corridor outside Sammi Deluca's bridal suite.

My imagination runs wild with visions of her in a white satin dress, her long blonde locks piled atop her head. Her cheeks dusted pink, and those full lips that have begged for my attention since we were teens painted the perfect shade of just out of reach.

My chest draws tight at the thought of her walking down that aisle in a few short minutes...*toward the wrong man.*

I'm supposed to be the one waiting on that altar. In every version of this moment I've envisioned throughout the years, that's how it's ended—with me watching through dewy eyes as the girl who secretly captured my heart at the ripe age of fifteen finally became mine.

Instead, I'm here, lurking in the hall, actually considering shooting my shot with my best friend's baby sister. And on the

day she's set to wed another man, no less.

"Fuck." With a loud groan, I fist my hands into my hair and give the long ends a firm tug.

It's now or never.

Nervous energy floods my veins; my pulse is a thundering stampede reverberating through my body. And I'm *this close* to pounding my fist on that massive mahogany wood door when I wrench my arm behind my back and stalk around the corner. Defeated, I sag against the wall and drop my head into my hand.

I can't do it.

Not because I don't love her.

Not because I don't have the balls.

Not even the fear of my best friend's reaction would be enough to stop me from going in there.

No. I won't do it out of respect for her father. It's Wayne Deluca's dying wish to walk his baby girl down the aisle.

The rage I feel toward myself festers like an open wound, raw and angry and blistering for an outlet as I slam a fist back into the stone wall.

I knew Sammi was seeing someone. Even that it was getting pretty serious. But I did nothing because I thought I had time. Time to wait it out while she completed college. Time to finish sowing my own wild oats before settling down.

But time is a fucking thief, and I'm about to be left holding an empty hourglass, forced to stand by and watch as the last few granules—and the only girl I've ever loved—slip through my fingertips.

This all came out of nowhere: The cancer diagnosis. That big brawny man's rapid decline. *This wedding*. I had to steel my reaction when I saw him at the rehearsal dinner last night, wasted away to skin and bones.

How could he be the same man that used to have me and Dane shitting our britches with a stern look?

Fucking Dane, man... This is tearing him apart. I'd give anything to fix this for him. For his mother, Trudy. And for Sammi.

Sweet little Sammi has always been such a daddy's girl. While he could be a bit of a boar to the rest of us, that man was putty in her hands. She can't be handling it well. And it kills me that it's another man's place to comfort her.

When I heard the news, I offered to pay for the best doctors money could buy—not that the Delucas couldn't have afforded it themselves. No one in our affluent town of San Robles Shores is hurting for cash. But having more of it than I know what to do with, my first response to any problem these days is to throw money at it. There isn't much the right amount of the mighty dollar can't fix. But the harsh reality is that apart from some medical trial he's so far not responding to, there's nothing to be done. He's too far gone.

It's for this reason alone I know I won't knock on that door. That I'll bear witness from a pew in the second row to the woman of my dreams pledging her love and loyalty to a man who could never love her the way I do—the way I always will.

I took for granted that she'd always be there. Truly believed promises whispered in secret from two doe-eyed kids would win out in the end. Because love's supposed to conquer all, right?

I thought we had time...then fate intervened.

I'm rounding the corner to head back to my seat when the sound of footsteps drawing near has me retreating right back to the safety of the abandoned hall.

“Darci, the wedding should have started ten minutes ago. We don't have time for whatever this is.”

I recognize the voice as that of the groom, Trent.

He sounds like a fucking douche—a mental assessment that I'm sure has everything to do with the fact that he's about to marry my girl.

“She’s refusing to leave that bridal suite until she talks to you,” her friend clips. “So get in there and let’s get this show on the road, please.”

The door creaks open, and I find myself holding my breath until I hear it click shut.

I should use this opening to escape unseen. No one would ever know I was out here stalking the bride like a total creeper.

But of course, that’s not the road I choose.

Instead, I flatten my ear to the wall, straining to make out the hushed conversation on the other side. I catch something about a breakup a few months ago when Trent dumped her because things were getting too serious. As a result, Sammi and a few of her friends took off for a girls’ week in the Bahamas to drown her sorrows. Apparently, weeks went by before he came to his senses and went crawling back with his tail between his legs. They got back together on the day her father learned of his grim prognosis. It was then that she asked Trent to marry her, so Wayne would have the opportunity to walk her down the aisle before he passed.

“Why are we rehashing all this now? Baby,” he croons, “that’s all water under the bridge. We’re about to be married.”

“Just give me a minute to get this out, please.” The crack in her voice makes me want to rush in there and rescue her from whatever it is she’s trying to confess.

“Trent...I’m pregnant.”

Silence.

All I hear is the sound of my own heart clattering to the floor in a billion pieces. Because this settles it. There’s no way I’m coming between a child and its father.

“Pregnant?” Trent finally sputters. “We’re having a baby?”

“Well, yes and...and no. I mean, *I’m* having a baby.”

“You’re breaking up with me?” he snarls. “Oh, this is rich...and after I agreed to marry you? You can’t keep my child from me, Samantha.”

“It might not be yours!” she shouts.

Hope restored, my adrenaline soars.

“Come again?”

“I slept with someone.”

“Who?” he bellows. “I’ll kill him with my bare hands!”

“I don’t know. Just some guy in the Bahamas. I was so drunk, and so angry at you for breaking up with me. I just—I’m not proud of it...” There’s a brief pause before she continues. “We’ve always been so careful, and I assumed I’d missed my period because of the stress of everything with Daddy. But when I did the math last night, I realized I’ve missed more than one. So, I—I took a test...and it—it was positive. That’s the reason I couldn’t go out there. Trent, I couldn’t marry you without telling you this first.”

He barks out a humorless laugh. “You think we’re still getting married?”

“I would like to, yes,” she answers, resolute, like she’s simply securing a business arrangement and not planning to spend the rest of her life with this man. “If you’re willing to raise this baby as your own, no matter what. If you’ll still have me. Yes, Trent, I still want to marry you.”

There’s a loud crash, followed immediately by the girls’ shocked screams.

I’m halfway to the door when it comes flying open, nearly smacking me in the forehead.

“Sounds to me like I just dodged a major bullet. You can do the honors of calling this sham of a wedding off. We’re done. For good this time. Get rid of that kid,” he snarls. “I don’t want it. I don’t ever—and I mean *ever*—want to see your face again.”

It takes every ounce of restraint I possess not to slam my fist into his smug face when he turns on his heel to storm off and our eyes connect.

He garbles on a muffled laugh. “She’s all yours, man.”

“Always was,” I singsong, all smug. Like I wasn’t preparing seconds ago to accept defeat.

We’re locked in a stare down, his jaw ticking as he chews on his response before finally waving a dismissive hand through the air.

“Good luck, then.” His eyes move toward the door he just left before he shoves past me. He’s still shaking his head to himself when I drum my fist on the wood.

“Tre—” Sammi starts before swallowing her tongue. Her tear-filled eyes widen. “Lyle?”

“Hey, Li’l Bit.”

She dabs a tissue under her eyes, as if she could hide the fact that she’s been crying. “What are you doing here?”

“I was invited,” I say, stepping past her into the bridal suite, where her friend is gawking so hard her jaw’s practically dragging the floor.

“You all right, doll?” I ask the starstruck brunette. “Someone should probably check on your friend here.”

Sammi groans before releasing her hold on the door and spinning around to lean against it. “I mean here, here—like in this room.”

“Oh, that,” I say with a wink, not wasting a second as I drop down to one knee and retrieve the velvet box I thought to grab from my top drawer, just in case. “Something I should have done a long time ago.”

“Oh. My. Gawd.” Darci appears to have pulled herself out of her stupor as she brings a hand to her chest.

“Lyle…” Sammi wrings her fingers. “You’re too late.”

“I heard everything,” I say, flipping the top open to reveal the antique, oval-cut diamond I’ve been holding on to for damn near two years. “Marry me, Li’l Bit.”

“This is crazy.” She chews her bottom lip, appearing to mull it over. “You can’t be serious right now.”

“I assure you, love. I have never been more serious about anything in my entire life than I am of wanting to make you mine forever.”

“You just heard me admit to cheating on my fiancé...”

“I’m pretty sure he wasn’t *your* anything, if memory serves. The idiot broke up with you.”

“Still...I wanted to marry him and slept with someone else, and that doesn’t bother you?”

I can’t contain the wry grin that curves my lip, because even if they hadn’t split up for a time, why would her cheating on him bother me in the least? “No.”

She sucks her tongue to her teeth, throwing her arms out. “Why?” She snorts. “Why would you want to marry me, knowing all that?”

“Because even after all this time has passed, you listened, Jailbait.”

Her eyes narrow. “How do you figure?”

“Clearly, he never had your heart.”

“No.” Her voice is a hoarse whisper. “That’s always belonged to you.”

I shift my weight around, my knee beginning to ache on the hard floor. “I’m here to claim what’s mine.” I take hold of her left hand and ask again, “Marry me.”

She tries to pull away, but I tighten my grip, not giving an inch. I was just seconds away from losing her for good. There’s not a chance in hell I’m leaving this church without making her my wife.

“I—we can’t. So much has changed.” Her eyes fill with tears, and I swear, a part of me dies at the sight of them. Sammi Deluca should never cry, especially not because of me. “You’re Mr. World Famous. Girls throw their panties at you on stage, and I’m just—”

I rise to my feet, gripping her chin with my free hand and tip her face up to mine. “Don’t you dare finish that sentence

with anything other than ‘amazing.’” Because that’s what you are, Li’l Bit. Fucking. Amazing.”

“But what will people think?” she asks, nibbling on her plump lower lip. “No one will believe it—that a manwhore like you settled down with a nobody like me.”

I pretend to be offended. “Well, that’s rich coming from a pregnant chick that doesn’t even know the father.”

She gasps, but the fire I’ve always loved so much sparks in her eyes. My girl may be down, but she’s not out.

For a split second, I worry I’ve gone too far, but then she spits out a laugh. “Touché.”

“Forget everything else. It’s you and me, babe...the way it was always supposed to be. Let’s do this. Marry me.”

Sammi dabs her nose with the Kleenex still balled in her fist. “You really want to do this?”

“More than anything.” My eyes drink her in, starting with the sheer veil sitting atop the golden waves cascading down her back. They linger on the square-cut bodice that’s in no way inappropriate but has me fantasizing about ripping it off her later tonight. I take in every curve, appreciating the way the fabric clings to her body. I don’t stop ’til I’ve reached the tips of her red-painted toes, peeking out from beneath the delicate satin and lace.

“And the baby?” she counters, the skin on her chest flushed from my perusal.

“Will be ours,” I answer, unwavering.

“Okay,” she stammers, shaking her head in disbelief. “Yes, Lyle Livingston, I will marry you.”

I’m back on one knee, slipping the ring onto her finger, when none other than Dane Deluca bursts through the door.

Chapter TWO



Sammi

My brother stands frozen in the doorway, eyes narrowed in confusion. “What the hell’s going on in here?”

“Dane!” I gasp, my mind whirling with all that’s just transpired. I don’t know how to make sense of any of this myself, least of all explain it to an outsider.

I’m having some kind of out of body experience. I know I should be upset that Trent backed out—devastated, even. Yet, I feel more excited about this wedding than ever before. In the blink of an eye, this day has gone from merely fulfilling an obligation to a dream come true.

Guess the right groom makes all the difference. Who knew?

As far as Dane’s concerned, the only connection Lyle and I have is *their* friendship. Well, that and the fact that we grew up neighbors.

“Samantha...” he prods. “Why did I just see your groom hightail it out of the parking lot like his ass was on fire, and

what in God's name is Lyle doing putting a ring on your finger?"

My mouth opens and closes, but my mind is blank. I'm finding it impossible to focus on anything but the weight of the diamond Lyle just placed on my finger.

It's stunning and perfectly suited to my taste. But why is this man walking around with an engagement ring in his pocket? Could it even be possible that he had this planned all along? And what would I have done if Trent and I hadn't just broken up and he'd come in here and proposed?

I have so many questions and no time to get them answered, because there's a church filled with people who are waiting on me.

"I've got this," my maid of honor offers when I stand there blankly staring into space. "Trent decided he no longer wanted to marry your sister, and Lyle stepped in." Darci flashes my brother her pearly whites. "Just a little change in groom, that's all."

"That's all, huh?" He steps into the room, letting the door shut behind him.

"Well..." My best friend sucks air through her teeth. "That and the fact that she's pregnant and doesn't know if it's Trent's."

"Jesus Christ, Darci," I hiss. *Couldn't she have left that part out?*

Dane's nostrils flare as he advances on Lyle, gripping him by the lapels of his gray suit jacket. "You fucked my sister?"

"Well," he scoffs, every bit the cocky rockstar. "Not yet."

My brother looks as if he's seconds away from losing his shit as he eases his grip and refocuses his attention on me. "Who's the father?"

"I don—" I start, my cheeks warm with humiliation.

"Me," my soon to be *husband* interrupts without hesitation. "Look, all you need to know is that in just a few minutes, your dad is gonna walk his daughter down the aisle,

the way he's always dreamed. I'm going to marry your sister," he says while peeling Dane's fingers back one by one. "And we'll raise this baby together." He smooths the wrinkles out of his jacket then looks my brother dead in the eye. "You're welcome."

"You're doing this for Dad." Dane's features soften toward his friend, the weight of our father's illness cloaking him in an all-too-familiar cloud of defeat.

"I'm doing this," Lyle answers, lacing his fingers with mine, "because I'm in love with your little sister. Make no mistake about that."

His declaration has me fighting the urge to purr. I'll never tire of hearing those words. Lyle Livingston loves *me*.

Swap the white knight for a rock star. And the dragon with my own poor decisions. I'm living some version of the world's most fucked-up fairytale.

Lyle is still everything I always knew him to be... gallant, and selfless, and noble to a fault.

"Since when?" my brother challenges, disbelief furrowing his brow. I can't blame him for being skeptical. For as close as they are, my brother's never gotten to see this side of Lyle. He's never known his friend to have any interest in a woman beyond physical or platonic. Lyle's kept the best of himself hidden so well for so long, it's going to be difficult for those closest to him to believe our feelings are real. To accept there's this whole other side to him they've never known.

"For as long as I can remember." Lyle's fingers tighten around mine, sending my heart racing. Nervous excitement pricks my skin. I've waited what feels like an eternity for the day this man would finally claim me as his. For the time to come when we could love each other out loud. Just when I'd given up hope, here he is.

"We don't have time for this kind of drama," Dane growls. "Why are you all so calm? This is a complete nightmare."

"Only if you make it one," Darci challenges, with a glare that dares him not to fall in line. "Just roll with the punches,

big bro.”

He balls his hands at his sides and growls. “If Dad wasn’t sick—”

“I’d have gotten my head out of my ass eventually and proposed regardless,” Lyle assures him. “But Mr. Wayne *is* sick. A fact that almost had your sister marrying the wrong man.”

“And you expect me to believe you’re the right one?” Dane quirks a quizzical brow.

“Please, Dane, just trust me on this, okay?” I plead, starting to hyperventilate.

“This,” he says, looking at the two of us hand in hand, “is a lot, sis.”

“I know.”

He scrubs a hand through his unruly blond curls, shaking his head in disbelief. “You’re really having a baby?” he asks.

I nod, and as if on cue, my little bean turns my stomach. How’d I not recognize the near constant nausea I’ve been feeling as a sign of pregnancy? Now that I know...there have been so many signs. I guess my attention’s just been too focused elsewhere to put two and two together. “I’d prefer if we kept that bit a secret until after...”

He nods his agreement with no further explanation needed. It’s hard enough to know Dad’s leaving his wife and children behind. A grandbaby would just make things that much more tragic.

“All right then, if you’re committed to doing this...” His eyes volley between Lyle and me. “We need to get moving. What do you need from me?”

“A best man,” Lyle pleads, steeping his hands in front of his face.

“Of course.” Dane clears his throat, forcing a smile.

This entire situation is clearly making him uncomfortable, but all things considered, he’s being a good sport.

“And rings,” Lyle adds, shrugging his shoulders in apology. “I had the engagement ring...hadn’t gotten around to purchasing a wedding set.”

“I’m sure I can borrow some for the ceremony,” my brother says with a nod.

Before he can run off, I throw my arms around Dane’s neck, suddenly overcome with relief. My brother and my father are the reason Lyle and I have kept our feelings hidden all these years. The weight of the world has just been lifted from my chest. “Thank you.”

His throat bobs with a hard swallow. “You look beautiful,” he whispers into my ear, hugging me tight. “Most beautiful bride I’ve ever seen.”

“Should I go out there and make an announcement or something?” Darci asks, interrupting our moment.

“Nah,” I say, imagining the chaos that would cause. “Let it be a surprise.”

With that, my brother takes off to complete his errand, and Darci follows to locate my other two bridesmaids and fill them in on the latest developments.

“Shit!” I say, just as Lyle starts for the door to have a chat with the pastor. “We don’t have a wedding license.”

“It’s fine,” he says, the picture of calm. “We’ll go through with the ceremony as planned and make things official at the courthouse next week.”

Another crisis averted; I draw in a deep breath. “I’ll never be able to thank you enough for this, you know.”

“It’s me who should be thanking you, Li’l Bit.” He smiles a longing smile. “Minutes ago, I thought I’d missed my only chance at happiness.” He pounds a fist lightly against his chest and points heavenward. “I’m thanking all that is holy that somehow this all worked out in my favor.”

“I love you, Lyle Livingston,” I say, my voice loaded with emotion. “So much.”

He stalks back over to where I'm standing, gripping either side of my face in his hands. "And I love you, Jailbait." He presses a hard kiss to my lips—one that has me tingling from the top of my head to the tips of my toes. "If we didn't have a hundred people and a dying man waiting, I'd show you just how much."

"Believe me," I rasp, "you just have."



"Daddy..." I grip his frail hand in both of mine, out of breath after rushing over to join him in the church foyer. "There's something I need to tell you before we walk through those doors."

As I stand here before my father, who looks so small in his tux, his skin prematurely wrinkled from the weight he's lost these last weeks, I can't help but get a bit choked up. This day we've dreamed of for as long as I can remember—the one I've been training for since I got that first costume gown and veil for my third birthday—is finally here.

And it's nothing like I'd planned.

But the way my daddy's looking at me—the love reflected in his deep brown eyes—is a memory I'll hold for as long as I live. It makes every bit of this craziness worth it. Without a doubt, I'd go through the entire debacle again and again to land here in this moment.

Maybe I've made some questionable choices as of late. And it's very likely the entire town will be whispering behind my back for years to come. None of it matters.

This...this instant. This feeling. Reaching this milestone is worth whatever it costs.

"What's up, Sweat Pea?" His misty eyes are a blend of adoration and concern as he looks me over. The light filtering in through the stained-glass windows highlights the yellow tinge to his skin. It's a stark reminder that his liver is shot—and of just how dire our situation is. I'm overcome with gratitude toward Lyle for swooping in and making this day a reality.

When I think of how close I came to ruining it...

I'd have never forgiven myself.

“My goodness, you're more beautiful than I ever imagined.”

“Thank you.” I give his fingers a gentle squeeze, hesitating to spoil his happiness—not wanting to see the pride disappear from his face.

I'd love nothing more than stand here and exchange pleasantries, but those doors will open any second, and the one person I can't afford to leave in the dark is this man here. “Promise not to freak out, okay?”

“Are you calling off the wedding?” My father's tone is surprisingly hopeful, catching me off guard. “I told you not to do this just for me.”

“No...” I shake my head. “But I—I'm not marrying Trent.”

If I didn't know better, I'd swear the deep breath that whooshes out of the man is born of pure relief. “All right, I'm trying to follow... But if you're not calling off the wedding and you're not marrying that weasel, who's the groom?”

My stomach sparks to life with nervous flutters as I prepare for the worst. My body has yet to receive the memo that I'm no longer fifteen and that there's no reason the two of us being together should matter any longer. “It's Lyle,” I murmur, chewing the inside of my cheek.

“Livingston?”

“Yep.” I nod, trying to read his stony face.

He chuckles to himself. “You mean to tell me that son of a bitch finally located his balls?”

“Daddy!” I glance around nervously, hoping no one heard him. “We're in *church*.”

“So we are.” He laces his arm through mine. “Let's go get you two hitched, then.”

“You aren't mad?” *What is even happening right now?*

“Heck no,” he scoffs. “Ain’t blind or dumb, either. Your mom and I always assumed the two of you’d end up married someday.”

“You did?” *That’s certainly news to me.*

“You think we didn’t notice the way you two were always making eyes at each other?” He smiles. “Or the many afternoons y’all wound up missing at the same time?”

Guess we weren’t half as sneaky as we thought. “But you never said anything...”

“Wasn’t my place. I just kept him scared enough to know better than to get on my bad side.”

Well, I’ll be damned. “You certainly succeeded there.”

He beams. “Your old man had a few tricks up his sleeve.”

“I guess you did,” I murmur.

“Lyle’s a good boy,” Dad proclaims. “He’ll take care of you.”

“Yeah,” I say with a smile brimming from ear to ear. “I think he will.”

Our conversation’s cut short when the organ sounds.

“Ready?” I ask, with a mouth full of sand.

“Ready or not,” Daddy answers, sporting a shit grin as he nudges his elbow into my side. “It’s now or never, ain’t it?”

His morbid sense of humor has me wanting to both laugh and burst into tears as the enormous, cathedral-style doors swing open and dozens of eyes fix in our direction.

I draw a shaky breath and hold it for what feels like the longest—and definitely the most significant—walk of my life.

With every step I draw closer to that altar—to the future I’ve always dreamed of, that until minutes ago I’d given up on. I’m bidding farewell to not only my past as a single woman, but to my father.

It’s both bitter and sweet as a litany of contradictory emotions war within.

I can hardly see through the tears pouring down my face.

The significance of my dying father quite literally holding me up to get me through this, as opposed to the contrary, is not lost on me. This man, who can hardly make it to the bathroom on his own anymore, has somehow found the strength to carry his little girl one last time.

“It’s okay,” Daddy says, as we approach the center of the church and wait for my groom to come out of the shadows and join us. “You’re doing so good, Sweet Pea.”

There’s a loud series of gasps when Lyle steps into view, but it’s quickly drowned out by the erratic beating of my own heart.

“Mr. Wayne,” he greets, dipping his head as he reaches for my father’s hand, pulling him in for a hug.

I nearly fall over at the sight of their bodies shaking with the force of their tear-filled embrace. And I can’t help the thought that passes—that had it been Trent, this exchange wouldn’t have been nearly so meaningful.

I guess sometimes things really do have to fall apart so they can come together. *Who knew it could all take place in the span of less than an hour?*

I’m feeling weak in the knees when Dane appears at my side, offering me his arm. “Guess Dad took the news okay?”

I snort because there’s no way I could formulate a single syllable at this point.

“All right, old man,” my brother teases, pulling the two men apart. “This is where she becomes someone else’s problem.”

“You take care of my little girl.” Daddy takes my hand, placing a kiss over my knuckles before slipping it into Lyle’s.

“You have my word, sir.”

My father bites down on his trembling lower lip and nods. “Then dammit, boy, you have my blessing.”

Those sitting nearest to us must overhear the exchange because the sniffles and sobs are momentarily interrupted by a handful of giggles.

Dane guides my father to his seat in the front pew beside my mother while Lyle slips his arm through mine and we complete the trek to the altar, where my best friends—Liz, Darci, and Margo—stand to the left of the stairs, blubbering into their bouquets.

My cousins Robert and Michael, who were to be ushers, stand beside my brother to our right. Dane must've had the good sense to recruit them, since they were already clad in tuxes for their roles, to serve as groomsmen.

To anyone who didn't know who I was supposed to be marrying, nothing would appear out of place. It's a picture-perfect wedding—like something right out of a magazine.

You'd never guess the entire thing was thrown together in two weeks. Or that the father of the bride was knocking on death's door. And let's not even get started on the whole pregnancy and groom disaster.

I feel like an actress playing a part in the story of my own life with no idea where the plot might lead.

At least the set is beautiful.

The church is draped in white roses and baby's breath. Lush floral arrangements in varieties of pink and cream cover every available surface. With each inhale, I'm graced with the scent of their fragrant blooms. Three bridesmaids, three groomsmen, and the most adorable little flower girl and ringbearer you ever did see make up the wedding party.

It'd be sheer perfection if I could get past the lump of guilt pitted in my chest.

As it stands, I'm thanking my lucky stars that the guest list was largely compiled of my own friends and family, and that Trent only invited his immediate family, most of whom, it appears—judging by the empty pews on the groom's side—have already quietly excused themselves.

Try as I might, I can't stop my thoughts from wandering to what they all must think of me.

"Uncle Lyle?" asks Annabelle, my flower girl, tugging at his pants leg. "What's going on?" the five-year-old whispers. "You're not Miss Sammi's boyfriend."

A grin splits his too-handsome face as he squats to her level and presses a kiss to her cheek. "Sammi opted for an upgrade at the very last minute."

Her big brown eyes widen. "You can do that?"

"Yep," he says, rising back to his full height, his amber eyes connecting with mine. "It's never too late to change your mind, pumpkin."

The little brunette harumphs. "Better hurry before she changes hers again."

I choke on a laugh. Leave it to a kid to lighten the mood.

"Annabelle," Liz hisses at her daughter, motioning for her to zip it.

"She's fine, sis." Lyle sends his niece a wink before apologizing to Pastor John for the distraction. "We're ready."

Our childhood pastor greets us with a warm smile and a nod before welcoming our guests. I'd have loved to be a fly on the wall when Lyle filled him in on the change-up. I'm sure he'll have a lot to say when he gets me alone later, but for now he's the picture of decorum.

"You, okay?" Lyle whispers, giving my hand a shake when I start to zone out.

My cheeks flame and I nod, directing my attention from his knowing grin to Aunt Barbara, who's already halfway through her reading.

The two of us have slept through our fair share of weddings growing up. We swore we'd wed barefoot, with our toes in the sand, bypassing these drawn-out formalities. But you know what they say about best laid plans.

“This is taking forever,” I grump to my groom after the pastor gives us communion and we take our seats while he moves on to distribute the sacrament to our guests.

Lyle’s chuckle is muffled by the choir. “Hey...I had nothing to do with the planning of this snooze fest. This one’s all on you, Li’l Momma.”

Li’l Momma... That’s new. I don’t hate it.

“Didn’t really have many options, considering Daddy can’t travel.”

“I know,” he says, trailing a finger up my spine. The gentleness in his touch has a swarm of butterflies fluttering in my chest. And when he brings his lips to my ear, it’s all I can do not to melt into a puddle at his feet. “You look incredible.”

“Thank you,” I say, trying to disguise the longing in my voice.

“Seriously,” he says, grabbing my hand and spinning the engagement ring around my finger. “I’m the luckiest man alive.”

“How long have you had this?” It’s probably not the best time for this conversation, but curiosity is killing me.

The apples of his cheeks pink. “A few years.”

“What exactly were you waiting for?” I feel myself getting worked up over the fact that it took me nearly marrying another man for him to realize he still wanted me. At the same time I feel guilty for my indignation, because he is here and he’s saving my ass.

He shushes me, smothering a laugh at my inability to ever pull off a proper whisper. “I don’t know.” He shrugs. “The right moment?”

“Shitty timing, Livingston,” I snap, the words leaving my mouth right after the music comes to an end.

I mean, of course I did, right? Because the rest of this day hasn’t been humiliating enough.

Pastor John stares and loudly clears his throat before motioning us to rejoin him.

The old man quirks a brow then murmurs, “Is the plan still to say your own vows?”

“Uhhh,” I stammer, knowing the vows I agonized over for the past week for Trent will no longer cut it.

“Just wing it,” Lyle encourages, clearly having no qualms about being put on the spot like this.

“Yeah,” I stammer, bile climbing in my throat. “Sure.”

“All right then,” Pastor John says with a smile. “Mr. Livingston, you’re up first.”

He rolls his shoulders before taking my hand into his. Ever the entertainer, Lyle cracks a huge smile, gazing out at the crowd. “Good thing I thought to dress my best for the occasion, huh?”

“And with a ring in your pocket no less,” I chime in, playing to our audience, as heat blooms in my cheeks.

My groom pats his chest and back pockets theatrically like he’s misplaced something. “Yet despite that bold move, I lacked the confidence to come prepared with vows.”

“If you’re lacking anything,” our pastor drawls, “it’s certainly not confidence.”

The church erupts with laughter.

“Touché.” Lyle chuckles before straightening his spine and cradling my hand in both of his.

“Li’l Bit,” he says, stroking his thumb over my knuckles. “I came here today prepared to let go. Then I found myself pacing outside your bridal suite, unsure what I was there for, but physically unable to peel myself away.” He blows out a breath. “I knew I was too late. I couldn’t just barge in there and stop this wedding like we’re in the movies. This is real life, and through no one’s fault but my own, I’d missed my chance.” He smiles. “But just as I was mustering the strength to walk away, lightning struck, and I was given a second

chance—one I'm not quite sure I deserve but that I'm eternally grateful for nonetheless."

He grips my chin in his thumb and forefinger, tipping my face up so I'm singularly focused on what he's about to say.

"Sammi Deluca, I promise to love you." He huffs a self-deprecating laugh. "It feels silly to have to vow to do something that comes as natural as breathing."

He rubs the pad of his thumb over my trembling lower lip. "I promise I'll do my best to keep you happy...to give you the life that you deserve."

The grin that follows tells me the mushy part is over.

"I'll keep the house stocked with Reese's Pieces, even though I despise even the smell of peanut butter, because I know how much you love them." He fiddles with the diamond on my finger. "I'll be nice to Maui"—my Indian Ringneck Parrot—"even though I'm convinced your *sweet* baby would love nothing more than to peck my eyes out, because I know how much you love him."

His mention of my bird, who is positively feral to anyone but me, has me grinning like a loon.

"I'll learn to separate laundry by color because I know how crazy you get about mixing them. I'll let you shower first and not complain when it's my turn and there's no hot water left, because I know how much you love your long, scalding showers."

"Good one," I whisper.

"I'll apologize, even when you're wrong, because I know no one's more stubborn than you."

My jaw drops.

With a finger he snaps it shut. "You and me...we might be a surprise to everyone else in this room," he says, "but I've spent years dreaming of the life we'd share together. One filled with laughter and adventure. With friendship and love." He gives my chin a gentle pinch before lowering his hand from my face. "I fell in love with you as a teenager, and despite the

distance, that love has only multiplied as you've grown into a strong, independent woman. And I look forward to falling in love with every version yet to come."

Well, hell. "Is someone cutting onions in here?" I ask, sniffing.

Lyle brings both thumbs to my face, swiping the wetness from beneath my eyes, and offers me an encouraging smile.

"Well," I say, pulling the folded-up note card from my bust. "Guess I won't be needing these anymore." I rip the useless vows in half and then in half again before looking around for somewhere to place the trash. I can't exactly toss it on the church floor.

Shaking his head, Lyle takes the pieces from me and stuffs them into his inside pocket.

"Always rescuing me, this one," I say, batting my lashes at my groom. "So, I guess it's only fitting you're here doing it once again." I pause briefly to collect my thoughts. "Most people look at you and see a jokester, or a celebrity. But to me you'll always be the hottie from next door."

Lyle snorts.

I shoot a sideways glance at the pastor. "Can—can I say hottie in church?"

"Just keep going," he says with a sigh.

"Right. Okay." I cringe. "Sorry."

I bring my attention back to my groom. "When I look at you, I don't see trouble or a bad boy...I see my rock. I see the most selfless, honorable, dependable man I've ever known."

I love you, he mouths, his eyes shining with emotion.

"I love you, Lyle Livingston," I say, loud and proud. "Not the fame. Not the image. I love *you*—my best friend. My protector. And more times than I can count, my knight in shining armor."

"Awww," Darci coos behind me, drawing a similar reaction from the crowd.

“I promise to love you. To honor you. To cherish every moment with you...”

“Obey,” he whisper-shouts, and the guests titter.

“Not a chance,” I respond, further encouraging their laughter. “After all, you just said my independence was something you loved about me.”

He nods, shrugging one shoulder.

“Our relationship has been unconventional, to say the least. But I’d like to believe the time we’ve spent apart, growing as individuals, has given us the maturity and knowledge necessary for a successful marriage.” I clear a wad of emotion from my throat. “I gave up on us.” A fat tear tracks my cheek. “For that I’m so sorry, but I promise it’ll never happen again.”

His tongue darts out to wet his lips.

“From this day forward, I promise to communicate my feelings and fears, and to be a sounding board for yours, and a soft place to land when you need it. We’ve spent years growing apart, and I can’t wait to see what we can do together.”

Chapter

THREE



“I now pronounce you husband and wife. Congratulations to the both of you.” Pastor John offers me an encouraging nod and murmurs, “You may kiss the bride.”

My bride... Holy shit! I'm a fucking married man.

Cheers explode behind us when I cradle Sammi's face and begin lowering my mouth to hers.

Warmth spreads through my veins, and my heart expands to near bursting with how eager I am right now. It's been five long years since our lips first touched. The memory of that fleeting kiss has been built up in my mind; it's the standard by which I've judged every one since. And it doesn't hold a candle to reality. I can only explain the sensation that rockets through me when our lips finally reunite as euphoric. The warmth of her breath as it mingles with mine. The taste of desire bleeding from her tongue. The sweet little mewls and moans that are for my ears alone. This is my very own version of heaven.

I'm a junkie, relapsing—tumbling into sweet, sweet oblivion.

This girl... she's intoxicating in the best of ways. I'm addicted to her touch. Entranced by her beauty. And that smile of hers—*those dimples*—I swear they could bring about world peace.

In this moment I know, I'd choose death before ever willingly attempting life without her again.

She's the best part of my past and everything I look forward to in the future. Sammi Deluca is utter perfection, and finally—*fucking finally*—she's all mine.

“Lyle,” my sister Lizzie growls. “He said to kiss her, not eat her face.”

Snickering, we break apart, both panting for breath, our cheeks flush with shared passion.

“Turn to face the congregation,” Pastor John instructs quietly. “Ladies and gentlemen, may I present to you,” he bellows, “Mr. and Mrs. Lyle Livingston.”

Adrenaline surges through my body like never before when he introduces us as husband and wife. Not even the thrill of performing can touch the sense of pride and accomplishment that comes over me in this very moment. Because I've never wanted anything so much.

“I can't believe we actually did it,” Sammi muses as we march back down the aisle and across the parking lot toward the reception hall.

I wrap an arm around her shoulders, pulling her snug to my body and planting a kiss to the top of her head. “It's been a long time coming, Li'l Bit.”

She smiles up at me, but it falters. “I really thought you'd changed your mind.”

“Not about you...never about you,” I promise. It's clear I owe her an explanation for dragging my feet for so long. But there really isn't one. The truth is I got swept up in the fast life and was far too confident in my belief that she'd wait. I can be arrogant to a fault. This time it almost did me in.

Our conversation is cut short when we arrive at a photographer who's set up to take our pictures beneath the sprawling oaks outside the hall.

It's difficult to focus on smiling and posing while people whisper and stare as they proceed inside. I've never seen so many bewildered faces in one place. Not that I blame them. Hell, I still haven't had time to process it all.

The moment we enter the building, we're swept into my parents' waiting arms.

"Lyle," my mother shrieks, gripping my shoulders and giving them a shake, "why didn't you tell us?"

"You and Sammi, eh?" Dad adds, grinning at my new wife, who he's always adored. "Who'd'a thunk it?"

"It was a surprise to me, too," I assure them, gazing over at my blushing bride.

"Well," Li'l Bit chimes, "maybe not quite. You did show up with a ring, after all."

I shrug, puffing out my chest. "I'm a cocky bastard; what can I say?"

"You get it from your old man." Dad beams, as if that's a trait to be proud of. "A chip off the old block."

This man... I swear if I'd committed a murder, he'd find some way to compliment my technique then take credit for it. He's always been my biggest supporter. I really lucked out in the parent department.

"Hate to break up this little love fest," Lizzie says, inserting herself into the middle of our huddle. "But you two are needed on the dance floor." She grabs Sammi and me by the wrists, dragging us out there.

Sammi stares up at me, her baby blue eyes wide with concern.

"What's wrong?"

"We don't have a song."

I'll be damned if after all she's been through these past weeks, especially today, I'll watch her fall apart over such a minor thing. "The hell we don't," I counter, remembering the one I played for her on my old acoustic at our spot beneath the dock. "You just let me handle this." I kiss her cheek and hold up a finger. "Be right back."

I rush over to the DJ booth in the corner to make my request before hurrying back to join my wife beneath the glowing spotlight.

The smile that stretches across her face confirms she recognizes the opening notes to "Make You Feel My Love," by Garth Brooks, and that she more than approves of my choice.

"This is perfect," she says, linking her arms around my neck as she releases a dreamy sigh. "That was one of my favorite days."

"Mine too," I rasp. "Every minute I spent with you in that cave was a favorite, Li'l Bit."

I grip her waist and pull her close, inhaling her sweet scent and relishing the warmth of her body pressed to mine. Bringing my lips to her ear, I serenade my girl, for old time's sake, while taking her for a spin around the dance floor.

Her heart beats faster with every word I sing, the warmth of her breaths coming harder and more frequent into the crook of my neck.

I nip her lobe and trace the shell of her ear lightly with the tip of my tongue during the second chorus, eliciting a full body chill.

"Lyle...I—" She stops, contemplating whether or not to complete her thought.

"Yeah?" I urge.

"This..." she says, nodding between us, "It still feels right..." It's a question as much as it is a statement. Her nerves are kicking into overdrive. She needs to be reassured that she's not falling back into these old feelings on her own.

“Because it is.” I slide a hand along the bare skin of her back, up the nape of her neck, and trail it along her jawline until I arrive at her chin. Leaning in, I press a chaste kiss to her lips. “Time can’t erase feelings this deep, babe. We’re written in the stars.”

She nods, stroking her thumbs along the sensitive skin just behind my ears. “We’ve changed though,” she hedges. “A lot of time has passed, Lyle.”

“We’re the same in here...” I flatten a palm to her chest. “Where it matters.”

She brings a hand to my cheek, gazing deep into my eyes. “But what if love isn’t enough?”

“It’s more than enough,” I vow with a hard swallow. “It’s *everything*, Li’l Bit.”

Rising to her toes, she stretches her face toward mine. Without hesitation, I accept the invitation, meeting her halfway. My lips hover just a hair’s breadth from hers, twitching as they beg for her to close the distance.

Sammi doesn’t falter. Just like with our previous kisses, fireworks explode between us the instant our lips meet.

I wonder if it’s possible for it to always be so good between us. And if kissing her is this exhilarating, what it’ll be like when I finally bury myself inside of her. The mere thought has me hardening in my slacks.

I allow her to lead, holding myself back while she tortures me, peppering the softest whispers of a kiss across my mouth.

A groan slips out when she traces the seam of my lips with her tongue, ever so lightly.

“I wish this baby was yours,” she says pulling back, her voice weighted with regret.

“Hey,” I say, nipping at the tip of her nose. “This baby’ll be as much mine as I am my parents’.”

Having been adopted as an infant myself, I know better than most that it takes more than blood to make a family. I’ve never questioned my mom and dad’s love for me, and I’ll

make sure this little one grows up feeling just as cherished as I did.

She nods, offering me a tense smile.

“I mean it. Biology doesn’t mean shit to me.”

“I know,” she says as the song draws to a close and our guests begin to celebrate with applause.

“It’s gonna be great,” I promise as her Uncle Bernard steals her away, pinning a crisp one-hundred-dollar-bill to her dress to commence the money dance.

Song after song, our partners switch out, each one pinning cash we don’t need to our clothing. It feels wrong to accept it, but you don’t mess with tradition.

It’s something my sister quickly learns when she adamantly refuses to dance with the broom my mother’s managed to find in a bathroom closet.

“You have to,” insists our Grandma Joyce, who came to live with them from Louisiana last year. “Your baby brother got married before you. Now you have to suffer the consequences like the rest of us had to.”

Mom swiftly agrees. “I had to do it when Uncle Bud and Aunt Sue got married.” She shrugs. “It’s bad luck if you don’t.” She narrows her eyes at her daughter. “Lord knows you don’t need any more of that.”

My family may not have had a thing to do with the planning of this impromptu wedding, but apparently, they’ve taken it upon themselves to infuse a little Cajun culture at the expense of my sister, and I’m here for it.

“Fine,” Liz grumps, snatching the broom from our grandmother’s hand. “But I’m choosing the song.” She gives Grandma Joyce a haughty glare over her shoulder as she turns to storm off.

“None of that bumping and grinding music,” the old woman warns.

“S’cuse me.” Liz pauses mid-flight. “Who’s the one dancing? Me or you?”

Grandma plants her hands on her hips and scowls.

“That’s what I thought... Just remember, this was your idea.” My sister leaves us with a wink before proceeding to sashay over to the DJ booth with the devil gleaming in her eye.

When I hear the words “Cash Money Records taking over for the ’99 and the 2000,” ring through the speakers, I picture my sister’s middle finger rising into the air and cackle.

There must never be a dull moment with those two headstrong women living in the same house. Thank God I don’t live there.

“I need a new mommy,” Annabelle says, appearing at my side. “This is embarrassin’.”

“Oh, she’s fun,” Sammi argues, shaking her ass beside me while cheering her best friend on. It’s crazy how close the two are, considering they’re five years apart. That hasn’t always been the case. But a lot has changed since I went away. These two are thick as thieves these days.

“I can’t believe you married her, Uncle Lyle. She’s embarrassin’ too!” She throws both arms out like she’s ready to just give up on life.

I choke. “But she’s really pretty,” I say, loud enough for my bride to hear.

If her answering smile is any indication, my message was received.

“I guess,” my niece grudgingly admits, folding her arms across her chest.

“And she’s a great cook,” I point out, continuing to sing my bride’s praises.

“Her spaghettis are pretty yummy,” she agrees, then squeals and slaps a hand over her face when her mother starts twerking on the broom handle.

“Where’s Pastor John?” my grandmother screeches. “Someone find that man and tell him to come douse this girl in holy water.” She snatches Annabelle’s hand, leading her and

her brother away from the spectacle their mother is making of herself.

By the middle of the song, Sammi and her bridesmaids have joined Lizzie out on the dance floor and that broom is the envy of damn near every man in this room.

One after another, Sammi's nosy family members begin to approach me, fishing for details on today's switch up. But if my manager Anika has taught me anything over the last few years, it's how to dance around uncomfortable topics. I'm well versed in the art of saying a whole lot without really saying much at all.

"Whoa," DJ Vibe wheezes into the microphone. "Y'all got me sweatin' over here, ladies," he teases, fanning himself dramatically. "But it's time for a little change in pace. Can we get the bride and her father on the floor, please?"

There isn't a dry eye in the building when Sammi and Mr. Wayne take center stage.

Swaying slowly in place, they hold one another close while Celine Dion's, "Because You Loved Me," rips them wide open. The tender ballad is Sammi's way of thanking her father for all that he's given to her throughout the years—his love and wisdom. His unwavering support. It's a promise that once he's gone, she'll be okay...and it's because he's instilled the best parts of himself into her. However unready she may be, he's prepared her to face this world without him.

The urge to go to her, to wrap my arms around her shuddering body and promise it's going to be all right, is almost too much to bear. But it isn't my place...not yet. This moment isn't about me. Besides, I've never lied to her before. And I certainly don't plan to start now. Losing this man is going to tear her world apart.

There's no way to protect her from it, no matter how badly I wish I could. All I can do is be here when the time comes, in whatever capacity she'll allow.

Chapter FOUR



Sammi

“Where are we going?” I ask for the third time since the limo rolled out of the church parking lot. “I don’t know if I can handle any more excitement.”

Today has been awful and incredible. I’m not sure I’ve ever experienced the depth of lows and the height of the highs I have today.

My emotions are off the chain.

“You can,” he insists, turning to plant a kiss to the crown of my head, which is resting on his shoulder. Lyle grips my knee, giving it an affectionate squeeze. “Trust me?”

My new husband was not too keen on the idea of staying in the suite Trent had booked for tonight, insisting he knew of a better place we could spend our wedding night than some hotel. What it might’ve lacked in luxury, however, The Winchester more than made up for in location, being minutes from my parents’ house.

Lyle’s never been a pretentious guy, despite our privileged upbringing. That’s why I’m convinced it had less to do with

the place itself, like he'd made it seem, and everything to do with the person responsible for planning it, which is more than understandable. And really, after what that man did for me today, who am I to deny him anything?

So, recent case of separation anxiety aside, I readily agreed, trying my damndest to hide my unease.

With every mile marker that whizzes by, the pit in my stomach expands.

"I do." I smile up at him with all the faith I can muster. "I trust you."

He bobs his head, taking my hand from my lap and holding it in both of his. "It's just...despite how this marriage came about, I want to do what little I can to make it ours, you know?"

A highlight reel of the day's events rapid fires through my mind giving me a wicked case of emotional whiplash.

Despite all the crazy—and there was so much of that—Lyle managed to make our wedding special in its own right. He had me smiling through the tears and swooning over his heartfelt words. That man did everything in his power to ensure I felt loved and cherished. And he did all of this on a day when—let's face it—I didn't really deserve it. I made my own bed, and he didn't have to lie in it with me. Yet here he is.

"And you have," I assure him, "from that epic proposal to those amazing vows."

"Meant every word," he says, brimming with pride.

"Except for the part about my being the most stubborn person you know, right?"

His obnoxious guffaw rattles my chest. "Especially that part."

I jab a playful elbow into his ribs, and his answering laughter sets my soul on fire.

In this moment, he looks young and carefree, a vision that's so reminiscent of the boy I grew up with.

I can't help but pause to stare at him in all his beauty, which somehow seems heightened by the soft glow of the full moon filtering in through the sunroof above our heads.

Lyle Livingston is a stunning man. With a full head of caramel-colored hair that always looks sex mussed, and skin permanently kissed by the sun, no matter the season, he's a treat to behold, turning heads wherever he goes. Gosh, even as a boy his jawline was pronounced, but now? As a full-grown man? It looks as if it was chiseled from the finest stone, his pert nose sculpted to perfection. And those pillowy lips of his were simply built for kissing. It's no wonder, next to the front man, he's the most lusted-after member of The Rhett Taylor Band.

There's something in his eyes, though, that really gets me going. By most estimations they could be described simply as an unremarkable toffee brown, more almond than oval in shape. A little squinty at times, and his least remarkable feature. But one look from that man and I swear I'm ready to combust on the spot. It's the way they sear into mine, like he can see past the surface, right down to my soul.

On second thought, maybe it's not the way his eyes look at all, *but the way they look at me...*

"You okay?" he asks, drawing me from my stupor with an all-knowing smirk.

"Uh-huh," I say practically swallowing my tongue. "So good." My head feels light, and my heart is fluttering impossibly fast. I haven't felt butterflies like this with anyone but this man. I'd forgotten how enchanting it felt just to be in his orbit.

"Great," he answers, reaching over my lap for the door handle and popping it open, "Because we're here."

"Oh!" Giddy to see where he's taken me, I fight the urge to squeal as I scramble across the seat, lugging the heavy dress behind. "I didn't even notice when we stopped," I say, glancing around at the enormous palms swaying in the breeze. The sound of their fronds rustling, paired with the waves

crashing against the shore, is music to my ears. I take a deep inhale, filling my lungs with salt and sea...and happiness.

Maybe he was onto something in skipping that hotel. I had no idea such paradise existed less than an hour from home. Or how much I needed a break from the sadness. A chance to breathe fresh air.

“You were a little preoccupied,” he teases.

“Hey,” I say, swatting him in the chest with the back of a hand when he comes to stand beside me. “There’s no shame in admiring your husband—” I choke up on the word. Because while I’ve always hoped it’d be Lyle standing beside me on that altar, I never imagined I’d be a wife at only twenty-one. “I—is there?”

“Admire away, *wife*.” He tucks a windblown strand of hair behind my ear. “I’ll never tire of the way you look at me...not ever.”

“And how do I look at you?” I prod.

The corner of his mouth curls up in a sly smirk. “Like I’m still the hottie from next door.”

I slap a hand to my forehead. “I can’t believe I said that in church.”

“It was, without question, my favorite part of the ceremony,” he says, the picture of seriousness as he takes a moment to stare off into the distance, deep in thought. “It was nice...”

“What was?” I rasp, accepting his offered hand.

“Being seen as anything more than famous.”

“Well,” I tease, snuggling close to ward off a chill while he leads me up the lighted stone walkway toward a colossal beachfront mansion. “Don’t you worry, hotshot. I’ll make sure the fame doesn’t go to your big head.”

“How do you know it hasn’t already? We haven’t exactly spent much time together over the last couple of years.” His tone is playful, but my answer is anything but. His actions

today were not those of a guy with an overinflated ego. In fact, they were the complete opposite.

“You just sacrificed your own freedom to save me from myself.” I gulp, trying not to become overly emotional again. Since we got the bad news, I’ve been living on the edge... and not the exciting variety. I’m one push away from a complete mental breakdown. “You kept a promise made between children. One you easily could have let slide. All so I could have my daddy walk me down the aisle before he passes. If that’s not selfless, Lyle Livingston, I don’t know what is.”

Never one easily accepting of praise, he’s quick to put a nefarious spin on the situation, but the gravel in his tone is all the assurance I need to know my words didn’t fall on deaf ears.

“Or, maybe I took advantage of a shitty situation to get what I’ve always wanted.” He punches a code into the door then knocks his hip into it to push it open, before quirking a brow my way. “Have you thought of that possibility, Jailbait?”

“And what you’ve always wanted...” I ask, batting my fake lashes fast enough to take flight. “Would that be li’l ol’ me?”

He shakes his head to himself, biting back a smile. “You’re incorrigible.”

“Always was when it came to you.” I brush against his chest deliberately as I slip past him into the foyer, admiring the double winding staircases to both my left and right.

He flips a switch near the door, bathing the room in a soft white light. The place is immaculate and expensively decorated, even by my standards. White and gray marble tile as far as the eye can see gives way to what appears to be the living room. I arrive at this assessment based on the white leather couches and stone fireplace now clearly in view.

“Whose place is this?”

“All of ours,” he says. The clang of his keys dropping into the shell-shaped bowl on the console table echoes through the open space. “Belongs to the band.”

“Impressive...” I say, trailing a finger along the curled end of the banister.

“So, you, uhh...want me to give you a quick tour?” Tall, tan, and sexy combs a hand through his hair while looking up at me from beneath his hooded lashes.

I shake my head, mustering the courage to saunter over to where he’s standing and flatten my palms to his hard chest. “Maybe tomorrow.”

Lyle sucks his lower lip into his mouth, scraping it through his teeth, his expression positively feral as he stares down at me like a mountain lion poised and ready to pounce. “What do you want to do, then?”

My body is a livewire, set to burst into flames at any moment. I no longer possess the required restraint to hold back, so I don’t even try. “You.”

Lyle wheezes at my shameless reply, but instead of capitalizing on the offer, his face becomes twisted with indecision. “Come here.”

Dejected, I trail behind him to the worn leather armchair in the corner, wondering what he could possibly be thinking so hard about.

He bends at the waist, dropping into the chair with a groan before hauling me into his lap.

“We don’t have to do this tonight.” With a tender caress, he brushes the hair from my face. “Let’s take things slow...get reacquainted. I’m not expecting anything.”

He curls a finger beneath my chin and strokes his thumb back and forth over my lower lip. “A lot has happened in a very short time, and I don’t want you to think you’re under any obligation to have sex with me just because we suddenly find ourselves married.” His soft smile is meant to soothe, but it feels like salt to my wounded heart. “We have our whole lives ahead of us.”

I realize he’s trying to be noble, and tomorrow might even appreciate the gesture. But right now, there is nothing I want

more than to be ravished by this man. What feels like a lifetime of pent-up sexual energy has me at my breaking point.

“We’ve been denying ourselves for years.” The fear of rejection seeps into my voice despite my best effort to hide it. “I want you,” I say with heat stinging the backs of my eyes, “so much it hurts.”

Lyle’s Adam’s apple bobs. His gaze grows dark, and his brow puckers with regret.

“Don’t cry.”

Desperate lips mold to mine, his tongue seeking and soothing. With measured strokes, he slips in and out, quieting my fears with each loving caress of his tongue against my own. “I want you too,” he huffs, the warmth of his breath only stoking the flames raging inside me, “more than I’ve ever wanted anything.”

“Then have me.” The air I’m holding burns in my lungs as I watch and wait for his reaction.

Lyle stares at me, wordlessly, his eyes blazing with hunger to rival my own. I don’t understand why he’s fighting this. Why he seems hellbent on delaying the inevitable. But I know desire when I see it, and I am not above doing whatever it takes to tip him over the edge. To send him careening down the same bottomless well of want I’ve fallen into. Need is not a strong enough word for what I’m feeling. Even desperation falls short.

“Make me yours, husband,” I all but beg. “In more than just name.”

Denial sits on the tip of his tongue, threatening to annihilate my already fragile feelings. “I have no control when it comes to you, Li’l Bit.” With a defeated grunt, he rises to his feet, taking me with him.

“On the contrary,” I challenge, tightening my arms around his neck when he shifts my body so that he’s holding me bridal style. As he starts up the seemingly endless steps, I press a kiss to his neck and whisper, “I think you’ve exhibited far too much...for way too long.”

With a loud groan, he comes to a stop, kicking open the door to what I must assume is his bedroom. “Soon, we’ll have a house of our own, and I’ll carry you over the threshold like a proper married couple,” he says, apology marring his handsome face. “For now, this room’ll have to do.”

“A tent would do, as long as I’m with you.”

“Fuck,” he groans before ceremoniously sweeping us through the doorway. “You say the hottest things.”

“I mean it.” I bring a hand to rest on his cheek, and my heart takes off at a canter. “I don’t need any of this fame and fortune.”

He eases me to my feet, keeping my body pressed against his. “You really mean that,” he says, gnawing on his lower lip as he gazes at me intently.

“I loved you back when you had a bird chest and knobby knees,” I tease, slipping my hands under his jacket. I scoop them over his broad shoulders and watch as the gray blazer hits the floor with a thud. “With acne and body odor.” I fake a shudder. “Of course, I mean it.”

“Body odor?” he scoffs, beginning the arduous task of plucking bobby pins from my hair. “You must be remembering one of your other crushes.”

“I said what I said,” I sass, loosening his rose-colored tie while glancing around at the impressive room. A huge four poster bed looms in the center beneath a gorgeous crystal chandelier. It’s unmade—the sheets rumpled and in complete disarray. “You live here,” I deduce when my eyes reach the mound of dirty clothes piled in the far corner.

“When we’re in town...”

“And the rest of the band? Do they live here too?” I didn’t see any obvious signs of life when we walked in, but it is late, and one can never be too careful. I need to know how quiet I have to be.

“At first,” he nods, raking his hands through my hair to loosen the curls and feel for any missed hair pins. “We all used to. Then one by one, they went off and got married.” He

chuckles to himself as if realizing he's just committed the same offense. "It's just me and Aiden most of the time these days. The others treat it like more of a vacation home." He takes his time, untangling a straggler, careful not to pull. "We're stationed in Nashville for the next few months, recording. So, it's just you and me."

"Well," I say, trembling beneath his innocent touch. My throat grows thick with mounting desire. "You have a beautiful home." I gaze at the wall of windows directly across from us overlooking the Pacific. "Can't wait to see that view when the sun comes up."

"*We* have a beautiful home," my new husband amends. "And you'll love it," he promises. "It's breathtaking."

"Right," I say with a terse smile, a little uncomfortable with his willingness to declare joint ownership of his vast possessions so soon. I realize he's the one who proposed, but I can't help feeling like I've somehow suckered him into this marriage.

"How long do you think it'll take for this"—I motion between the two of us—"to stop feeling like a dream?"

He shrugs, spinning me around so we're both facing the night sky and my back rests on his chest. His hands land on my shoulders, where he slowly and meticulously begins to knead out the tension. "I think if we give ourselves a little time and grace, we'll fall into it naturally. And before long we won't even remember what life was like before there was a Lyle and Sammi Livingston."

"Sammi Livingston," I muse, smiling back at him over my shoulder. "If only you knew how many times I scrawled that very name across the back covers of my high school notebooks." The memory brings a smile to my face and a warm gooey feeling to my chest.

"Oh, yeah?" he says, bringing his lips to rest at the curve of my neck where it meets my shoulder.

"Mmhmm," I moan, squirming while he peppers kisses along my nape. "Lyle..."

“Mmm?” he murmurs without stopping his ministrations.

Sweet baby Jesus, I pray heaven is even half as wonderful as this. I couldn't dream up a better way to spend eternity.

“H—help me out of this dress,” I stammer, suddenly feverish and desperate to be free of the heavy garment.

He trails the knuckles of one hand along my spine before giving the tie to the corseted back a firm tug. A soft chuckle sounds from deep in his throat. “Why do you still feel like forbidden fruit?” he asks as his deft fingers slip between the ribbon and the skin at the small of my back. The sound of the satin as it's ripped through the corded loops is surprisingly sensual. Thick digits, roughened from years of plucking at his bass, offer the most delicious friction.

There's nothing soft or delicate in his touch. Lyle Livingston is all man. And by some stroke of luck, *all mine*.

“I've dreamed of this for so long,” I pant, finding it increasingly difficult to remain upright with the way my knees are wobbling. I'm teetering on the brink, and he hasn't even finished undressing me yet.

Lyle brings his lips to my ear, nibbling gently on the diamond stud. “Do you think of me when you touch yourself?” he asks, ripping the ribbon free of the last eyelets with a forceful tug and tossing it to the floor.

Gone is the anxious teenaged boy who once treated me with kid gloves; in his place stands a dirty talking, assertive lover. A man who's blatantly aware of his own appeal.

“When I touch myself,” I admit with a nod, burning from the inside out, “and every time anyone else has touched me.”

Lyle spins me back around to face him. Our eyes lock, drawn together like twin flames. “Me too,” he says. “Fuck, Li'l Bit...you're all I see. All I've *ever* seen.” On that note he grips the thin straps at my shoulders in either hand, sending the dress cascading to the floor where it settles in a puddle at my feet.

He brings a hand to his mouth and bites down on his bent knuckle while scouring over my near-nude body. “And my

imagination was sorely lacking. You. Are. Exquisite.”

Clad in no more than a strapless lace bra and matching panties, I’ve never felt more beautiful than I do in this moment. My confidence soars to new heights, fueled by the hunger in his gaze.

Feeling bold, I reach to my back and flick the clasp to my bra, baring my breasts. My nipples harden instantly beneath his wide-eyed stare.

Thank you, pregnancy, for the free boob job.

“Sammi...” he rasps. “Can I...I need to...”

I’ve never seen him so flustered. It’s endearing and hot as hell.

“Touch me, Lyle.” My voice is a hoarse whisper. “And for the record, you need not ask permission. If my standing here naked didn’t make it clear enough, please know...you have an open invitation.”

He lurches forward, cupping each of my tits in his hands. With a slowness that’s damn near excruciating, he rolls my pert nipples beneath the pads of his thumbs.

I lean into his touch, the sensation so intense that I’m fighting the urge to come. I’ve never experienced anything like this. Never felt such extreme pleasure from my nipples alone.

“Lyle,” I mewl, my pussy throbbing, aching for attention.

“You’re perfect.” His expression is almost pained. “So goddamned perfect.” With that his mouth crashes against mine.

Releasing my right breast, he trails his hand up my chest and around to the nape of my neck, where his grip tightens. With purpose he stalks toward the bed, his lips never parting from mine.

Lust drunk, I fumble with the buttons on his dress shirt for a minute before losing any semblance of patience and ripping it open. The sound of the little buttons bouncing across to the floor sends a burst of adrenaline coursing through me.

“Take this off,” I order when the shirt gets stuck where it’s still secured at his wrists.

The urge to weep is immediate when he removes his hands from my body in order to accomplish the task.

“Better?” He lifts an inquisitive brow while eye-fucking me from a foot away.

Licking my lips, I take a moment to return the favor, savoring the impressive view he’s displaying before me.

The planes of his smooth chest are highlighted by the dim light filtering in from the wall of windows. I’ve seen this man shirtless more times than I can count, but not from this close in many years. The version in my head wasn’t quite so defined. He’s grown up—filled out in all the right places. Broad shoulders give way to long, lean muscle. The desire to trace the dips and ridges of his abs with my tongue has me salivating. And the light dusting of hair that disappears beneath the unbuttoned slacks that are barely hanging on at his waist is a sinful treat I’m dying to explore.

“Incredible,” I rasp. It wouldn’t surprise me to find drool dripping from my chin with how hard I’m staring.

“Glad to meet your approval, *Mrs. Livingston.*”

“As if there was ever any d—” A glimpse of black ink on his right pec seizes my attention. “What’s it say?” I take a step toward him to trace my fingers over the tattoo. No matter how hard I squint, I can’t decipher the letters in the darkened room.

“It’s a date,” he rasps. “July, 1, 2017.”

“The day you got signed with the band,” I say, remembering it all too well. One doesn’t forget heartbreak of that magnitude—no matter how hard she might try. The same fateful date he proudly displays inked over his heart is forever scarred upon mine.

He clears his throat, bringing his hand to rest over my own where it’s still pressed to his chest. “It represents the date we shared our first kiss.” A wobbly smile tugs at his lips. “And the day I promised to come back for you.”

His admission momentarily steals my breath. Here I was thinking he'd moved on from whatever we shared back then, reconciling myself to a mediocre life with someone else—someone who couldn't hold a candle to the forest fire Lyle's always lit within me—when all this time he's had a permanent reminder tattooed on his chest. “And beneath it?” I ask, still trying to make out the script.

He takes my left hand into his, and whispers, “To be continued...” while fingering the diamond he gave me just this morning to fulfill that prophecy.

Chapter

FIVE



Every emotion conceivable flickers like lightning in her bottomless blue eyes as she delicately fingers the ink on my chest.

Her touch is a warm shot of brandy, heating my blood and muddling my thoughts.

I hate myself for waiting so long—for letting her reach a point where she ever doubted my devotion to her.

“You’re it for me, Li’l Bit.” My whispered words earn me the faintest hint of a smile. I brush a thumb over the dimple on her right cheek, as my throat heaves with the force of a hard swallow. “I gave you every piece of my heart under that dock all those years ago.”

“Sometimes,” she whispers, so low it’s almost inaudible, “I wondered if I imagined the whole thing.”

“It was real,” I say, as sure of my feelings for her as ever. “Still is.”

“Then make love to me.” Emotion pools in her too-trusting gaze. Her vulnerability hangs in the balance like a twig ready

to snap at the slightest breeze. “I need more than words, Lyle. Something tangible.” Desperation clogs her throat. “I need to feel it...please.”

My heart hammers as indecision renders me mute. I’m torn between the primal urge to devour this siren inch by tantalizing inch and wanting to savor every first with the woman who will, from this day forward, be my only.

Today has been a whirlwind, to say the least. For myself, but more so for her.

There’s nothing I want more than to accept all that she’s offering, but my respect for her runs far too deep to act on impulse alone.

The fact is that I’ve done nothing to warrant access to her body—to this treasured temple that’s worthy of my utmost care and respect... I placed her on a pedestal when we were barely more than children. She’s always been this end game it felt like I might never reach. But I was prepared to put in the work. I might’ve set her free and remained in the shadows for a while, but I always had every intention of returning, And pulling out all the stops when I did.

This—this was too easy.

For years I’ve barely been present in her life. And just because I stepped in and married her in a moment of sheer desperation, when she’d probably have said yes to the fucking milkman, doesn’t give me the right to take what I haven’t earned.

Liquid fire surges right to my dick as my eyes snake over her impeccable form. Despite my noblest intentions, this woman is hellbent on testing every ounce of my restraint, which is already flimsy, at best. “Sammi, I—we...”

“Shhh,” she says, cutting me off with a brief finger press to my lips. She takes a step back before making a show of slipping her fingers beneath the thin strips of elastic holding up the lace barely concealing her pussy. Every bit the seductress, she slinks out of them, one slender, heel-clad foot at a time.

My resolve is a fraying thread. That last move of hers just might be the one to snap it. “Jesus, Sam.” She’s my every wet dream brought to life.

“Please.” The yearning reflected in that lone word is impossible to deny.

I stalk toward her, eating up the distance between us. “I’ve done nothing to deserve you,” I say, trailing a hand from her temple to her chin.

There’s a nagging ache in my chest. I’m plagued with guilt over the fact that *this* is how our union’s come about.

My Li’l Bit didn’t get the romantic proposal she deserved. We have literally no dating history—just stolen moments, hidden away, like some dirty secret.

Our goddamned wedding was intended for her and another man. And changing the location doesn’t eradicate the fact that her wedding night—*tonight*—was also meant for *him*.

How can I, in good conscience, indulge myself in her body—this woman who deserves the world—knowing I put forth no effort whatsoever? Just stepped in and filled the fucking shoes of some other schmuck.

“No,” she rasps, smoothing her hands over my chest. “Don’t do thi—”

Sammi always was too good at reading me.

Refusing to humiliate her further by making her beg, I silence her with a kiss. One that starts out slow and tender but quickly catches fire. One second, we’re exploring new territory with delicate caresses, and the next, our basest instincts vanquish any semblance of control we might’ve still possessed. She’s ripping at my pants, and my hands are gripped to her ass, our labored breaths mimicking the erratic thrashing of our hearts.

It’s uninhibited.

Complete chaos.

And quite possibly the most freeing experience of our lives.

“Yes,” she moans, her long nails scoring my back as I lift her to sit on the edge of the bed.

Wheezing for air, I step between her parted legs, staring down at my wife in silent reverie, committing every dip and curve to memory.

The age-old question begs, what do you do when you finally have everything you’ve ever wanted? But the answer eludes me. Because with this little breather comes a hint of clarity, and with it my doubts come creeping back in.

“How are your pants still up?” Sammi groans, clearly not suffering from the same dilemma as she tosses her head back in exasperation. “Show me the goods, Livingston.”

“Don’t you have the internet?” I ask, hinting at a photo a one-night stand somehow managed to leak to the paps last year. “Thought the whole world had seen it by now.”

“That was...*real*?” She gapes at me, slack-jawed. Her greedy eyes drop to my crotch briefly before she visibly catches herself and jerks them back to mine.

She looks like a kid who’s just been handed the keys to Willy Wonka’s chocolate factory, and I am barely holding back a guffaw. I have to admit it was quite a flattering angle. I wasn’t even mad about it.

Anika, however, was ready to bury me alive.

“Wouldn’t you like to know?” I taunt.

“Uh...” she drawls. “Yeah.” Sammi whips a hand to the space between us, giving her fingers a few solid snaps. “Let’s see it. I showed you mine, now show me yours.”

“Where’s your patience, Li’l Bit?”

“Died out about midway through your vows,” she clips. “Stop thinking so much.” Palms pressed to the mattress; she leans back, crossing her ankles. She’s an absolute vision, reclined on my bed, her long curls framing her breasts. “We don’t have to fight it anymore.”

“Fuck, you’re beautiful,” I grunt. “And too damn sexy for my own good.” I scrub a hand over my face, huffing out a

heady breath. “You’ll be the death of me, Jailbait.”

“I just might if you don’t do something about this ache between my legs.”

I lock eyes with hers while leisurely trailing a finger between her breasts and down her stomach, before dragging it along her slit to test her wetness.

Her perky tits rise and fall with her sharp intake of breath.

“Ah, you’re soaked for me.” My groin pulls tight, pressure mounting, as I continue fighting against the tide.

She bites down on her lower lip and nods.

Desperate for a taste, I bring the finger coated in her arousal to my mouth and suck the sweet nectar off.

Eyes wide, her cheeks flush the most delectable shade of red. “That was...”

“Delicious,” I provide when her head lolls back, then grin. She’s lost to any and all rational thought now.

I return my hand to her cunt, this time inserting two fingers and swirling the pad of my thumb over her clit.

“Fuck,” she moans, her walls tightening as I pump the digits in and out with deliberate slowness. “I—I was gonnna say...”

“You were gonna say?” I inquire, helping her with her train of thought while sinking to my knees, her loyal subject, ready to worship at her throne.

“Hot.”

“Sorry...” I grip her inner thighs, spreading her lips with my thumbs before burying my face between her legs. “What was that?”

I swipe my tongue along her opening, damn near busting a nut at the taste of her. “Couldn’t hear you with my mouth full,” I garble, flitting the tip lightly back and forth over her clit.

Her scent is an instant shot of dopamine, hardening my cock and heating my blood.

Her hips jerk up from the bed and she pushes into me. “H—h—hot!” she squeals. “Sssso fucking hot.”

“That’s it, sweet girl, ride my face.” I can hardly breathe but can’t think of a better way to go than drowning in her essence, her sweet scent engulfing me, and the sounds of her falling apart resounding in my ears.

“Lyle... I—ohhhh!”

I glance up briefly to draw a breath to find her hands gripping her breasts so hard they’re gaping between her fingers.

“Fuck yeah, Jailbait,” I growl, urging her on. “Tweak those pretty pink nipples.” My voice is pure grit, and my cock swells to full mast, threatening to pop the stitches on these dress pants as I drink my fill. “Just like that,” I encourage when she pinches and tugs, grinding her ass into the mattress as she draws closer to release. “Give me your hand.”

Without hesitation she reaches toward me, and I take her first two fingers and run them along her slit, soaking them in her desire. “Now...” I say, “touch ’em again.” My throat thickens. “Roll ’em around in that liquid gold.”

Her indecision hangs in the air, her hand playing a game of limbo...torn between humility and ecstasy. She’ll soon learn her pleasure will never take a backseat in our bedroom.

“Don’t get shy now, wife,” I urge when embarrassment stalls her vigor. “Never hold back with me,” I growl. “Do whatever feels good. The greatest compliment I could ever receive is your complete surrender.”

My words reignite her fervor and the urge to take my own advice and shuck these pants off—to slide my cock into her warmth and feel her contracting around my dick the way she’s squeezing my fingers—is nearly impossible to ignore.

Sweat beads on my brow as I pick up the pace, thrusting harder and faster to match the tempo she’s set.

A feral growl rips from my throat when her hands fist into my hair. I pull her swollen clit into my mouth, sucking it soft and slow, building in both speed and pressure with every thrust of her hips.

Using my hair for leverage, her body folds in half as the force of her mounting climax has her writhing out of control.

Gripping her hips, I tug until her ass is hanging off the edge of the bed, alternating between lapping at her pussy and nibbling on her swollen bundle of nerves.

“Oh—ohhh! Oh Lyle, yes!” Her quivering legs press in on my head, squeezing it in a vise grip.

A string of nonsensical gibberish signals her imminent release, spurring me on.

“Give it to me,” I growl before biting down on her clit.

Her grip on my hair tightens just as a scream pierces the night. Seizing, she rides out every last tremor, unabashedly grinding her sweet cunt into my face.

In a state of pure ecstasy, I drink every last drop of her release, gobbling her up like the fucking delicacy she is.

Spent, and gasping for breath, I fall back on my haunches, heart pounding like I’ve just run a marathon. I’m wet with sweat and painfully aroused.

Her grip relaxes, her fingers lazily combing my scalp as she works through the last waves of her climax.

Only when the shudders come to a complete halt do I rise to my feet.

Gripping her head in both hands, I give it a tilt, until her gaze is even with mine.

“Still can’t believe you’re finally mine,” I say, my heart swelling as I take in every inch of her sated body: The red splotches on her cheeks and chest, her hair wild and mussed. Her nipples still fully erect and beckoning me like a siren’s song. “Fuck, you’re beautiful.”

Her eyes shimmer as she stares up at me with indisputable love.

How I've managed so long without her, I'll never understand. Because now that I've had just the smallest taste, there's no chance in hell I'd be able to do it again.

"I feel like I should thank you," she says through a blissed-out smile.

"Not necessary." I flatten my palms to the mattress and lean in slowly. "But I'll take a kiss."

To my surprise, she jerks back, her lip curled in disgust. "But you ju—"

"Just devoured your pussy?" I rasp, crowding her space until she's flat on her back and I'm hovering over her.

Sammi's fiery blue eyes widen. "I mean...yeah."

"You weren't complaining." I quirk a brow.

She scoffs. "Definitely not."

I nod, clearing my throat. "And now it's a problem because?"

The apples of her cheeks flush crimson. "I can still smell myself on your lips."

I pucker my mouth and scent the air, and my pulse instantly takes flight. "Does it turn you on, Jailbait?" I ask, swallowing hard to tamp down my own rampant desire. "Cuz I've never been so turned on in my life."

She nods, slowly, and I move in further until we're a breath apart.

"Are you truly opposed to tasting yourself on your husband's lips?" I bring my knuckles to the side of her neck, to stroke her jaw, unable to miss the way her pulse is thrumming out of control. "Or are you embarrassed"—my teeth clamp down briefly on my lower lip—"because you want it?"

She squirms beneath me while my hand makes the brief journey from her chin to rest on her heaving breasts. "Tell me

if I'm mistaken, but fuck, baby..." I bite back the urge to moan. "This feels like desire."

"I—" Her eyes flutter to half-mast, her lips twitching with their eagerness to be kissed.

"You what?" I press. "There's no wrong answer, sweet girl... but I do need an answer."

"Lyle," she whines, afraid to give voice to what we both know she's after.

"There's no room for shame," I rasp. "Not here...not between us." I grip the sides of her neck, dragging the pads of my thumbs down the column of her throat. "Say it..."

"I want you to kiss me," she stammers, reaching up with both hands to cup my face. "I want..." She blinks hard, shaking her head to herself as if she can't believe what she's about to say. "I want to taste myself on your lips."

My dick does a victory punch against my zipper at her salacious request. With a savage groan, I descend on her, our lips melding in a frenzied inferno. I bury a fist in her silky locks, guiding her movements as I plunge my tongue in and out. The scent of her sweet pussy is like kerosene, adding fuel to the fiery passion blazing between us. "See how fucking good you taste," I groan into her kiss, rolling over, until she's straddling my waist.

"Mmm," she murmurs, meeting my tongue thrust for thrust while grinding down on my erection.

Our current position is doing nothing to help my diminishing restraint.

"Sammi," I rasp, pressing a soft kiss to her lips before dredging up the strength to pull away. It goes against my every urge when I shift her nude body to lay beside me.

"What's wrong?" The flash of hurt that sparks in her eyes is a line drive straight to my gut. I feel like the worst kind of asshole as she studies me, her brow pinched with confusion over my drastic one-eighty. "It's your turn."

I've got nothing. What the hell am I going to say to that? *No thanks?* Not likely. I need a way out that won't break her heart, and I'm drawing a complete blank.

Thankfully she doesn't waste any time waiting on my reply before swirling a finger around my nipple. "We've tasted me..." She huffs out a timid laugh. "Whaddaya say we taste you now?"

Yup. That'll do it.

I take my escape, bolting out of that bed like my ass is on fire. "It's a no from me, dawg," I say, imitating the infamous Randy Jackson, which is a nod to our weekly *American Idol* nights growing up.

"Ask yourself, dear husband..." She taps a wicked finger against her lips, slow and calculated. "Are you really opposed to tasting yourself on your wife's lips, or just—"

"Yes!" I say, cutting her off as she tries slinging my earlier words back at me. "I am absolutely one hundred percent, without a shadow of a doubt, opposed to sampling my own jizz from your lips or otherwise."

She snorts. "Good. Cuz that actually wouldn't be sexy at all."

Just the thought has me gagging. "There's not much I'll say no to, but that's a hard line, Li'l Bit."

"I was just fuckin' with ya," she says with a shit grin. "You got real tense all of a sudden...thought I might lighten the mood." She pats the mattress beside her. "Come back so I can sample your special sauce." The waggle of her brows is exaggerated for effect.

Her sense of humor is so perfectly matched to mine, it's uncanny. This situation could have gone downhill fast. With most women that likely would be the case. But given the choice between falling apart and flipping the script, my girl will choose laughter ninety times out of a hundred.

"Hold that thought, beautiful," I say, blowing a kiss to where she's still splayed across the bed as I begin working my way across the room with backward steps.

“Lyle?” She sits straight up, her just-fucked hair a veritable rat’s nest framing her face.

“Need the bathroom,” I lie, offering her a placating smile. “Make yourself comfortable, Li’l Bit. I won’t be long.”

“I’ll be waiting,” she says, grabbing the rumpled sheet from the foot of the bed and tucking it under her chin before flopping to her back.

With her mollified, I slip into the bathroom and slump against the door, pulling in a few deep breaths in a feeble attempt to calm my racing heart. I tap the base of my palm to my head, trying to clear the haze that’s clouding my thoughts.

This sudden case of integrity I seem to have developed is extremely inconvenient.

My dick, for one, is not a fan.

I dabble with the idea of getting myself off. With the visual of Sammi coming apart on my tongue so fresh in my mind and her distinct flavor lingering on my taste buds—it wouldn’t take much. A few solid strokes.

But while that might make it easier for me not to lose control and take her in the heat of the moment, I can’t go out there with a limp dick, unable to perform. Sammi would see it as an insult. Who wouldn’t?

Despite how desperately I want her, my conscience keeps rearing its moral head. Reminding me that Sammi isn’t just some girl. She’s the one. A rare and precious jewel. She’s, my diamond. And diamonds are forever.

So, here I am, at an impasse...hiding from my bride in the fucking bathroom.

Get it together, man.

It’s just a freaking blowjob... I could still make the first time we go all the way extra special. Hell, anything would be more meaningful than me filling in for that douche she almost married. I can’t do it.

That’s fair. And a compromise I think I can live with.

I give myself a quick once-over in the mirror, running a hand through my hair just to have the strands land right back where they started.

Time to quit stalling.

Feeling a bit more confident after the internal pep talk, I crack the door and peer my head around to take stock of the situation.

The moon shines like a spotlight, blanketing my bride in an ethereal glow. She's curled toward the windows in the fetal position.

With easy steps, I cross the room. It isn't until I hear the soft purring coming from the lump beneath my sheets that I'm sure she's fallen asleep. I've been granted a reprieve.

I could turn tail and haul it right back to that bathroom to deal with this persistent bulge—especially now that I know she'd be none the wiser. But it wouldn't be worth missing another second spent beside her.

I lower my zipper, finally comfortable with losing the extra barrier. Though I usually prefer to sleep in the buff in the privacy of my home, I'm not that confident in my own restraint, so the boxer briefs stay.

Taking extra care not to wake her, I climb in from the foot of the bed and slip beneath the sheet, molding my chest to her back.

I bring my nose to her temple, inhaling the nostalgic scent of her favorite lavender shampoo. It's a subtle reminder that despite all that might've changed over the years about the woman I love, much remains the same. So, I'll draw comfort in the familiar while opening myself up to learning what makes her tick these days. Her likes and dislikes. Her hopes and dreams.

She stirs when my warm exhale meets her skin.

"Lyle," she murmurs, reaching a hand over her shoulder to my cheek.

I press my lips to her temple and snuggle in closer. “Sweet dreams, Jailbait.”

“You’re very good at giving orgasms,” she muses, scratching the scruff on my chin before threading her fingers through mine and bringing our hands to rest on her stomach.

“Glad you enjoyed it.”

“Sorry I fell asleep.” Her grip tightens, and she buries a yawn into the pillow.

“Don’t be.” I slip my hand out of her hold and flatten it over her tiny baby bump. “It was a long day, and you’re growing a human.”

“Rain check?”

“I’ll accept that, but there’s no rush. We have the rest of our lives to indulge ourselves. Tonight, I’m more than happy to just cuddle my wife.”

Chapter SIX



Sammi

The sun is barely starting to peek over the horizon when my full bladder screams out for relief.

You'll just have to wait, I think to myself, mentally addressing the irksome organ. Determined to see this through, I adjust my position, where Lyle's got the grip of a boa constrictor around my abdomen, hoping to ease the discomfort even just the teensiest bit.

Nothing short of a five-alarm fire's gonna make me miss this sunrise.

Just as I'm settling back in for the show, a loud bang coming from what sounds like directly below us proves me a liar.

"Lyle!" I say, holding the blanket to my chest to conceal my still-nude body from whoever's clomping up the stairs. My pulse begins to race, and fear has me feeling like I might actually pass out. "Wake up!"

I give his shoulders a firm shake, seriously contemplating shoving him to the floor if he doesn't come out of this sleep

coma of his with a quickness. I'd likely smile over the realization that he still sleeps like the freaking dead if I wasn't on the verge of a panic attack.

"I think—" I grip the blanket tighter. "I think someone broke in," I say when he peeps a lazy eye at me.

"Huh?" Half-conscious at best, he smooths one hand over my back and brings the other to his face to scrub the sleep from his eyes. "Do what now?"

"I heard a loud noi—"

The door flies open and bounces off the wall. "Oh good," a tiny hellcat in heels and a pantsuit says as she bursts into the room. "You're up."

"Who's that?" I murmur under my breath, *and apparently to no one*, because that's who answers.

"Actually," Lyle says, addressing her with a relaxed drawl. He's as cool as a cucumber, leading me to the assumption that this type of intrusion is a regular occurrence around here. "I was right in the middle of a really great dream, starring this little hottie." He plants a kiss on my shoulder before making a shooing motion toward the high-strung brunette who's now pacing no more than a foot from his side of the bed. "Can we do...whatever this is later? I'd like to get back to it."

"No," she clips. "We can't."

"Had a feeling you'd say that." With a loud groan, he drags himself up to rest against the headboard. He smooths a hand up and down my calf in an attempt to pacify me. "What brings you all the way back to California in such a chipper mood this morning, boss?"

Boss?

"Oh, this visit will be anything but pleasurable, I assure you."

"Who is this woman?" I ask, already over her shitty attitude. I refuse to sit around like some prop caught in the middle of whatever the hell's going on.

“This is our manager, Anik—” my husband starts before the bitchy brunette cuts him off.

“Funny,” she interjects in a tone that is anything but, “I was about to ask the same question with regard to you.”

Her apparent air of superiority isn’t sitting well with me. Manager or not, she’s out of line. “His wife,” I deadpan, quirking a lone brow in a silent challenge.

“So, it’s true?” Her eyes damn near bug out of her head, and that little vein between her brows doubles in size. The tips of her pointy ears turn fire engine red as she levels my husband with a murderous glare. “You said you were *attending* a wedding, Livingston!”

“Well,” he offers with a smirk, as he pulls me close and drapes an arm around my shoulders, “technically...”

“Oh, don’t technically me.” A string of muffled curses spills from her pursed lips.

“Wait,” Lyle says, holding out a finger as if he’s just processed what she said. His entire body stiffens over all that it implies. “You already knew?”

Her eyes narrow to slits. “The whole goddamn world knows, dumbass. There are no such thing as secrets when you’re a member of one of the most famous bands on the planet!” Some of her anger dissolves as a look of pure defeat shrouds her features with disappointment. “You *know* that.”

An understanding passes between them, and his cocky demeanor instantly morphs into one of sincere apology. His brow lines with what looks like regret and it’s one hell of a pill for me to swallow.

My arrogance evaporates as shame takes center stage. Because I never, not for one second, considered what a shotgun wedding might do to his reputation. How it might affect his career. Or the band.

“Is it—is it bad?” Repentance blisters as it scales the walls of my throat.

“You tell me,” Anika says, retrieving an iPad from her leather messenger bag and dropping it on the mattress in front of us, already open to the shameless gossip site, TMD.

BREAKING NEWS!

Ladies, hold on to your tits because we’re coming to you today with shocking news you won’t want to miss.

Lyle Livingston—bassist of The Rhett Taylor Band—has tied the knot! Yes, the man we all know to entertain his female company strictly on one-night standards has taken the plunge, reportedly to his best friend’s little sister!

Our exclusive source tells us he was to be a guest at Sammi Deluca’s wedding and somehow ended up at the altar himself.

How long can this perpetual playboy remain monogamous? Only time will tell. Stay tuned right here to TMD for more details as we set to unravel the makings of this shotgun wedding.

“Oh God,” I groan, as a hollow feeling takes root in the pit of my stomach. “I’m gonna be sick.”

“This is nothing,” Lyle insists, pinning his manager with a severe look while giving my thigh a reassuring squeeze. “This kinda stuff happens all the time. We just need to issue a statement to the public introducing you as my wife, with enough background information to feed their appetites, and they’ll lose interest quick. No big deal, right Annie?”

Her drawn-out sigh is a direct contradiction to her words. Not to mention the eyeroll she makes no attempt to hide. “Sure. Easy peasy.”

“See,” he says, planting a kiss to the top of my head. “Relax.”

“Okay,” I begrudgingly agree. “But do we have to do this naked?” I must admit I feel vulnerable as fuck sitting here in my birthday suit while engaged in a silent pissing match with CEO Barbie.

“Please,” Anika says, motioning with a wave toward the bathroom.

I tug the sheet, wrapping it around my body for modesty’s sake, when Anika interrupts with a shout. “Don’t—”

I’m already on my feet before I realize she means for me to keep Lyle’s meat and potatoes covered. But she needn’t worry...I’m sure not about to show them off to her when I haven’t even gotten a look myself.

“Really, Annie? Don’t look so horrified. It’s nothing you haven’t already seen.” His tone is incredulous.

Well, this just took a turn. I narrow my eyes and start to whirl around when her next words hit me.

“Not by choice,” she says tartly, visibly relaxing when she’s greeted with a pair of navy and white striped boxer briefs.

But all I see is the way they cling to his massive morning wood like a second skin and how immune she seems to it.

We’ve been married less than a day and already insecurity is rearing its ugly head. I’m realizing just how much his life has changed during the years we were apart. This woman is clearly a huge part of it, and I don’t know her at all, much less trust her. It’s all making my head spin. I need a damn minute to recalibrate. “I’ll be right back.”

“Take your time,” she coos, clearly itching to have a private conversation with my husband.

Without another word, I dart off to the bathroom, where my overnight bag still sits on the granite counter, untouched.

I flatten an ear to the cool, penny tile wall, trying to make out the hushed conversation on the other side. But it’s no use. Rather than waste more time trying, I give up on the idea and rush through the world’s quickest shower.

With the smell of his manly soap and shampoo clinging to my hair and body, I don a fresh pair of panties, bra, and cut-off shorts with a flowy white top, chosen for *obvious* reasons.

I brush my teeth—*twice*—and run a comb through my hair, forgoing makeup altogether, eager to get out there so I don't miss too much.

“How's it going, guys?” I ask, breezing back into the room, refreshed and in a slightly better headspace.

“Great.” Lyle's face lights up at the sight of me, and it's a huge boost to my bruised ego. Eager for my return, he pats the mattress beside him where he's still half-naked, having made no attempt to cover up.

With the sheet clutched to my chest, I scamper over to join him, not so casually draping it over his lap as I plop down next to him.

A knowing look crosses Anika's snooty face—one that makes it clear she thinks I've gotten in way over my head with this marriage. She looks all too pleased to have an unobstructed view from which to watch me drown. I can't wait to see her choke on that high and mighty attitude when we prove her wrong.

The man in the hot seat clears his throat, pulling the sheet all the way up to his neck and tucking it beneath his chin, earning himself a heavy dose of side eye and a grin that won't be subdued.

I never could stay upset with him, not when he's this freaking adorable.

“Much better,” I commend, choosing not to harp on his manager's obvious lack of faith in our union. I can't let her get inside my head. Lord knows I've got more than enough shit to worry about without adding an intrusive Karen to the mix. “What'd I miss?”

“Already got our response typed up. Just needs my bride's approval,” he says, taking the iPad from Anika and placing it on my lap.

Hello, friends, fans, and family,

Lyle Livingston here, to tell you that this time the rumors are true!

Your favorite member of The Rhett Taylor Band—that'd be me, for those who might be confused—is off the market. But I guess I should start by telling you that I was never on it to begin with.

You see, yesterday I had the honor of marrying the woman who captured my teenaged heart. Sammi Deluca was the girl next door, my best friend's little sister, and completely off limits.

When I left home years ago to join the band, it was always with the intention of returning for her someday, when our three-year age difference was no longer an issue. After she'd had time to live and love and was certain that a life with me was what she wanted.

As luck would have it, I waited too long, and she moved on with someone else, under the assumption that I'd given up on us.

Fast forward to yesterday—her wedding day.

I found myself pacing outside her bridal suite, kicking my own ass for letting her slip through my fingertips. I was debating whether to go in there and shoot my shot when the groom showed up, and I overheard the man she was set to marry call off the wedding.

It was as if the stars had aligned, and I knew I'd been gifted a second chance.

Call me a lovesick fool, but there was no question in my mind what had to happen next. I was gonna have to locate my balls.

I knocked on that door, dried my girl's tears, got down on one knee, and asked her to be my wife. By some miracle, she said yes.

I understand your shock. But believe me when I say that this union was a long time coming. Sammi and I are very

much in love. And while the path we've taken to arrive at our happily ever after was filled with bumps and bruises—and riddled with mistakes, largely on my part—I believe it's made us stronger, both as individuals and as a couple.

Everyone wants a fairy tale, but that's seldom real life. Real love is messy and complicated. Our story is no different.

I truly believe we've finally gotten it right, and I can't tell you how much I look forward to spending the rest of my life driving this woman positively insane, both in and out of the bedroom.

So, without further ado, I hope you'll help me welcome her to the crazy world of country music with a hoot, a holler, and a red solo cup.

Bottoms up, folks!

“Folks? Who are you? Bugs Bunny?” I snort. “That doesn't sound like you at all.”

“Well, it originally said, bottoms up, bitches, but Anika freaking censored me.”

She scoffs, taking the iPad back from my hands. “Sorry, not everyone considers the word *bitch* a term of endearment.”

He shrugs his shoulders.

“I love it,” I say, smiling up at my husband with beating hearts in my eyes. “You made it sound so romantic.”

“Yeah,” Anika jeers. “Nothing screams romance like stealing another man's bride.”

And in one freaking breath she took his warm rendition of our wedding day and shit all over it.

“Are you always so rude?” I snap, my blood simmering.

“It isn't my job to be nice, sweetheart,” she answers, repacking her bag. “I get paid to keep shit real honest around here. Sorry if your delicate feelings can't handle it.”

“Enough, Annie.” Lyle rises to his feet, stalking after her toward the door. “As my wife, Sammi now pays a portion of the paycheck you just saw fit to bring up. You’d do well to remember that.”

Her tongue darts out to moisten her lips, which she promptly presses together in a firm line. “Lyle, you and I both know I’m not going anywhere, so cut the shit, huh?” She reaches up to push a tuft of hair back from his eyes, then pats his chest twice. “I’ll be downstairs in my room. Our flight leaves at nine a.m. tomorrow. I’ll see you then if I don’t see you before.”

Tomorrow morning?

I miss the end of their heated conversation, too hung up on the realization that he’s leaving so soon. Of course he is. He only came in to attend my wedding as a guest. Why on earth would he have planned to stay longer than the weekend?

Just when I think my life is coming together, I realize it’s more of a clusterfuck than ever before.

Chapter

SEVEN



“You’re leaving in the morning?”

Her miserable tone hits me right in the chest. I was already up half the night watching her sleep, dreading my looming departure. This time it’s much worse than the last because this time, there’s nothing but my career keeping us apart.

In many ways it was easier to leave when we were younger, than to be tempted by her presence day in and day out. To constantly have the one thing I wanted more than anything else dangled in front of my face.

But she’s finally mine. And even if it’s only for a couple of days at a time, knowing I’m getting on that plane without her feels like the equivalent of ripping off a limb.

“Unfortunately,” I say, shutting and locking the door Anika just exited so she can’t storm back in here and wreak any more havoc on my life. “We’re in the middle of recording the new album in Nashville.”

She nods. “It’s fine.” Her head shakes away her look of disappointment, which she attempts to hide with a halfhearted

smile. “You have to work.”

“And you need to be with your dad.”

“Right.” She blows out a long breath. “Speaking of...we should probably be heading back soon.”

“Hey,” I say, moving to crouch before her. “It won’t always be like this.”

She nods and then bursts out with the most anguished laugh I’ve ever heard. “Yeah. Soon, he’ll be dead.”

“Li’l Bit...” I shake my head, forcing back tears. “I know it doesn’t seem like it now, but—” Fuck. I don’t even know how to finish that statement. I’ve never lost a parent. To tell her it’ll all be okay or that it’ll get easier with time would just be me spewing a bunch of bullshit.

“It’s okay,” she offers. “Sometimes there’s just nothing to say.”

“What can I do?” I ask, my heart shredded from the pain darkening her eyes.

“You’ve already done it,” she smiles, reaching out to comb her fingers through my hair. “You’ve given me the most precious gift. You gave me a memory with my daddy I’ll cherish for as long as I live.”

“You’re giving me far too much credit.” I bring her fingers to my lips. “Marrying you was no sacrifice.” I press a kiss over each of her knuckles in tandem. “Don’t make me out to be some martyr, love.”

I pinch her chin in my thumb and forefinger, holding her gaze to mine. “Marrying you is and will forever be the highlight of my life. While I’m happy it worked out that you got your moment with your father, I don’t want you to ever feel indebted to me or think of this marriage as anything less than everything I’ve ever wanted.” I scrape my lower lip through my teeth, giving my bride a thorough once-over. “You are my most prized possession and certainly not fucking charity.”

Her lips warble. “Okay,” she says, nodding through a torrent of tears.

“Come here, sweet girl,” I say, pulling her from the bed and into my chest so I can hold her close. “You’re everything to me.” I smooth a hand up and down her spine.

“It feels wrong,” she says, lifting the neck of her shirt to dry her eyes.

“What does?”

“To feel so happy.”

“You can feel more than one emotion at the same time. They aren’t mutually exclusive. Being happy we’re together doesn’t mean you’re any less upset over what’s happening with your dad.”

Her head bobs lightly in a silent nod. Her fingers pressed to her lips like she’s deep in thought.

“I’m leaving in the morning, but it won’t be like it was before. You’re mine now.”

“I really like the sound of that.” Her warm breath on my shoulder sends a chill down my spine.

“Good.” I press a kiss to the tip of her salty nose. “I’ll be back before the sun rises on Friday.”

“You already booked a flight back?” she asks, incredulous.

She has no freaking clue how crazy I am for her, but she will. I’ll make it my mission to show her every day. “Last night,” I admit, “after you started snoring the walls in.”

She gives me the death stare. “A simple yes would have sufficed.”

“Now what fun is that?” I ask, smoothing her hair back and resting my chin on the top of her head “Hey,” I rasp.

“Yeah?” Her arms tighten around my back.

“You have some homework this week.”

She jerks back to glower at me. “You’re not gonna be one of *those* husbands, are you?” she asks widening her eyes on

the word “those.”

“What kind of husband would you be referring to?” I ask, slipping out of her hold and over to my dresser for a change of clothes.

“Bossy. Dominant.” She nibbles the side of her lip. “On second thought...”

I snort. “You wanna be ordered around, Jailbait?”

She shrugs. “Maybe just in bed.”

“Fuck,” I groan, snatching a pair of boxers from the top drawer.

“What?”

“You got me excited,” I say, turning so she can see the effect of her words.

Sammi jolts. “Lyle,” she rasps, her eyes unmoving as she openly gawks at my crotch. “You’re fucking huge.”

“Told ya,” I taunt, hinting at the time I said she wouldn’t be able to handle what I was packing when she shamelessly begged me to take her cherry beneath that boat dock.

“What’s stopping you now?” she asks, not missing a beat as she slinks across the room and backs me against the wall. “Make love to me, husband.”

Unable to maintain my composure while looking her in the eye, my gaze drops to the creamy expanse of her neck, which is no better. My throat goes instantly dry and scratchy. “Friday,” I say, barely able to hold myself back from tossing her on that bed.

“Right now,” she counters, reaching between us to palm my rigid length. “Please?”

“Ahhh, Li'l Bit,” I moan, nearly coming undone at the feel of her warm fingers wrapped around me. “Give me this, please.”

“I’m trying,” she teases with a giggle.

“Fuck, you’re good at that.” My breath comes out in shallow pants as I slowly and involuntarily start thrusting into her hand. My blood turns to molten lava, and I’m hot everywhere.

“Let me take care of you before you go.”

“Friday,” I grunt, “after we make this marriage official.”

“Since when do you care about being married before sex?”

I take her hands in mine and lift them into the air, switching our positions and pinning her to the wall. My heart is beating so hard it feels like it’ll break right through my ribcage. “Since the woman in question was you.”

“I’m no virgin, Mr. Livingston.” She fans her long lashes up at me.

“And I’m no saint. All the more reason to do things right with the woman I love.” I lower my face to hers and trail the tip of my tongue over her trembling lips. “Yesterday was his,” I grumble, biting back emotion. “Friday... Friday is ours, Li’l Bit.”

Understanding dawns. “That’s why you were so hesitant last night.”

“I want you.” I lower my hands to cup the sides of her face. “But I don’t want to feel like a stand-in.”

“But you’re not.”

“Get the license this week. That’s the homework I was speaking of. Book the courthouse Friday at whatever time you see fit.” I rest my forehead against hers. “Give me a day that’s ours alone,” I say, burying my fingers in her long locks. “One that was never intended for anyone else.”

“Okay,” she agrees, withdrawing her hand and trailing it up my abs to rest over the ink on my right pec. “We can wait.”

“I’ll make it worth your while,” I say, molding my lips to hers.

“You better.” Her threat is distorted by tangled tongues and gasping breaths.

Desire runs rampant between us. Our kiss is a lewd promise...a passionate prelude of what's to come.

Before I realize what's happening, her lips are blazing a path down my chest. The silky touch of her fingers exploring my torso as she flits her tongue over my nipples steals my resolve. Good intentions be damned, I'm a willing passenger on whatever ride she sees fit to take me on.

"Just a taste," she murmurs nipping her lips along the dusting of hair beneath my navel. "I'll leave your virtue intact," she teases, gripping my underwear and dragging them to my knees.

My dick pops free, stretching to full mast.

Sammi's sharp intake of breath and hard swallow seem to echo in my head which is blessedly empty. "Merry Christmas to me," she sings.

My answering laugh is cut short at the feel of her warm wet tongue swirling around the head of my dick.

"Fuck," I groan when she cups my balls with one hand and the base of my erection with the other.

"Is this okay?" she asks, innocently. As if I'd have it within my power to say no.

"More than," I rasp, gripping two fists full of her silky mane and falling into the slow and steady rhythm she's set. "So hot, Li'l Bit," I grunt, unable to take my eyes off her mouth gliding up and down my hard length. Her baby blues are open wide, fixed on mine.

She picks up the pace, taking me deeper, all the way to the back of her throat.

Weak in the knees, I brace a hand against the wall behind her, driving into the warmth of her mouth. With every thrust she moans, her lips vibrating along my shaft. Sammi's eyes water as her throat contracts around the head.

My dick starts to twitch, my hips jerking of their own accord. I'm approaching the point of no return, tumbling into

the sweet abyss as the world fades to black. Heat and pressure build at the base as she hollows her cheeks.

My release is so close I can fucking taste it when suddenly she yanks back.

“Holy shit!”

I peer down, taking in her shocked expression as she flicks the ring at the base of my dick back and forth a few times with a finger. She’s utterly fascinated with her new discovery.

“Jailbait,” I groan, painfully aroused. “Not now.”

“Right.” Cheeks flushed, she attacks with renewed vigor, putting her entire body into it as she dips low and presses her tongue along the throbbing vein at the underside of my cock on each upward draw.

My breathing becomes erratic as my vision drifts back out of focus. Liquid fire spreads through my groin, a tell that my release is imminent.

“Li’l Bit,” I groan, jerking into her mouth, “Gonna come.”

“Mmm,” she moans around me. It’s all the encouragement I need to shoot off like a rocket on her next upward pull.

She drinks every drop, not easing up until my body deflates. Spent, I bow my back, leaning my forearms against the wall while trying to catch my breath.

“Your dick is pierced,” she announces before I’ve fully regained control of my senses.

“It’s a pubic piercing,” I pant, smiling down at her curious expression.

“Does it feel good when I flick it like this?”

I huff out a laugh. “Right now, I can hardly feel it at all. Still kinda numb down there. But it’s not meant for my pleasure.”

“Oh?” Her eyes double in size. “Pierced for *her* pleasure?”

I hook a finger under her chin and guide her to her feet, caging her between myself and the wall. “You’ll think you’ve

died and gone to heaven.”

Chapter EIGHT



Sammi

I've woken up every day of my life thus far without Lyle beside me, apart from the last two, and already it feels like this huge piece of me is missing.

I clutch the pillow he slept on last night to my chest and bury my face in it, engulfing myself in his scent.

I was half-asleep when he left this morning, but the skin on my forehead still tingles in the spot where he kissed me. The warmth of his hand where he slept with it pressed to my belly all night lingers like a shield protecting our precious cargo. And the memory of his whispered, "See you in a few days," to our little one has been running through my head nonstop.

Yep, I've got it bad...

"Intruder alert! Intruder alert!"

"Maui!" I screech, laughing at the obnoxious green and yellow parrot running back and forth along his perch like a guard dog.

"Keep it up, asshole," Darci warns, wagging a finger at his cage as she slips into the room. "I'll throw you on the pit, and

we'll have grilled ringneck for dinner!"

"I'm a demigod," he announces, proudly fluffing out his feathers.

"You're a jerk's what you are."

"Stop it," I growl, crawling to the foot of my bed where I can get to his cage and let him out. "You're gonna have him saying all kinds of not-nice things."

"Not nice," he chirps, stepping up onto my finger. "Not nice, bird."

"You're so right. Darci is not a nice bird." I place him on my shoulder and turn to face him. "Gimme a kiss," I say, puckering my lips.

He presses his little orange beak to my mouth and makes a loud kissing noise. "Thank you, baby," he responds, as is our usual routine.

"I love you," I say, giving his noggin a few smooches.

"Ugh, get a room," my best friend groans with an exaggerated eyeroll.

"I have one...you're in it."

"Oh, yeah." She pulls out my desk chair and plops her ass down, apparently intent on sticking around.

"Can I help you?" I ask, but it's just a formality. There is no mistaking the way she's frothing at the mouth for the tea.

"Girl, you know I need details." She rocks back in the chair, crossing one leg over the other, making herself nice and comfy.

I expel a long, dreamy sigh. "Gosh. I don't even know where to begin."

"His package," she encourages. "Start there."

I flush from the tops of my breasts all the way up to my cheeks. "Huge."

She nods. "I knew it. That dude gives off some major big dick energy."

You have no idea... “It’s uhh... It’s pierced.”

“What?” she shrieks, before leaning in close. “I’ve always wanted to fuck a pierced dude. How was it?”

“Hold the fucking phone, bitches,” Margo hollers, storming down the hall from her room to mine. “I know y’all were not about to have this conversation without me.” Her usually pale cheeks are a rosy hue in her righteous indignation.

“Calm your tits, she-devil,” Darci barks, motioning for our redheaded darling to have a seat at the foot of the bed. “All she said so far was Lyle’s got a huge, bedazzled bologna pony.”

“Who’s got a huge, bedazzled bologna pony?” Liz’s curious voice probes from the living room. “Wait. We better not be discussing my baby brother,” she adds, realizing her mistake as her socked feet skid to a stop in the doorway.

“Hey,” Margo shrugs with her arms crossed over her chest. “No one invited you.”

Squawk! “Intruder alert!” Maui bellows right into my ear.

“Shh,” I admonish. “It’s just Liz.”

“*It’s just Liz,*” she mimics. “Thanks a lot.” The willowy brunette feigns offense. “I don’t know what endears you to that thing,” she says, referring to my pet. “He’s so rude.”

“He’s a sweet, sweet baby,” I coo, scruffing the feathers behind his neck. “And your nephew now, so be nice.”

“I’m a demigod,” he declares.

“Yes, well, you are that too,” I agree as I stretch to place him on his play perch on the opposite side of the bed and away from my guests, where he’ll be more comfortable.

“Back to the man meat. Focus, woman!” Darci snaps her fingers. “What kind of piercing? Let us who are cursed with plain peckers live vicariously through you.”

“Stop!” Liz holds up a hand. “Come on guys...he’s my little brother. Can y’all do this later when I’m not around?”

“Yep,” I say, thankful for the reprieve. “What’re you doing here anyway?” I realize how badly that could be interpreted

and follow it quickly with, “Not that I’m not happy to see you, of course!”

“Lyle asked me to pick you and the girls up so we could keep you company while running errands today.”

“He did, did he?” He must be really worried I’ll forget to pick up that license. I can’t deny that his enthusiasm has my heart skipping a beat.

“He did.” She nods. “He also sent Frank.”

“Frank? His security guy?”

“Yep.” She beams. “That’s the one.”

I’ve met Frank a few times when our families have gone out to dinner together over the years. He’s usually somewhere in the background keeping fans at bay. “Does he really think I need a bodyguard?”

“Apparently.” She shrugs. “Get dressed. The poor guy’s waiting in the car outside your apartment.” Her head shakes. “I invited him in, but he insisted he could serve you better by keeping surveillance out there.”

“Give me a few minutes.” I hold out a finger before heading to the bathroom to freshen up. I throw on a pair of ripped skinny jeans, a thin mauve sweater, wedged booties, and a few chunky bracelets. After spraying my roots with dry shampoo, I use the flat iron to freshen up my curls and artfully apply a full face of makeup.

Never have I been so grateful I chose to go to cosmetology school, despite my parents lobbying hard for a four-year degree.

If Lyle thinks I need Frank following me around, odds are I’ll find my face plastered all over the internet and littering magazine racks. At least I have the skill required to look reasonably presentable while having my privacy violated.

I’m not fooling myself for a minute into believing that a great majority of his fans won’t be looking for any and everything they can use to rip me apart. I follow the media. I

saw what they did to Rhett and Nick's wives in the beginning. The public can be fucking brutal.

By the time I come out, Darci and Margo—along with Liz, who came ready—look like they've been waiting on me for a while.

"What?" I ask, grabbing my purse from the kitchen counter.

"That man's been waiting in the car for over an hour!" Margo looks ready to pummel me.

"Chill." With a roll of my eyes, I head for the door. "He has air conditioning."

They follow me out, still rambling about how inconsiderate I am. "It's his job to wait in the car," I snap, not realizing he's standing right outside the door waiting to let us in.

"Hello there, ladies," the enormous muscled man in question greets, biting back a laugh as he tips his hat to reveal a mass of salt and pepper hair. He opens the door to the blacked-out Navigator, ushering us inside like a proper gentleman.

"Sorry to keep you waiting, Frank," I say when he climbs into the driver's seat and shuts the door behind himself.

"Don't be," he says, looking back over his shoulder to face me. "It's my job to look out for you, be it from the car, a table across the bar, or a few paces behind you on the sidewalk."

My cheeks flush. "I didn't mean for that to come out so rudely."

He smirks. "I know what you meant." Frank glances to each of my friends before quirking a brow, and I swear I can smell Vag-agra Falls gushing all around me. "Ladies, stop giving Mrs. Livingston a hard time."

I'm surprised they don't moan in unison at the flirty wink he leaves them with before spinning back to face the front.

"Shameless hussies," I whisper, just loud enough for the girls to hear.

The giggling is nonstop as he chauffeurs us around town. First to the courthouse, of course, where I secure the coveted license and an appointment with a judge at noon on Friday. We follow that up with a swanky lunch at the country club.

And now we're walking into Mirabel's, our favorite high-end boutique.

"He's like a superhero," Margo purrs, watching Frank fend off reporters.

Turns out Lyle was wise to send a chaperone on today's excursion. I don't know how smart it was to send one with the build and charisma of The Rock, but my girls certainly are entertained.

"Hello ladies." A young sales associate who looks like she could walk the runway with her long, lean legs and rail thin figure greets us with a smile. "My name's Misha, and I'll be happy to take care of you today."

"Thanks." I smile back, trying to read her face to see if she knows who I am. Or who my husband, is rather. If she does, she's not giving anything away. "I'm looking for something to wear to a courthouse wedding."

"I see," she says, tapping a pen to her lip. "And who's the lucky bride?" Her crystal blue eyes pause on each of us curiously.

"A friend," Lizzie rushes to answer, giving us all a warning glare that has us shutting our traps on impact.

I wonder if that momma look comes naturally once you pop a kid out. It's quite impressive, and I sure hope I get one even half as intimidating as hers.

Hear that? You're gonna walk a chalk line, little bean.

I fight the urge to cup my tiny baby bump while giggling to myself, remembering not to draw attention to this pregnancy that is still very much a secret. Because I know damn well I'll be the biggest pushover, and if anyone's gonna be walking any line, it'll be me.

Once we've been directed to an area filled with everything from formal to semi-formal dresses, and Misha's become occupied elsewhere, Lizzie explains herself.

"As far as the public is concerned, you're already married, Sammi."

Of course. "Right."

"Just don't give them anything else to print. From now on everyone is a potential source. From the sweet sales associate at your favorite boutique to the woman giving you a pedicure. You can't trust anyone."

"Well that's depressing," Darci grumbles, flipping through a rack of pink dresses in varied styles and cuts like she's on a mission.

"People are vicious, and the media will go to any lengths for a story. For the foreseeable future, consider yourself under a microscope."

"Just 'til they move on to the next big thing," Margo offers. "Right?"

Lizzie shrugs. "Best to get in the habit of erring on the side of caution."

"I think you should go for something like this," Darci says, pulling a blush, lace and tulle dress from the rack. "The deep V neckline is perfect to accentuate those temporary titties."

"Shhh," I say, slapping a hand over her mouth.

Lizzie sighs dramatically. "These bitches are gonna have you in the paper daily."

"Yeah, well...your brother's got a..." She tosses the dress over her shoulder, then with two hands molds a ridiculously enormous cock in her pelvic region and thrusts a few times to really drive it home. "Dickpedo."

Shaking her head, Lizzie snatches the gown in question from her and holds it up to my body. "Try it on," she says, nudging her chin toward the dressing room.

She can't get away from Darci's immature ass fast enough.

“What do we think?” I ask, stepping out to model for the girls.

“Dayum,” Margo growls. “Can I touch ’em?” She makes grabby hands at my ample cleavage.

“No,” I laugh, turning this way and that, admiring the way my new figure fills out this dress in a way I never could have before. What are the odds that the first thing I’d try on would be *the one*? “Should I try a few more?” I ask, dying inside at the thought of considering anything but this one.

“No,” my three friends all answer in unison, finally agreeing on something.

“This dress was made for you,” Lizzie gushes. “Lyle is going to flip.”

The mention of my husband brings a smile to my face. “All right,” I say. “So, we’re done?”

“Not so fast...” Darci whips something white and skimpy from behind her back. “Can’t forget the wedding undergarments.”

She holds it out for our approval. The top is a sheer balconette bra with rose details embroidered in the lace. The thong has similar detail to the bra and the garter belt has a dainty miniskirt attached that sits just below the navel, extending about three inches and ending right above the pubic bone.

“That’s incredible,” I say, taking it from her hands and examining it more closely.

“I have my moments,” Darci beams, proud of her find.

“We also found these,” Margo says, tossing me a string of pearls.

“I have real ones at home...don’t need costume ones. And what kind of closure is this?” The clasps are huge. I’ve never seen anything like it.

Lizzie rolls her eyes. “It’s nipple clamps.” She takes it from my hand and opens the pinchers at either end a few times to demonstrate. “See?”

“Oh.” I clear my throat and my nips start to tingle. “I don’t know about this,” I hedge, sucking air through my teeth. “They are really sensitive lately.”

“Listen, Linda,” Margo sasses. “That boy pierced his damn ding-a-ling. You can give him something fun to play with, too.”

“Annnnd, we’re done here,” Lizzie snaps. “Misha!” she calls, waving at our sales associate and motioning for her to meet her at the register. Lizzie passes her a card before I can even get mine out of my wallet. “It’s on your husband.”

“I have my own money,” I argue, holding out a finger for Misha to wait before swiping.

“Let the man spoil you,” my sister-in-law insists. “He spent all morning lining up every detail of today to make sure you were able to get around without being harassed.” She rolls a finger toward the ever-patient woman waiting on us to sort our shit, encouraging her to go ahead and run it. “Leaving you so soon after the wedding is really messing with him. If this is what it takes to make him feel like he’s taking care of his wife, then you’re just gonna have to damsel a little for him, mmmkay?”

“Fine,” I agree, dropping my wallet back into my purse just as my phone starts to ring. My stomach drops when dad’s name flashes across the screen. “I’m gonna take this...”

“Sure, go ’head. I’ll finish up here.”

“Hello?” I answer, moving to an empty corner of the shop in search of a bit of privacy.

“Hey, Sweet Pea. It’s Dad.”

“I know,” I say, grinning through my nerves. Doesn’t matter how many times I tell the man he doesn’t need to name himself when he calls, he still does it every single time.

I file it away as something to remember when he’s gone—one of the many little things I hope to never forget.

“How’s your day with the girls going?”

“Good. How was your appointment?”

“Well, that’s what I’m calling about,” he says. “I have some news I’d rather deliver in person. Think you could swing by for dinner?”

“Sure.” My pulse takes off at a dizzying pace, as I try not to think the worst, reasoning with myself that truly, it can’t get much worse than a few weeks. “I’ll be there soon.”

“See you then. Daddy loves you.”

My heart clenches as I fight to rein in my emotions enough to respond. “Love you too.”

I slip the phone into my back pocket before scrubbing my clammy hands on the front of my jeans.

“Come on,” Margo says, lacing an arm through mine. I didn’t even notice when she got here, but I’m grateful for her presence. “We’ll have Frank drop you at your parents’ house first.”

“Okay,” I say, unmoving. I can’t seem to remember how to put one foot in front of the other.

“Want us to come with you?” Darci offers, her face tight with concern.

“Nah.” As tempting as it would be to have them there for moral support, my father doesn’t need an audience when he shares his news. “But thanks for offering.”

“We love you,” Lizzie says shifting the shopping bags from one wrist to the other. “And we’re just a phone call away if you need us.”

I give an appreciative nod, not trusting myself to speak without falling apart in public. I’m lucky to have the amazing support system I do, to know I can call on them any time and they’ll drop everything and come running.

But, oh, how I pray I don’t need to...

Chapter

NINE



After a three-hour weather delay, we finally touch down in Nashville just before five p.m.

Nearly four hours of being lectured by Anika had me fantasizing about throwing open that emergency exit and jumping to my own death. I mean, not really, but Jesus Christ, the girl knows how to beat a dead horse.

“You ordered a limo?” I ask as we prepare to deplane onto the runway, expecting to find one of our usual black Navigators with dark-tinted windows waiting to whisk us away.

“It was all the service had available.” She shrugs as I move aside to let her down the steps first.

“Well, isn’t this just our lucky day, then?” I follow behind her to the car, gearing up for another ass chewing on the drive to the condo that she, our keyboardist Aiden, and I are sharing.

When we’re about five feet away, the doors swing open, and clusters of white, black, and gold balloons billow out into the air.

“Congratulations!” Rhett, Nick, and Aiden shout while firing confetti blasters in my direction.

“Surprise!” Anika cracks an enormous smile, a stark contrast to the grimace she’s been sporting since I saw her yesterday. “You didn’t think we’d let you get married without a bachelor party, did you?” With a snort, she throws her arms around my neck. “Congratulations, asshole! No more surprises, huh?”

“I’ll do my best,” I say, knowing full well I’m already hiding the fact that Sammi’s got a bun in her oven. But it’s important to my wife to keep that under wraps until her father passes, and my loyalty is to her first and foremost.

“You think you know a guy,” our drummer, Nick, muses on his way over to shake my hand. “She must be some girl.”

“She is.” I’m grinning like a fool. “Can’t wait for y’all to meet her.”

“You met her, right, Annie?” Rhett probes. “First impression?”

“I don’t think we really hit it off...” Cringing, she combs a hand through her long dark hair, pulling it over a shoulder and nervously fiddling with the ends.

“Gee...” I roll my eyes. “Wonder why that is?”

“Let’s not harp on the past.” Anika says, ushering us toward the limo. “Time to get this party started!”

As far as apologies go, this is the best I could hope to get from Annie. She’s a tough egg to crack, but once you’ve broken through that hard exterior, you won’t find anyone more loyal.

“What’d you do?” Aiden gives her a judgy look before helping her into the car and scooting across the seat to sit beside her. He drapes an arm over her shoulders and pulls her close.

Those two have a weird, touchy-feely relationship. Weird because she’s a lesbian. If you didn’t know it, you’d never

guess by the way they interact with one another. Get a few drinks in 'em and the sparks start flying.

Sometimes I wonder if she's the reason he's never seriously dated anyone. Of course, he could just like fucking with her and knowing she'll never expect it to lead anywhere.

"Why's it have to be my fault?" She takes the offered shot glass from his hand and gives the amber liquid a sniff.

My former wingman tosses a shot of whiskey back himself, trying not to choke on his response. "Because you're a raging cunt."

Now it's her turn to choke.

While everyone's entertained by their antics, I fire off a quick text to Sammi.

Me: Just landed. The guys picked me up for a surprise bachelor party. I hope you're having a great day with your friends. Miss you plenty already.

Jailbait: It was good. Got the license. Frank's about to drop me off at dinner with my parents.

Me: Tell them I said hey. Friday can't get here soon enough. Love you, Li'l Bit.

Jailbait: I love you too. Have fun at your party.

Me: Can I call you when I get in?

Jailbait: You better.

"So, why the urgency?" Rhett, our lead singer and band's namesake asks. "I'm not trying to be a dick. I really am happy for you, but why'd you jump right into marriage instead of just asking her out? Seems a bit extreme."

It's a fair question. "Her dad, man. He, uh... He's dying."

"Shit." His face falls. "I'm sorry."

I clear my throat, still having a hard time accepting that this man who was like a second father to me will be gone so soon. "I knew how much it meant for her to have him walk her

down the aisle, and if we didn't do it right then, he'd likely not get the chance."

"That was a really selfless thing to do," Nick says, the mood in the car sobering.

"Doesn't feel selfless though," I say, finally understanding why it drove my mother so crazy when everyone told her what a saint she was for adopting me. When you love someone, the last thing you want is for anyone to reduce them to a charity project. It doesn't matter how good their intentions are. It digs. Truth is, if either of us is lucky, it's me, and I know it. "Not when I was just freaking the fuck out, thinking she was about to marry another man."

I still can hardly wrap my head around how close I came to losing her. "Opportunity presented itself, and I went for it."

"Crazy." Aiden shakes his head. "You been in love with this chick all this time and never said a word."

"Thought this was supposed to be a party?" grumbles Anika, refilling her shot glass for at least the third time.

"Wait? Where're we going?" I start to panic when I recognize that we're headed toward Broadway Street. I hope like hell they didn't plan this shit at one of the places Aiden and I frequent when we're on the prowl.

"You'll see." Her playful tone says Anika's well on her way to tipsy already.

Good. We all like her better that way.

"The sign's up!" I note when the limousine rolls to a stop in front of *our bar*; there's a yellow neon "Booze & Bad Decisions" sign glowing above the door.

The band recently purchased one of the older honky-tonks to renovate as our home base. The hundred-year-old building is built like a fortress and is practically a historical landmark 'round these parts. It's in a prime location with an excellent three-story layout. With a little TLC, we knew her potential was endless.

And the idea of sticking around in one spot to play regularly scheduled shows sounded like some kind of heaven.

Sure hope my wife's cool with the idea of relocating.

We still have so much to discuss regarding our future. With how fast everything happened, there was no time. But surely she realized in accepting my proposal that we wouldn't be living out our lives in San Robles Shores.

“Hey, the lights are on...” I begin to grow a little suspicious as I look around at their smiling faces. “Hold up...” My chest starts vibrating to a familiar beat. “Is that bass coming from inside?”

Boss lady's grin widens. “What better time to give the new digs a trial run?” Anika rubs her palms together. “There's still plenty to be done upstairs and on the rooftop terrace, but the main floor is mostly good to go.”

Our security team bursts through the front doors, releasing the now-familiar balloon bouquets. They look like a bunch of giant pansies.

I fucking love those guys.

“You threw this together in a day?” I can't help smiling at Ron, Josh, and Reginald in their matching “team groom” ballcaps and tees.

“You sound surprised.” With a haughty smirk she exits the vehicle, joining our bodyguards who've come out to escort us the twenty or so feet to the bar. Sometimes it all seems so excessive.

“I am very surprised,” I huff. “You weren't exactly happy with me.”

“Oh, I'm still not.” She levels me with an icy glare, but there's a rare hint of laughter shining in her tawny irises. “A party is to be expected. Gotta keep up appearances.”

“Uh-huh.” I follow her inside. “You like me. I'm your favorite,” I singsong. “Admit it.”

She throws a hand into the air without looking back and pinches her fingers together. “Maybe just a tad.”

“I think we all know who Annie’s favorite is,” Aiden drawls, jumping ahead of me to slap her on the ass. “Isn’t that right, pixie-pie?”

Her head whirls in his direction. “That’s because so far you’re the only one in the bunch who can manage to keep his ass out of the headlines.”

“I do not accept that answer.” His tone is indignant. “Our connection...it’s so much deeper.”

Anika balks, stopping short. With a hand on her hip, she stares after him, awaiting his explanation.

“You want me for my hot bod.” He tosses his hair back and smooths a hand down his chest. “It’s quite obvious.”

“Well...” She stares up at him, batting her sooty lashes. “I do find you most appealing to look at.”

“Hah!” He pumps a fist, claiming victory. “Knew it!”

Fingers pinched to her chin, she eyes him thoughtfully. “Makes sense, seeing as you have the most feminine features.” She lifts onto her tippy toes and reaches up to push his long dark hair behind his ear to drive her point home.

“Cunt,” he grumbles, stalking off to play behind the bar.

I look around in awe. “Place looks great!”

It’s been less than a week since we last stopped by to check on the progress, and the difference is staggering. The construction crew said things would start moving quickly, and they weren’t kidding. This place went from little more than a shell to a country music fan’s paradise.

We opted for dim lighting with an industrial feel. Black, wrought iron pipe chandeliers hang from the ceiling with Jim Beam bottles in place of globes. They line the bar that follows the entire right side, as well as the rectangular one in the center of the room where Aiden and Rhett are living out their dreams of tending bar. Whiskey barrel tables take up the space along the left side of the room with inverted beer glass light fixtures.

The floor is scored concrete, stained a rusty brown. The walls are red brick, and massive exposed beams in the ceiling

coordinate with the wood used to build the stage and bar tops.

A clattering of glass sends Anika rushing over in a tizzy to our amateur mixologists.

“Seriously, Rhett?” She shakes her head. “What the heck made you think you could juggle liquor bottles? Clean that shit up.”

“Calm your tits, boss-babe,” Nick chides. “He was practicing his flair.”

“Give me that.” She snatches the rag from Rhett, shoving him aside to mop up the mess she just told him to take care of.

Can you say control freak?

“What’cha got goin’ on over here?” My eyes scan the shooters Aiden’s got lined up in front of him.”

“Liquid Cocaine.” Aiden does a little shimmy as he passes the first shot to Anika, who’s still crouched on the floor, then one to each of us. He lifts his own into the air for a toast. “To settling.”

“Settling?” I furrow a brow, pausing midway to my mouth.

“Down,” he adds, smacking himself in the forehead, as if he can’t believe he messed that up. “Settling down.”

Nick scoffs, shaking his head at the foolishness. “Bottoms up, boys.” The beefy blonde giant extends his in the air for a second before tossing back the shot of sparkling water Aiden prepared just for him.

Nick’s recovery is something the entire group takes seriously.

We all follow suit. My boy was not messing around. The combination of Bacardi, Rumpel Minze, Jägermeister, and Goldschlager leaves a prickly burn in my throat as it settles warm in my stomach. The smell alone could clear your sinuses.

“Take your shirt off.” Anika reaches for the bottom of my tee, offering her assistance with the endeavor.

“Hey now...” I swat her hands away, taking a step back. “I’m all for strippers, but I’m the guest of honor tonight, not the entertainment.” I cross my arms on my chest, lean back, and quirk a brow. “You take off *your* shirt.”

Aiden reaches for something beneath the bar then tosses a wad of black cotton at me. “Put that on, dumbass.”

I shake it out to read what it says. “One clit, that’s it,” I mutter before busting out with a laugh. *So fucking Aiden...* the self-proclaimed connoisseur of cooch.

“I just landed myself the Cristal of pussy, my friend.” I roll my tongue over my lips, my heart rate increasing as I recall her unique taste. “My girl is a fucking delicacy,” I say, swapping shirts.

Aiden sneers. “There’s not a woman on this planet I’d swap my diverse palate for.” He makes a V with his pointer and middle fingers and laps his tongue greedily between them. “Variety is the spice of life, after all.”

“That kind of variety also leads to STDs, but do you, booboo,” queen bee says, giggling as she brushes a hand over his chest on her way to the massive stage set up on the back wall.

“Testing, testing...” Anika’s voice booms through the surround sound, followed by the thump of her finger tapping the mic. “Lyle...” She motions toward a lone chair in the center of the dance floor. “Take a seat and prepare to be entertained.”

I snatch one of the concoctions Rhett just whipped up off the bar before rushing over and plopping into my assigned seat. I make a show of scrubbing my hands together in anticipation for her performance. “I’m ready,” I tell her, digging into my wallet for some cash. “Take it all off, Annie!” I fan a wad of bills into the air, just as the guys move to join her on stage.

“Wait...” I look around anxiously, finding our security guys cackling at their post near the front door. “You fuckers better keep your damn clothes on.”

“Calm down, pervert. Ain’t that kinda party.” Annie straightens her blouse. “We’ve each prepared a special song in honor of your big day.”

“*You’re singing?*” My eyes grow wide because, holy hell, she is the *worst*. I’m talking so bad she can’t even get the lyrics to *our* songs right. This girl is a special level of musically challenged. “Oh, this I gotta see. This might even be better than a peep show.”

She ignores my comment, signaling Rhett up. “For our first act of the night, we have the one and only Rhett Taylor, who arranged a special acoustic rendition of ‘Danger Zone’ by Kenny Loggins.”

“Nice,” I say, snickering at his song choice as he lugs a stool behind him and gets situated at the mic.

A few lines in and I forget he’s trying to be funny. The guy’s got chops. He could record this shit and have a hit with it tomorrow.

“Lyle,” he sniggers into the mic as he strums the last chords on his guitar, “hope you know what you’re getting yourself into, my man.”

“All right, now that the professional has properly shown off,” Anika says, shooing Rhett away, “the rest of tonight’s performances will be conducted karaoke style. Nicholas Potter is up with ‘Another One Bites the Dust’ from musical legend Queen.”

Nice. “I’m beginning to sense a theme here.”

“Oh, you just wait.” Anika’s comeback has me wondering even more what the hell she’s chosen for her song.

“Congrats, bud,” Nick says when the first beats come through the speaker. “Couldn’t have happened to a more deserving guy.” He takes a pull from his beer before stretching his arms out like he’s preparing for a sporting event. “Take that any way ya like.” With an exaggerated wink, he yanks the mic from the stand and puts all he’s got into rocking the joint.

As Nick winds to a close there’s a scuffle to the left where Anika and Aiden appear to be arguing over whose turn it is.

Next thing I know, Aid's lugging her to center stage. "And now Anika will do her worst with Kanye's 'Gold Digger.'" "

"Of course." I shake my head, laughing to myself.

She's swaying a little when he sets her to her feet and reaches around to lower the mic to pint-sized.

"Don't fuck with my track," she warns her bestie as he runs off stage. Apparently, he was trying to find an instrumental to swap it out with. "Here I go," she says when Jamie Fox's part comes on. "I'm gonna sing along with the words, so I don't forget."

I give her a thumbs up, dying laughing when she starts and stumbles through the entire song, belting out each chorus with the utmost confidence, like she didn't just decimate Kanye's track.

"For real," she slurs as her song draws to a close. "I'm happy for you if you're happy. That's all I want for all of you assholes." An extremely rare tear trickles down her cheek, and she swats it away with excessive force. "I just hope you thought to get a prenup."

I shake my head, knowing I have no need for that shit. I'd never have insulted Sammi in suggesting one.

"We'll discuss later." She's still wagging a finger at me when Rhett drags her from the mic.

"My turn, bitches!" Aiden darts onto the stage with a fucking tablecloth tied around his neck to serve as a cape. *Who does he think he is?*

"Clearly, we saved the best for last. Tonight, I'm gonna sing a little tune you may have heard before, from none other than Jay Z. It's called '99 Problems.'" "

He raps along to the track, not missing a single word as he stomps around the stage, flapping his cape. The energy is nonstop all the way through until he finishes with an emphatic, "I got ninety-nine problems, but a bitch ain't one!" and drops the mic.



“What’s this picture you sent me?” There’s an unmistakable laughter in her voice. “Are you *motorboating* a titty cake?”

“Yup.” I yawn, fighting to keep focused enough to carry on a conversation. “It said, ‘Tit’s your day.’ You know...before I destroyed those bazoombas.”

“Of course.” She cackles, then clears her throat. “I love that they did this for you.”

We’ve been on the phone for over thirty minutes, and I’m just now remembering about her dad’s appointment today. “Jesus,” I groan. “Here I am going on and on about clits and tits and Jager Bombs. I’m so sorry, babe. How was your dad’s appointment?”

“Actually,” she says, her voice perking up. “It was good news for once. You know that trial he’s in? The one that hasn’t really made any difference so far?”

“Yeah...” I hedge, sensing a but.

“Well, his numbers looked significantly better today. They want to get him in for a PET scan in the next few days to determine how much it’s actually helping, but this is promising.”

“Hell yeah, it is.” Her news gives me a second wind. “Babe, this is fucking fantastic.”

“Yeah,” she sighs. “I’m trying not to get my hopes up, but who am I kidding, right?”

“Hope is all you have right now. Give up on that and you might as well give up altogether.”

“I just have a really good feeling.” I can hear the smile in her voice, and it sends a burst of warmth shooting through my chest.

“Cling to it.”

“Lyle,” she rasps.

“Yeah?”

“I think you’re my good luck charm.”

“Oh yeah?” I sink deeper into the mattress, “Why’s that?”

“A week ago, my life was in shambles, and from the second I opened that door and saw your face, it’s just steadily gotten better.”

“It’s kismet.”

“Huh?”

“The universe rewards what’s right,” I explain. “It’s like destiny.”

“I like that. It’s beautiful.”

“Embrace the good and keep focusing on the future,” I slur, the booze starting to pull me under. “I have a feeling it’s only up from here.”

Chapter TEN



Sammi

“Sammi, your groom is waiting downstairs,” Mom says, tapping a knuckle lightly on my bedroom door. “You have to be at the courthouse in thirty minutes. What’s taking so long?”

“Hey,” I say, cracking it open just a smidge. “Can you send him up here really quick? I need to talk to him about something.”

“Okay.” My mother worries her lip between her teeth. “Everything all right?” She reaches in, brushing three fingers through the hair framing my face. “You look so beautiful, sweet girl.”

“Thanks.” I draw a deep breath. “I’m okay. Just have something I need to get off my chest.”

Mom’s eyes grow wide as saucers, no doubt recalling what happened the last time I had to clear my conscience right before a wedding. I mean, it was just a week ago. I think we’re all still a little traumatized. “Can’t whatever this is wait?”

“It can’t.” I leave it at that, pleading with my eyes for her not to press the issue further.

“One groom, coming right up.” She leaves me with a tense smile, one that echoes the lava roiling in my gut.

She isn't gone a full minute when Lyle peers his head into my childhood bedroom. He wastes no time with knocking, just slips right in, looking like he's come straight from a red-carpet event.

One look at him and I've managed to forget how to breathe.

The man's always been easy on the eyes, but Lyle Livingston in a suit is a sight to behold.

Temporarily rendered mute, I look him over, allowing myself a moment to relish the view.

He's opted for a tan linen suit that fits his trim body to perfection. A baby blue skinny tie delivers the perfect pop of color over a crisp white shirt. His tan vest brings it all together. He's decided to forgo the jacket completely.

His look is formal without being stuffy.

Lyle's gaze drifts over me in turn, his thumb gently tugging at his lower lip. “That dress.” His voice is low and raspy—so damn sexy. “You look...” He steps closer, running his knuckles along my right shoulder, inciting a flurry of butterflies in my stomach, “Like an angel.”

My cheeks heat. “Thank you,” I say taking his offered hand. The same one he's just trailed the length of my arm, leaving goosebumps in his wake. “You,” I choke out. “You are more handsome than my wildest teenaged dreams.”

“Yeah?” He tucks the curled index finger of his free hand beneath my chin. “Then why do you look like you're about to take off running?”

He looks so broken. So afraid.

I shake my head, biting back tears.

“Talk to me, Li'l Bit.” There's an undeniable desperation in his tone.

“I just...this is a lot.”

He nods, his jaw ticking.

“It all happened so...so fast.”

His brow furrows. “And you’re having second thoughts?”

“No,” I rush out. “I’m not...But I am sort of feeling like I maybe somehow trapped you.”

He starts to issue a firm denial, and I stop him with a finger pressed to his lips.

“You heard what happened with Trent. You knew the situation with my father. And you felt compelled to fix it.” I place a hand over his heart—his big, beautiful heart. “I know that you love me and that you wouldn’t have done this simply out of pity. But I’m worried.”

His head is steadily shaking side to side. “What are you worried about exactly?”

“Lyle, I’m pregnant!” I stalk off, pacing the room. “You aren’t just taking me, but a *baby* too. To go from living the single life to a married man with a child overnight...it’s a lot.” A knot twists in my gut. “Which reminds me...I haven’t even been to a doctor yet. I don’t have a doctor!” Panic has my heart nearly beating out of my chest.

I’ve truly made a mess of my life.

“One thing at a time, love.” His tone is placating, albeit a bit unnerved. “A simple phone call will have you and *our* baby seen to next week. You’ve had a lot going on.” He brings a hand to his chest. “I want you, and I want this child, more than I want my next breath.” His hand balls into a fist clutching his heart. “Nearly losing you was the ultimate wake-up call. I don’t care how this child came to be; I only care that he or she will be *ours*. That we will have the life we’ve always dreamed of. And I hate that it took such drastic measures to make me stop dragging my feet, but I want you. *Both* of you.”

How can he be so calm about all of this? He must have some reservations. “I’m worried you may be having regrets and are simply too much of a gentleman to tell me.”

“I’m not,” he promises, “having regrets, nor am I anything resembling a gentleman.”

“Please stay over there,” I beg when he starts to cross the room, “so I can finish.”

He stops in his tracks, releasing a frustrated breath.

“The situation with my father...it’s improved. The results of yesterday’s scans change everything.” It takes all the strength in me to keep going, because I don’t actually want him to take the escape I’m offering, but I couldn’t live with myself if I didn’t give him this out. “So, if there’s any part of you that went back to Nashville and was like what hell did I just get myself—”

“Jailbait?” he says, slowly and steadily making his way to where I stand. “With all due respect, stop talking.”

“Excuse me?” I stammer, ready to tell him what he can do with his bossy self, but I open my mouth and no sound comes out. There’s a very strong chance I’m in shock, because what the hell is happening?

My groom’s hands drop to his waist, where he yanks his belt open. He keeps his gaze locked on mine as he proceeds to unfasten his pants.

“Lyle?” I rasp, my heart rate speeding out of control at the sound of his zipper lowering.

In one fluid motion, he bares his lower half, as his clothes pile around his ankles.

“Th—thought you wanted to wait until tonight?” I am so confused. And also so very turned on.

“Get on your knees,” he commands, his tone leaving no room for dispute.

Clearly something is very wrong with me because I swallow hard, lift my dress, and lower myself to the floor without argument. “Now what?” I ask, both nervous and excited. Lyle would never hurt me. I know that much.

He lifts the tails of his shirt, exposing his rigid length. “Tell me, angel, does this look like regret?”

At first, I think he's referring to his massive boner, but then I see it. "What did you do?" I reach out to gently finger the raw skin above his piercing, reading the black script that definitely was not there a week ago. "Property of Li'l Bit." I pull in my lips, smothering a laugh at what's obviously a very fresh tattoo. "You didn't."

"I most certainly did. Now," he says, bending to retrieve his pants. "Get up."

I do, watching as he tucks his shirt back in, righting his clothes in the full-length mirror on the back of the closet door. "Anything else you wanna get off your chest?"

"No." I shake my head, trying to ignore the desire burning in my loins. "That was all."

"Great," he says, taking me by the hand. He lifts my fingers to his mouth, pressing a soft kiss to my knuckles. "If it's all right with you, I'd like to go marry the woman who owns my heart...and now my dick."

"Well," I say, blushing, "what the hell are you waiting for?"

Chapter ELEVEN



The vision of my *wife* standing on the rocky shore, staring off into the pristine blue water, her long blonde hair whipping in the breeze as we watch the sun set, will forever be burned to memory.

I didn't think it was possible for there to be a more beautiful bride than she was last week. But the way she looks tonight, in a lace, full-length, nude-colored dress with a crown of flowers resting atop her head? With the water kissing her bare feet? So simple, yet elegant. Such a timeless beauty. Without question, I was mistaken.

I take a deep inhale of the salty air, letting it cleanse me of any lingering stress. I signed away the weight of the world when we endorsed that marriage license today. "We did it," I say, pulling her close and planting a kiss to the top of her head. "After all these years, you're finally, truly mine."

"No take backs," she teases, pinching my side.

"Never."

“It’s so beautiful, Lyle.” Her voice has a dreamlike quality as she takes in the orange and purple glow where the sun is quickly disappearing behind the waves.

When Anika showed me this place, I knew it’d be the perfect spot to spend our honeymoon. The pictures did it no justice.

The little coastal city of Carmel is a well-kept secret among the crowded beaches and fast life our home state is known for. Our rental is located on a half-mile expanse of private beach. The house itself sits on a rocky peninsula and is surrounded by water on three sides. Floor to ceiling windows throughout provide panoramic views of our little slice of paradise. This weekend trip is meant to be a prelude to the real deal, which’ll have to wait until things are more settled with Mr. Wayne and I’ve finished recording, but aside from only having two days, it doesn’t much feel like we’re settling.

“It’s not bad.” I tip her face up and press a tender kiss to her lips. “But you should see my view.”

“When did you become such a romantic?” She turns into me lacing her arms around my neck.

“Don’t get used to it.” I peck at her nose, splaying a hand over her bare back. “Don’t know what’s come over me.”

“Shut up and kiss me.”

“What the lady wants, the lady—”

Before I can finish my sentence, she’s risen to her toes and is molding her eager lips to mine. I could stay right here for hours and never grow tired.

Kissing her is an endless fall, that stomach-in-your-throat sensation that breeds adrenaline junkies. I’m flying, soaring, tumbling without a care in the world, because the only thing I’ve ever needed is right here in my arms.

I cup the nape of her neck, angling her head for better access, kissing her softly, slowly, savoring the high.

I want to bottle this moment. The taste of her lips. The smell of the ocean. The warmth of the setting sun.

“Come home with me,” I beg against her lips. It’s a conversation I meant to save for the morning. I want to kick myself as soon as the words slip out because the timing couldn’t be worse. I just pray I haven’t gone and killed the mood.

She pulls away, swiping the back of a hand over her kiss swollen lips. “To Nashville?”

I nod, staring into her storm-filled eyes.

“But my dad...” Her face falls. She doesn’t want to disappoint me and is clearly apprehensive about leaving him. The last thing I want is to make any of this harder on her.

“I know,” I say, pulling her face to my chest. “I just thought...it’s fine. We can wait.”

“Hey,” she says, reaching up to cup my cheek. “What if we start with the weekends? Just until we see how things progress with my dad?” She sucks her teeth, recoiling as if she’s just remembered something. “After next weekend, that is...Dad has to be admitted for his treatment and I—I want to be there.”

“Of course you need to be there.” I smooth a hand along the back of her head, twirling the ends of her hair. “What doesn’t kill you only makes you stronger, right? We’ll be bulletproof by the time this is over.”

She giggles into my chest. “I guess we will.”

“So, you’re not opposed to moving?” I ask, needing to put that fear to rest. It’s been a constant worry since the thought first crossed my mind days ago. Since realizing we’d made no plans for our future together before rushing to the altar.

She scoffs. “If I were, I certainly wouldn’t have married a rock star.”

“I would give it all up for you, you know.” I clutch her hair in a fist, squeezing her body tightly to mine. “I just want you to be happy.”

“I would never ask that of you.” She clears her throat. “I can be happy anywhere, as long as we’re together. I just want to get through a few more appointments and make sure

Daddy's treatments continue working before moving so far away."

"I think I can live with that."

She stares up at me. Her radiant smile bursting with gratitude. Her eyes filled with mischief. "The sun has set."

"It has."

"Your boner has not." Reaching between us, she fondles the bulge in my pants.

I huff out a laugh that turns into a moan. "No. It hasn't."

"I'm soaked," she volunteers, batting her lashes. "And I don't just mean the bottom of my dress."

"Wow." I scoop her into my arms, because I can take a hint, especially when she's practically beating me over the head with it. "That was a bit forward."

"Would you rather I play coy?" She swirls a finger in circles around my nipple, innocently, like she doesn't know she's driving me wild. "Pretend I haven't gone to bed dreaming of that piercing all week since you left me with a blue bean?"

I nearly slip on the rocky path up to the house I'm so shocked by her response. "Samantha Livingston!"

She starts to laugh, but it's cut short. Her eyes widen as if something's just occurred to her. "I sure hope you didn't fuck this all up with that tattoo!"

I consider screwing with her, but the look on her face cautions me against it. "It's thin script. I have a clear adhesive to put over it. Don't worry, love. I came prepared."

Her only response is a curt, but satisfied nod.

"Dinner first?" I ask, once we've crossed the threshold into the house, "or would you rather dessert?"

With a finger aimed at the master, she narrows her eyes. "I've waited six long years for this. Sure, hope you've got what it takes to live up to my wild imagination."

“Oh, it’s like that huh?” I speed walk to the bedroom, twisting this way and that to avoid knocking over any of the knickknacks with her feet.

“Just saying, I gave myself two orgasms Monday night alone.” She waggles her brows. “That piercing was great rub hub material.”

Rub hub? Where the hell does she come up with this shit?

“Two, huh?” Still chuckling, I set her to her feet. “Then I’ll be sure to deliver three.”

Her teeth clamp down on her lower lip as she stares after me with hunger blazing in her eyes. “Unzip me?”

“With pleasure.” I pull her front flush to my chest and reach around to lower the zipper at the small of her back. When I lean in for a kiss, she starts walking away with measured backward steps.

“I bought something special to wear for you tonight.” She lets the thin straps slip just past her shoulders, just enough to tease.

Heat surges to my dick. “Did you?”

She nods, roving her eyes over me like I’m a piece of meat. “Feel free to lose the suit while I’m away.”

With that she spins on her heels and rushes off to the en suite, leaving me gaping after her.

It doesn’t take long for me to snap out of it and strip down to my birthday suit. This is normally the point where I’d give my cock a few strokes, making sure he’s presentable for the upcoming performance. But he’s doing quite the job himself. Just the thought of slipping between her thighs has a bead of moisture seeping from the tip.

I wish I’d thought to find some silk boxers or a Hugh Hefner robe or some shit for the occasion. I don’t even know if grooms do that. But I feel a little ill prepared knowing she’s getting all sexified on the other side of that door and I’m just...*naked*. And while that in itself is *very* impressive, it doesn’t require much thought.

I'm feeling a little disappointed in myself until I remember the gift the guys gave me at my bachelor party that I tossed into my suitcase.

Must've been kismet at work again because it couldn't be more perfect.

Snickering the whole time, I retrieve my "outfit" and put it on, eager for her reaction. While I'm at it, I apply the adhesive plastic patch to my tattoo to keep it protected.

Then, I wait.

Ten excruciating minutes go by before the click of the doorknob finally signals her impending arrival.

The door swings open, narrowly missing my face, and out walks the hottest fucking thing I've ever seen—Li'l Bit, scantily clad in white lace and ribbon. Her tits are spilling out of a sheer bra. Her rosy nipples are hard as stone, pushing through two little peepholes. *Ay caramba.*

I forget how to breathe. Forget my own name. Forget that I'm standing here with a blow-up ball and chain dangling from my dick until she disrupts my ogling with her obnoxious laughter.

"Jesus Christ, Lyle!" she spits out between guffaws. "Way to ruin a girl's entrance."

"Judging by the fact that your hostage here has swollen up to the point that the cuff has cut off his blood supply, I'd say you nailed that entrance, love."

"Are you serious?" She bends to examine the *situation*. "You aren't kidding. This is really tight." She sounds rattled. "Should I look for some scissors?" Sammi moves to the dresser and starts opening drawers, one after another. "A knife maybe?"

"Woman, you aren't getting anywhere near my dick with a knife."

I reach for the valve on the underside of the cuff and let the air out.

“Oh.” She shrugs, attempting and failing to slink over sexily. It could be the snort that kills it for her. “Why didn’t I think of that?”

“Gotta say, that your mind instantly went to sharp objects kinda scares me, Li’l Bit.”

“Fuck around and find out.” She takes the deflated *cock-stume* from me, spinning it around on one finger before flinging it across the room. “Cute.”

“That’s what I was going for.”

“Yeah?” she says, palming my erection. “Well, I was going for seductive.”

“Looks like we both delivered.” I fight the urge to throw my head back and moan as she continues stroking me. “Consider me seduced.”

I trail the back of a hand over her right breast. “You have beautiful nipples.”

“Thanks?” She arches a brow. “I think.”

“Are they always so...hard?”

“Umm.” She squirms as I roll the pad of my thumb over the firm bud. “It’s the pregnancy.” A sharp hiss blows through her lips. “They’re very ummm...oh—”

She loses her train of thought when I lean forward and give it a hard suck then bite down gently.

“They’re very?” I ask, nibbling and flitting my tongue over the tip.

“Sensitive,” she squeaks.

“I wonder...”

“Yeah?”

“If I could get my first score without going below the belt.”

“You probably could, but I’d rather you not.”

Her tit slips from my mouth. “Rather me not?”

“I want your face between my legs, Lyle.” Fuck. Her shameless command fuels the desire burning through my veins.

“Tell me how bad you want it.” I brush both thumbs over the pebbled points, causing my bride to wriggle and writhe.

“More than Reese’s Pieces.” She reaches for my throbbing cock, but I step back and drop to my knees.

“You like those a lot,” I muse.

“More than sunsets, and rainbows, and... Oh, yesssss.”

I trail the tip of my nose along her inner thigh. Her scent driving me wild. “Those things are pretty magical.”

“Mmmhmm,” she sighs, digging her fingers into my hair and forcibly attempting to guide my head to her hungry pussy. “But they can’t compete with the stars.”

“You wanna see stars, love?” I nip and kiss along her bikini line, trailing my tongue up the curve of her hip.

“God, yes.” Her panting breaths and my pulse engage in a feverish battle toward the finish line as I begin to slowly advance, backing her toward the bed.

“You’re so sexy,” I say, gripping her waist and stroking my thumbs over her tiny baby bump. The slight swell of her abdomen is driving me insane. “You always were,” I add, pressing kisses over her stomach. “But fuck if these curves don’t make it damn near impossible to control myself.”

“Who says you have to?”

“This is a marathon, Li’l Bit, not a sprint.”

“Oh...” she says, shocked as her legs make contact with the mattress.

“Sit.”

She does without pause.

I wrench her legs apart, kissing my way from her inner knee to the lace thong shielding her cunt. “You smell so

fucking good, baby,” I say, hovering a breath away from her clit. “Jesus, I can practically taste it.”

“Lyle,” she moans, pushing her hips forward, desperate for me to put my mouth on her.

“Lay back,” I say, placing open mouth kisses along her torso as I crawl in over her. “Good girl.”

She preens beneath my praise, sliding back to the middle of the mattress without much prodding.

“Such a good fucking girl.” I cup each of her tits in opposite hands, pinching her nipples where they’re jutting through the openings in her lingerie.

She bucks against me when I lower my mouth to her right breast, lapping my tongue over the swollen bud while tweaking with my fingers.

Sammi fists a hand into my hair, pulling as she thrashes beneath me. When her mumbled praise becomes a series of incoherent gibberish, I know she’s nearly there.

Propelled by her eagerness, I attack with renewed vigor, alternating between nipping and sucking each of her swollen breasts in turn. I have to remind myself not to lose control, so I won’t hurt her. The harder I bite down, the more ravenous she becomes.

“Mmm,” I groan, tugging her nipple between my teeth. “So, my sweet girl likes it rough...”

My assessment sends her hurtling over the edge. Eyes pulled tight, she arches from the bed moaning through her climax as she damn near rips my hair out from the roots.

“Fuck, yeah, Jailbait. Give it to me.”

I keep after it while she bucks beneath me, not slowing until her grip on my hair goes lax and she sags into the mattress, limp and panting.

Chapter TWELVE



Sammi

I peel my eyes open as the final waves of my climax ripple through me and see Lyle sitting back on his haunches with the most self-satisfied look on his handsome face. The cocky grin he's got fixed on me says he doesn't plan to let me live this down anytime soon. *If ever.*

He has every right to be pleased with himself—I *certainly am*—because he sure as hell just got me off on nipple play alone.

I can't help but smile when he quirks a lone brow, soliciting some much-deserved praise.

“That was impressive.” I scrape my lower lip through my teeth while devouring him with an appreciative gaze. “I'm thoroughly satisfied.”

“Oh, baby, you don't know the meaning of satisfaction yet...that was merely an appetizer.” His grin widens, and I damn near leap off the bed when he runs a finger through my slick folds. He brings the hand right in front of his face, swirling the moisture around between his thumb and forefinger before sucking them clean.

His throaty moan fills the quiet room. “Delicious.”

Heat spreads throughout my body as I watch him savor the evidence of my release like it’s some rare delicacy. Like it’s his lifeblood.

“I could eat you for every meal.” His eyes flutter to half-mast, the tip of his tongue slowly sweeping over his lips. I can hear his heart pounding, the steady beat resounding in my chest as he lowers his body to hover just above mine.

“Lyle,” I whimper, burning with the need for him to make good on that promise.

There is nothing hotter than the way this man loses himself so completely for me. He has no inhibitions. No filter. Just says and does whatever comes to mind, no holds barred. That type of honesty is refreshing, and I trust him implicitly. Enough to let down my walls and truly experience every second we’re together to its fullest.

Bracing his weight on one arm, he buries the fingers of the hand on the other into my hair as his lips begin their decent toward mine. Without pretense, his tongue plunges into my mouth, seeking and taking. There’s no masking his hunger. He kisses me hard and deep. Claiming me. Marking me. Ruining me.

I’ve never been kissed like this before. Didn’t know such euphoria existed. And maybe prior to this moment it didn’t. This feeling. This fire...maybe it belongs to us alone.

“This mouth,” he groans, biting and tugging on my lower lip, sending my pulse soaring. “Is mine.”

“It’s yours.” Panting, I comb my hands through his hair as he scrapes his teeth along my jaw.

“Look at you...” His warm tongue skims along the column of my throat. “You’re shaking you want it so bad.”

I’m overwhelmed with emotion, nothing but sensation.

I can hardly breathe.

Forget speech. It’s all I can do to moan my agreement.

“So responsive,” he rasps, searing a path along my chest. “These...” He sucks one of my breasts into his mouth. “Mine.”

“Y—yours,” I agree. Every cell of my body is buzzing with the electric energy teeming between us.

“And this...”

I look down when he doesn't finish, watching as he brings both hands to my stomach, resting them there reverently.

“It's yours,” I offer, unable to hold back my tears. “That's yours, too.”

Lyle brings his forehead to my abdomen for a beat before pressing a chaste kiss just above my bellybutton. “You're mine, little one.”

Any fear I might've still possessed over whether he truly wanted this child evaporates with the sentiment he just poured into that declaration.

“Fuck,” he groans, moving back to my mouth for an emotion-filled kiss. He swipes his tongue through once, then breathes against my lips, “I love you so much.”

“I love you too,” I mutter around the second swipe. “So much.”

With the pads of his thumbs, he brushes away my tears. “Why are you crying, Li'l Bit?”

I shrug, trying to summon the energy to put what I'm feeling into words. “I just...” I shake my head, emotion obstructing my throat. “Thank you,” I finally manage to get out. “Just thank you.”

“Don't thank me yet.” He winks then presses a brief kiss to the tip of my nose before resuming his descent. His pillowy lips skim my throat then each of my breasts in turn. He makes no attempt to remove my bra, leaving my tits trussed up, spilling over the top of the half cups and gaping through the nipple holes.

“Lyle,” I gasp, his fascination with my tits reminding me of the toy I brought to compliment my sexy ensemble.

“Mmm?” He moves on, nibbling along the curve of my hip.

“I got some nipple clamps.”

That captures his attention. His head pops up, eyes wide. “Say what?”

“I dropped them when I walked out of the bathroom and saw your surprise.” I wave a hand in the general direction of the en suite. “I thought we might try them out...”

He mutters some discombobulated nonsense before launching off the bed to retrieve the toy.

I’m dying laughing when he strolls back with the clamps positioned in front of his own chest.

“Good thinking,” I say, knowing this is not at all what he’s thinking. “Try them on yourself first.”

“The fuck?” His head jolts back. “No way.”

I give him an exaggerated pout. “But what if they hurt?”

His expression says, *duh*. There is no other way to describe how he’s looking at me and what he thinks of my genius idea. “That’s exactly why I have no desire to wear the damn things. I’m no sadist.”

“Yeah, okay...you pierced and tattooed your dick.”

He cocks his head, rubbing a hand over his chin. “Guess you have a point there.”

I make grabby hands toward him for the string of pearls. “Can I do the honors?”

“How’d this game take such a drastic turn?” he wonders aloud, passing me the clamps.

I grin. “I like this new version way better.”

“You wou—Ouch, son of a bitch!” His hand lifts to cover the clamp that’s now dangling from his nipple. He rubs at the sting, but he doesn’t pull it off.

“How is it?” I ask, as if his yelp wasn’t telling enough. I have no interest in clamping the other one after his reaction.

Nor do I have any desire to try them on myself.

He busts out laughing at what is no doubt a horrified look on my face. “I was fuckin’ with ya. It’s not that bad. A little uncomfortable at first. Nothing worse than what I was just doing to you with my teeth.”

My cheeks flush at the memory. I don’t know what’s come over me; I’ve never been into mixing pleasure and pain. But fuck...that was hot. I feel myself getting wetter just thinking about it.

“Okay,” I say poking out my tits and shimmying side to side, determined to put the blind trust I have in this man to the test. “Lemme have it.”

“You’re sure?” he asks, as he removes it from his chest.

“Yep.” I nod, and close my eyes, only to be pleasantly surprised when instead of a pinch I feel wet warmth followed by intense suction. He lays me back down, slipping a finger through the easy access slit in my thong into my pussy while laving at my nipple. Next thing I know, he’s working on the other breast.

I look down to find the clamp already attached to the one he just left.

Lyle leaves me no time to panic over the application of the second clamp, cleverly distracting me by rocking two fingers in and out of my throbbing pussy. The pressure is so intense *everywhere* that when he brushes his thumb over my clit, I release a sharp squeak.

“All done,” he says, staring down with pride at his handiwork. “How’s it feel?”

I’m twisting around like a worm on a hook, *that’s* how it feels. “Like I—I need you,” I moan, grappling for his retreating shoulders, desperate for him to bury his thick cock inside of me.

“How’s this?” he asks, ignoring my plight as he gives the tether joining the clamps a slight tug.

“Oh, God,” I moan, thrusting my hips into the air.

Apparently, I *am* a sadist, because holy hell, I feel like I've died and gone to heaven. Or hell. There probably are not torture devices designed for crazy girls' pleasure up there.

"Tell me if it's too much."

It's the last thing I hear before his face is buried between my legs, his tongue working together with his fingers, lapping up every drop of my desire while I come un-fucking-glued.

I vaguely hear the wanton sounds that can only be coming from me. Screams and wails, and begging. *So much begging.* I'm an incoherent bundle of nerves, lacking any control over my actions.

"So damn hot." Lyle yanks the chain while sucking my clit into his mouth and thrusting his skilled fingers inside of me. "Can't wait to feel you come apart on my cock."

"Lyle, I—" My head whips side to side, my vision completely out of focus.

"That's it, Jailbait. Fuck my fingers."

"Fuck *me*," I cry, wanting nothing more than for him to ram his dick inside of me and bring this thing home.

"Not tonight," he coos. "Tonight, I'm going to make love to my wife." Those tender words and a delicate rub of his thumb over my clit are what send me spiraling into the abyss.

With his fingers still deep inside me, he climbs up to rest beside me, tangling his tongue with mine while I dig my nails into his back. Just as the last pulses of my orgasm hit, he withdraws and releases the clamps, gently rolling my nipples between his fingers, inciting another blinding explosion.

He holds me silently in his arms while my body relaxes, his fingers softly gliding up and down my forearm.

"Lyle," I say, swirling a finger through the light dusting of hair beneath his navel while staring out at the dark night.

"Yeah?"

"Have you ever had sex without a condom?" I swear his dick raises the sheet another half inch.

His throat clears, and he pushes the hair back from my forehead, resting his lips against it. “No...”

“Do you want to?” I rub a hand over my little bump. “It’s not like I can get pregnant.”

“You think that’d stop me?” His chuckle is warm and throaty. “I want a whole football team of babies with you.”

“What if we have girls?”

“You trying to say girls can’t play football?” He stares down at me in mock horror. “Rude.”

I ignore his teasing, eager to connect with him on the most intimate level. “I’ve never had sex without one either,” I offer, giggling when he looks at me like I’m stupid, for *obvious* reasons.

I shrug. “I’m one of the point whatever percent. One of the condoms had to have broken because I’ve never had sex without one, yet here we are.”

“So, we get to experience a first with each other.”

I nod, lowering my hand to grip his erection beneath the sheet. “I want to *feel* you.”

“Baby,” he says, sliding his hand out from beneath my neck and rolling himself on top of me. “You’ll be feeling me for days.”

I reach up and finger the ends of the hair dangling in front of his face. “Looking forward to it.”

He rubs the crown of his dick through my slit, coating it in my arousal. I can feel his body tensing as he looms above me. He’s at my entrance, a thrust away from entering me, when he blows out a frustrated sigh. His face instantly morphs from ravenous to pained.

“What’s wrong?”

“What about the baby?” he asks, his concern making me love him all the more, even if he is a bit of an idiot. “I don’t wanna do anything that might hurt him.”

“*She’s* tucked away nice and safe in my uterus,” I answer, flipping us over to switch our positions. “Even one as gifted as you, can’t reach her,” I say, grinding down on his impressive erection.

“You’re sure?”

“Are we really going to stop now for an anatomy lesson?” I glide my pussy back and forth along his length, teasing him to distraction.

Lyle’s head lolls back, and the sexiest little moans fill my ears as he grips my hips in both hands, guiding me to set the tempo. “Won’t last long.” His hoarse confession serves as an unnecessary apology.

“That’s okay.” I rise up on my knees, shifting until he’s seated at my entrance. “I’ve already gotten off twice.”

“Thrice,” he counters, reaching to palm my tits. “You were done when I removed those clamps.”

“Fine.” I grunt as my body stretches to accommodate for his size when I begin to sink down on his cock. “Two and a half.” My words are sharp and breathy. I’m quickly losing my wits.

Nothing could have prepared me for the depth of emotion this moment brings. This is the culmination of years of yearning. Of longing looks and aching hearts.

“Welcome home,” I whisper, fighting the urge to burst into tears. Never have I felt so at peace in all my life. It’s the calm and the storm all at once, like our souls are in a state of utter tranquility while our bodies are on fire.

“Jesus... Fuck.” His jaw clenches as he jerks upward, sheathing himself completely inside me. “You feel incredible.”

I flatten my hands on his chest, slowly rolling my hips to get used to the fullness. To catch my breath. Because just being with him here like this has me winded. I need to move, but also just want to stay connected to this man like this for the rest of eternity.

His hands lift to cradle my face. “You are so beautiful.” Lyle pulls me toward him while lifting his head to meet me for a kiss. “You feel it too, right?” His lips tremble against mine. “This energy?”

“Yes.” I nod, as I slowly begin to slide up and down his erection. “I’m trembling.”

“Me too.” His hands move lower, to my neck, his calloused thumbs stroking my jaw as he leisurely slips his tongue between my lips. He kisses me slowly, reverently, shaking me to my core. If I were standing, this kiss would bring me to my knees.

He pulls me closer, until I’m nearly lying flat on his chest while he continues to pump in and out of me.

My clit brushes over his piercing sending a spark of pure bliss shooting throughout my body. My moan is loud and uninhibited. Impossible to contain.

“Just like that,” he encourages, picking up the pace while I grind against the ring. This sensation is unlike anything I’ve ever experienced, the coolness of the metal clashing with the heat radiating from my core.

“I can feel you clenching around me, like warm silk.”

His dick grows impossibly harder inside of me. I can feel him contracting, trying to ward off his release.

“Come in me,” I growl, encouraging him to let go. “Please,” I moan, my own climax mounting to impossible heights.

Every muscle in my body tenses as he relinquishes control, ramming into me, chasing his imminent release. “I’m coming, baby,” he grunts, just before a burst of warmth fires off inside of me, taking me over the edge.

“Lyle,” I scream, vibrating around him. My fists clench the mattress. My toes curl. It’s as if time stops. Nothing else exists but the two of us and the devastating love bounding between us.

He buries both hands in the hair at the nape of my neck, rolling us over so he's once again staring down at me. But there's a new appreciation in his eyes. "That was...mind blowing."

A sated smile curls my lips. "I concur."

"I didn't know anything like that existed." His words echo my earlier thoughts.

I smile. "Because it didn't."

Chapter

THIRTEEN



“Fourteen days without you in my arms is never happening again.”

“Never,” she agrees, dropping her purse down on the runway and jumping into my outstretched arms. “God, I’ve missed you,” she says, just before her lips crush mine.

“Mmm.” Moaning, I slant my mouth over hers, devouring her pouty lips. The fire in my bones that’s lain dormant since I last held this woman in my arms sparks to life as I drink her in with every bit of my soul. “Missed you, Li’l Momma.”

She squeezes her legs tighter around my waist, her sexy little sigh telling me she approves of the term of endearment.

“You taste like peanut butter,” I mutter through a tangle of tongues. It’s a flavor I loathe, yet don’t mind quite so much when the delivery is this aesthetically pleasing, but I wouldn’t be me if I didn’t call her out on it.

Sammi jerks back. “Oh, my God... Do I taste gross?” She huffs into her cupped hand and smells it. “I figured you were the one who left the bowl of Reese’s Pieces for me.”

“I was,” I say, laughing as I peck at her nose. “And you taste like heaven.”

Her puckered lips twist to the side. “You hate peanut butter.”

“My love for you cancels that out.”

“Really?” Her teeth clamp down on her lower lip. “I have gum in my purse.”

“Can’t wait that long for another taste,” I say, before capturing her mouth for another steamy kiss.

My chest swells at the knowledge that she’s been snacking on the candy I arranged to have waiting for her on the plane. Being able to spoil her in little ways—to feel like I’m taking care of her and her pregnancy cravings—brings me a sense of pride.

Living away from my wife has been torture. I don’t want to be my Li’l Bit’s husband in name only, but it’s hard not to feel like that’s the case when we’re apart more than we’re together. I keep reminding myself it won’t be this way for long. Mr. Wayne’s health is improving each and every day. As soon as he’s stabilized, we’ll be free to build the life we’ve always dreamed of, together.

It’s crazy how we went from spending years apart and functioning just fine to me being completely lost without her by my side.

“I mean it,” I murmur between kisses. “I will sit in the damn waiting room at that hospital next time your dad has a weekend treatment before going through this agony again.”

Her smile stretches against my lips. “You would do that, wouldn’t you?”

I give her another hard kiss before setting her to her feet, appraising my girl while Frank retrieves her luggage from the plane. “Absolutely.”

Her cheeks flush beneath my perusal. I’ve never had much of a poker face, and it’s clear by her reaction she has a pretty good idea what’s going through my mind.

“What?” She giggles.

“Just like looking at you.” I grip the front of her black cardigan and tug her close enough to slip my hand inside discreetly to feel her bump. “*He’s* growing.”

Li'l Bit scoffs. “It’s not surprising. *She’s* got one hell of a sweet tooth.”

I cock my brow before ushering her toward the waiting car with a hand at the small of her back.

“T minus thirty minutes.” I open her door, helping her inside before ducking in behind her. “Then you’ll have to stop calling our son a she.”

“We’ll see...”



“Right this way,” Dr. Ruby says, ushering us in through the back entrance of her office building, quickly locking the door behind us.

“Thanks so much for meeting us on a Saturday,” Sammi says. Her pitch is higher than usual, and she can’t stop fidgeting with her sweater.

I take her hand in mine, curling my fingertips along her palm in an attempt to ease her fraying nerves.

“It’s no problem at all.” The short, middle-aged woman gives us a warm smile. “It’s truly my pleasure. So nice meeting you both.”

She shakes Sammi’s hand before reaching for mine, a small gesture that makes me like her instantly. Most would have bypassed my wife and gone straight for my hand—maybe even asked for a photograph or an autograph.

I adore my fans, but there’s a time and a place for everything, and I appreciate that this woman clearly respects that.

The doctor guides us down a long, dim hall to a cozy room with a leather couch covered in pillows that’s situated across from a massive executive style desk. “I’m just going to get

some information before conducting your exam. Are you okay with your husband being present for this?"

"Of course." Sammi grins up at me, seeming to draw comfort from my presence.

"Great," Dr. Ruby says, crossing the room to sit herself behind the desk. "Y'all go ahead and have a seat on that couch, and we'll get started."

She begins by going over my wife's medical history, followed by that of her family.

Things grow a tad uncomfortable for my wife when she starts asking about my medical history and Sammi has to inform her that it's not necessary because while she's uncertain who the biological father is, she's positive it isn't me.

The doctor doesn't bat an eye at my wife's confession that has her red in the face and tripping over her words.

"It's okay," she assures Li'l Bit. "I'm not here to cast judgment or to spread your business. Believe me, you are not the first and will certainly not be the last woman to find herself in a similar situation. This child will have two loving parents, and that's all that matters. How that came to be is irrelevant. Please don't worry yourself over such things. Especially not with me."

She offers my wife a genuine smile, waiting patiently for her to nod her agreement before panning her eyes back to her chart. "Says here the date of your last period is unknown?"

"Right..." Sammi's knee starts to bounce. "I've never been regular. Sometimes I skip a month, sometimes three or four." She shrugs. "I was using protection and didn't really have any reason to think I could be pregnant until I started to feel sick and realized it had been a few months. It dawned on me that I was about to get married and had slept with someone el—"

"Not any of my business," the woman says, jotting something in her file. "Nor is it anyone else's. Happens more often than you'd think." She sets her pen down and folds her hands on the desktop. "Can I offer you a bit of advice?"

Sammi nods.

“I see a long line of high-profile clients. The public can be brutal, as I’m sure you’re realizing very quickly. They will eat you alive if you allow their projections to affect the way you see yourself.”

My heart wobbles at her words because she couldn’t be more spot on. “Were you a therapist in a former life?” I ask the question to lighten the mood, but am only half kidding.

“Just a fellow human, woman, and mother who’s seen a lot.”

“Thank you,” my wife says, dabbing at the corner of her eye with her sleeve.

“Know yourself. Know your heart. And don’t give anyone—not me, not the media, not even your own family—the power to take that from you.”

“I’ll try,” Sammi says, sitting up a little taller after her pep talk.

“Great,” the doctor says, retrieving her pen. “Now, back to business. We can get a pretty accurate due date from the ultrasound.”

“Perfect.” My wife visibly relaxes into my side.

“Breathe,” I whisper against her temple. “We’re about to see our baby.”

“Our baby,” she utters, just loud enough for me to hear. She blows out a long breath, seeming to release much of the weight that’s been sitting on her shoulders since our arrival.

After a few more questions, Sammi goes off to provide blood and urine samples and have a physical exam, whatever that entails. My new bride was not too keen on my partaking in that part of the appointment, and I’m a little relieved. Don’t know how ready I am to see my favorite toy splayed open for someone else’s perusal. I’m perfectly content with keeping my ass right here on this couch.

“You can come on back now, Mr. Livingston,” the doctor says, peering her head into the doorway.

My pulse takes off at a sprint as I get up and follow her to a dark room across the hall. My wife lolls her head to the side, smiling at me from the table where she's laying with her shirt tucked up under her bra and her black leggings rolled to just above her pubic bone.

I rush over to stand by her side. "What's happening?" I whisper.

But it's the doctor who answers. "We're going to do an ultrasound to determine how far along she is."

"Will you be able to tell us if it's a boy or a girl?" I don't beat around the bush. I need to know so I can properly flaunt my victory.

Doc smiles. "As long as she's twelve weeks or more, we should be able to tell. Provided Mom wants to know, of course."

"Yes," Sammi answers while simultaneously nodding her head. "We'd love to know."

"I'm gonna squirt some jelly onto your stomach. It's been in the warmer, so shouldn't be too bad."

"Pshh," I snort. "She's no stranger to having sticky stuff on her belly."

"Lyle!" Sammi's eyes widen to the size of saucers while the doctor goes about her business, trying not to laugh as she squirts a blob of goop onto her tummy and starts swirling a wand around in it.

"It's true." I shrug, turning back toward the screen to avoid her scathing glare.

"Holy shit!" I say when a little skeletal baby appears on the TV screen. "Li'l Bit..." I give her hand that's still clutched firmly in my own a shake. "Do you see that?"

"Yes," she laughs with tears brimming in her baby blues. "I see."

"I'd say you're already into the second trimester," Dr. Ruby volunteers. "But let's take some measurements to be certain."

“What’s that mean?” I ask, looking between the two women. “What’s a second trimester?”

“Pregnancy is broken into three stages,” Dr. Ruby says while zooming in on various parts of the baby and taking her measurements, “The first trimester is up to thirteen weeks. The second trimester is fourteen to twenty-seven, and the third is twenty-eight to forty.”

“So, what you’re telling me is we’re gonna be able to see his junk.”

Sammi gasps while the doctor goes on like it’s just another day at the office. “We’re going to try. He or she wasn’t cooperating just now. I’ll make another attempt at it after I finish.”

“Will you behave?” my wife chides, glowering at me from the table.

I pretend to mull it over for a moment. “Not likely.”

Our stare off is interrupted by Dr. Ruby. “Here’s your baby’s heartbeat.” A rhythmic whooshing sound fills the room. “Nice and strong at 153 beats per minute.”

My heart triples in size, and my throat grows thick with emotion. It’s without doubt the most surreal experience of my life, staring into my wife’s tear-filled eyes while our baby’s heartbeat echoes around us.

In this instant shit becomes real. It’s the singular moment that transforms our relationship from that of a newly married couple to a family. At least it is for me. Maybe it’s different for Sammi being that she’s the one carrying him. But seeing him. Hearing him. It’s just split my heart wide open.

“That’s the most beautiful sound I’ve ever heard.”

“I can email you the clip so you can listen over and over again,” Dr. Ruby offers, seemingly touched by my wonderment.

“I’d love that,” I say, meaning it.

“Looks like you’re about sixteen weeks and two days, give or take a few. Dating by ultrasound isn’t an exact science.”

“Sixteen weeks!” Sammi’s head bolts up, as she braces herself on her elbows. “How did I not know?”

“With your irregular cycles, it’s very easy to miss. Especially if you weren’t having extreme morning sickness to alert you that something was amiss.”

“Shouldn’t I be feeling her moving around in there?” my wife asks, still stunned by this news.

“You probably have and just didn’t realize it,” Dr. Ruby offers. “Movement this early feels like little more than gas or flutters in your tummy. Now that you know, I bet if you lay still, you’ll be able to feel it.”

“When am I due?”

“We’re going to go with March nineteenth.”

Sammi nods then frowns. “And can you tell around when I conceived?”

Fuck if my stomach doesn’t drop at the reminder that I’m not the one responsible for knocking my wife up.

“Likely the week of June 26th. But again, it could be a week earlier or later since we can’t go by your cycle. It’s all an educated guess.”

I stare at my Li’l Bit, waiting for her to share with me the significance of that date, because judging by the expression on her face, it means something to her.

“Could be either of them,” she says, shaking her head as if she’s disgusted with herself.

“Stop it.” I clutch her chin and turn her face to mine so she’s looking me in the eye. “None of that matters anymore. This is our child. Yours and mine...”

“You’re right,” Sammi says, accepting my kiss before relaxing back onto the pillow. “The past can stay in the past.”

“That’s exactly where it belongs,” I agree.

The doctor spends the next thirty minutes trying unsuccessfully to determine the gender of our baby before we

finally throw in the towel and agree to give it another go at her anatomy scan in a few weeks.

We're already running late for Rhett and Korie's little girl's first birthday party and need to get moving.

"He kinda looks like an alien," I say, holding the photo of the baby's face out so we can examine it together as we depart through the back door and make our way toward the dumpster to our waiting car.

"She's the prettiest little Martian I ever did see." Li'l Bit rams an elbow into my ribs. "Seriously, though, I can't believe we have to wait another month to find out which one of us is right."

Sammi is a planner, and a bit of a control freak, and I can just imagine what not knowing is doing to her.

"You'll still have twenty weeks to shop and plan."

When we reach the car, Frank looks around, whistling, as if to show he has no idea what's going on while he opens our door.

"I guess," Sammi pouts. "At least we have this." She pulls the little stuffed bear with the recording of baby Livingston's heartbeat inside and presses the button on its paw.

My own heart races at the sound, fighting to keep time with our baby bean as we speed away to Rhett's place, where I'll finally have the honor of introducing my best friends to the love of my life.

Chapter FOURTEEN



Sammi

Tucked away off the main road, behind a gated entrance and miles of sprawling trees, is something akin to paradise. Rhett's house is massive. I can't help but feel intimidated by the opulence of it all as Lyle and I climb the stone steps.

"You all right, Li'l Bit?" Lyle smooths a bent finger up and down my back.

I nod. "Just a little nervous."

"Don't be." He bends to press a tender kiss to my lips. "They're going to love you."

I sure hope so, I think to myself as he reaches forward to press the doorbell.

"You made it!" A petite blonde who I'd recognize anywhere as Rhett's wife, Korie, greets us at the door wearing frayed cut-off shorts, a black tee that says "crew" on the front, and black chucks. Her hair is dangling over either shoulder in twin braids. On her hip sits an adorable baby girl who immediately, upon seeing my husband, lurches toward him

with her pudgy arms extended, causing my heart to somersault in my chest.

“Happy birthday, Hadley girl,” he coos, taking her from her mother and flying her around in the air before positioning her on his hip. Gosh, the way he looks at her. I swear it makes my ovaries quiver. If I weren’t already knocked up, I’d be begging him to put a baby in me tonight.

“Aren’t you a cutie?” I say, admiring her adorable outfit—a black onesie with “Being ONE rocks” scrawled above an electric guitar, tucked inside a rainbow tutu with pink high-top Converse. Top it off with blonde ringlet pigtails, and I damn near get a toothache from the sweetness.

Freaking adorable.

“Hey Kor,” Lyle says, hugging her with his free arm. “Allow me to introduce you to my wife, Sammi.” He looks over at me. “Sammi, this is Korie, Rhett’s wife.”

“Nice to meet you.” I reach out for her hand, intending to shake it.

“None of that.” The little spitfire rolls her eyes. “We greet family with hugs around here.”

Before I’ve escaped the awkward embrace, Nick’s wife, Raven, appears. “Oh, Anika wasn’t lying. You are gorgeous.”

I’m still stuck on the fact that Anika had anything nice to say about me when I find myself wrapped in yet another set of arms.

“She said that?” I ask, trying to return the sentiment with the same bubbly excitement as my assailant.

“Mmhmm.” She releases me, taking a step back. “She’s a real bitch, right?”

“Heard that.”

My stomach drops at the sound of their manager’s familiar voice.

“What I was about to say, if you’d have eavesdropped just a little longer, is that you’re actually harmless and all bark

once you get to know a person.”

Anika sneers. “Don’t believe a word she says.” She hikes a thumb at Raven. “I bite. Try me.”

“Ahem...” My husband appears at my side. “Can you tone down the cuntometer for the duration of our niece’s birthday party, please? This is low, even for you.”

Justly chastised, the brunette sucks her tongue over her teeth and nods. “You’re right.” She looks from my husband to me. “Enjoy the party, Mrs. Livingston.”

With that she stomps off, her stilettos clacking louder than necessary as she takes her leave.

“Woooo, girl,” Raven hoots. “She *really* doesn’t like you.”

“Don’t listen to Ray. She didn’t like any of us,” Korie offers. “Anika’s just protective of the boys. Once she realizes you aren’t here to cause trouble, she’ll be just as protective over you.”

I choke out a laugh because I don’t see that ever happening. “If you say so.”

“Come with me,” our hostess says, slipping an arm through mine. “I’m gonna borrow your beautiful wife for a bit, Lyle.”

He searches my face to make sure I’m okay.

“I’ll be fine,” I say, wiggling a few fingers in his direction as I’m dragged off to the kitchen.

“Holy crap!” I clap a hand over my mouth. “Sorry,” I add, “forgot there were little ones, but this is incredible.” There are Pinterest parties, which I’ve been to aplenty, and then there are *celebrity* parties.

The entire room is draped in crepe paper, balloons, and tulle. There’s an arch specifically set up for picture taking, neon letters forming the words “Hadley’s Groupies” on the wall. And I’m not talking about cut-out letters. This is a Vegas- style neon sign glowing bright pink. And if I were a betting woman, I’d say that’s a professional photographer snapping pictures.

There's a section for face painting, and a paparazzi photo booth.

"Is that...are they doing *tattoos* over there?"

"Temporary ones," Raven says, beaming. "The one in the hot seat, working on his second full sleeve, is my little guy, Alex. He's *obsessed*."

"Wants to be just like his daddy, huh?"

"Yeah," she says with hearts in her eyes, as the man in question bursts into the room with their little girl on his shoulders. "Nicholas," she calls. "Come over and meet Lyle's wife."

At the sound of his wife's voice, he changes course, galloping over while Ava squeals with delight.

"Giddy-up, horsey," she shouts, tugging on his spiky blond hair when he stops in front of us.

"Take a break, your highness." Raven pulls her down. "Say hello to Uncle Lyle's wife, Aunt Sammi."

Aunt Sammi. I don't know if it's the pregnancy hormones but being accepted into the fold so quickly has me ready to burst into tears.

"Lovely to meet you, Aunt Sammi." The little girl goes into a full curtsy in her princess dress.

"The honor is mine," I say, reacting in kind.

The little girl purses her lips and nods, studying my form. "Your curtsy needs work. We'll get it. Don't worry."

"All right, Ava," her father says. "Buzz off."

"Ugh," she gasps. "Rude."

"She's precious," I say, smiling after her.

"She's a fucking mess," Nick counters before wrapping me in a hug and lifting me clean off the ground. "Welcome to the crazy, sis."

"Thanks," I say, trying not to be tense, but I can't help but wonder if he can feel the bump I'm hiding beneath my shirt.

“There she is!” Aiden, the long-haired keyboard player, comes charging into the room.

“Uh, hi.” I can’t tell if he’s going to hug me or rip me a new one. This guy is very intimidating.

“Fuck,” he groans, shaking his head in defeat. “Bring it in, sis.” He holds out his arms, opening and closing both hands in a come-hither motion.

“Nice to meet you.” I walk into his embrace, awkwardly hugging him back.

“Of course it is.” His brows furrow and he tosses his hair, very Justin Bieber-esque, but he’s no pretty boy. “I’m awesome.”

“I don’t know how to read you,” I say, honestly.

“He’s just mad cuz he wanted to hate you for stealing his wingman,” my husband says, sneaking up behind me and snaking his arms around my waist. “But Aiden never could be mean to a pretty girl.”

“Ahh.” I quirk a brow in the caveman’s direction. “What about an ugly one?”

He shrugs. “Haven’t met one yet, but I was sure hoping you’d be the first.”

I choke on my next breath. “I heard you were a ladies’ man. Guess the rumors are true.”

“Most of ’em,” he agrees with a nod. “When something’s this good,” he says, smoothing a hand down his chest, “You have to share it with the world.”

“I’m sure that’s a huge sacrifice for you.”

“You know,” he says, nodding, “it really is. I’d love to be settled down with one wom—” He spits out a laugh. “Shit. I can’t even say that with a straight face.”

Aiden’s personality is larger than life. He’s such a cad... reminds me a lot of someone I know. Someone peppering kisses along the bend of my neck.

My eyes flutter closed beneath Lyle's ministrations. I reach back and swat him away. "Stop that," I growl, losing the ability to focus.

"So," Aiden says, propping an elbow on the counter. "I hear you've got the crème de la crème of well..." He stares at me as if I should understand where he's going with this. "Uh, crème."

Lyle chokes on his beer behind me.

"Is he referring to what I think he's referring to?" I ask, my eyes volleying from each member of our very captive audience, which now includes the entire band, their wives, and a few elders I haven't met yet who I'm assuming are the birthday girl's grandparents.

"I believe your husband's exact words were that he found the Cristal of...well..." The scoundrel's eyes drop to my waist while he runs his tongue over his lips seductively. "Kitty."

My husband jumps into action, ready to go after him, but I pull him back, shaking my head. Something tells me I need to prove I can hold my own with this one.

"Well," I say leaning in close, "considering I've sampled it myself, I must concur."

Aiden pounds a fist on the countertop, laughing hysterically. "You're a little pistol, aren't ya?"

I shrug. "Got a big brother. And grew up next door to this one." I dip my head back toward Lyle. "You ain't got shit I haven't seen before."

It's hard not to react to everyone hooting and jeering around us, but that would diminish my badassery. Make it seem like I'm playing to an audience. So, I stand firm, refusing to crack even a hint of a smile.

Then Anika comes slithering out from behind the crowd, positively beaming, her face red from laughing. It's the first time I've seen her smile. "Wooo," she howls, slapping her hands on Aiden's shoulders. "I do believe you've met your match," she goads.

Aiden hangs his head in mock sadness. “It’s true,” he says, shaking it from side to side, “but as luck would have it, Lyle met her first.”

Anika walks up to me, looking every bit the dog with its tail tucked between its legs. “Anyone who can get one over on Aiden Addams is all right in my book.” She holds out a hand, a peace offering.

If she were anyone else, I’d tell her where she could shove that olive branch. But I’m smart enough to know when to fold. Anika isn’t going anywhere, and neither am I. So, I swallow my pride for the benefit of my husband and the band and reach back.

“Welcome to the family, *Cristal Cooch*.”

Chapter FIFTEEN



Sammi

I'm lying in bed, wrapped in Lyle's arms, both of us gloriously naked and still basking in the aftermath of a pre-dawn fuck-a-thon when we're jarred awake by an obnoxious pounding on the door.

This type of wake-up call is not something I will ever get used to. Lyle and I are going to have to find a place of our own sooner rather than later, before Anika gives me a freaking heart attack. That woman has no respect for boundaries.

"Go away," my grumpy husband shouts, reaching to the side of the bed for a shoe and blindly flinging it in the direction of her grating voice.

It connects with the wood with a loud *thud*.

"Open this fucking door, or I will break it down." The locked doorknob rattles as she gives it a good jostle from the outside.

"That truce was short-lived," I grumble as I drag myself up to sitting.

“There’s no stopping her when she’s worked up like this.” The frown he aims at me doubles as an apology, as he pulls a rumpled tee over his head. “Throw some clothes on,” he suggests, eyeing my bump, before stumbling toward the dresser for pajama pants.

“I’m not joking.” Anika’s fist meets the door again, banging three times in rapid succession.

“No one thought you were, Godzilla. Give us a minute to put some clothes on, for fuck’s sake.”

I grab one of Lyle’s hoodies from the desk chair and throw it on with the nearest bottoms I can find, a pair of his ratty sweats that are balled up on the floor.

Keeping it real classy, I think to myself as I give him the nod to open the door.

“Good morning,” Lyle sings as she storms right past him with an all-too-familiar iPad clasped to her chest.

“Start talking,” she barks, holding the tablet out for our examination.

Tears mount in my eyes and the breath whooshes right out of my body when I catch sight of the image on that screen: Lyle and I walking out of Dr. Ruby’s office, staring adoringly at what is without question an ultrasound photo. “Shit...”

“Well,” Lyle says, studying the screen for an obscene amount of time. He’s irritatingly calm. “Guess the cat’s outta the bag.”

“The cat’s outta the bag?” Anika repeats, aghast. “So, you’re telling me this isn’t a doctored photo?”

Bile churns in my stomach as my husband looks her right in the eye and answers with a very matter of fact, “That’s correct.”

The iPad takes off flying across the room, denting the sheetrock and shattering across the tile floor.

I jump back, shocked by the outburst.

“Was that really necessary?” Lyle’s eyes pan briefly to the mess then back to the raging brunette breathing fire no more than two feet in front of him.

“I asked you,” she grits out. “No—I *begged* you—not to keep any more secrets from me after the wedding.”

At least he has the decency to look contrite when he responds. “You did.”

“And you didn’t see fit to tell me the woman you married just happened to be pregnant?”

“It’s not his fault,” I cut in, shaking like a leaf but unwilling to let him take the fall. “I asked him not to—”

“Of course it’s your fault,” she snaps. “Every bit of this is your fault. Before you, I had *some* control over this one.” She swats a hand toward Lyle, who is the picture of calm, albeit a touch annoyed.

“You’re overreacting,” he says, rolling his eyes, which only further enrages her.

“Am I?” She scoffs. “Because there is no way we can pass this child off as yours, considering the image was clear enough to zoom in and read the due date!”

“So?” he shrugs, while I stir beside him, damn near hyperventilating.

“So,” I answer, meekly, “We either have to say we slept together while I was still with Trent or admit that I was already pregnant when we wed.”

“Ding! Ding! Ding!” Anika appears to be on the verge of a complete mental breakdown. “Your fans haven’t even fully accepted her as your wife yet and now this.”

“It’s a fucking baby, Anika. Everyone loves babies!”

There he goes, finally showing some emotion. Though I’m not sure it’s the kind that’ll help our cause.

“Not women who fantasize about having you for themselves.” She scrubs a frustrated hand over her face.

“Women who we’re trying to sell on some fairy tale love story.”

“We just need to make a statement,” he says to her, but his mollifying tone says it’s more for my benefit. “Go grab your laptop.” He shoos his manager toward the door with a few backward waves of his fingers. “And let’s get this thing handled.”

“No,” she says shaking her head side to side in rapid succession. “You and your new PR nightmare here can figure this one out on your own.”

Shit. “I have to sit down,” I say, panting for breath before plopping down on the foot of the bed. Lyle’s rigid posture says he’s about to blow.

From this vantage point I can only see the back of his head, but can clearly envision the look he gives her. “I can appreciate that you’re upset. But that’s enough of this tantrum throwing.” He takes a purposeful step toward her. “It is literally your job to smooth this shit over. It’s what we pay you, quite nicely I might add, to do. Get off your fucking high horse, go get that damn laptop, and let’s get this dealt with like adults.”

Other than some heavy breathing, Anika handles her berating fairly well.

Until he tacks on one final demand. “Then stay out of my face the rest of today.”

That sends her spiraling. “Stay out of your face?” Anika screeches. “Stay out of your face?” She slams both palms into his chest, causing him to lose footing and stumble back. “Oh, I’ll stay out of your face all right. But it won’t just be for today.”

Oh no. Nausea bubbles in my throat because I know what’s coming next.

“I fucking quit!” Her lip quivers, and her eyes are rimmed in red. “I can’t work like this.”

The tremor in her voice brings tears to my eyes, and I don’t even like the girl. *What the hell is wrong with me?*

She gives me a scathing look before storming toward the door.

“Ah, piss off, Annie.” Lyle cuts a hand through the air. “You don’t quit, and you know it.”

“What are you doing?” I ask, rushing over to my husband. “Stop goading her.”

“You don’t know Anika like I do. She lives and breathes this band.” He pats the top of my hand that’s clutched onto his arm. “She’s just blowing smoke.”

Maybe he’s right. He does know her better than me. And maybe she does have a flair for the dramatic. But I saw the pain in her eyes; witnessed the look of pure devastation on that woman’s face.

All I know is I can’t leave things as they are. My conscience won’t allow me to overlook the way we’ve hurt and betrayed her.

“I’m going to go talk to her.” I give his arm a squeeze before moving for the door.

Lyle stops me in my tracks. “Just let her be.”

“Even if she does just get over it, it doesn’t mean what we did was okay. This is my fault. I asked you to lie to her, and it’s on me to make it right.”

“Argh,” he growls gripping two fists full of his hair in frustration. “This is not a good idea.”

I pinch his chin in my hand and rise up on my toes to press a kiss to his lips. “I can handle my own, Mr. Livingston. But I appreciate your concern.”

“Fuck,” he groans.

“Where are you going?” I ask when I hear him padding though the house behind me.

“Gonna go sit on the couch so I’m close by in case I have to break up a cat fight.”

“Suit yourself.” I shrug, smiling to myself over the way he’s fretting unnecessarily over this. I’ve never been in a

physical fight in my life and don't plan to start one now. I don't know Anika well at all, but I just can't see her attacking a pregnant chick. Even if said chick is me.

"Here goes nothin'..." I glance back at my husband, who's barely got his ass propped on the edge of the couch. That man is ready to spring into action at a moment's notice. God bless him.

"It's not too late to do the right thing." His eyes pan from Anika's closed door to the stairway leading to his room.

I shake my head. "I know. And I have every intention of doing it."

"Woo." I rotate my head and roll my shoulders, taking a deep inhale before lightly rapping my knuckles against the door.

When she doesn't answer, I knock a little harder. "I know you're in there, Anika, the door's locked."

Nothing.

"I just want to apologize."

Still nothing.

"Fine. I'll talk through the door." I sigh. "The reason Lyle stepped in and proposed when my fiancé left me on our wedding day is because my father is dying..." I groan. "Well, he was dying. It seems like an experimental drug—"

"Just get in here," she says, pulling the door open.

I shoot my husband a thumbs up on my way in, to which he simply shakes his head.

"You have a really nice room." I'm not just making small talk. It's gorgeous. Everything is white and pink and trimmed in gold. It looks like a Pottery Barn catalog.

She nods, motioning for me to have a seat on the tufted pink couch while she takes a white leather armchair.

"Listen..." She sighs. "You don't need to bare your soul to me. I was—" She shakes her head. "—still am extremely angry, but Lyle's right. This band is my life, and I'm not

leaving. So whatever messes you two make, I'll be here doing my best to clean it up."

I nod. "I'm really glad to hear you've decided to stay."

She pokes her tongue around on the inside of her cheek.

"I'd still like to apologize and fill you in on every sordid detail of the mess I've made of my life, because we're family now..." I smile, but she doesn't return it. "And because you deserve to know. No more surprises."

"Fair enough."

And boy do I ever fill her in. Starting with Lyle and me sneaking around as kids and the promise he made when he left to join the band. I tell her about my relationship with Trent, and the day he broke up with me. I divulge as much as I can remember about that night in the Bahamas, which isn't much. I sob through the retelling of my father's illness, and how I shamelessly begged Trent to marry me so he could walk me down that aisle.

She hands me a box of Kleenex to sop up my tears when I recount how shocked I was to learn I was pregnant, and the devastating way it all went down when I told my then fiancé.

"I didn't even love him," I cry. "And still I tried to convince him to marry me and accept this child as his, because I couldn't see past what I needed. And quite simply, that was a groom." I snort. "Any groom."

Anika's eyes are bigger than I've ever seen them. I'm sure she's having regrets about opening that door. "That's...a... lot." She swallows hard.

I nod. "Then there was a knock on the door, and I thought Trent was coming back...that he'd changed his mind. But it was Lyle." My heart swells at the memory. "He'd been standing out there the entire time. He heard it all and he still wanted me." I shake my head. "And this baby."

My hand moves to cup my tummy. "I thought he'd given up on us, and there he was with a ring he'd had for *years*. It was like I was transported from a nightmare right into my very own fairy tale."

“And so you two got married.”

I nod. “I do love him, Anika. You have to know that. He’s the only one I’ve ever loved.” I blow my nose before continuing. “After the dust settled, I started to feel guilty. Like maybe he only proposed because he felt it was the right thing to do. I know he loves me. He loves my daddy. So, I—I gave him an out. But he refused to take it.”

“But why did you two hide the baby?”

“Because at the time, my dad’s treatments were not working, and he was only given weeks to live. I didn’t want for him to die knowing he had a grandbaby on the way that he’d never meet. It just felt cruel.”

She nods. “I get that.”

“It was selfish of me. I see that now. But for the past two months, I haven’t been myself. I’m horrified at the way we’ve hurt you.”

“Okay,” Anika says, smoothing her palms over the front of her pants. “It’s a lot. And the press is going to try to spin you in the worst possible light. So, be prepared for that.”

I nod. “But it’s fixable?”

“Yeah,” she says, “I think it is.”

Feeling as if the weight of the world has just been lifted, I smile at my nemesis. “Did we just become besties?”

She scrunches her nose. “Absolutely not.”

“Friends?” I hedge.

“Let’s go with distant cousins who tolerate one another.”

I snort. “It’s a start.”

“Now, get your asshole husband in here so we can draft this statement.”

When I open the door, Lyle all but falls in on top of me. “Nosy, much?” I can’t help but laugh at the thought of him standing there with his ear pressed to the door.

He shrugs, looking around for I don't even know what. "Everything okay in here?"

"Peachy." Anika crosses her legs, reaching for the open laptop on her desk. "Let's do this." She tips her head toward the couch, urging us to take a seat.

I sit in silence, watching the two of them interact as though they weren't just yelling at each other a few minutes ago. There's no apology from either party. No lingering animosity, either. It's a dynamic I'm not accustomed to. I'm a person who much prefers to hash things out rather than allow them to fester. But whatever works for them, I guess.

It doesn't take long for the pair to draft the perfect response.

My only request is that they allow me to make a call to my parents before it goes live. I'm banking that since they haven't been blowing up my phone they haven't yet seen this morning's breaking news starring yours truly.

Hello fans! It's me, Lyle—your beloved bassist.

Once again here to confirm a little rumor you may have gotten wind of over the last twelve hours or so.

Yes, it's true that I'm going to be a father, and I couldn't be more excited.

It is also accurate that my wife was already pregnant when we wed, and that this child is not biologically mine. This was never something that was kept from me. I knew it at the time I proposed to her.

Having been adopted myself, I've never put much stock in biology. I believe that love comes from the heart. And I love both Sammi and this little one with every beat of mine.

When I married this incredible woman, I made a commitment to both her and our baby. To love them.

Honor them. Protect them. And it will be the greatest privilege of my life to do just that.

So, why the secrecy? I realize it's difficult to look at a celebrity and see them as anything more than a public figure. But I'm also just a man. My wife and I have family and lives behind the cameras.

Sometimes we choose to hold things close for a while for personal reasons. I'm asking that you respect our privacy. That you treat my wife and my unborn child with the same regard you'd want for your own loved ones.

Though this announcement came sooner than we'd have preferred, here it is: We're having a baby! Grab a drink, put it in the air, and join me in toasting this momentous occasion.

To baby Livingston!

Hot damn. I'm gonna be a daddy, y'all.

Cheers!

Chapter SIXTEEN



Sammi glances over at me from the passenger seat of the blacked-out Range Rover I rented for today's outing. "Where are we going?"

"You'll see." I send her a flirty wink, admiring my handiwork. She's hardly recognizable in the clever disguise I put together for her—a huge white floppy hat with matching trench coat and dark, oversized sunglasses. She still looks posh enough to fit in where we're going but it's not at all her usual style and no one would pick her out in a crowd, much less identify her through the dark-tinted windows on this beast.

"You make driving look like foreplay." The shameless hussy lifts her sunnies and peers up at me, gnawing on her lower lip. "Those veiny hands on that shifter thingy." She vibrates through an exaggerated chill.

"The shifter thingy?" I shake my head, because she's ridiculous.

"Mmmhmm," she purrs. "It's really turning me on."

“You sure it’s me driving? Or the fact that we haven’t seen each other in a week?”

She shrugs, dipping her head toward one shoulder, then the next. “I’m sure it’s a little of both.”

“It’s this newsboy cap, isn’t it?” I reach up to pat the wool monstrosity.

“Oh, yeah.” She shifts around in her seat. “It’s making me wet.”

“Just wait til you see it paired with the peacoat on the back seat at dinner.”

“Ohhh.” Her brows waggle. “Something to look forward to.”

The GPS guides us to a massive iron gate before declaring we’ve made it to our destination.

“Here we are.” I reach through the window to the pad, inputting the code I was given.

“And here would be?” She looks around in a huff as the gates open and we proceed through. “All I see are trees and a road.”

“Patience, Li’l Bit.” My heart thrums wildly with excitement as I navigate the winding drive. “There,” I say when the enormous Victorian home comes into view.

“Are we visiting someone famous?” she asks, gaping at the immaculately kept grounds.

“We’re meeting a realtor.” I pull up beside the white Lexus already waiting in the driveway, throw the truck into park, and unbuckle.

“A realtor?” She looks out toward the house then back at me. “Shut up! Are you serious?”

“Figured after the shit show of last weekend, we needed to start looking for a place of our own.” I quirk a hesitant brow, biting down on the corner of my lip. “I hope that’s okay?” I couldn’t decide whether I should talk to her about it beforehand, but ultimately went with the element of surprise.

“It’s more than okay.” Her dimples make an appearance, settling my nerves.

“Perfect. Well, let’s go scope it out, shall we?” I run around to her side and open her door. “You can leave the hat and glasses in here. We’re far enough from public eye. There’s no one around to recognize us.” *Lord knows I ditched mine the second that gate shut.*

“This place is beautiful.” She glances around in awe.

“Reminded me of that dollhouse you and your dad built.”

Her mouth falls open. “You know, I was trying to figure out why it seemed familiar. That’s exactly what it looks like.”

“Well, hello there.” Our realtor Wanda comes out before we’ve finished climbing the steps, greeting us on the wraparound porch. “You must be Lyle and Sammi.”

“That’d be us.” I usher my wife up ahead of me.

The women shake hands and get acquainted.

“It’s so nice to finally meet you after conversing on the phone all week, Mr. Livingston.” Apart from a little flush in the woman’s cheeks, she keeps her composure. As a realtor specific to Boulder City, she likely has frequent run-ins with celebrities and knows how to handle herself accordingly.

It’s refreshing.

The guys and I regularly discuss how wild it is that we spent the first part of our lives wondering what it’d be like to be famous, only to get here and live for those rare moments when we’re treated like everyone else.

“Likewise.”

“All right.” Wanda makes a show of opening the door and waving us in, “Let’s get started.”

A musty smell assaults my senses the moment I walk in, but I school my features, not wanting to ruin it for my bride in case it doesn’t bother her. I’m sure it’s nothing the right cleaning crew couldn’t remedy if she fell in love with the place.

“Ohh.” Sammi clutches her stomach, her nose scrunched. “It smells like sewage in here.” Her body lurches.

“Bathroom?” I ask, trying to avoid a mess. I’ve come to recognize her “I’m about to blow chunks” face.

“Over there.” Wanda points to a skinny door beneath the stairs.

With a hand at the small of her back, I guide my wife toward the facilities, lifting the lid—

“Oh, hell no.” Li’l Bit moans, turning and making a run for the exit.

After dropping the lid to cover the massive dookie someone left behind, I chase after her, just in time to watch her empty the contents of her stomach off the porch onto what once was a lovely patch of purple flowers.

Wanda rushes out behind us. “Oh, my goodness! Is she all right?”

“She’ll be fine.” I smile back at the woman, while retrieving a wet wipe from Sammi’s purse so she can clean her face. “Someone left a souvenir behind in that bathroom.”

“Oh, gross.” Wanda’s face pinches.

“I’m fine.” Sammi plasters on a smile. “But I think we’re ready to move on to the next one.”

“Of course.” Wanda sprints back inside to turn off the lights and hopefully flush away the unwelcome bathroom dweller, before leading the way to option two.

The second house is a Greek Revival style home with massive white marble columns and enormous sprawling oaks. I can easily picture our little one climbing the branches that nearly hang to the ground.

“This is fancy.” The color has returned to my wife’s face. “Look at all the statues in the landscaping. Kinda looks like a museum.”

“Right this way.” Our realtor waves us over from across the expansive lawn.

“This place is really cocky,” I say, observing all the nude male statues along the way.

“Oh, but they’re all so tiny and cute.” Li’l Bit pinches two fingers together for effect.

I shake my head. “I’m sure it won’t take much to have them all removed.” I point to a near nude female statue with a sheet draped around her form, big ol’ titties fully exposed. “That one can stay.”

“I bet it can.”

“I already made a run through and checked all the facilities.” Wanda’s cheeks are radiating her embarrassment. “I’m so sorry about the last one.”

“Don’t mention it.” I hope my smile alleviates a little of her anxiety. It’s not like she left the shit in there—at least I hope not. What a plot twist that would be...

“Lyle...” Sammi gives my hand a tug, pulling me from my overactive imagination. “Let’s go see the inside.”

“The current owners of the home are huge art aficionados.” Wanda sweeps a hand around the foyer, presenting the massive headless trunks protruding from pillars in the walls. “They really poured their love of the human form into every facet of this house.”

Sammi and I share a sideways glance, but reserve casting final judgment until we’ve seen more of what this place has to offer.

The kitchen is a chef’s dream. No ass or titties in sight. My wife is enamored with the giant picture windows and ample natural light.

“Can you see it?” she asks, nudging me in my side. “A breakfast table there...” She points to a bright corner off to the side. “And our little girl doing her homework here at the island while we prepare dinner?”

“I can.” I can’t help but smile at her enthusiasm. “Little George is gonna color all over these white cabinets.”

“George?” She looks at me like I’ve lost my marbles. *If I have, they’re likely somewhere on these grounds. Hah.*

“After the king, of course.”

Her forehead scrunches. “Of England?”

“Of country music, babe. George Jones.”

“Oh...ew.” She shakes her head. “No. We will not be naming our child George.”

“So, you’re admitting it’s a boy.” I quirk a brow.

“No...But I’m sure we’ll have more babies and eventually one of them will be a boy whose name will not be George...or Hank...or Conway.”

Damn, she knows me well. Shutting down all my classic favorites in one swoop!

“Oh, my goodness!” The excitement in my wife’s voice has me running clean across the house to find her latest discovery.

“What is it?” I go straight through the master bedroom to the en suite, where she’s slid down the wall, smothering on her obnoxious laughter while pointing a finger at the brass towel hooks.

Shaking my head, I go over there to check them out.

You guessed it, and if you didn’t, and haven’t yet caught on to the phallic theme of this house, there’s no help for you.

“They’re little donges!” Leave it to my wife to state the obvious.

“I see that.” I reach to the floor to help her back to her feet.

“This place is too much,” she heaves, leaning on me for support.

“If you like that,” Wanda says, peering her head in, “get a load of the faucets.”

“We’re done here,” I say when I look over to find my wife stroking the spout built to model a curved shaft.

“Lyle!” she screeches. “The knobs are balls!”

I give my head a firm shake and look over to our realtor. “I don’t think we’re classy enough for this joint.”

“Understood.” She snorts. “Let’s head out. I have one more on the list to show you two today, and I have a feeling you’re going to love it.”

I’m feeling a little discouraged on the drive to our third and final home of the day. If we don’t find something we like that’s already on the market, we’ll have to build, and that will take time we don’t have. I want more than anything for us to be settled in our new home before the baby comes. But so far, our options just aren’t cutting it.

“This is nice.” My wife is clearly trying to cheer me up in complimenting the wrought iron gate. “Look at the little rose accents.”

“This is the one.” I dig deep for the excitement I started the day with that’s been quickly waning. “I can feel it in my bones.”

“Relax,” she says, patting my thigh. “We don’t have to find a place today.”

I nod, knowing she’s right but also eager to be settled.

Sammi gasps so loudly when the house comes into view, I nearly veer off the road. “Holy shit!”

Li’l Bit gapes out the front dash. “It’s like Prince Eric’s castle.”

“Say what?”

“The Little Mermaid?” She eyes me briefly with disgust before turning back to admire the house.

It’s a Spanish-style estate with a red tile roof. The front is white stucco with gray stone and stained wood accents. The windows are arched to a point, and there are two balconies overlooking a courtyard that features a pond with a fountain at the center.

“You were right. This *is* the one,” my giddy wife proclaims as I help her out of the car and we start making our way toward the house to join Wanda.

“Pump the brakes.” I laugh. “We haven’t even been inside yet.” But I have to admit, what we’ve seen so far is hella impressive. “With the luck we’ve had today we’re liable to find dead bodies hidden in the closets.”

“Funny,” Wanda says, catching the tail end of our conversation. “I truly believe we saved the best for last. This house just came on the market yesterday, and it won’t last long.” She glances around the property before bringing her attention back to us. “For obvious reasons.”

“We’ll take it!” Sammi has apparently lost her fucking mind.

“Let’s take the tour first, and then decide, huh, love?”

She gives me an annoyed glare and sulks. “Fine.”

Our realtor gives my wife an exaggerated wink before starting her spiel. “This Mediterranean-style home was originally built in the 1930s and has remained in the same family for nearly a century.”

“Wow.” I follow her through the gate into the courtyard, letting its history soak in. “Why are they letting it go now?”

“Mr. Cartwright’s great-granddaughter just inherited it after the passing of her father—her last living parent. She’s an only child who’s been residing in New York for more than ten years and has no desire to return to country living.”

We follow her inside through arched double doors into a foyer that features brick floors, an elaborate iron chandelier, exposed wood beams, and cream-colored textured walls.

“If you’ll follow me, I’ll show you to the kitchen.”

We walk through a brick archway on the left side of the foyer into a kitchen that’s about half the size of the one Sammi loved so much in the other house and lacks a lot of the natural light she was obsessed with as well. “Penny for your thoughts?”

“It’s so cozy.” My wife trails her hand along the granite island in the center of the room. “It feels homey, right?”

Her positive reaction has me breathing a huge sigh of relief. “I think so. I love the mixed elements...the exposed wood, the brick.” I move to examine the backsplash. “And I really like the pop of color these patterned tiles bring to the room.”

“Me too.” Sammi walks over to join me, smoothing a hand along my back. “My heart feels happy here.”

“Does it?” I press a kiss to her forehead. “Mine is happy anywhere yours is.”

“Such a smooth talker, Mr. Livingston.”

“Just comes natural.”

We finish the tour, falling more and more in love with the house with every room we visit. The downstairs features a master with an adjoining room that can serve as a nursery to start and be converted to an office years from now when we’re done filling our nest. There are two other bedrooms and three bathrooms downstairs, as well as a living room, den, kitchen, and foyer.

Upstairs there are three more bedrooms and bathrooms, one of which is a second master, perfect for when our parents come to visit.

But it’s the back yard that seals the deal for me.

“This back yard is an entertainer’s paradise,” Wanda says, leading us out through French doors off the kitchen to a veranda the length of the house. It’s fully furnished with lush couches and conversation sets. All the way to the left is an outdoor kitchen fit for a king—that’s me.

“Look at this view.” My wife stares out at the designer pool with stone accents blending it in with the surrounding landscape. There’s a colossal grotto I can’t wait to ravish her in, and a waterslide that would be any kid’s dream. Behind all of that is a pristine lake, the same one Rhett and Nick’s homes are built on.

“It’s incredible,” I say, imagining lazy days spent fishing off that dock. “What’d’ya say, Li’l Momma?”

“I say...” She throws her arms around my neck spreading a whisper of kisses along my collarbone. “Where do we sign, lover boy?”

Chapter SEVENTEEN



Sammi

“Are you sure you don’t want me to fly out there with you to help get you settled into your new home?” Momma lugs the last of my suitcases to the waiting car while I push the one on wheels. I told her Frank and Dane would take care of it, but my mother has never been one to wait on a man.

A well-kept woman, she may be, but a delicate flower, she is not.

“I’m positive.” Bittersweet tears well in my eyes. “I feel bad enough about leaving Daddy. I need you to stay by his side until you can both come together.”

My father really is doing so much better. He’s regaining his color and his strength, but he’s still having chemo multiple times a week and can’t travel. And while I have talked to the doctors myself and all signs point to him eventually making a full recovery, provided his treatments continue to work as well as they have been, it’s still hard as heck to leave him.

But as my father has pointed out many times over the past few weeks, I’m a married woman now, and my place is with my husband.

And he's right. With Lyle is absolutely where I belong. It's where I want to be. I can't keep letting residual fear from Daddy's health scare keep me from living life.

I'm already halfway through this pregnancy at nearly twenty weeks, and Lyle deserves to share in this experience. I want him there to feel the first kicks right alongside me and to watch my belly swell.

It's time.

"Don't forget this," my brother says, holding Maui's carrier away from his body as if the bird could bite through the hard plastic.

"I was coming back inside for that." I glare at Dane, taking my baby from him. "It's okay, Maui." I smooch at his covered form through the see-through panel. "Don't be scared."

Poor little thing is petrified. He's not made a sound since I put him in there. It's unlike him to be so quiet, but he also hasn't ridden in one of these things in nearly eight years, when we first brought him home. So, it makes sense that he'd be unsure about the whole thing.

I set his travel cage on the back seat so I can run back into the house and give my dad a proper goodbye.

"Hey, Sweet Pea." He rocks forward, lowering the footrest on the recliner where he's been dozing. "You all set?"

"Think so." My lip trembles while I try like hell to maintain my composure. I move to lean in and hug him, but he stops me.

"I'm gonna get up and give you and my grandbaby a real send-off." It takes him a solid minute to peel himself out of that chair. Then he slips his arm through mine, just like he did on my wedding day, a gesture that tugs at my heartstrings. "Off we go."

He escorts me to the car, where my mom and brother are still waiting to say their goodbyes.

One by one, they wrap me up tight, offering words of encouragement. Telling me how proud they are. And how

much they'll miss me.

"Why does it feel like I'll never see you guys again?" I ask once I'm situated in the backseat with the window down. My heart feels as if it's being split in two.

"It's a new chapter, Sammi-girl." Momma reaches in to squeeze my hand. "Change is always hard at first, but you're gonna rock it!"

"You call me any time day or night if my buddy ever needs to be put in his place. I'll be on the next plane out to whoop his ass into shape."

Oh, Dane.

"I'll remember."

"Ain't gonna be necessary," Daddy says, shaking his head. The man has quickly become my husband's biggest champion. "Never seen a man look at his girl the way that one looks at you."

"That's a sweet thing to say." A smile pulls at the corner of my mouth while the tears I've barely held at bay silently trickle down my cheeks.

"Oh, Sweet Pea, we sure are gonna miss you around here." Daddy opens my door and leans in for another hug. "You're gonna be just fine. Lyle's gonna take good care of you and that grandbaby of ours."

I nod into his shoulder, breathing in the familiar scent of his aftershave. "I'll be back to visit soon."

"You better," he says, before stepping back and gently closing the car door. "Go spread those wings."

"Okay," I say, smiling out at my family as I swat away the wetness from my cheeks. "Guess we should get going so I don't miss my flight."

"See you soon." There's a crack in Momma's voice that brings forth another wave of emotion from me.

Damn pregnancy hormones.

I hang my head out the window when the car starts rolling, waving like a lunatic until we round the corner and they disappear from view.



“Don’t you even think about opening that door,” Lyle threatens from the car, where he’s retrieving my bags. He wouldn’t let me carry more than my purse and the bird, and I only got the bird because I think Lyle’s a little scared of my precious baby.

My pulse picks up speed as I twist the key in the lock and push it open, taunting him to spring into action—and it works.

My luggage clatters to the ground as he takes off at a sprint to join me at the entrance to our new home.

He’s breathing hard and smiling even harder. “On this twenty-ninth day of October,” he announces like a total nut, as he scoops me into his arms and makes great ceremony of carrying me over the threshold, “we begin the process of christening every room of our marital home.”

“That’s a lot of rooms.” I giggle as he sets me back to my feet, not at all opposed to the idea. My hunger for this man is insatiable.

“If you lose the bird we can start right here in the foyer.” He puts a hand behind his head and begins to thrust his hips in circles, making his semi quite noticeable as it flops around in those strategically planned gray sweats he’s rocking—*yum*.

“As tempting as that sounds, I really need to get him in his cage with food and water. He’s getting depressed from being confined for so long.”

“Fine.” He scowls at Maui playfully. “Let’s go get your little precious situated.”

I follow him to our bedroom, where I’m met with the most unexpected surprise. “This...this is the bed from my Pinterest board!”

He grins. “It is. And that’s the vanity and those are the lamps...”

“How did you do all of this so fast while recording?” I was honestly expecting to spend the first few nights sleeping on a blow-up mattress while shopping for furniture.

“Didn’t take much. All I did was hire an interior designer and tell her to find everything she could from your boards and the closest matches to those she couldn’t.”

“This is incredible!” It’s the exact natural wood bedframe with tufted cream head and footboards I had envisioned. The bedding and pillows are varying shades of creams and whites with light blue and yellow accents. She found everything, down to the bright yellow peonies in a vase resting on the glass-topped bedside tables trimmed in muted gold.

“If there’s anything you want changed, please tell me. I want it to be everything you dreamed.”

“Oh, Lyle.” My eyes start to sting from the influx of emotion. “It’s already so much more.”

Pregnancy is wild. My moods range from hormonal to horny. There’s not much in between. I’m either weeping from my eyes or leaking from my lady bits.

“I had her match Maui’s things as best she could to keep with the ambiance.” He swirls a finger in the air, making him look like a total snob.

I spit out a laugh. “I’m sorry. You just sound so funny using such fancy terms.”

He shakes his head in mock disappointment, pointing me in the direction of said setup that blends so well, in fact, I didn’t even notice the ornate gold cage sitting right there in the corner.

“Maui, look!” I open his carrier and coerce him onto my finger. “You got a new mansion too.” I set him on the perch up top where there’s already water and his favorite food blend waiting.

He instantly perks up, running back and forth along the pole, scoping the place out.

“I think he likes it!”

“I’m glad.” He grips my chin in that delicious way he’s made a habit of doing and kisses me breathless.

I’m literally gasping when he backs away.

“Now open that door.” He points to what will be baby bean’s nursery.

“What did you do?” I ask, my skin prickling with excitement as I walk over and twist the knob.

“Hopefully something that won’t have me sleeping in the pool house on our first night in our new home.”

“That sounds promising...” I give the door a little push, revealing another surprise that instantly has the waterworks flowing. “What? H—How? Lyle...this is perfect!”

“I know we don’t know if it’s a girl or a boy yet, although I have a strong feeling one way.” He briefly sticks out his tongue. “But you wanted the same furniture either way, right? So, I told her to go for it and figured you could personalize it once we know.”

I can hardly catch my breath to speak as I cross the room, running a hand along the wood rail to my dream crib. I clasp a hand to my mouth. Speechless. Utterly speechless.

“I—is this okay?” he asks, no doubt getting nervous at the sight of his pregnant wife sobbing.

I nod. “It’s perfect,” I choke out, making my way over to the plush cream rocker situated near the window. “You even got the light fixture,” I notice when I take a seat, cupping my bump, and rocking baby bean for the very first time.

It’s a huge globe made of wicker, similar in color to the rest of the wood in the room. I wanted a nice, neutral pallet. A soothing environment for our baby, regardless of the gender. And did he ever deliver.

“Can’t take too much credit,” he says, beaming. “It was all Angelica.”

“So, you’re telling me all I have to do is make Pinterest boards for the rest of the rooms, and it’s just going to happen?”

His broad shoulders rise and fall in a shrug. “Pretty much.”

“Wow,” I say, rising from my seat. “And they say money can’t buy happiness.”

He barks out a laugh. “You’re a mess.” He reaches for my arm, pulling me flush to his chest.

I crane my neck, looking up at my prince. “I’m your mess.”

“Damn right you are.”

“Was your heart set on starting in the foyer?” I ask, nibbling my lower lip.

I feel his cock thicken against my belly at what he must know I’m suggesting. “You had some place else in mind?”

I rub my bare foot along the fluffy rug. “I was thinking we could start right here...”

Chapter

EIGHTEEN



“Get up, woman.” I toss one of the many throw pillows from the floor at her still-sleeping form. “We have to be at Rhett’s in an hour.”

The lump in the bed shifts, accompanied by a groan. She rips the sheet away from her face and hits me with a pathetic pout. “We could just treat ourselves to another room...”

“Li'l Bit, you're out of control!” I shake my head, laughing. “We've already christened most of the downstairs and we moved in two days ago.”

“So?” She sits up, letting the fabric slink to her waist, exposing two tantalizing mounds of flesh, a move I guarantee was intentional.

“So,” I say, crawling in from the foot of the bed to motorboat those voluptuous tatas. “I never thought I'd say this”—I suck one of her nipples into my mouth, biting down gently before nipping at her chin and her nose—“But my dick might actually fall off if we don't give him a little rest.”

“Fine.” She slinks out of my arms and off the bed, gloriously naked, her sex tousled hair is sticking out in every direction. I’m beginning to have regrets about turning her down as she makes her way to the bathroom.

“Fuck, my wife is hot.” I’m practically drooling as I ogle the sensual sway of her hips.

She glances down at her tummy and frowns. “Your wife looks like she has a beer gut.”

“Hottest little beer belly I ever did see.” I give my brows a waggle to emphasize the compliment.

Sure would be nice to know the gender of said belly. Stubborn little shit kept its legs closed all through the anatomy scan yesterday. At this rate it’ll be baby bean until it pops out. Hell, we’ll be so used to addressing it as such, might even make the birth certificate.

She gives her eyes an exaggerated roll. “Beer guts are not sexy,” she says, before shutting herself away in the bathroom.

“Maybe not,” I agree, getting up and stalking to the door to yell through it. “But your hot little body incubating our child is about the sexiest fucking thing I’ve ever seen.”

The door cracks open just enough for her head to fit through. “You’re the hottest thing I’ve ever seen,” she says, kissing the tip of my nose. “Now go get ready so we can get our Halloween on.” She gives me a flirty little wink before shutting the door in my face.

This girl has no clue what she does to me.

For some reason, the rounder she gets the more obsessed with her body I become. And it’s not just some kinky pregnancy fetish—although I do fantasize about doing very kinky things to this woman. It’s an obsession specific to her. I’ve been around pregnant chicks in the past. Hot ones, too. They’ve never tempted me in the least. But Li’l Bit growing our child just does something to me at a primal level.

I dress in a pair of worn denim and the tee I purchased to compliment hers. It’s white, with Darth Vader’s face and the words “I am the father” screen-printed in black. More than this

Halloween party, more than trick or treat with my favorite kiddos—what I’m looking forward to most is seeing our picture blasted across headlines in the morning.

“You sure about this?” Sammi asks, coming out of the bathroom in her Yoda shirt that says “Pregnant, I am.”

“One hundred percent.” I wave her over to where I’ve just assembled the tripod for our first photo op of the night. “Nothing like using statement tees to...well, make a statement.”

“Have I told you lately that I love you?” She gazes up at me, her vibrant blue eyes sparkling with mirth.

“So many times I’ve lost count,” I tease, kissing her cheek so I don’t smear her makeup. “But I’ll never tire of hearing it.”

“Wait...Is this Anika approved?” There’s a hint of terror in her voice.

“I’m not about to start running my wardrobe by my manager.”

“Oh jeez.”

“It’ll be fine.” I tug her to my side. “Big cheesy grins first,” I say, pointing to where I need her to look. Using the remote in my hand I snap a few of those. Then we move on to her hands on the belly, and my fingers pointed at the wording on my shirt. We make silly faces and kissy faces and then it really is time to go.

Sammi’s still a bundle of nerves as we make our way to the golf cart and head out. “What exactly are you doing with these pictures?”

“Check out my Insta,” I say, chuckling.

She whips her phone out of her purse rushing to the app. “Oh, Lyle...” Sammi brings a hand to her head, appearing to get a headache. “We better not get in trouble for this.”

“Trust me?” I help her down from the cart when we arrive at Rhett and Korie’s place.

“About everything else?” She nods. “Sure, but when it comes to CEO Barbie? Not a chance.”

“Speak of the she-devil,” I croon as Annie comes traipsing down the drive in what looks to be a cave woman costume.

“Hey Cuz!” Li'l Bit is doing way too much, waving that girl over like they're best friends.

“What is wrong with the two of you?” Anika shakes her head, laughing. That's the first sign someone's been doing us a favor and pumping the girl with happy juice.

“How long ya got?” I ask, leaning in to give her a one-armed hug.

“Not long enough.”

When she greets my wife with a bear hug, I know the girl is feeling no pain. “You two are just lucky the comments are blowing up the right way.” Her pointed finger volleys between the two of us.

“So...you aren't mad?” Sammi gnaws on her thumbnail.

“Nooo,” she slurs, waving the thought away. “Pshhh. I don't get mad at *everything*. Just, you know, the stuff that has the potential to ruin lives. And everyone already knows you're knocked up and it ain't his but, like, it really is.”

Li'l Bit looks at me, wide-eyed, and all I can do is shrug.

“There you are, Jane!” Aiden comes sprinting over from the backyard wearing a damn loin cloth.

Sammi nods, piecing their costumes together. “Tarzan and Jane.”

“Hey guys.” My near-nude friend balks at our attire. “It's fucking Halloween. The slut, slut, sluttiest time of the year. You two couldn't find something sexier than jeans and T-shirts?”

“Well,” Li'l Bit says, laughing. “We're going trick or treating with children, and I'm kinda knocked up.”

“Excuses.” He tosses his long hair in that annoying way he does. “You can't even tell you're pregnant yet, and I've seen

plenty of slutty pregnant chicks.”

“Knock it off,” I warn when Rhett and Korie round the corner dressed up like Mario and Yoshi, toting Hadley along as Princess Peach.

Right behind them, Nick, Raven, and the twins make their appearance as Fred, Wilma, Bam-Bam, and Pebbles.

I give Nick a nod, trying not to laugh. “Nice dress.”

“It’s a caveman kilt.” The glare that accompanies his bullshit prevents me from ragging him any further.

“Cute shirts.” Korie sticks her thumb in the air, giving my wife and I her seal of approval. “Nothing like a not-so-subtle middle finger to the paps. I approve this message.”

While Li’l Bit chats with the women, I squat down to say hello to my pint-sized besties. “I’m diggin’ the bone in your hair, Ava.”

“Thank you, Uncle Lyle,” the almost four-year-old sings. “And I love the scary man on your shirt.”

“Thanks, princess.”

“I can see Uncle Aiden’s booty,” she whispers, loud enough for her father to hear, who shoots the resident dumbass a scathing look.

“Yeah.” I nod, glancing over and cringing at the back of his costume, which is little more than butt floss. “Don’t get too close in case he farts.”

She shrieks. “Ewww!”

“I’m serious. Have you ever heard of a shart?”

She shakes her little head.

“It’s when you shh—*poop*,” I correct when I feel Raven’s eyes lasering in on me. “When you poop and fart at the same time.”

“I thought that was diarrhea.” She crosses her little arms, calling bullshit.

I shake my head. “Diarrhea is runny. A shart is more like a poof of poop. Just like poop crumbs that accompany the fart.”

“Lyle!” Raven hip-checks me in the arm, causing me to fall back onto my butt. “That’s not appropriate.”

“Did you ever sharted before, Momma?” the little blonde asks, taking her mother’s hand.

I’m waiting with rapt fascination for Ray’s response when all hell breaks loose. There’s a loud “Bam! Bam!” followed by Aiden releasing a high-pitched scream.

I might’ve missed the action, but there’s no mistaking what just happened when I see Alex holding his club proudly to his chest and Aiden cupping his loin cloth to his junk.

“Alex!” Nick tries to reprimand his kid but can’t stop laughing. Everyone but Tarzan himself is in absolute hysterics.

When the laughter finally starts to wind down, I overhear my wife suggestively tell Anika she should take him inside and kiss his owie, and I fucking lose it all over again.

“Oh, God, no.” Anika couldn’t look more repulsed.

“Am I missing something?” Sammi glances around, clearly looking for someone to explain, but that would require one of us being able to catch our breath long enough to speak.

It’s Aiden who finally peels himself off the ground and cups a hand to my wife’s shoulder. “How do I say this eloquently?” He pinches his chin giving it some thought. “Annie here prefers the taste of Cristal.” He nods and winks.

And my wife’s face turns red as a tomato. “Really?” She looks at the two of them in their coordinating costumes. “But—Wow... Okay.” Her head shakes. “I just thought you two...”

“Just friends,” Anika offers, looking as if she’s chewing on vomit.

“A little more than friends,” Aiden counters, pinching his fingers together.

“He wishes.” Annie shrugs away when he tries to sling an arm over her shoulders.

“Aw, don’t be like that, Pixie. We don’t need to put a label on this fire that burns between us.”

“We’re friends,” she echoes her earlier sentiment. “And maybe not even that for long if you don’t cut this shit out.”

“Aren’t friends apposed to like each other?” Alex asks, reminding us all that there are children present.

“Yeah.” Aiden squats to his level, ready to confront his attacker. “They sure don’t club each other in the di—*twigs and berries.*”

The miniature version of Nick shrugs. “You can’t be mad, Uncle Aiden. It’s what my character does. BAM! BAM!”

“Hear that, Annie?” He rises back to his feet, pointing at Alex. “You can’t be mad when I grab you and lug you around under my arm.” He shrugs. “It’s what my character does.”

“How ‘bout we hop on some golf carts and take these kiddos huntin’ for some candy, huh?” Raven grabs each of the twins by the hand and heads for their cart.

Aiden throws his hands out when Nick and Rhett take off. “Who are we riding with?”

“Great,” Sammi groans. “Looks like we’re stuck with the bickering “not couple.”

Chapter

NINETEEN



Sammi

“Lyle!” I shout, dropping the curling iron on the bathroom counter in my excitement and rushing off to find him. “Lyle!” My voice echoes through our massive home.

It’s so much space for two people, but it’s not like we could move to just any neighborhood. We needed the security and privacy a place like Oak Manor provides. Plus, I must admit it’s nice having Korie and Raven just a short golf cart ride away. The two have been so welcoming.

Don’t get me wrong, Lyle is amazing, but sometimes you just need a little girl talk. Our budding friendship has done wonders to soften the blow of leaving my best friends behind.

“Hey!” He comes to a skidding halt on the kitchen tile right in front of me, gasping for breath.

My heart starts walloping triple time at the sight of him. He’s shirtless, and there are beads of sweat trickling along the ridges of his abdomen. *Holy moly. I should interrupt his midday workouts more often.*

“What’s wrong?” His voice is fraught with alarm, while I can barely remember my own name.

“Huh?” I lift my gaze to his worried face. It takes a ridiculous amount of effort to fight through this lusty haze and try to remember what I summoned him for.

He snaps twice. “Focus, Li’l Bit.” Then, using the towel slung around his neck, he dabs at his brow while grinning to himself.

“The baby!” I say, reminded when I feel a nudge down below.

“Is something wrong?” His amused expression quickly vanishes.

“No.” I shake my head. “Nothing like that. Put your hand right here.” I press his palm firmly to my growing bump. “Did you feel that?”

He frowns. “I don’t feel anything.”

“You have to push really hard and concentrate.” I grip his first two fingers and dig in there.

“I don’t want to hurt him.” He attempts to pull away, but I tighten my grip. “Or you, for that matter.”

“You won’t. Just be patient.”

I study his face for a reaction. A few nudges go by, and he doesn’t so much as flinch to indicate he noticed. I’m trying not to get frustrated because the books say your partner should be able to feel movement between twenty-one and twenty-four weeks. I’m twenty-three now and so far, nada.

I’m about to throw in the proverbial towel and head back to the room to finish getting ready when his eyes go wide with amazement.

“I’m pretty sure I felt something.” The thrill in his voice brings tears to my eyes.

Hell, everything lately brings freaking tears to my eyes. But this is super special. This man is giving my child a father he or she wouldn’t otherwise have had. And he couldn’t be

more involved or genuinely excited about it. Lyle constantly makes me feel like the luckiest girl in the entire world.

I nod and smile, digging his fingers a little deeper in hopes that baby bean will push back.

It works.

“Okay, I know I felt it that time.” His smile is blinding. “Wow...” He starts to poke and prod without my insistence. “He’s really strong.”

“I hope you won’t be too disappointed when it turns out to be a girl.”

“You know me better than that.” He reaches out, attempting to pull me in for a sweaty embrace.

“Uh, I just showered and dried this unruly mane. Keep your stink to yourself, sir.” I bat his arms away half-heartedly.

“Whatever...you love my man stench.” He returns his hand to my stomach. “And I promise, I’ll be happy no matter what. I just really enjoy sparring with you.”

“That’s what I thought.” But hearing him say it helps ease that niggling worry. “I feel the same. I just wish we knew so I could start shopping!”

“I’ll tell ya one thing, if it is a girl, she’s already got the modesty thing down.” He chuckles. “This baby either really enjoys fucking with us already or has a natural inclination to keeping its legs closed.”

“See...” I taunt. “Definitely a girl. There isn’t a male alive that doesn’t like flaunting his peeper.”

My husband bobs his head just slightly, reluctantly agreeing with that assessment. “Yeah...He’s definitely fucking with us.”

“You are so deep in denial.” I rub a hand over my bump, forgetting for a minute that we have somewhere to be. The Booze & Bad Decisions soft opening is in just a few hours. “I need to go finish my hair and makeup.” I slither a finger along his chest through the trails of sweat. “You should probably hop

in the shower soon.” I grimace at the wetness, rubbing it between my thumb and pointer finger.

“What’s with the face? You were just looking at me like you wanted to lick every drop from my body.”

I cringe at the thought. “The moment has passed. Now you’re gross.” I poke my tongue out before spinning around and heading back to finish making myself presentable.

He’s hot on my heels. “You’re lucky we don’t have another couple of hours for you to start over on your hair and makeup, cuz I’d show you just how gross I am.”

I think back to the dirty things we did in that grotto last night and my pussy clenches. “I think I have a pretty good idea.” I wink at him through the bathroom mirror while watching him strip off his shorts and underwear.

He sends me a knowing smile when he catches me with my lip clenched between my teeth, my eyes mesmerized by him in all his naked glory.

“Don’t burn your hair, love.” Chuckling he steps into the shower while I quickly unclamp the iron from my locks.

I’m hopelessly besotted with this man. “Your sex appeal is becoming a hazard to my health, Mr. Livingston.”

His answering laughter dies out under the spray of the water.

Lyle and I decide to wear complimenting outfits, because there’s a strong likelihood at least some media will be allowed access to the event in order to start buzz circulating around the opening of the club in two weeks.

A lot of thought goes into ensuring we don’t clash but also don’t look like we’re intentionally twinning. I, for one, am quite impressed with the finished product.

My husband looks scumdidlyumptious in a pair of tailored jeans and a red and navy flannel. He leaves it untucked, with the top few buttons open and his signature brown leather jacket over the top. A pair of square toe boots completes the effortless country boy image he’s shooting for.

I opt for a white, tiered minidress, belted just above the belly with brown leather to match my knee-high boots. A coordinating cropped denim jacket completes my outfit. I went full glam with the makeup and styled my hair in big barrel curls because I know how much Lyle loves it when I wear it down.

After adding a pair of large gold hoops to my ears and a few bangles on my wrist, I'm ready to roll

"Look at you." Lyle slowly peruses my body when I step out of the bathroom. "You're gorgeous."

"Why, thank you, hunky." I throw my arms around him, and he buries his lips in the spot between my neck and shoulder. It's his go-to spot when I'm all made up and drives me absolutely wild. "If you don't stop that," I say, squirming in his hold, "we're gonna be late."

He releases me from his clutches then slaps a hand to my ass. "Rain check?"

"Of course." I flutter my sooty lashes before grabbing my purse from the foot of the bed and linking my arm through his. "Let's go party."

Frank stops right in front of Booze & Bad Decisions to let us out, handing us off to Reginald before heading around back to park the car. The entrance is roped off, with two beefy bouncers standing guard. It's all fancy and official.

They're in the midst of turning a group of women away as we approach.

Silly girls. The sign clearly says, "Soft opening, entry permitted by invitation only."

Lyle pauses for a minute to check in with his new employees to see how things are going before we continue into the club.

I nearly pee my panties when we walk into a room filled with people shouting and shaking noisemakers. A cascade of black and gold confetti rains down on us from the second-floor balcony. "What's happening?"

“No, they didn’t.” Laughing, Lyle taps my shoulder and points to the huge banner at the top of the bar that says “Booze + Bad Decisions = Baby.” “This is awesome.”

“We decided to make the soft opening double as you and Lyle’s baby shower.” Raven scampers over in her heels to give me a hug. “Believe it or not, Anika planned the whole thing.”

“Really?” I say, my eyes combing the room until they land on hers. “You would organize my baby shower in a bar!” I shout, feigning offense.

She shrugs and laughs. Our relationship is slowly becoming less strained.

“Yeah,” Aiden says, coming out of the woodwork. “We’re real classy around here, sweet cheeks. Get used to it.”

“Did you know about this?” I twist my head to question my husband while Aiden squeezes the breath out of me.

He shakes his head, smiling ear to ear. “Just as shocked as you are.”

I scan the room, taking in all the faces that have quickly become familiar since moving here. The guys and their wives, of course. Anika. The security team and road crew and their wives. Then my eyes land on my three closest friends standing off to the side, and I do a double take. My heart nearly leaps out of my chest with pure joy.

Abandoning my husband, I run over and say hello. “What are y’all doing here?”

“Anika invited us.” Darci beams.

“We wouldn’t have missed your baby shower for the world.” Margo immediately reaches out to touch the bump. “You’re really starting to pop, chick.”

“Hush,” Lizzie’s chastises. “She looks amazing.”

“I can’t believe you guys are here.” I fan my eyes, trying to dry the mounting tears before they drag mascara down my face. Once I’ve regained my composure, I bring my besties over to meet my new friends.

They instantly hit it off. Even Anika is pleasant. Guess you only get the royal treatment from that one when you're dating a member of the band.

"What's your glass say?" I take Darci's mimosa from her hand, smiling at the inscription. "Poppin' Bottles" on one side and "Showering baby Livingston" on the other.

"Cute, right?" Korie gushes. "The guys got Koozies that say, 'There's a baby brewing.'" She snorts.

"This is too much." I laugh when I see the boys and Anika engaged in an intense game of "Binkie Pong." "Who knew alcohol themed baby showers were a thing?"

"If there's something booze themed, this gang'll find it, all right," Lizzie muses.

"What are you looking at?" I ask, following my sister-in-law's line of sight. "Or should I say who?"

"Oh, my God. Stop staring." Her cheeks flame.

"You got a thing for Frank, bestie?"

"Shut up." She elbows me in the arm, tearing her eyes away from where he's posted near the door.

I throw my hands out in surrender. "Just saying, I could probably arrange a date."

"Don't bother." She sighs.

"Why not? Frank's great."

"He is," she agrees. "But he's also permanently stationed in Nashville now that the band is, and I'm in California." She shrugs. "Not really into the whole long-distance thing. I have the kids back home, and my parents would die if I moved them away. It's just not a good idea to start something that could never go anywhere."

"Good dick is always a good idea," Raven offers, listening intently to our conversation. "But remember, ladies." She points up to the sign above head. "Booze plus bad decisions makes babies."

“Speaking of,” Nick says, coming up behind his wife, “have another, pretty girl.” He swaps her empty glass out for a fresh mimosa.

“Are you trying to get me drunk and take advantage of me, Mr. Potter?”

“Mmmhmm...” He nibbles along the curve of her neck, giving *me* the damn goosies.

“Woo,” Darci says fanning herself with a stack of napkins. “I don’t know about you,” she says to Raven. “But I think I just got pregnant.”

Margo nods, and holds out her glass. “Hear hear!”

“What are we toasting to?” Ray asks, her glass hovering in the air.

“To you and this fine man here reproducing.” The redheaded minx rolls her tongue.

Nick reaches around his wife forcibly tapping her glass with Margo’s. “We’ll drink to that.”

Raven’s head whips around in his direction. “The hell we will!”

“Testing, testing,” Anika says into the mic, putting an end to the pregnancy negotiations. “At this time, we’d like to call the parents up to open gifts!”

Lyle and I share a smile before walking up and taking the chairs in the center of the stage.

“You can open mine first since it was my idea.” Anika waves a hand at someone backstage. Her enthusiasm surprises the heck out of me.

Reginald comes out with an enormous wicker basket filled with neutral-colored baby items and sets it on the floor in front of us.

“This is so much.” My chest squeezes as my husband and I begin simultaneously holding up items. There are muslin receiving blankets in every shade of white, cream, and tan. A lamb lovie so soft, I can’t help but rub it on my cheek. The

most adorable hand knit, stuffed giraffe ever made. Neutral sleepers and bibs and burp cloths. And... “Bows?”

Annie shrugs. “Just in case...if not you can hold on to them for the next one.” She winks.

Thank you, I mouth before continuing. Beneath all the cloth items are bath products, and diaper creams, pacifier holders, and books galore.

“Oh my gosh.” I take the box of Kleenex Darci runs up to deliver and begin sopping up my tears. “Thank you so much, Anika.”

“You’re welcome.” One of those rare but radiant smiles graces her face. “Just be warned—I don’t do diapers or throw up. Or crying!” She cringes. “I just like looking at them and dressing ’em up.”

I snort. “Noted.”

“She’s not kidding,” Korie says, racing to the stage so she can be next. She stands there waiting eagerly while I rip the paper off. “The Baby Rocker LEVO is a must!” She starts pointing out all the features on the fancy baby seat. “Hadley napped in this thing for months!”

“Thanks so much, Kor.”

She gives me a hug then exits stage left.

One after another, our friends come up bearing gifts for our little one. An Ergobaby carrier, more blankets, and so many diapers. Teethers, including an enormous rubber giraffe called Sophie that’s apparently all the rage. A handmade wood rocking horse that will match perfectly with the neutral tones of our nursery.

“Who did this?” I ask when I open a NoseFrida Snotsucker without a card.

Darci’s maniacal laughter instantly gives her away.

“I will not be sucking baby bean’s boogers through a tube. Thankyouverymuch.”

“What in the redneck...” Lyle snatches the box from my hand and literally starts gagging before he finishes reading the back. “Darci...” He shakes his head. “You’re wrong for that.”

Just as my husband and I stand to give our heartfelt thank you speech to the group as a whole, Aiden comes running up with a gift bag. He hands it over to Lyle, bringing a hand to his chest, huffing for breath. “Saved the best for last.”

Oh Lord.

Lyle reaches in the bag and pulls out a book. “The Pregnancy Kama Sutra,” he reads, then jumps up and gives his buddy a one-armed man-hug-back-slap. “Bro, I can always count on you to put my needs first.”

“From your former wingman.” Aiden beats a fist to his chest. “I gotchu!”

“Let me see that.” I snatch it out of my husband’s hand, flipping through a few pages. “This is...ummm...explicit.”

“I expect a full report on each position.” Aiden wags a bossy finger at me.

I scoff. “There’s no way we’re trying all of these.”

“How ’bout a little wager?” Lyle has that look on his face that clearly says he’s up to no good.

“I’m listening...”

“If the baby turns out to be a boy, I can pick any position from that book, and you can’t say no.” He raises his brows. “If it’s a girl, the choice is yours.”

“Bet,” I say holding out my hand to shake on it.

“Ooo, hoo, hoo, hooo,” my husband sings, reaching back. “Better start prepping that no-no hole now, love.”

“Funny you should mention that.” Aiden hands Lyle another gift bag. “It’s cock rings and butt plugs and such.”

What the boozy baby shower hell have I just gotten myself in to?

Chapter TWENTY



“How’s it going in here?”

I cease playing at the welcome interruption. “Good.” A huge smile splits my face as I look over at my sexy wife, lurking in the doorway of the soundproof rehearsal room.

I decided to come in early to make use of the practice space at Booze & Bad Decisions, since our home studio is still in the works. Sammi and I were the first to arrive, but the staff have slowly been trickling in, preparing for tonight’s grand opening. This place is going to be a complete madhouse.

I can’t wait.

“Is it okay if I stay and watch?”

“Of course.” I urge her inside with a tilt of my head. “Close that door behind you, babe.”

It swiftly clicks shut, followed by the scrape of the lock as it slips into place. My pulse starts thumping over the implication of that sound. My girl came here for a hell of a lot more than a private concert.

The little seductress slinks over to where I'm standing with my foot perched on the amp. "I've always loved watching you play." Her voice is low and raspy, her eyes full of fire. "Remember when I used to watch you in your garage for hours after school?"

"I do." I clear my throat, picking up on a hint of mischief as I stare into those bottomless blue orbs.

She lifts a hand to my nape, her delicate touch causing the hairs to stand on end. "It used to make me so hot."

"Did it?" My dick rises to attention, becoming uncomfortably tight in these concert jeans. I take the fingers still clutching the pick in my right hand and tip her chin up.

"Yes." Her response is breathy.

I lean forward, running my tongue over the seam of her lips. "I knew."

She sucks in a breath.

"Just like I know that pretty pussy's dripping for me right now."

Her eyes flutter closed as she slowly nods, confirming my assumption. "Want a taste?" She bites the pick, snatching it from my fingers and spitting it to the floor as she guides my hand beneath her denim miniskirt.

"Fuck," she moans, clutching my shoulders and buckling at the knees when I pass a finger along her slit, coating it in her arousal.

"Where are your panties, ma'am?"

"In my purse." She smiles sheepishly. "Took them off before I came in here."

"That's some confidence." My tone is teasing. In truth, I love that she possesses such blind faith that she can count on me to tend to her needs.

"Mmmhmm," she squeaks as I make another swipe through her slick folds, eliciting a full body chill to flow

through her. She's so responsive to my touch. It's a boost my ego doesn't need but greedily feeds on just the same.

I lock eyes with my wife's before bringing the digit to my mouth and sucking it clean. *Fuck, that's good.*

A delicate moan escapes through her slightly parted lips as she stares wantonly. There's no hiding the fact that she's turned on as she brazenly watches me sample her dessert.

"Sit." The lone word is a firm command, one she's all too eager to oblige. Her ravenous eyes scan the mostly empty room.

"Where?"

I tap my foot on the speaker. "Right here."

Without an ounce of hesitation, she perches on the edge of the box.

"Close your eyes, love."

Once she complies, I start the intro to the next track, slow and low, building in intensity as the tempo picks up. Heat surges to my dick as I watch her cleavage trembling with the vibration.

I continue to play, watching with rapt fascination as her head rolls back and soft moans begin to spill from her red-painted lips.

"Unbutton your top for me, angel." My voice is raw with unfettered need.

Resting back on one hand, she brings the other to the front of her blouse, slowly popping each of the little pearl buttons open.

"Fuck, that's hot," I growl, picking the strings while she desperately begins grinding down on the speaker. Her full breasts bounce, nearly spilling over the top of her black lace bra as she undulates those sexy little hips.

"Lyle," she whimpers, past the point of desperation. She's begging for relief that I have every intention to deliver. *But not yet.*

I haven't had my fill. This right here...this is my ultimate fantasy brought to life. Countless times I've imagined her just like this, splayed over my amp while I play her to completion. Every note that vibrates up my arm is simultaneously reverberating through her pussy.

She's my marionette and I her puppet master, bringing her to life with a pluck of my string.

"Touch it," I urge, reaching the climax of the song. "Play with your pussy, baby. I wanna watch you while you watch me."

Eyes locked to mine, she hikes her skirt, spreading her legs so I have a clear view of her rolling her fingers over her swollen nub.

"No one can hear you," I pant, reminding her she's free to let lose. "Let me hear you."

I play harder, thrusting into my bass while watching her pump two fingers in and out of her slick center. "Ffff—uck..." The profanity rips from her chest. Loud and uninhibited, she hits a crescendo as she rocks into her own hand.

"Pop those tits out for me, Li'l Bit." My voice is pure gravel.

She lifts them out of the cups. Her nipples are rosy and fully extended, begging for attention.

"Fuck," I growl, setting my bass aside and dropping to my knees. My blood is on fire as I crawl between her parted thighs. "Tweak those nipples," I encourage, blowing on her clit before sucking it into my mouth.

I spread her lower lips apart with two fingers, lapping up every drop of her arousal while she grinds into my face.

"I want you to come too." Her voice is a panting plea as she grips two fists full of my hair and pulls. "Come in me, please. I want to feel you dripping inside me while you're on that stage tonight." She moans loudly while I bite down on her clit, rocking into my face at a frantic pace.

“I want...” She loses the ability to speak when I add a finger to the mix, pumping it in and out of her pussy while flitting my tongue over her tender flesh. “I want the evidence of this moment soaking my panties, reminding me who you belong to while watching those girls toss theirs at you on stage.”

With a savage growl, I rise to my knees. My muscles tense as I rip the button of my jeans open, lower the zipper, and wrench my erection out.

Lining up our centers, I slam into her dripping pussy in one hard thrust. Her warm walls tighten around my cock, squeezing me with a vice grip. Slowly her pussy starts pulsing around me, caressing my shaft with a velvet touch.

I dig my fingers into her ass cheeks, gripping her while grinding deep.

“Yes!” she screams, bucking her hips when I hit just the right spot. “God, Lyle, Oh, yeah—harder.”

The sight of her fingers pinching her nipples, still shiny from playing with her pussy has me ready to bust.

It’s a struggle, but I refrain, studying her facial expressions, watching and waiting to unleash fully until her entire body is trembling with her impending release.

Only then do I let go, pounding rhythmically into her, spurred on by her passionate screams.

Fiery heat travels through my shaft. Like a coiled spring, my muscles contract, as I battle against nature in a fight to hold out until her climax hits. She clenches around me, moaning and thrashing, begging me to fall with her.

Sweet relief fires off in spurts as we tumble together in perfect harmony. The first one hard and fast, each subsequent gush waning in intensity.

Spent, I fall to my back, bringing her with me, my dick still buried to the hilt.

I’m lost in a state of complete bliss while she slowly rocks over me, milking every drop of her orgasm. She rides out

every wave until, thoroughly sated, she collapses on my chest.

We lay there on the carpet, still joined, our hearts beating to the same erratic rhythm. There's no sound apart from our labored breaths and the occasional smooch of our lips.

"How bad is it?" she finally asks, picking her head up so I can assess the damage to her makeup.

I swipe a thumb beneath her lip, picking up a little runaway lipstick. "Your face still looks great... Might wanna do something with this though..." I make a point of trying to comb my fingers through her hair. They get stuck about midway down.

"I'm getting off now," she warns, hiking her skirt all the way up as not to get any mess on it before easing up and off.

She retrieves the package of wet wipes from her purse, passing me a few before cleaning herself up and slipping back into her panties.

"Here." She tries to hand me another wad of wipes. "You should probably clean your mouth and chin."

"What for?" I goad.

Her eyes shut and she shakes her head. "So you don't smell like my vagina on stage."

I scrunch my nose as if considering it. "Nah," I finally say, puckering my lips and taking a long whiff. "Think I'll leave it..."



"How you doin' tonight, Nashville?"

The packed house goes wild in response to Rhett's intro.

"That's good," he answers. "Well, we're doing real good too. Super excited you've all come out to celebrate the grand opening of our new stomping grounds."

He pauses for a series of screams and cat calls before continuing. "As you know, me and the guys have been doing this gig for a while now, out on the road." He turns to face the

band in silent acknowledgment. “Don’t worry, we aren’t planning to sell the tour buses just yet.” He winks. “But we certainly look forward to scaling back. It means everything to us to have your support in this new endeavor.”

“Hell yeah!” Aiden shouts into his mic. “Bottoms up, bitchessss.” He flings his whiskey glass into the air.

My eyes immediately search for Anika in the crowd, expecting to find smoke billowing from her ears after the stink she pulled about me signing off on my statement with that exact phrasing.

Not gonna lie; I kinda wanna have Sammi tit-punch her when I see the megawatt smile on her face.

My irritation, however, is quickly replaced with a burst of adrenaline when Nick takes that as his cue to count us off. There’s something about that four count that instantly flips a switch. It transports us all to another dimension, where we become one unit...a synchronized heartbeat.

I start out in the back near the drums, where Nick and I set the rhythm.

Front and center are Rhett on vocals and guitar, and Aiden just to his right on keys and backup vocals.

I’ve never been very good at keeping a low profile like your stereotypical bassist. In auditions, that’s what set me apart from the rest. I don’t just play music; I live and breathe it. It embodies me heart and soul. And I leave it all on that stage.

The Rhett Taylor Band is known for our high energy shows. If there’s one thing you can count on, it’s that we’ll show up to entertain.

By the time that first chorus hits, I’m rocking it in my signature spot, just to Rhett’s left. We feed off each other, playing to the crowd.

I keep time with my instrument with effortless ease while making eyes at the pretty girls in the audience. One can never underestimate a well-timed wink here and a smirk there. As a unit, we’ve mastered the art of flirting while performing.

Aiden starts a synchronized clap with the crowd during the chorus of our twangy anthem, “Pour Judgment.”

And while Rhett belts out the emotion-filled lyrics to our most recent hit, “Safe in These Arms,” I lock eyes with my beautiful wife, softly singing along, promising that no matter what challenges life may bring, these arms will be her haven.

The sight of her tears shakes me to my core. It’s a damn good thing it’s our last song of the night.

After Rhett’s closing speech, I shuck off my instrument and jump out into the crowd with my sights set on my girl.

She’s laughing with tears pouring down her cheeks when I grip her face in my hands and devour her salty lips.

The crowd goes nuts, but I barely notice, too keyed up on adrenaline. Too intoxicated by this woman. “I love you,” I say through a jumble of ravenous tongues. “So much, Li’l Bit.”

“I love you.” She laughs into my mouth. “We should stop. We’re making a hell of a scene.”

“All right, Romeo.” Anika parts the crowd shaking her head as she makes her way over to hand me a beer. “I’d say you more than earned this.”

“Thanks.” I take a long swig, downing more than half the bottle in one gulp.

“I was a little worried about how the crowd would interact with you, knowing you’re married now, but it didn’t seem to be an issue, judging by all of the thongs on that stage.”

“Told ya.” I puff out my chest. “I’m so good I make bitches forget their morals.”

“I can’t with you.” She rolls her eyes. “Go join the guys behind the bar and sign some autographs, huh?” Boss lady puts a hand on my back, nudging me forward.

“You got it.” I give her a salute and place a final peck to my wife’s lips.

“Wait,” Sammi says, yanking me back. She pulls my head down and takes a deep inhale near my lips. Her entire body

shivers. “It gets me so hot, smelling myself on you.”

“Had me sportin’ wood all night.”

She giggles, and Anika gags.

“Gross.” My manager gives me a firm shove this time.
“Go!”

Chapter TWENTY-ONE



Sammi

“The Rhett Taylor Band, everybody!” Helen Generous waves a hand, showcasing the band who are already waiting on stage but are only just coming into view as the velvet curtain lifts.

While she dances a little jig around the studio on the way to her chair, the guys stand and wave to the audience. The incessant flirts make a point to catch the air kisses the ladies are throwing at them and nail them with a series of panty-melting winks. The crowd goes wild. It feels like we’re at a concert rather than on daytime television.

“So, it’s been nearly two weeks since the Booze & Bad Decisions grand opening in Nashville,” Helen Generous says to the guys while waving them back into their seats as her intro music fades out. “How are you feeling?”

They all look at one another, silently trying to decide among themselves who’s going to answer.

The girls and I, seated in the front row of the audience, hold a collective breath when it appears Aiden’s going to be the one to take it. You just never know what’s going to come

out of his mouth. Thankfully most of the fans tend to find his crass sense of humor endearing rather than offensive.

“We’re feelin’ fan-fuggin-tastic.” His teeth clamp down on his lower lip and he gives his hair a flirty little flip, making an obvious attempt to seduce the camera. “We’ve played two sold-out shows so far with another planned for this coming Saturday night.”

She nods. “You sure seem to be enjoying yourself up there, Mr. Addams.”

“You know...” He scrubs a hand over the scruff on his chin. “Life’s too short not to.”

The woman looks out at the audience and shrugs as if to say, “Touché.” Her guests respond in kind, nodding and whispering their agreement.

She refocuses her attention on Aiden. “All right now, this one’s specifically for you.” Helen flips to another note card.

He sits up taller and rubs his hands together like he’s trying to spark a fire. “I’m ready.”

“With the rest of the band members all married with children—or in Lyle’s case, with one on the way—are you feeling the pressure to settle down?”

His handsome face screws up in disgust. “Absolutely not, Ms. Helen.”

I can’t help but laugh because the man looks like he just got a whiff of shit.

“I feel like I still have so much to offer the female population.”

Helen snorts behind her stack of cue cards before quickly composing herself.

I swear, women eat his bullshit with a spoon. It’s so ridiculous.

“I just...” He pauses for a second, as if giving careful consideration to what he wants to say. “I have an affinity for the ladies, you know? All shapes, sizes, ethnicities. I can’t

imagine I'd ever be satisfied with just one flavor. I'm a connoisseur of c—"

He stops short when Nick elbows him in the chest.

"Right," she agrees, biting back a smile. "Well, ladies, you heard it straight from the horse's mouth. Aiden here plans to continue spreading his love across the globe for the good of women-kind."

The audience titters around us.

"Rhett..." Our hostess addresses the front man while flipping to another card. "Your turn in the hot seat."

He adjusts himself in his white cushy chair, giving her that million-dollar smile he's so well known for. "I'm ready."

"Our audience would like to know how you and Korie manage to juggle having such high-profile careers?" The camera pans to Korie then back to Rhett. "I understand she's back on the circuit this season?"

"That's right." He pokes his tongue around in his inner cheek. "It's especially difficult when we're touring. Hadley travels with Korie and her mother." He tries unsuccessfully to hide a frown. "It's—it's hard. That's one of the reasons I made the suggestion to the guys about opening the club. Thankfully they were more than receptive to it."

The guys unanimously bob their heads in agreement.

"It was a great idea, man." That nod comes from Nick.

"What are you going to do with all the free time you'll have between Saturday night performances?"

His turquoise eyes brighten. "I'm gonna travel with my wife for a change." He winks out at Korie, who's positively gushing beside me. The way he loves his woman is palpable.

"I'm gonna stand out in that crowd, with our little girl on my shoulders, cheering obnoxiously loud for her momma." He pumps a fist into the air, exuding so much genuine excitement.

Helen beams. "Think the entire audience just swooned on that one, Mr. Taylor."

He sinks down in his seat and smirks. “They don’t call me the king of swoon for nothing, ma’am.”

“No, they don’t.” She flips through a few cards, turning her focus to Nicholas. “It’s no secret, Mr. Potter, that you’ve had some issues with alcohol in the past.”

Talk about ripping off the fucking Band-Aid. Ouch.

Raven’s nails dig into my thigh, just above the knee. I hear the breath as it catches in her throat.

Even the audience becomes pin drop quiet, immediately sobering with the drastic change in topic.

Nick sucks his tongue to his teeth and nods. “I have, yes.”

The camera zooms in on his face exploiting his pain. His green eyes are shining. His jaw ticking as he grinds his molars.

It’s awful.

Her sympathetic smile is acting at its finest. “But you turned your life around.” She beams. “Got sober for the twins and your wife?”

He nods.

“How’s that going?”

Nick cracks his neck side to side and takes a deep inhale. “I wish I could say it’s easy, but I don’t make a habit of lying. Especially not when it’s something many of my fans deal with themselves. It’s hard as hell.” He pauses briefly. “I do the only thing I can do: I keep up with my meetings, and I’m regularly in touch with my sponsor. Beyond that...I take things one day at a time, just like every other person who has an addiction.”

“Your transparency is refreshing. Thank you for that.” She reaches out to pat his knee. “I think it’s what connects your fans to you so deeply.”

He spins the band on his finger while smiling to himself. “My wife and kids help, tremendously.” His eyes seek Raven’s and hold them. “They give me purpose I didn’t have before. I’m a work in progress, as we all are. But I’m also the luckiest SOB in the world to have such a strong woman in my corner.”

“Love you,” Raven says, biting back tears as she kisses two fingers and holds them out in his direction.

“I love you, pretty girl.”

“This is intense,” I hear someone whisper behind me amid the sea of “awws,” as if she can’t believe Helen Generous went there. I couldn’t agree with her more. Life in the public eye isn’t for the faint of heart. The way these men have to live their lives so openly, to have their every move, every weakness, dissected before the world, is brutal.

It’s my new reality. And one I haven’t come close to adjusting to just yet.

“He handled that with so much grace,” I whisper to my friend.

She nods, her face glowing with pride for her man.

“How are little Alex and Ava?”

Nick’s posture visibly relaxes as she steers him into more comfortable territory. “They’re great.” He smiles, combing a hand through his spiky blond hair. “Getting so big. They’ll be four soon.”

“Four?” Helen jumps back in exaggerated surprise. “Seems like just yesterday when you and those little tots proposed to Raven on stage.”

“Time flies, man...”

“You also must be looking forward to being a little more settled with the kids now that you’ve opened the club?”

“Without a doubt. The twins start preschool this year, and it was important to us to have them settled and attending physical school. We want to make their lives as normal as possible.”

“I can understand that.” Helen’s short blonde bob bounces with the nod of her head. “Sounds like this place is an enormous blessing for all.”

“Indeed.”

“Now,” Ms. Generous hedges, “We’re gonna move on to the one causing all the commotion recently.”

My husband looks to his left, to his right, then spins around to look behind him.

“Oh, you know I mean you, Mr. Livingston.”

He chuckles. “I’m prepared for whatever you’ve got to throw at me, Helen.”

“Actually,” the hostess says, “John, can we get another chair out here beside Lyle for his wife, Sammi?”

My stomach drops. I can feel the blood drain from my face. This was not part of the plan. “Wh—what?” I look to Korie and then to Raven and finally to Anika for someone to notice the sheer panic on my face and put a stop to this insanity.

“Get on up there, troublemaker.” The shit grin on Anika’s face makes me want to punch her in the teeth.

I’m in a trancelike state as I climb the steps and take the seat beside my husband, who immediately clutches my hand.

“Breathe,” he whispers as he presses a kiss to my cheek.

I take a deep inhale of his familiar cologne, wishing like hell I could keep my face buried in his neck but fully aware this is the time to prove I’ve got what it takes to survive in this world. *Fake it til ya make it, right?* I tighten my fingers around his, plaster a smile to my face, and turn to face our hostess, who I’m liking less and less by the moment.

“First,” she says, grinning ear to ear, “congratulations to you both on the marriage and the baby.”

“Thank you,” my husband and I answer in unison.

My stomach flip-flops, and I can’t tell if it’s bean or my nerves acting up in there.

“So, most of our audience’s questions were surrounding the two of you.” Helen has the gall to look contrite.

“Naturally.” Lyle smirks. He’s so cool and collected, while my nerves are buzzing.

“Sammi...”

Oh, God. “Yes?”

“By far the most popular question was how you could claim to love Lyle when you were seconds away from marrying another man.” She crosses one leg over the other. “Would you like to shed some light on that for the fans?”

A cold sweat breaks out over my forehead. “I, umm,” I stammer, as bile climbs in my throat.

“You can do this, Li'l Bit.” My husband rubs a hand up and down my calf in a soothing gesture.

“Lyle and I were just teenagers when we fell in love.” I smile over at him, drawing strength from his unwavering confidence in me. “He was everything to me, but he was also three years older, and an actual relationship between the two of us at the time wasn't in the cards.”

“Right.” Helen nods, encouraging me to continue.

“When he left to join the band, he all but begged me to date guys my own age. He wanted me to live my life while he was out living his. And he promised to come back for me when our age would no longer be an issue.”

“Sounds like something straight out of a movie.” Helen brings a hand to her chest for affect, romanticizing my pain.

“It was rough. Years went by, and I saw him less and less. His exploits were everywhere.” I shake my head. “All over the media.”

I watch Lyle's throat bob with a hard swallow. Shame colors his cheeks.

“So, I started dating and found I enjoyed the attention. But my heart was never in it. For a long time, my dating life was a revolving door, until I met Trent.”

“The runaway groom?” she pries.

“Yeah.” I snort at her clever title. “He was charming and sweet, and I felt a connection I hadn't felt with any of the others. Certainly nothing that remotely touched on what I had

with Lyle, but by this point I was twenty and figured he'd changed his mind."

"Never." He cuts me off, shaking his head.

"But still, I held out hope...tried not to let anything get too serious. Then my father got sick. Really sick. And he was given just weeks to live and I—I freaked out." Tears well in my eyes. "From the time I was a little girl, my dad and I talked about my wedding day. I knew how much it meant to him to walk me down that aisle." I take a Kleenex from the talk show host to dab at my eyes. "And it meant everything to me. So, I proposed."

"*You* proposed?" Helen's head jerks back, stunned by my admission.

"I did." My chuckle lacks any warmth. "We'd just gotten back together after a few months apart." I pull in a deep breath. "It was the day my daddy was given roughly two weeks to live. In the heat of the moment, I went for it. And he said yes."

"Wow." Her eyes widen. "So, take us to your wedding day. What made this Trent fellow leave his pregnant bride on the day of the wedding. Was it just cold feet?"

"Oh, God," I mutter, on the verge of hyperventilating. "I can't."

"I'll take it from here." Lyle smooths a comforting hand over my back.

Helen nods at my knight, encouraging him to continue with the story.

"This is the part where I'm pacing outside her bridal suite, hating myself for screwing this up. I'm about to go back to my seat because despite how desperately I want to, I can't break this wedding up. I know the situation with her father, and had just passed him in his tux with that father of the bride glow on my way back there. I just couldn't do it." He clears his throat. "Then the groom shows up and goes into that room, and I overhear her telling him that she's pregnant. That she just found out and that it might not be his."

There's an audible gasp from the audience.

“Remember, they'd just gotten back together after months apart.”

I'm shaking to the bone while all my dirty laundry is being aired for the world.

“The other potential father is not in the picture. It was a one-time thing on a girls' trip...a trip she'd taken to get over him. He flipped out and completely lost it. He told her to get rid of the baby and that he didn't want to ever see her again.”

“Wow.” Helen leans in closer. “And that's where you came in.”

“Yes, ma'am.” My husband chews his lower lip. “It felt like fate. My girl was seconds away from marrying the wrong man, and I had no one but myself to blame. I pushed her into dating. I drug my feet on coming back for her. I just...I waited too long.” He shakes his head.

“And then lightning struck,” I say, sniffing.

“Boy did it ever,” he says, bringing my hand to his lips. “There was my girl, already in the dress, carrying a child without a father.” I huff. “Her babies were always supposed to be mine.” He places a hand on my tummy. “And so, I grabbed the ring I'd bought years ago for her, got down on one knee, and asked the love of my life to marry me. To share this child with me. To build a life with me.”

“And she said yes...” Helen dabs at the corner of her eye.

Lyle nods. “She said yes.”

Chapter

TWENTY-TWO



“I can’t believe you actually did this.” Dane scours our parents’ yards in awe as the machine-made snow piles up around us. He scrubs a hand through his poufy curls then stuffs a hat on his head. “Those kids are going to flip out.”

“It was your sister who gave me the idea without even knowing. Sammi asked if I thought we could rent a cabin in the mountains next year when your dad would hopefully be able to travel again. She was really excited at the idea of giving the family a white Christmas.” I can’t help but grin at how awesomely it’s turning out. “I figured...why wait?”

“That’s my boy.” Dad wraps a hand around my shoulders, staring out at his lawn that’s quickly being transformed into a winter wonderland. “Spoilin’ that girl right.”

“I learned from the best, Pops.” That man would go to the ends of the earth to make my mother happy. I can only hope to be a fraction of the husband and father he is.

It’s an unusually cold day here in Los Angeles, at under forty degrees, so the snow is having no issue sticking to the trees and the ground. The guys from the snow company are

currently stacking hay bales to build a hill for sledding. Frank should be back from the sporting goods store any minute with sleds, gloves, and boots for the masses. I can't wait to see the look on my wife's face when she gets here. My pulse is racing a mile a minute.

"Have any of you heard from the ladies?" I glance from Dane to each of our fathers. "Any clue what time they'll be back?"

"Just talked to Trudy. She said they had one more stop to make at the bakery for some pastry Sammi's been craving, then they'll be on their way home—not because they're tired or anything." He chuckles. "But because the stores all close at six on Christmas Eve."

Those women could make an Olympic sport of shopping.

"You didn't spoil the surprise, did ya, Wayne?" My father gives his best friend a knowing glare.

"Of course not..." Sammi's dad rolls his eyes then huffs and hangs his head. "Shit. You got me, Ronnie. You know I can't keep anything from her. She could tell in my voice that we were up to something."

My dad shakes his head with mock disgust. "So whipped."

As if he's not.

"Cut it out, kids." Dane grabs two of the snowballs he's been molding and nails each of them in the chest. "You two bicker more than an old married couple."

"Mrs. Trudy won't spoil the surprise and now we'll have a heads up when they're on their way. It's fine." I hand the snowball mold over to my dad. "Get busy while me and Dane work on forming up some snow bricks."

"What're the bricks for?" Mr. Wayne trails behind me, probably trying to avoid getting chewed out by my father again.

"Gonna build some walls we can hide behind during the snowball fight."

“This is genius.” He rubs his hands over his arms trying to ward off a chill. “You know, I always wanted to give the kids a white Christmas. We talked about it every year, but I never could peel myself away from work long enough to do it.” His lips purse in contemplation. “Nothing like facing your own mortality to make you realize all the shit you took for granted.”

I fire off a quick text to Dane to bring his dad a heavier coat and a chair, so my wife doesn’t kick my ass when she arrives to find her father’s teeth chattering.

“You were dedicated to your clients.” I pack some more snow in and smooth it over before plopping another brick to my growing wall. “You and Pops are two of the best damn lawyers this county has to offer. That work ethic gave us kids a great life.”

“Maybe...” He nods. “All I know is I’m gonna do things different with this second chance. Once I’m through kickin’ this cancer’s ass, I’m gonna travel the world with my wife.”

“Yeah?” Dane pops up behind him with a folding chair, his coat, scarf, and a blanket. “You won’t be kicking shit if you come down with pneumonia.”

I smother a laugh while the two bicker over him bundling up. There was a time not too long ago when Dane wouldn’t have dreamed of ordering his dad around.

“Do it for me, Mr. Wayne. Your daughter will rip me a new one if she gets here and her daddy isn’t being tutted over like a newborn baby.”

“Fine.” Grumbling, he plops down into the chair and even props his feet up out of the snow, onto the log Dane drags over. “Don’t know what the hell happened to respecting your elders.”

“That flew right out the window when you turned into the most ornery, stubborn patient known to man.” His son gives him a stern look. “Cause any more trouble and you’ll be watching from the windows.” With that, he takes off to resume erecting his wall across the yard.

“Ever since that boy took over my spot at Deluca & Livingston, he’s been acting a little too big for his britches.”

“He’s a chip off the old block.” I give my father-in-law a sideways glance while starting on another brick. Frank better hurry with those supplies. It’s so fucking cold, I can hardly feel my fingers anymore. Gardening gloves don’t offer much protection against the blistering cold, but unfortunately that’s all we could find.

Mr. Wayne’s answering smirk snuffs out his natural inclination to argue because he knows I’m right. Dane is the spitting image of his father at our age, in looks as well as mannerisms. They’re both incredibly strong in stature and gumption. It’s their unwillingness to yield that makes them a force to be reckoned with in the courtroom.

“Where you want this stuff, boss?” As if I conjured him, my right-hand man comes around from the front, arms loaded with gear.

“Sleds near the hill. Just drop the other stuff right there on the patio.”

He gives me a salute. “You got it.”

“Thanks, man. You’re the best!”

“They just turned into the subdivision.” Wayne’s still texting with his wife when he makes the announcement.

“Let’s get you on the patio where you’ll have a good view of the kids’ faces.” I make it about the kids to pacify my father-in-law, who positively adores my niece and nephew. But I really just want to get him out of the snow.

No more than a few seconds after we have him situated, the kids come blazing into the back.

“What the?” Annabelle freezes just outside the blanket of snow. “It snowed here?”

“I telled you it was gonna snow at Christmas.” Carter pokes his tongue out at his big sister. “I asked Santa when I sitted in his lap.”

“Merry Christmas!” I shout when Sammi and her mother, and my mom, and sister, and grandmother come traipsing into the yard, mouths agape.

“Can we go play, Uncle Lyle?”

“Sure, you can, buddy.” I scoop Carter up into my arms. “After you change into your snow boots and gloves.”

His lower lip pokes out. “But I don’t have any.”

“You do now!” Frank waves him over to where he’s already ripping tags off their gear. “Come on, Carter boy. Let’s get you suited up.”

He practically jumps out of my arms in his excitement to go meet his pseudo uncle. Frank’s been around so long, he’s practically family. The kids adore him.

“Lyle, this is incredible.” My sister walks over and gives me a big hug. “Thanks so much for doing this.”

“You’re welcome, sis.”

She can’t stop smiling. “I’m gonna go help Frank.”

Sammi gives her a strange look. “I bet you’ll go help Frank.”

“What was that all about?” I ask, pulling my wife into my arms while my sister storms off with her middle finger extended into the air.

“Nothing.” She shakes her head, rising to her toes and bringing her pouty mouth within a breath from mine. “This is so magical.”

“Good surprise?” I ask, pressing my lips to hers.

She kisses me back, gently gliding the tip of her tongue across my lips. “The best.”

We’re still wrapped in each other’s arms when the snow fall machines come on, taking the ambiance to the next level.

Li'l Bit smiles into my kiss, heating me from the inside. “How did it have enough time to pile up like this?” She sticks

her hand out, catching the flakes as they fall. “We weren’t gone *that* long.”

I push her hair behind her ears, forcibly restraining myself from feasting on her mouth the way I’d like, which would be entirely indecent in front of our current company. “They used big fireman style hoses to blow it all over the yard. Didn’t really take long at all.”

“I’m sorry we missed it. I bet Carter would have—”

“Oh, Uncle Lyle...” *Speak of the devil...*

I release my wife and turn toward my nephew just in time to get nailed right in the nose with a snowball.

“It’s on, little man!” I make a freeform ball from the snow at my feet and take off after the little sneak, clobbering him in the back.

“I wanna play!” Annabelle rushes over with Lizzie, both wearing matching hot pink gloves and boots.

“If you start crying,” her mother warns, “you’re going inside.”

The little sassafras plants a hand on her hip, rolling her eyes. “I’m not gonna cry, mom. I’m not a baby.”

As if trying to prove a point, Carter nails her in the face with a blob of snow.

“Hey,” I say, when his sister’s face crumples and she bursts into tears. “Not in the face.”

“Yes, sir.” He pouts, his little lip quivering as if he too is about to spring a leak.

Not on my watch.

“Unless it’s Uncle Dane,” I add, handing him another snowball. “Go get him.” I give him a little shove toward his next target, relieved that the threat of tears has passed.

I wonder briefly if my wife realizes she’s going to have to be the disciplinarian...

“What did I just say about that crying?” My sister starts to reprimand her daughter when Sammi returns from retrieving her gloves, smashing her right between the eyes.

Liz shrieks, cussing up a storm as she scoops the ice away.

“Mmmhmmm,” my wife heckles. “Didn’t like that too much, did ya?”

My niece’s tears quickly dry, replaced with a fit of laughter.

“Point taken, asshole!” Lizzy glares at my wife while clearly trying not to laugh. “You’re lucky you’re pregnant.”

My wife holds out a hand for Annabelle to give her a high five.

“Y’all’s kid is going to be such a menace!” My sister shakes her head at her best friend and daughter.

Sammi shrugs. “Then she’ll fit right in with her mommy and daddy.”

“He,” I insert. “He’ll fit right in.”

She doesn’t pay my comment a lick of attention, but the way she’s intentionally avoiding looking at me has me certain she heard it.

“Who wants some hot chocolate?” Gramma Joyce comes out of the house with a tray full of foam cups with lids and starts passing them out to everyone, including the snow people. My little Cajun granny’s roots run deep. That woman is forever playing hostess. She makes it her mission in life to see to everyone else’s comfort, usually in the form of food or drink.

The adults gather around the firepit, sipping on chocolate while the children who seem to have swallowed theirs in one gulp make castles in the snow with their sand toys.

Mr. Wayne starts blasting Christmas music through his surround sound. It’s all so cozy, I almost forget we’re in sunny California.

Once we've sufficiently warmed our bellies, we hit the slope with the sleds. The hill is maybe six feet high, but steep enough to give a thrilling stomach drop. The kids are loving it and don't want to do anything else. They aren't fighting, and no one is crying, so we let them have at it.

I hang back with my wife while the rest of the adults engage in an all-out war with the mounds of snowballs we spent a good portion of the day preparing.

"Your chariot awaits, milady." I drag a huge toboggan out from behind a cover of trees and urge Sammi to have a seat.

Her icy blue eyes sparkle with excitement. "Oh, my goodness. It looks like a miniature version of Santa's sleigh!"

She's right; I hadn't realized it, but it does. The sled is wood with red trim and has red velvet cushions. The rope is red leather with bells that jingle in the wind. Frank's getting a bonus for this beaut.

I press my lips to her forehead and adjust her knit hat before taking her hand and helping her on.

Once she's situated, I grab the reins and give a good heave-ho, only to have the sled barely move. "They sure make this shit look easier on TV," I mutter.

"I'm too heavy," she wails.

"You are not. Sit back down, woman." I loop the rope around my midsection and pull like a pack mule. Slow and steady, we start making some progress. After about five minutes, I'm winded and losing steam, but the radiant smile on her face keeps me trudging along.

I proceed to walk backward for a bit so I can indulge myself in the view. My Li'l Bit's so beautiful, with her red-tipped nose and the wind whipping through her hair. Her dimples and those rosy cheeks, and the snowflakes resting lightly on her lashes make her resemble an ice princess. It's like something straight out of a dream.

Then Annabelle and Carter crash the scene deciding they too need a turn on Santa's sleigh. The two climb aboard in front of Sammi. With their added weight, I'm really in trouble.

There's no way I'm going to kill the magic of their first ever snow day. So, I spin back around and put every bit of my strength into it, feeling superhuman when I finally get the sled to dislodge.

“Woah!”

At the sound of my wife's distress, I whip around to find her and the kids toppling over to one side. Trying not to laugh, I right their ship. “The terrain is just too flat, but I have an idea.”

“You're scaring me.”

“Just stay put.” I leave her there and head off to the garage where just as I expected, the key is still sitting in the ignition of the riding mower.

You'd swear these kids were on a rollercoaster with the way they're carrying on. Their peals of laughter and screams of delight are a sound I won't soon forget.

I drive them around the yard until just after the sun sets, while Dane, Liz, Frank, and my mom engage in a game of beer pong on the patio with spiked eggnog.

Somehow our white Christmas has managed to veer a little into redneck territory, but what more do you expect from a bunch of Louisiana transplants?

Chapter

TWENTY-THREE



Sammi

“All right, guys.” Liz pushes back from my parents’ table, collecting the cookies her kids just decorated onto a plate and covering it in plastic wrap. “We need to do presents so I can go put these two to bed so Santa can pass.”

It’s been tradition since we were little kids for our families to gather on Christmas Eve for dinner and cookie decorating and to exchange gifts.

The realization that we can keep the ritual alive with our own children without worrying over alternating which family we spend the holidays with is an instant relief.

We move to the living room and gather around the massive tree to watch the kids open their presents.

From Lizzie, they get holiday pajamas. Their faces light up like they’re surprised, even though it’s what they get every Christmas Eve from their mother. It’s what each of us got from our parents at our little holiday get together, as well.

My parents gift them season passes to the zoo. Lyle’s parents keep it simple with a baby doll for Annabelle and Nerf

gun for Carter, leaving their bigger gifts for tomorrow.

“Is it my turn now?” Lyle is chomping at the bit to give them their presents from us.

“I thought you gotted us the snow?” Carter’s face is a mix of confusion and excitement when Frank lugs in two huge boxes, one at a time, from the car.

“That was for all of us. These are just for you two.”

Annabelle starts jumping up and down, screaming without even knowing what’s in the box. The Barbie paper is enough to have her losing her damn mind.

“Open it, crazy girl,” I say when Carter starts tearing into his John Deere paper.

“I gotted a tractor!” Carter does a goofy little dance, cracking us all up.

“And I got a Barbie convertible!”

“You got them Powerwheels?” Liz glares at her brother. “This is all they’re gonna want to do now.”

He shrugs. “It was that or puppies.”

When I see the horror on Liz and her parents’ faces, with whom she still lives, I decide to egg it on a bit. “I really wanted to get her a miniature pony, and Carter a tiny cow, but Lyle shut that down.”

“Absolutely not.” Trudy’s face contorts in what looks almost like pain. “You made the right choice.”

“Hey, I got a little something for the kids too.”

Everyone turns to look at Frank, who’s standing off to the side with an envelope in his hand.

The enormous man is practically sweating with nerves. It’s adorable.

“You didn’t have t—”

“I know,” he says, stepping forward. “I wanted to.” He hands the card to the kids, who tear into it immediately.

“We’re going to Disney Land?” Carter’s already doing that damn dance again before he knows what it is he’s got.

“No.” Frank chokes on his laughter. “It’s tickets to Disney On Ice. It’s in three days, so I hope you didn’t have plans already.”

“Of course, she doesn’t have plans,” I volunteer when the cat seems to have stolen my bestie’s tongue. “Right?” I say, giving her a nudge in the shin with my foot.

“No.” There’s an unmistakable tremor to her voice. “We don’t have plans.” She takes the offered envelope from her daughter. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.” His cheeks are rosy, and he’s fidgeting like a little boy. You could cut the sexual tension between these two with a knife.

“There’s four tickets in here.” Liz’s eyes widen.

“Yeah. You could take your mom or…”

“Or him,” I volunteer, unable to stand another minute of this awkward exchange. “How convenient. It’s the night before we head back to Nashville.”

“That is very convenient.” Trudy can’t hide the joy from her face.

“Frank is coming?” Annabelle rushes over to hug his leg. “Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome, Princess. But only if your mom says it’s okay. She might have someone else she wants to take.”

“Liz,” I straight growl. “Put the man out of his misery, for God’s sake.”

She shakes herself from a stupor. “Yes.” Her throat clears. “Yeah. That sounds like fun. We’d love for you to join us.”

A Cheshire grin splits his face. “Great.”

The two stare at each other, making eyes until the rest of us reach the point of damn near losing our dinner.

“All right you two,” Dane finally says. “Get a room.”

Annabelle perks up. “What’s that mean?”

“What he means,” Liz answers with a dark look at Dane, “is that you two”—she points between her kids—“need to get to your rooms so Santa doesn’t miss us.”

“Wait!” Daddy jumps up with a fire I haven’t seen from him in quite a while. “Let’s give Sammi and Lyle their gift first.”

“Oh, yeah.” Liz blows the hair out of her eyes. “Go ahead, Mr. Wayne.”

“Well, we know how crazy it’s been making the two of you, not knowing if bean is a girl or a boy...”

“So,” my mother-in-law Grace pipes in, “we got you a 3D ultrasound here in town for the day after tomorrow.”

“But—” Liz cuts me off when I start to thank them, “the tech is under strict orders not to tell you, because the other part of your gift is a gender reveal party and celebratory baby shower!”

“This is amazing.” I start to tear up and Lyle grabs my hand, squeezing it tight. “When’s the party?” I ask, starting to panic, because I don’t know how long I can wait, especially knowing someone else will know the answer I’ve been so desperate for.

“That afternoon.” My mom’s face is radiant. “Just a small thing here after you get back. Liz is going to tag along so the tech can give her the correct set of confetti poppers. Not even Liz will know until you fire them off.”

“How can you have a shower immediately following?” Lyle gnaws his lower lip.

“Oh, don’t worry...these ladies bought everything in both pink and blue, including ordering a girl-themed cake and a boy-themed cake,” Dane offers with a roll of his eyes. “They’re fully prepared for either outcome.”

“It’s true,” Grace admits, slightly embarrassed. “We have girl presents and boy presents, and we just kept receipts to

return the stuff we end up not needing. We didn't want to get you more unisex stuff."

"I don't even know what to say... thank you all so much."

"You're welcome." Momma walks over and wraps her arms around my shoulders. "I hate that we couldn't be there for your last shower. We wanted to show you how excited we are and celebrate the arrival of baby bean with the both of you."

"I can't imagine a better gift," Lyle gushes. "It's perfect."

We wrap up gift giving with the parents and siblings and bid the children a good night before heading out to the car, with Frank trailing a respectful distance behind.

"They're prepared for either outcome," my husband speaks into my temple, holding me close to keep me warm.

"Mmhmm," I nod, breathing in his scent, eager to get home and ravish him.

"The question is, dear wife...is your booty-hole prepared for either outcome?"



"Why so tense, love?" my husband teases, while gently lathering my hair into a massive hive atop my head. The scent of lavender wafts into the air while traces of today's news puddle around my toes before swirling down the drain. Blue powder and glitter and tiny slivers of foil confetti trickle along our nude bodies—his hard and sculpted, mine round and ever changing with the evidence of our *son*, growing in my womb.

The way my heart leaped when we fired off those poppers. *A baby boy*. Finally knowing makes everything so much more real. I can't wait to get back to our house in Nashville and personalize his nursery and wardrobe.

"Oh, I don't know." I grip the wrist of the hand that's yet again wandering entirely too close to forbidden territory. "Maybe because you keep poking and prodding at my asshole," I squeak when he gives up and reaches around to pinch my extended nipple.

“Relax, Li'l Bit.” His breath is warm on my neck, despite us being in a steaming shower. “I would never do anything you weren't a hundred percent onboard with, even if I did win.”

I snort at his now-constant reminders of his victory, sucking a lungful of soapy water.

“Woah,” he says chuckling as he gently thumps a palm on my back. “It's not that serious. Being a loser is no reason to drown yourself.”

“But it might be reason enough to drown you,” I threaten, whirling around with narrowed eyes. I try to pull off an intimidating look but end up giggling instead. It's hard to be mad at a naked man with “Property of Li'l Bit” tattooed on his junk. “Kneel down.”

“Hold up...” He pinches his puckered lips. “Shouldn't I, as *the winner*, be ordering you, *the loser*, around?”

I shrug. “Fine then, wash your own hair.” I grab my loofa and add more soap before making a show of washing my tits, my belly...

Lyle drops to his knees, taking the sponge from my hand. He goes to work on my lower half while practically purring as I gently scratch my nails over his scalp.

“Have a seat on the ledge.” He runs a palm up my calf. “Getting a little prickly down here.”

I do as he says with the biggest grin splitting my face. In the last month this baby has really been growing. About a week ago Lyle saw me struggling to shave and volunteered himself for the job. Now every other day or so, he pampers me. The man has made shaving an art, buying all sorts of products I didn't even realize existed.

He starts with a tub of hot pink goop, rubbing the gritty substance up and down my right leg, massaging it further in slow circles.

“Feels so good,” I say as my head drops back, resting against the tile while the steam from the still running water billows around us.

He retrieves the removable showerhead and rinses it off before applying a layer of shaving foam. With the gentlest touch, he runs a fresh blade over my skin, before moving to the other leg. Then come my knees...then my thighs.

“Gonna shave your pussy now, love.” His voice is raspy seduction as he grips my knees and ever so slowly pulls my legs apart.

My clit pulses and heat fires through my veins when he bends forward and swipes the tip of his tongue along my slit, flitting it over the swollen bundle of nerves before moaning his satisfaction.

I never in my life thought I'd be this comfortable with another human. But I can't think of anything at this point I wouldn't let him do...well, besides fucking my ass. But in all honesty, if I wasn't seven months pregnant, I probably wouldn't be so terrified of the idea. I'm sure in due time, I'll give him that too. For now, I'll enjoy watching him beg.

“Lyle,” I moan, clutching two fists full of his wet hair.

“Stop squirming.” With a chuckle he retrieves the special vulva exfoliator he purchased from some highly acclaimed vajacialist.

I swear the man goes all out in every situation. I've been shaving my entire body with soap all my life. But not my husband. He's made it his mission to learn and teach me the proper way to care for my bits.

“Then stop trying to seduce me.”

“Sorry. She was just there, in my face. Taunting me with her shimmering essence.”

“Essence?” I laugh.

“Sounds better than discharge, right?”

I think I just threw up in my mouth. “Eww. You had to go there?” I shake my head while he gets to work, smoothing the gritty, rose-scented vag-foliant over my lower lips. “You could have said come, or uh—” I moan, trying not to move too much

as he massages it in with the pads of his thumbs. “Umm... something romantic like... Oh, I know!”

He pauses and looks up, quirking a brow. “I’m listening. What should I have called your pussy juices?”

I spit out a laugh. “My arousal.”

“Not bad.” His head bobs as he gets back to work. The way he concentrates so hard is beyond adorable.

“It’s what they call it in the books I read. It’s sexier, right?”

“Sure,” he agrees, while reaching for the shower head.

My entire body thrums with anticipation as he adjusts the spray and rinses the exfoliator away, letting it linger for a beat right over my clit. Some garbled nonsense tumbles from my lips.

“Who knew shaving was such great foreplay?” His teeth clamp down on his lower lip as he increases the pressure on the sprayer, watching my reaction with blatant desire.

“Shh—shaving has never felt like this before,” I say, fighting the urge to touch myself.

“Almost done, Li’l Bit.” He drops the showerhead and lathers me up with a whipped concoction that also came from the aforementioned vagina guru. This one smells sweet—like cotton candy.

I no longer so much as flinch when he takes the blade to my most sensitive flesh. He takes more care and is far gentler than I have ever been with myself.

I’m so relaxed, in fact, that I’m beginning to doze right here in the shower when the spray returns. He rinses me clean then rewards my good behavior by spreading my lips and devouring my pussy. I’m already so worked up from all the attention he’s been lavishing on me, it doesn’t take long before I’m screaming my release and damn near ripping his hair out at the root.

“Oh my God,” I moan, coming down from my climax. “That was so good.”

With a megawatt smile he climbs to his feet, reaching for my hands to help me to mine. We stand under the rainfall briefly to rinse off any lingering suds. Then he grips my ass cheeks, pulling me as close as my basketball-sized belly will allow.

“Glad you enjoyed it,” he goads, tipping my chin up with a finger. “Cuz it’s time to pay up, loser.”

Chapter

TWENTY-FOUR



I'm sitting on the edge of the bed with a towel wrapped around my waist, fanning myself dramatically with the infamous pregnancy kama sutra book when my wife slinks out of the bathroom. She's wearing a royal blue silk robe, knotted just above her belly, a gift from my sister at today's baby shower.

Her hair's still wet and rests in clumps on her shoulders. Nervous excitement practically leaps off her as she ambles across the room.

"Show me the page." She's already shaking her head as she says it.

My wife is not the slightest bit surprised when I open to the illustration of the woman on all fours at the foot of the bed and her partner with his hands gripped to her hips, dick buried between her cheeks.

She crosses her arms on her chest, making her breasts perk up.

My mouth waters at the sight.

“I have never done anal. You will legit split me in two.”

“That’s why I got you a present.” I grab the little velvet box from beside me on the bed and place it in her hands.

Clearly expecting a piece of jewelry, she cackles when she opens it and finds a rubber cock-shaped butt plug. “Is this a joke?”

I shake my head. “It’s custom made from yours truly.”

Sammi takes it out of the box, examining it more closely. “No way. This thing is tiny.”

“Yes, well, it’s scaled down, of course.” I snort. “If you could handle the real thing, this wouldn’t be necessary.”

Her brow furrows—her thumb absentmindedly stroking the head—the display making my dick twitch with jealousy.

“I thought we could just try it?” I grip her thigh beneath the robe, massaging the smooth skin. “You really seem to get a thrill when I use a finger back there...this isn’t much thicker than that.” I start climbing higher until I can feel the heat of her pussy.

She sucks in a breath when I trail my middle finger through her slick folds. “Maybe,” she moans, grabbing hold of my shoulders to keep her balance. “But can we pick a different position? I don’t want my first time to be so...”

I flip to the dogeared page. “This is more what I had in mind.”

“Reverse cowgirl in the bath?” A grin tugs her lips, and her breathing escalates as I tease her pussy with my fingers. “I can’t believe you went through the trouble of molding this thing after yourself.” She flips it around in one hand while steadying herself with the other.

“If anything breaches that hole, it’s gonna be me, love.”

Her eyes dilate. She really gets off on my possessive streak. “I think,” she moans, grinding into my palm. “I think we can make this work.”

“Yeah?” I study her face, making sure she’s really into it. “If you don’t like it, say the word and I’ll stop.”

She nods, holding it out toward me. “Do you put it in now?”

“Not yet, baby.” I rise from the bed, grabbing the cherry flavored lube and intimate massage oils from the bedside table. “Gonna prep you real good first.”

She curls her fingers around the plug, staring up at me as if waiting for instruction.

“Bathroom,” I say, swatting her firmly on the ass.

Giggling, she takes off.

I’m hot on her heels, eager to share in this new experience with her.

I plug the deep soaker tub, throw in some salts, and start the water. “Come here,” I say, pulling out the vanity chair and dropping my towel before taking a seat.

She walks over to stand between my legs, intentionally brushing my cock with her knee. Her eyes fix on mine, so innocent and trusting.

I unknot her robe, spreading it open slowly. Then I press my palms to her stomach on either side of her navel, trail them around to her hips, and up the sides of her ribs. With a featherlight touch, I brush the backs of my fingers over her breasts and slide up to push the fabric off her shoulders and watch as it puddles at our feet.

Adrenaline surges straight to my dick as I take in my beautiful wife in all her naked glory. “You’re perfect.” My voice is gruff, filled with love and lust and mounting desire.

I reach for the oil and squirt it into my hand, inviting her to straddle my legs, keeping them about a foot apart as she does to better expose her. I trail one hand between us and bring the other around to her ass, where I simultaneously massage her front and back to loosen her up.

She leans forward, bringing her tits within inches of my face. At the exact moment that I bite down on her nipple, I

insert the tip of a finger into her ass, pumping it in and out while sucking and tugging on the pebbled peak.

“How’s that feel?”

“Amazing,” she whimpers while grinding her clit against my piercing. “Is it time?”

There’s still a hint of fear in her voice and I need her completely relaxed to ensure it’s a pleasurable experience for her.

“Not yet.” I reach over to shut off the water. “Ready to ride, cowgirl?” I circle my hips and lasso my hand in the air, to lighten the mood.

“Always.”

I help her up, so she doesn’t lose her footing, then climb into the tub and sprawl out, resting my knees against the walls of the bath.

“Careful,” I warn, holding her hand to help her in.

She eases down, sitting between my legs with her back to my chest.

“Give me that mouth.” I bring her head to rest on my shoulder. Palming her tits, I lower my lips to hers, prodding with my tongue for entrance then sweeping it through her mouth.

Her nails dig into my thighs as I tweak her nipples with wet fingers. Our kiss catches fire, our tongues lashing at one another, warring for control, desperately seeking fulfillment that never comes. We can’t get close enough. Can’t delve deep enough.

She rocks against me, my dick sandwiched between my stomach and her lower back. “I need you,” she begs as her hand dips between her legs to play with her cunt.

I reach blindly for the plug, where we left it resting on the vanity chair, my tongue still plunging in and out. “Suck,” I say, ripping my mouth from hers and holding the replica of my dick to her lips. “Get it nice and wet for me baby.”

Without hesitation, she takes it into her mouth, giving me one hell of a show.

“Good girl,” I say, praising her the way I know she likes. “Now lean forward and hold on to the edge of the tub, ass in the air.”

A loud moan rips from her as I spread her wide and run my tongue over her clit and along her slit, stopping just when I reach her tight puckered hole.

I grab the cherry lube from the floor, squirting it directly onto her skin while probing in and out with my finger to get it nice and slick.

She glances over her shoulder, her hungry eyes never leaving mine as she removes the plug from her mouth and makes a show of licking and sucking it.

A rush of heat surges to my dick. Desire spreads like a wildfire through my limbs. “Enough,” I growl, holding out a hand. If I don’t put a stop to this now, it’ll be over before we really get started.

She opens up and it plops into my hand, wet and warm from her ministrations.

“Straddle my legs, Li’l Bit.” I bring them together as she spreads hers apart. “Just like that, baby,” I say as she eases down, hovering just above my cock. “Now bend over.

With her hands gripped to my ankles she follows my instruction.

“Keep that ass in the air,” I say when she starts lowering into a resting position.

“Fuck yeah...just like that.” My pulse takes off, anticipating what’s to come.

I add more lube to her hole, teasing it with the thumb of my left hand while guiding the plug through her slick folds. I dip it in and out of her pussy a few times to coat it in her juices.

“Do you want this?” I growl, teasing the rim of her tight ass with the toy.

“Yes.” She pushes back, trying to force it inside. “Y—yes!” she cries when I ease it away.

“Ask nicely.”

“Please,” she begs. “Please put it in.”

I insert just the tip, nudging it in and out like I did with my finger. “Should I keep going?”

“Lyle,” she snaps. “Please...fuck...just put. it. in.”

I slip two fingers into her pussy at the exact moment I push the plug all the way inside, hoping to distract her in case there’s any discomfort. But judging by the way she bucks and writhes, I think it’s safe to say my girl’s not feeling any pain.

“Ride my dick, baby.”

I withdraw my fingers as she eases back on her haunches, making slow work of feeding her my cock. Once I’m about halfway in, she impales herself, taking it to the hilt.

Sweet heat engulfs me, the fit tighter than usual. Her pussy contracts, squeezing me in a vice grip.

She rides me hard and fast while I thrust beneath her, matching her pace.

Water sloshes over the sides of the tub, splashing to the floor. Her cries and my grunts meld with the sound of our wet bodies slapping together.

“I’m close,” I warn, trying like hell to hold out for her.

I grab the sprayer from behind my head and turn it on, bringing it around and aiming it at her clit. She seemed to like that a whole lot earlier today.

Sammi accepts my offering, grinding against the handheld sprayer. She’s thrashing and screaming her pleasure while fucking me with wild abandon.

Pressure builds at the base of my cock as the first waves of orgasm rip through her, milking my release.

Taking hold of her hips, I assume control, guiding her movements as I slam into her, filling her with my release while

simultaneously igniting hers.

She comes hard and fast, whimpering and shaking, then collapses back on my chest, utterly exhausted.

I hold her in my arms, reminiscing about the day while she dozes in and out of sleep. It's surreal, finally knowing. A son... This incredible woman is giving me a son. A little boy who I imagine in her likeness—white blond curls and crystal blue eyes. I hope he has her dimples and my love for music. I can't wait to look out in the crowd and see him rocking out at our shows. To teach him to ride a bike and bait a hook.

“Lyle?” Sammi lifts her head from my chest, eyes heavy with sleep.

“Yes, love?”

“Can we remove this thing now and go to bed?”

I laugh into her hair, walking my fingers down her back to the little knob. “Gonna need you to push it out while I pull.”

Her eyes bug out. “Say what?”

“Push,” I say again.

“Like a poop?” Her cheeks flame with embarrassment.

“Mmhmm. Exactly like that.”

She groans.

I bite back a laugh. “Something wrong?”

She shakes her head just slightly. “Just wish you would have told me the removal process before putting it in.”

“You're making a big deal out of nothing. We're even in the water, so any mess will wash off on the way out.”

“Oh, gross.” She gets up, looking at me like I've sprouted a third arm or something.

“What's wrong now?”

“I'm not going to sit in poop soup!” She climbs out of the tub, wrapping a bath sheet around her body and securing it between her boobs, while looking at me expectantly. “Get out.”

“Of the tub or the bathroom?” I lift the built-in drain stopper then step out onto the drenched floor and grab myself a towel.

“Both.” Her hand flattens to my back, and she gives a little push toward the door before shooing me away. “I’m gonna keep what little dignity I have left and shit this thing out in private.”

“Okay,” I agree, pausing in the door to press a kiss to the tip of her nose. “Thank you for allowing me to take my little willie to your chocolate factory.”

She presses her lips into a flat line, trying like hell not to laugh as she shoves me the rest of the way through. “Out!”

The door slams shut.

Laughing, I make my way to bed with my cup overflowing.

My heart is full.

My balls are empty.

Life is good...

Chapter

TWENTY-FIVE



Sammi

“Hey, Li'l Momma...” Lyle peeks his head into the nursery where I’m humming “Twinkle Twinkle Little Star” and rocking baby bean.

I do this a lot now—sit in here and dream of what life will be like in two months when he’s finally here. Eight more weeks seems like a lifetime; then I remind myself thirty-two have already passed and reason that it’s actually not so bad.

Smoothing my hands over my enormous bump, I smile up at the man who’s made this incredible life possible. “Hi.”

“Can I show you something?” He’s still standing in the doorway, and his excitement over whatever he wants me to see is palpable. My heart rate picks up without knowing a single detail.

“What is it?” I ask, gripping the arms of the chair to lift myself out of it, but before I have my butt off the seat, he’s in front of me, offering me a hand.

“So, I was in the studio messing around this morning and recorded a lullaby for baby George.” His smile is dazzling.

“His name is not George,” I huff as he leads me through the house to his studio, only recently completed.

“I want to play it for you.” He brings me into the room where there’s a table filled with art supplies. “On your stomach,” he adds, reading the confusion on my face.

“Huh?” His explanation does nothing to clear up what he wants.

He flattens his front to my back, moves my hair aside and brings his lips to my ear. A chill moves through my entire body when his warm breath hits. “I want to paint a guitar on your belly.” He grabs my left hand and stretches it out. “And the frets on your arm.” Lyle nibbles my lobe while lightly feathering his fingers along the sensitive skin on the inner side of that arm. Suddenly this all seems very sensual. “And play it on your body along to the recording.”

“Are you trying to seduce me, Mr. Livingston?” I ask, looking back at him over my shoulder with fireflies dancing in my chest. My voice is breathy. “Because if you are, it’s working.”

“Always,” he says, nibbling from my ear along my neck and finally placing a tender kiss to my shoulder.

His touch has me tingling all the way down to my toes. Excitement buzzes in the air. “I can’t wait to hear it.”

His grin is reminiscent of the boy I grew up with as he whips a stool out from behind the counter, motioning for me to sit. “You’ll have to lose the shirt.” My husband’s tone is less than apologetic. A Boy Scout, he is not.

“But I’m not wearing a bra.” I bring a hand to my chest, feigning innocence.

His head shakes. “You usually aren’t wearing a shirt either.”

“Touché.” I shrug, dipping my head side to side before ripping his threadbare tee over my head, leaving me in just a pair of pink cotton panties. If I’d have had any clue I’d be put on display like this, I’d have worn something sexy. But the fire blazing in his amber eyes says he’s not the least bit deterred by

my less than impressive undies. “Everything okay?” I ask when he just stands there staring.

“Sorry.” He reaches out to tweak one of my nipples, causing my breath to catch, “you’re very distracting.”

“Should I go put on a bra?” I offer, though the idea is not very appealing.

“No, of course not.” His brow furrows. “I *can* control myself.”

I snort, because that remains to be seen.

“I said, I can...I just usually choose not to.”

“Then by all means, paint me.” I wave both hands in the air, motioning to his canvas.

“I’m not much of an artist,” he volunteers as he rubs my belly down with alcohol wipes to remove any oil from my skin. “So, don’t laugh at my elementary painting skills.”

“I will try my best.” I smooth a hand through his mop of brown hair when he crouches before me and brings the tiny face-painting brush to my belly.

“Just gonna do a simple round body. It’ll look better on your belly than the traditional shape.” His entire face is taut, his focus absolute.

“Okay,” I say, trying not to giggle.

“Why’s your belly tightening like that?” His voice turns frantic. “Is the baby okay?”

His obvious concern makes it impossible to hold back the laughter I’m fighting. “Baby’s fine.” I offer, trying to regain my wits. “I was trying not to laugh, so you wouldn’t think I was making fun of your skills, but it tickles.”

His posture visibly relaxes. “It’s insane when you tense up like that. I swear I just saw the outline of George’s butt.”

“Oh my God,” I huff. “We are not naming him George!”

“We’ll see,” he challenges.

“Yes, you will.”

We engage in a little stareoff before he gives up and reaches for his supplies.

“Okay, keep still,” he orders, getting back to work.

After drawing the outline, he colors it in using a little sponge, then retrieves a black pencil that looks a hell of a lot like— “Is that my eyeliner?”

He shrugs sheepishly. “That’s what the instructions said to use for detail work. I’ll get you another one.”

I force myself to keep very still while he draws the strings. It’s not too difficult on my stomach, but once he reaches my arm to draw the frets, I swear I’m about to come unglued.

Picture that scene from *Dirty Dancing*. You know, the one when he’s running his hand down her arm. I’ve never related to anything so strongly.

“You’re ruining the neck of my guitar!” He tries like heck to hold my arm straight and finish the strings, but we’re both in hysterics at this point. “Whatever,” he says, finally tossing the eyeliner pencil to the table. “We’ll have to imagine that this looks anything like a fret board.”

I glance to my left and crack up all over again when I see the end result. It can only be described as a complete disaster.

The paint only takes five minutes to dry, so it’s pretty well set by the time he finishes with his detail work.

“Try not to be ticklish,” he orders while dragging another stool up behind mine for himself.

With the touch of a remote, he dims the lights. Then he stretches my left arm out, holding it in place with his left hand, fingers positioned on the frets.

He sets the little remote on the stool between my legs and with the press of another button soft music fills the room.

My head lolls back onto his shoulder while he hums along to the intro, strumming the chords on my tummy.

Tears spring to my eyes at the sound of his beautiful voice. At the sentiment poured into each of his words.

He sings of meeting a young girl with sunshine in her hair and the oceans in her eyes who forever altered the course of his life. Of loving her beyond reason and the pain of nearly losing her.

My heart brims over with love for this incredible man.

The rest of the world fades away. In this moment there's only him and me, existing in this bubble he's created through his lyrics. A journey specific to the two of us.

“Never thought it was possible in one lifetime to feel such magic twice,” he croons. *“Until the day that girl waltzed back into my life, Giving me more than I ever dared to dream, A life, a purpose, and it all revolves around you, little bean.”*

Tears pour down my face as he sings of the future he imagines for us. A life filled with love and laughter. With struggles and triumphs.

His lips brush my lobe, and I swear I feel a tear hit my shoulder when he sings of how foolish he'd been to take a love like this for granted.

My chest heaves with sobs when he sings the chorus for the last time:

“You're mine, through and through,

No matter what, you're mine.

The both of you.”

Chapter TWENTY-SIX



Sammi

“Hey,” Lyle says, walking out of our bathroom looking all kinds of sexy in a gray muscle shirt and faded black jeans. “How are you feeling?”

“Tired.” With a groan, I roll to my back.

Like a magnet, his hand adheres to my stomach, the tips of his fingers poking around in hopes my little squatter will push back.

He gets his wish.

The corners of his mouth lift into a smile. “He’s so strong.”

“Tell me about it.” There were a few times I was convinced he’d cracked a rib or two.

“Just a couple more weeks, Li’l Momma.”

I hold out three fingers and wiggle them in the air. “Thirty-seven down, three to go.”

“Sure you don’t want me to wait for you to leave?” He plops down on the bed, smoothing a hand up and down my leg

over the blanket. “I will happily tell Frank to take a hike and come back for me later.”

“I’m positive.” I give his thigh a squeeze, teasing his bulge with a stroke of my pinky. “I’m just gonna take a nap and have nice a long bath. I’ll call one of the guys to come get me when I’m ready to head that way.”

“You sure?”

“Yes, I’m sure. You need to be at rehearsal with the rest of the band.”

He draws a deep breath and sighs. “I just hate leaving you here alone...especially since you’ve been getting those Braxton Hicks the last few days.”

“You heard Dr. Ruby yourself. This is perfectly normal.” I can’t help but smile over his concern. “Besides, I’ll have Maui here to keep me company.”

The bird perks up at the sound of his name and starts pacing along his perch. “I’m a demigod.”

“You’re an asshole.” Lyle turns toward my bird and gives him the finger.

Maui squawks then we both nearly keel over when he says, clear as day, “You’re an asshole.”

My fist connects with my husband’s back as he cackles with delight. “I told you if you kept saying that he was going to repeat it.”

He can’t wipe the smile from his face. “Maybe the little fucker’s cool after all.”

“Oh, my God!” I growl. “Stop cursing in front of him!”

The sound of a horn in the driveway signals Frank’s arrival. “All right, love. I gotta go.”

He leans in and sprinkles kisses all over my face, ending with a big smack on my lips.

“Love you,” I say, wrapping my arms around his neck. “I’ll see you at showtime!”

“Love you too.” He makes it as far as the door before stopping in his tracks. “Do you want me to check with Korie and Raven and arrange for you to hang out with one of them tonight instead of coming out to the bar?”

I scoff. “First of all, I can arrange my own babysitter, should I need one.” I turn in his direction and poke up two fingers. “And second of all, I *want* to go... Once this baby comes, I won’t be able to make a lot of your shows.”

The thought makes me want to cry. Watching him up there, living his dream, is one of my favorite things.

“Okay, Li’l Bit.” He kisses his first two fingers and sends it my way. “See you in a few hours.”

I don’t remember anything after catching that kiss until a sharp pain wakes me from a dead sleep. At least I think it does, because I bolt straight up, waiting to feel it again with no luck.

Deciding it must have been a dream, I run myself a bubble bath and light the candles in the bathroom. I still have four hours until the start of tonight’s show and intend to spend half of that pampering myself.

But no sooner than I get in the tub and rest my head on my bath pillow, do those irritating Braxton Hicks start up again, ruining the experience completely.

I wash up and give my hair a good scrubbing, rinse off using the handheld sprayer that I will never again look at without remembering kama sutra night, and step out onto the bath mat.

While blowing out my hair, I get a sharp pain. This one has me clutching the counter and holding my breath.

Once it passes, I grab my phone and call Korie.

“Hey girl,” she answers. “How’s it going?”

“Hey...uh. Do you remember what it felt like when you started having contractions?”

“Yeah...it was really intense. Not at all like the Braxton Hicks I’d been having.” She gets distracted for a moment with

her daughter then comes back to the line. “Why? Are yours getting worse?”

“I’m not sure. A little over an hour ago I had a sharp pain that woke me up out of a dead sleep, but then it never came back. Then I started feeling those fake ones again and figured maybe I just dreamed the other one up.” I place a hand on my belly, relieved to feel little bean kicking. “But I was just blow-drying my hair and got another one...and now nothing.”

“Hmmm.”

“I do not want to make a fuss or go in again just to be sent home, and I certainly don’t want to alert the men and screw up their show for nothing.”

“Right. No, don’t do that. I’m gonna call Raven and we’ll round up a sitter and come hang out with you at the house.”

“I told Lyle I was going to be at his show...I still plan on going.”

“That’s cool,” she assures me. “If this shit’s all in your head, we’ll just tag along to Booze & Bad Decisions with ya.”

“Perfect. And make sure Raven doesn’t—”

“Say anything to Nick,” she finishes for me. “No worries. We know not to alert those papa bears prematurely. Hang on to your mucus plug, bitch! Your babysitters are on the way!”

I finish drying my hair and apply a light face of makeup, then dress in the outfit I plan to wear to the show, a light blue Rhett Taylor band tee cropped just above my belly, with a black sports bra and black maternity leggings that go all the way up, completely covering the bump.

Other than a few Braxton Hicks, I feel nothing until I sit on the couch and bend over to zip my booties and nearly fall on my face. It’s at that moment the mother hens walk through the front door and immediately rush to my side.

“Holy shit!” Raven crouches in front of me. “Girl, are you okay?”

I attempt a nod even though I’m not sure I am—I’m still trying to work through the pain.

Korie sits beside me on the couch, rubbing my back until it eases up. “Definitely not Braxton Hicks, my dear.”

“I don’t know what to do,” I say with tears brimming in my eyes. “I don’t want to worry Lyle. People pay a lot of money to see them. Right now, even if these are contractions, they’re still an hour apart. Everything says not to go in until they’re five minutes or less.”

“Yeah, if you go now, they’ll just send you home.” Korie rolls her eyes. “Been there. Done that. *Twice*.”

“Welp,” Raven says, making herself comfy on my other side and grabbing the remote, “looks like we’ll just hang out and time contractions then.”

“Who has the kids?” I ask, relaxing back into the cushions.

“Edna and David.” Raven kicks her feet up on the coffee table and starts flipping through the channels, stopping on some Ted Bundy documentary. “They even offered to let us use their old hoopty car if we end up needing to go to the hospital so no one will recognize us.”

Edna and David are the twins’ maternal grandparents, but of no relation to Raven. Alex and Ava’s biological mother died of brain cancer when they were just two years old. That’s when Nick learned of their existence, and they came to live with him. It was a whole shitshow, but one that brought so many unlikely people together. They’re the reason Nick and Raven decided to settle down in Nashville and subsequently why the rest of the group has followed suit.

“They’re amazing.” In just the few months I’ve lived here, I’ve discerned what a blessing they are not only to Nick and Raven and the twins, but the entire group. They’ve really taken on the role of pseudo parents to us all.

“If I’d lived in Washington back then...” Raven points the remote at the TV and shakes her head as if disgusted with herself. “I’d have been bludgeoned to death by that man.”

Korie snorts and quickly agrees.

“Why do you think that?”

With a finger, she splits her long dark hair in two. “I fit the profile...and my horny ass never would have turned that prime specimen down.”

“Okay,” I say, clearly seeing it. “You have a poi—ohh!”

My belly squeezes tight as another pain renders me mute.

“That was only ten minutes,” Raven announces, while Korie tries to remind me to breathe through the pain.

“Fuck, that hurts.” I grab a tissue and dab at the tears welling in my eyes.

“Should you maybe let Lyle know you decided to skip out on the show?” Korie asks. “Cuz even if you don’t end up going in to the hospital tonight, there’s no way you can go to the show like this. Those men will all jump off that stage in the middle of a song if they see you bowled over like that.”

I check the time. She’s right. Their show starts in just thirty minutes. “Okay.”

I grab my phone and fire off a quick text.

Me: Hey. I’m still feeling pretty tired. Gonna take your suggestion and stay back and hang with the girls tonight. Love you so much. Have a great show.

Lyle: Sounds good, Li’l Momma. Love you

No sooner do I put my phone down than another sharp pain strikes.

“Five minutes,” Raven announces with a giddy excitement that has me seriously considering tit-punching her.

When I get two more at five minutes apart, we decide collectively it’s time to call Dr. Ruby and head to Memorial.

“Shouldn’t we tell the guys? Or at least Anika?” Raven worries her lips.

“No,” Korie and I say in unison.

“Not unless I get admitted. Then we can let them know. I’m only thirty-seven weeks. They might very well send my ass home.”

“Fine,” she begrudgingly agrees, rifling through our entryway closet for a few caps and sunglasses while Korie heads back to Nick and Raven’s on the golf cart to pick up the station wagon.

My contractions, or what I imagine by this point are contractions, come steadily at every four to five minutes throughout the forty-minute drive to the hospital.

As instructed on the phone, we meet Dr. Ruby in the emergency room, where she’s waiting with a wheelchair to escort us to a room.

“Yep,” the doctor announces when I ball up in pain in the elevator. “It’s a good thing you called... You’re definitely contracting.”

It’s a relief to have my suspicions confirmed. Everyone always tells you you’ll just know when you go into labor, but for me that couldn’t be farther from the truth, because I was certain those little Braxton Hicks were the real deal. Once you’ve embarrassed yourself by going into the hospital and being sent home, it makes you very reluctant to do it again.

I have a second one just as we’re entering the room, at which point the doctor pulls out a gown and sheet and orders me to undress. “We’re going to put you on the monitors and time them for an hour. I’ll be back in a few minutes to check your cervix.”

I can feel my pulse everywhere, pounding like the music in a suspense movie.

“Can we tell the guys no—”

“No!” That very firm order comes from the boss herself, Korie. “Not until she gets admitted.”

Raven’s eyes roll. “Fine.”

“You should probably get changed and in that bed before the next one hits.” The little blonde snaps her fingers at me and points to the gown. “Everything off.”

I make haste, stripping down. First my top, then my bra...

Korie sighs. “I miss my pregnant titties.”

“Dayum!” Raven murmurs reverently, openly gawking. “Now those might be worth getting knocked up for.”

I’m laughing so hard I can barely keep myself upright as I roll my leggings down my belly and peel them off. For modesty’s sake, I decide to slip the gown on before removing my underwear.

“Hold up, slow down, li’l mamma.” Raven juts her chin in the air. “Lift that gown.”

“What?” I lift and look down, but of course I can’t see past my belly to know what she’s looking at.

“Is that Lyle’s *face* on your knickers?”

“Oh shit,” I groan, remembering the novelty panties I was going to surprise him with tonight. It’s a thong, and just below his face are the words “makes me wet.”

“Yep,” I say, dropping the gown and tying the top laces behind my head, which is radiating my embarrassment.

“Let me help you.” Korie steps up and ties the last two sets of strings before helping me into bed. Only then do I slip off my panties and add them to the pile with my other clothes.

“These are great,” Raven says, picking them up to examine them closer. “Sammi here’s a little freak-a-leak, and I’m here for it.”

I can’t even react to the fact that this woman is staring at my dirty underwear because another contraction has me gripping the metal bedrail.

“Raven, really?” Korie shakes her head in disgust. “Put the girl’s panties down.”

“Kinda tempted to sniff ’em,” the nut job announces, spinning them around on a finger. “I hear it’s the top crotch.”

“Oh my God!” I finally scream when I can speak. “Put my fucking panties away.”

Chapter

TWENTY-SEVEN



We're about midway through our set when Anika signals for a time out.

Rhett takes his cue and addresses the crowd. "All right, guys. We're gonna take a brief intermission. Enjoy a little classic country from the jukebox, refill those drinks, and empty those bladders. We'll be back in a jiff."

The four of us rush off to meet Anika backstage to find out what's going on. We don't keep our phones with us on stage, so the girls know to call her should anything pressing arise. Naturally, we're all a bit frazzled, because for Anika to pull us off stage, it must be something major.

"Just got a call from Raven—the kids are fine," she rushes out when Nick gets a panicked look on his face. "But they've just admitted Sammi to Memorial."

The rest of her words sound like they're coming from underwater. My head goes foggy, and my knees nearly give out on me. The thought of anything happening to her or our baby is paralyzing.

Frank materializes behind me with a chair, grips me by the shoulders, and forces me to sit.

Then a glass of whiskey splashes me in the face, bringing me back from whatever dimension I just went off to. “Snap out of it, dumbass.” Aiden shakes his head. “You’re not supposed to pass out until you see the gore.”

“Sh...she’s okay?” My eyes fix on Annie as I lick the liquor from my lips. I don’t know why my mind instantly went to thinking the worst, but whatever that little blackout was caused me to miss most of what was said.

“Yes,” she says with a laugh. “She’s fine. Just getting ready to have a baby.”

“A baby...today?” I leap to my feet, hit with a sudden burst of adrenaline. “We’re having a baby!” My heart starts pumping double time.

“Hell yeah, you are.” Rhett slaps me on the back. “Get your ass to that hospital. We’ll have Gage fill in for you.”

After a string of well wishes from the guys, I sneak out through the back with Frank, and we make a mad dash to the hospital.

I attempt to call my wife as soon as we reach the car with no answer, but soon after received a message that she’s in the middle of being checked. This apparently means the doctor is all up in her business, and it’s not a good time to talk.

“She’s six centimeters,” I tell Frank, needing someone to talk to when the news comes through.

“Is that good?” he asks, flipping his blinker and merging onto the highway.

“I mean...yeah.” I nod. “I guess so. Gotta get to ten before he comes out.” My foot is steadily tap—tap—tapping on the floor. “She says we have time.”

“That’s good.” He punches the gas anyway and takes off flying with his caution lights flashing.

“Just got her epidural,” I announce, not at all upset to have missed that part. That needle is no freaking joke. My wife is a

beast.

“Says she’s feeling no pain.”

Frank nods, smiling to himself at my nervous chatter. “Glad to hear it.”

Pretty sure my friend is ready to throw himself into oncoming traffic by the time we arrive at Memorial. I’m in such a rush to get to my wife that I don’t think to wear a disguise, nor do I even attempt to hide my identity, which is even more obvious than usual since I’m in concert wear.

As soon as I step foot into the hospital, heads whip in my direction and the whispering starts.

“This way!” Dr. Ruby waves me over to a staff elevator, away from the prying eyes. “She’s doing great, Lyle.” She cups a hand to my shoulder. “Breathe.”

“But isn’t it too soon?” I can feel my blood pressure rising again. I’m a nervous wreck.

She shakes her head. “Thirty-seven weeks is considered full term, and remember we had to date by ultrasound. That really just gives us a ballpark.”

Once the elevator stops, she guides me down the hall to the room all the way at the end. I can hear Sammi, Korie, and Raven cackling before I even step foot inside.

“Oh, Lyle,” Raven says when I enter the delivery suite. “Wait til you see the stretched-out mess that was once your beloved—”

“Stop it.” Korie smacks her behind the head. “It goes back to normal. Don’t listen to her.”

“If not, I’m sure you could ask doc here”—Raven hitches a thumb over her shoulder toward Dr. Ruby who’s snapping her hands into a set of gloves to examine my wife—“to uh... add a few extra stitches.” She makes a sewing motion with her right hand.

Ignoring the peanut gallery, I rush to my wife’s side, bringing her hand to my mouth, kissing each of her knuckles

in tandem. Then, I kiss her forehead, the tip of her nose, and finally her lips. “I can’t believe we’re having a baby *today*.”

“Right now, actually,” doc says, popping up from beneath the sheet shielding Li'l Bit's business. “You're complete.”

“Complete?” I stare at my girl, waiting on clarification while listening to the doctor in the background suggest to the ladies that it's time to head out to the waiting area just down the hall.

Sweat beads on Sammi's brow. “This is it,” she says, eyes wide. “It's time to meet our little bean.” She's white with fear but also teeming with excitement.

Before I know it, there are two nurses in the room, breaking apart the bed and pulling stadium lighting down from the ceiling and aiming it at her crotch.

Everything happens so fast. There's none of that nervous pacing like in the movies. No time for passing out cigars. I just walked into the damn room and it's go time.

“She's crowning, guys,” a redheaded nurse announces after having a peak under the sheet. “Someone get Dr. Ruby back in here, stat.”

When the doctor returns, the nurse moves to the opposite side of my wife's bed from me. She tells me to keep a hand on her back and when she's given the order to push, I'm to help lift her into a sitting position.

Seems easy enough. And I'm glad to have an assignment, because right now I have enough nervous energy to climb the fucking walls.

“All right, Sammi,” Dr. Ruby says, rolling her stool to her spot at the foot of the bed, “on the next contraction I want you to give me a big push.”

“But I—I don't know how,” she whines, looking around in a panic for guidance.

“You just grab the back of your legs and sit up and strain like you're having a bowel movement,” the nurse opposite me instructs.

“Hah!” I choke on a laugh, instantly recognizing those instructions. “You got that, love? Same way you removed that butt plug the other day.”

“Oh no, you didn’t.” Leslie, the nurse, sucks in her lips, trying not to laugh while shaking her head.

The glare Sammi aims at me is lethal. “I think I might actually hate you right now.” But knowing I distracted her from her fear for even a minute is worth the temporary disdain.

Dr. Ruby keeps her poker face firmly in place, not reacting at all to my nonsense. “Push!” she says, then starts counting back from ten.

Li’l Bit’s face turns almost purple as she puts everything she’s got into forcing this baby out.

“And...rest.” Dr. Ruby looks up briefly to smile at my wife. “You’re doing great. His head’s already almost out. Give me another one just like that...” She waits for the monitor to start climbing, signaling another contraction. “Now!”

“Come on, baby, you got this,” I say, encouraging her through another ten-count while sneaking occasional glances at the mirror set up down there for our viewing pleasure. I can’t look for very long because every time I do, I end up feeling woozy. “Pushhhhhh!” I shout while she squeezes the life out of my hand.

“Head’s out! You can relax for a minute.”

This time Sammi remains in her upright position, ready to go when given the order.

“There he is,” I say, pointing toward the bloody mess in the mirror and trying not to pass out. It looks like a scene from a horror movie down there, with the doctor unwrapping the cord from around his neck and suctioning all kinds of goop out of his mouth.

“He’s so beautiful.” Big fat tears spill from my Li’l Bit’s eyes. This must be what they’re referencing with that phrase “a face only a mother could love.” Because my wife is smitten.

“That’s exactly what I was just thinking,” I lie, praying the situation gets better once he’s cleaned up.

“One more big push,” the doctor says, nodding at my wife. “In three, two, one...”

Sammi bears down, digging deep for every ounce of strength she can muster.

“He’s out!”

The second Dr. Ruby makes the announcement, Sammi’s body falls back and she is racked with sobs.

It’s the sound of his first cry that has me biting back tears. Hearing his little voice for the very first time. “You did it, Sam!”

My chest swells to near bursting with immeasurable pride. “You’re amazing.” I grip her face in my hands and smash my lips to her sweaty forehead while she attempts to catch her breath. “I love you so much.”

“I love you.” Her fingers tighten around mine. “So much.”

“Mr. Livingston,” Dr. Ruby calls, “would you like to cut the cord?”

I look to my wife, who smiles up at me and nods, giving me a little nudge. “Go meet your son.”

The overwhelming feeling of warmth that consumes me as I look at our little miracle is the purest form of love I’ve ever experienced. “He’s perfect,” I rasp, as tears run unchecked down my cheeks.

“Right between these clamps,” Dr. Ruby says, handing me the scissors.

Once I make the cut, the doctor hands him off to the second nurse, who until now had just been hanging out near the baby warmer.

“What’s happening?” There’s an edge of panic in my wife’s voice. “I thought...shouldn’t we be doing skin to skin?”

“I’m sorry, Sammi,” Dr. Ruby says. “It’s standard procedure when a baby comes this early to have them

thoroughly checked out by a NICU nurse. Given his size and that we don't have a true due date to work off of, it's really for the best."

"Oh...okay." Her voice cracks and fresh tears spill down her cheeks.

I move back to my wife's side, dabbing her face with a tissue. "It's better to be safe," I say, smoothing her sweaty hair back. "That cord was wrapped pretty good around his neck too."

Sammi nods, never taking her eyes from that warmer.

"Five pounds, ten ounces," the nurse announces.

"He's so tiny." Sammi continues to stare in awe at the little life she created. "Is he okay?"

"So far, so good," the nurse says, looking back briefly to smile at my wife. "Lungs are good and strong."

"He's such a handsome little guy," Dr. Ruby offers while finishing up with whatever she's still doing between my wife's legs. "Have you two decided on a name?"

The way she just carries on conversation while she's messing around down there boggles my mind.

"George Wayne Livingston," I answer, not missing a beat.

"That's ni—"

"That's *not* his name," Sammi says, cutting her off when she nails me with another one of those killer glares. "Stop calling him that."

I cower at the unfamiliar bite in her tone. "Sorry, baby. Won't happen again."

"Would you like to hold your son?" The nurse chooses the perfect moment to walk over with the baby bundled up like a little burrito and place him into my wife's arms. "Congratulations. You have a healthy baby boy."

I'll never forget the expression on her face as she trails a finger over his little features, as if trying to commit them to

memory. This right here is the definition of love at first sight. It's sacred and pure and I feel honored to bear witness to it.

“Judd,” she says, lifting her gaze to mine for approval. “Judd Wayne Livingston.”

“It's perfect.”

The name.

The baby.

This moment.

Our life.

Chapter

TWENTY-EIGHT



Sammi

We've been home from the hospital for a few days now, and I still have this constant urge to pinch myself just to be sure I'm not dreaming.

I just can't believe this is my life. That this little angel baby is truly mine *to keep*.

He's got the most perfect little head full of blonde fuzz, and Lyle definitely manifested those dimples. His lips are so tiny and cute. And his long, golden lashes just melt this momma's heart.

Judd is everything I never knew I needed, especially not at the age of twenty-one.

I know it's early yet, and I shouldn't count my chickens before they hatch. But he's such a *good* baby. He's just the sweetest little lovebug who wants to be in our arms at all times. And believe me, his daddy and I are more than happy to indulge him.

Our only argument these days is over whose turn it is to hold him. And when losing means I get to watch the two of

them together? Well, it doesn't feel much like much of a loss at all.

I didn't think it was possible to love Lyle more than I already did—until I saw his heart melt for that baby. From the moment he proposed, there's never been an ounce of hesitation. He made the choice to step in and be a father to my son, and he's never looked back.

He didn't have to do any of this...*but he did.*

He *chose* this life with us. And I'll never stop counting my lucky stars that he landed outside my bridal suite that fateful day.

A text alert sounds on my phone, pulling me from my thoughts.

Raven: Where the hell are you?

Me: Uhh...the bathroom. Just got out of the shower. Why?

Raven: Come to the living room and be quiet.

Guess we have a visitor.

I pad through the house quietly, as instructed, to find Raven snapping photos of my husband and child asleep on the couch.

“Did you do this?” I ask when I notice their matching white fluffy robes and the towels wrapped around their heads like they're at the spa. Where do you even find head wraps that tiny? *Surely she must've staged this.*

Raven shakes her head.

“The cucumbers?” I whisper when I note the slices resting on their eyelids.

“Nope.” Her head shakes again. “I just walked in.”

I too take out my phone and start snapping pictures of my bougee-ass husband and his sidekick. Only Lyle would think to pamper a newborn this way. “This is the cutest thing I've ever seen.”

“Ugh, right?” Raven groans. “My ovaries did not need to witness this.”

I snort. “Just give that man a baby already.”

Her lip curls in disgust. “I don’t think I’m quite ready to fuck up my vagina just yet.”

I give her a death stare. “Probably not the right thing to say to the one-week post-partem chick who’s still waiting for hers to bounce back.”

“Yeah...I’m holding out to see yours in a few weeks before making my final decision on this whole poppin’ a kid out idea.” She laughs softly. “If that thing resembles anything that even remotely looks like a vagina...I’ll consider it.”

“What the hell makes you think I’m just gonna show you my vag—”

The door swings open, stopping me mid-sentence.

“Oh, hi, Anika...” I say when she just barges right on in. Swear to God, no one around here knocks.

“Cute,” she motions to my guys before having a seat beside them and tapping my husband on the leg. “Wake up, sunshine.”

As soon as Lyle sits up, Raven confiscates the baby, careful not to wake him or disturb his eye veggies. “Looks like y’all have some important business to discuss.” She adjusts the front of his little robe, wrapping him tighter. “I’ll just take this off your hands.” She moseys over to the armchair across the room to get her baby fix and the tea all at once.

“What now?” I ask when I notice the cursed iPad resting on Anika’s lap. I really hoped I’d seen the last of that thing when she smashed it to smithereens, but no such luck. She just went out and got a new one.

Annie pats the couch on her other side, inviting me to have a seat. “I fucking hate people,” she says before flipping the tablet over to TMD’s home page. “I’m really sorry, guys, but we have to deal with this.”

Breaking News!

Just when we thought we'd seen the last of the drama surrounding Lyle Livingston (bassist of The Rhett Taylor Band) and his shotgun bride, we learn things aren't exactly as kosher as they may seem.

As we all know, there are two sides to every story, and we're here today to help Trent Thomas, better known as Sammi Livingston's runaway groom, tell his.

According to Mr. Thomas, he was informed only moments before walking down the aisle that not only was his bride to be (then Sammi Deluca) pregnant—but with another man's baby! This shocking discovery is what understandably led to him calling off the wedding.

He has recently learned through interviews with Mr. and Mrs. Livingston that baby Judd might, in fact, be his biological son.

This is his public appeal for a paternity test.

If it turns out that the child is his, he plans to seek shared custody.

Stay tuned right here to TMD for updates on this developing story.

I open my mouth to speak but no sound comes out. Just tears. *So many tears.*

It was too good to be true. This fairy tale life I've been living is imploding around me, and I haven't the slightest idea how to stop it. I feel frozen in this moment—trapped in an absolute nightmare.

“Oh, Sammi,” Anika wraps an arm around me, pulling me close, but the sweet gesture only makes me cry harder. “It's going to be okay.”

I bring a hand to my trembling lips and shake my head, because this can't be happening. Not to my perfect little family—to my husband and my sweet baby. They don't deserve this.

“That fucking snake.” Lyle grips the pad still clutched in his hands so tightly the case begins to crack. “He told her to get rid of *it*,” he grits, nostrils flaring. “It!” he repeats louder. “I was there. I heard him.”

Anika nods, her face more broken than I’ve ever seen. “I believe you.” She takes the tablet from his hand and returns it to her bag. “But you know as well as I do that it’s your word against his.”

My husband gets up from the couch and starts pacing back and forth across the room, silently stewing in his anger.

The girls and I watch with bated breath for the explosion that seems inevitable. I’m afraid to say or do the wrong thing. Not out of fear that he’d hurt me, but that I might unintentionally wound him further.

He pauses near the front door, clenching and unclenching his fists before rearing back and punching a hole through the wall. Then he falls to his knees with an anguished cry that pierces straight to my soul.

I rush to his side with a torrent of tears pouring down my face. “I’m sorry,” I say, wrapping him in my arms and holding his head to my chest. I can hardly breathe, knowing he’s in so much pain. Even worse is that, in a roundabout way, I’m to blame. “I’m so sorry.”

I say it over and over, rocking with him on that floor until I feel his body begin to relax. His heart is beating so hard, and the veins in his arms are bulging, pumped full of adrenaline.

“It’s not your fault.” He kisses my head then pulls me into his lap, burying his lips in my hair. His knuckles glide along my arm in a soothing gesture that seems to have a calming effect on us both.

He looks up at Anika. “What do we do?”

“The only thing we can do.” She frowns. “We order the test.”

Lyle’s grip tightens, but otherwise he has no outward reaction. “Then what?”

“If it’s negative, we carry on like this never happened. The results will be enough to appease your fans.”

“And if he’s the father?”

Hearing him refer to anyone else as Judd’s father churns my stomach. That title belongs to one man, and it sure as shit isn’t Trent Thomas.

“Then we fight him in court. Get as much physical custody as we can. The fact that you live in different states, and you and Sammi being married, should help with that.” She runs a hand through her long hair. “The courts like to see children in stable homes. Judd has that here with the two of you.”

“That piece of shit is only after his money,” Raven hisses quietly, so she won’t wake the baby. “This is such bullshit.”

“How soon can we get the test?” I ask, still trying to stifle my sobs. I’ve got to pull myself together and be strong for my husband.

This is a crushing blow to both of us, but I’m not the one having my role in our child’s life threatened. However this test turns out, I’ll still be mom. But there’s a real possibility he could be demoted from dad to stepdad. And while I know a title won’t change the way he feels about Judd, it’s still a loss—one he’s already grieving the possibility of.

“Say the word and I’ll get the ball rolling today. I’m sure Trent is eager to see if he’s hit the jackpot. I can’t imagine he’d be opposed to providing a sample as soon as possible.”

“Do it,” Lyle says, grinding his molars. “And expedite it,” he clips. “Let’s figure out what the hell we’re dealing with here.”

“On it,” she says, rising to her feet. Anika makes it halfway to the door before stopping and turning back toward us where we’re still huddled on the floor. “I can’t imagine what you’re feeling...and I am shit with knowing what to say in situations like this.” She shakes her head, as if she can’t believe she’s going to even attempt it. “But Lyle, you are that baby’s dad, no matter what any stupid test says.”

He sucks his tongue to his teeth and nods.

“You chose him for the right reasons,” she says. “DNA can’t take that away.”

“She’s right.” I say, pressing a kiss to the bend of his neck. “Trent can’t compete with what’s in here.” I squeeze the hand that’s resting over his heart into a fist. “Love will win out in the end...it has to.”

“I’ll be in touch.” Anika starts back for the door. “Gonna go work some magic and see if we can have those results in the next day or two.”

Once Anika’s gone, Lyle gets up from the floor, careful not to flash Raven with his robe. He blows out a long breath and then helps me to my feet. “I’m gonna go put some clothes on.”

I nod, smoothing a hand down his back. “Okay.”

He aims a snarky finger at Raven, but his voice is so heavy. “Then I’m gonna come hold my son.”

Tears well in my eyes. He’s clearly trying to lighten the mood, but I’m just so relieved to hear those words from his lips. Judd is his, in every way that matters. I’ll do whatever it takes to ensure that he knows no matter what those results show, his role in our son’s life will not be diminished.

Raven smiles. “You got it, Daddy.”

Chapter

TWENTY-NINE



“Are you smilin’ at me, little man?” I wiggle the finger he’s holding, getting a little burn behind the eyes as I stare down at his perfect little face. “Your momma says it’s gas.” I scoff. “But I think she’s just jealous that you smiled at me first.”

He squirms in my arms and lets out a little grunt.

“Nope...no fussin’.” I pop his binky into his mouth, shushing him. “She’s gonna come snatch you up if she hears you.”

The past twenty-four hours have been some of the hardest of my life.

Trent trying to stake a claim to Judd came so far out of left field. After seeing his reaction at the church to Sammi’s pregnancy, and never saying a word during it, him popping up out of the woodwork is just something we never considered.

I’d be lying if I said I didn’t care one way or another how the test turns out. The truth is I care so fucking deeply it’s making me crazy.

It's all I've been able to think about. Not because it'll change the way I feel for my son, but because the thought of sharing him with that man makes my skin crawl.

"Hey," Sammi says, plopping down beside me on the couch that's damn near molded to my ass with how much time I've spent sitting in this spot since this baby's arrival. "It's time for me to feed him."

"Nuh-uhn," I tease, twisting my body so he's just out of reach to mess with her.

"I'll give him right back." The sound of her laughter feels like music in this house that's been mostly silent since yesterday. We're both doing our best to pretend there isn't this huge cloud looming over us. "Look at how hard he's sucking on that thing."

"Ah..." I cut a hand through the air. "He just likes it."

Her brow quirks. "I heard him start to fuss from the kitchen." I swear she has super-sonic hearing now. I'm beginning to understand how my mom knew we were up to stuff when we were little. It always seemed like witchcraft.

"Fine." I hand my little best bud over and watch as he immediately latches onto my wife's breast. "Such a little piggie."

"He sure likes to eat." Sammi smiles down at him, sinking into the couch to get more comfortable.

I prop a pillow under her arm and lean in to kiss her salty lips, a tell that despite her mostly dry eyes since the initial shock, she's still crying in private.

"Hey, little man," I say, tapping him lightly on the shoulder. "You better enjoy it now, cuz those titties are just on loan."

Li'l Bit's hand flies out and smacks me in the chest. "Lyle," she shrieks, shaking her head and laughing a true belly laugh. One that lets me know that no matter what, we'll eventually get back to some kind of normal around here.

I'm getting up to head to the kitchen for a snack when the intercom at our gate buzzes. Sammi and I lock eyes and my pulse starts racing as I answer with the app on my phone.

"It's a certified delivery," I tell my wife, a lump forming in my throat as I buzz the mail carrier in.

She gives me a half smile. "This is it."

"Yep." I stare at her and the baby for a beat before rushing out in my socks and meeting the delivery guy in the driveway to sign for my package.

It feels like I'm carrying a bomb in my hands as I make my way back inside and sit across from my wife on the coffee table.

"Open it," she says, her face as white as a sheet.

My hands are shaking so hard. I've literally done nothing but anticipate the arrival of these results, and now that they're here I'm afraid to open them.

"It's okay," Sammi says. "Whatever the results...it's you and me who will be raising our son."

"This changes nothing," I agree, looking her in the eye as I rip the envelope open and withdraw the neatly folded paperwork.

"What's it say?"

I unfold it in her direction then hold it out with a shaking hand so she can do the honors.

Tears well in her eyes, and she cracks the most radiant of smiles, and I know before the words even leave her mouth. "Congratulations, Daddy...that son of a bitch is *not* the father."

Relief pours over me; it leaks from my eyes and fills up my chest. "He's mine," I say, scanning over the results to see for myself. "He's really...truly...mine." Throwing my head back, I beat a hand to my chest. "Thank you, God."

I move to the couch and pull my wife and son into my arms, holding them close. I pepper kisses all over her tear-

soaked face while gently stroking the fluff on my little man's head.

Judd continues sucking away, blissfully unaware of the hell his mother and I have just endured.

“Check your phone,” Li'l Bit says, smiling down at hers that's just gone nuts with notifications.

I retrieve it from the coffee table and open to multiple new messages in our group chat with the band members and their wives. And Anika, of course...who's the one responsible for all the alerts.

Anika: Well?

Anika: Hellooo. We're dying over here.

Anika: WHAT ARE THE RESULTS?!

“What the hell?” I bust out laughing. “Was she stalking our freaking gate?”

“It's Anika,” Sammi says. “Of course she was.”

“Should we put them outta their misery?”

She nods, cupping a hand to my face. “They're family.”

I snap a photo of the results and send it over.

“Think it went through?” she asks when a full minute passes and no one responds.

I shrug. “You can see it on yours, right?”

She nods. “Maybe it got to me faster because we're in the same house?”

“Here,” I say, taking the baby, who's finally finished eating. “I'll go change him. You call Anika and let her know.”

“Come on, son.” I carry his stinky butt over to the changing table. “Let's get that mushy mustard off your tush.”

“She's not answering.” Sammi frowns. “And neither are Raven or Korie.”

“Hmm...that's weird.”

Just then, our front door swings wide open and everyone piles in...Anika, the guys, the girls, their kids.

“Congratulations!” they all shout in unison.

“I’ll take him,” Korie says, scooping my son out of my arms. “The guys need you in the yard.”

I look around to realize only the women and children remain inside. Well, minus Anika. She’s unsurprisingly out back with the guys.

“Wait,” Raven says, following right behind me. “Let me put my camera on so I can video for social media.”

“Hurry,” Korie hisses.

“God, I hope Trent Thomas sees this shit,” Ray snickers. “Okay...go!”

As soon as my wife and I step outside, five champagne corks fire into the air, followed by a shower of bubbles all aimed right at my head.

Sammi’s screaming and trying to duck behind me to get out of the line of fire.

Once the bottles have run dry, the twins come outside with baskets of confetti and start throwing it at us, which pairs great with us being soaking wet.

Hadley toddles next to them, screaming her excitement as she stomps her feet, splashing in the bubbly.

“Thanks, guys.” My cup is overflowing. “Seriously, you’re the best fucking friends a guy could ever hope for.”

“Nope,” Aiden says, holding a hand up in protest. “We’re not doing this.”

“Not doing what?” Sammi asks.

“Goddamn it, yes, we are!” he says, dabbing at the tears forming in the corners of his eyes. “You guys are turning me into a fucking pussy.”

Anika looks at Aiden with her nose scrunched. “I can’t believe you’re fucking crying.”

“What?” he sniffs, rubbing his nose on his sleeve. “You’re fucking crying too!”

“I’m a girl!”

His answering snort gets him punched in the stomach.

“I can’t believe you guys did all of this.” I shake my head. “What was the plan if the results had gone the other way?”

“Ah, ah.” Aiden shakes his head, holding out a chastising finger. “We don’t talk about Bruno.”

“Whyyyyy?” Raven whines when the twins start singing their favorite song from *Encanto*. “Why would you say the B-word?”

“Don’t worry about the alternative.” Rhett throws a hand over my shoulders. “There’s no need to waste any more energy on that.”

“That’s right,” my wife says, throwing her arms around my neck. “Love wins.”

I grip her face in both hands, running my thumbs over her cheekbones and echo her words from the day before. “It has to.”

“Today, tomorrow, and for always.”

Epilogue



Sammi

5 Weeks Later

“Hey guys!” Dr. Ruby greets us bright and early on a Saturday morning for my six-week postnatal appointment. “My goodness,” she says peeking at Judd in the infant seat slung over Lyle’s arm. “He’s gotten so big already.” She smooths a hand over his head, careful not to wake him. “Looks just like his momma.”

Her observation has me beaming.

After a few minutes of small talk with my husband, she directs him and our son to a waiting room before asking me to follow her to her office.

Dr. Ruby starts by asking a series of questions pertaining to my mental health, which so far has been fine. Thank goodness.

“And you’re still breastfeeding?”

“I am.” I smile, proudly.

“How’s that going?”

“He likes to eat.” I laugh. “No issues there.”

“No problems with breast infections?”

I shake my head. “Not since the one I saw you for a few weeks ago.”

“That’s great,” she says. “And have you had your period yet since delivering?”

I shake my head.

“But you have stopped bleeding?”

“Yep.” I sigh with relief, so glad that part’s over with. “Stopped right at about three weeks after he was born.”

“Good deal.” She jots something down in her file. “And what are your plans as far as birth control goes?”

“Uh...” I shrug. “I think we’re just gonna go with the pull-out method for now.”

“It’s your choice, of course,” she says, “but it’s highly recommended you wait at least eighteen months before getting pregnant again to avoid an increased risk of complications.”

I nod. “Okay.”

She gives me a side eye. “The pull-out method is not very effective,” she adds, tapping her pen on the desktop.

“I guess I could try a low dose birth control.”

Dr. Ruby sighs with relief. “I think that’s wise. You really do need to give your body ample time to recover. It’s just been through quite an ordeal.”

“Makes sense.”

“Okay, let’s go get your physical exam done, and if everything checks out, you’ll be given the all clear.”

“Uhhh...” I hedge, wiping my sweaty palms on my jeans. I knew this topic would eventually come up. “All clear...for?” I ask, playing dumb.

“Sex.” Her answer is so matter of fact.

“About that,” I say, chewing my lower lip. “We might’ve already done it...”

Whatever she’s thinking is hidden behind that killer poker face of hers. “Did you use protection?”

“No...”

“All right, well, before I can put you on birth control, we’re going to have to do a pregnancy test.”

“A pregnancy—why?” I ask, flustered. “If I haven’t had my period yet, that means I’m not ovulating, right?”

“Not exactly. It is very possible to get pregnant on your first ovulation after pregnancy, in which case, you would not have a period.”

“But that’s like...rare, right?”

She shrugs. “It happens.” She turns around and opens a drawer to retrieve a cup. “Go take a walk down to the bathroom. You know where it is by now.” She shakes her head and laughs. “Leave it in the little door.”

Although I’m sure this is more as a precaution than anything else, I must admit I’m nervous. I expected to get fussed at over the possibility of hurting myself for having sex before I was cleared. A possible pregnancy wasn’t even on my radar. But now that she’s explained it, I feel more than a little stupid.

After providing my sample, I go back to her office and wait.

It doesn’t take long before Dr. Ruby returns with a complimentary baby bag identical to the one I received at my first appointment for Judd looped over her arm.

“You’re joking.”

“I assure you,” she says, passing me the bag, “I do not kid about these things.”

My heartbeat gets louder. I can hear it echoing in my head. “I’m pregnant?”

She nods. “Congratulations.”

“For Lyle,” I muse, not realizing I said it aloud.

“Well, I would hope so,” Dr. Ruby says, chuckling.

“Shit.” *Shit. Shit. Shit*

“Well,” she says, attempting to lighten the mood, “at least this time we can get a due date based on the date of conception.”

After my exam, we head to the waiting room to retrieve my husband and child.

Lyle immediately recognizes the little diaper bag full of free shit. “What’s that for?”

“Your daughter,” I say dryly, renewing our debate.

“My da—” His jaw drops. “Nooo.”

I nod. “Surprise!”

“You’re pregnant?”

“Apparently.” I shake my head, still not sure I believe it myself.

“This is incredible!” He wraps his arms around me, grinning like a fool.

“It is?”

“Fuck yeah.” He swings me around before setting me back to my feet. “Judd and George will be the best of friends.”

Click [here](#) to read a special bonus epilogue for *One Night Standards*.

Continue reading for the Prologue and Chapter One from *Pour Judgment* (Rhett & Korie’s book.)

**PREVIEW OF POUR
JUDGMENT**

**Pour
JUDGMENT**



USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
HEATHER M. ORGERON

Prologue



“Oh, Rhett, yesss...”

I squeeze harder, lapping her nipple into a firm bud through her thin top. My cock stiffens as she grinds her hips to the tempo of the music, giving me a sexy as fuck lap dance. Suddenly I have this inexplicable urge to look up, letting Monica’s tit slip from my mouth. I feel smothered—like all the air has suddenly been pulled from the room.

Who is that?

“It’s fine, Nick—” She digs her heels into the floor. “No, I don’t want to meet—”

“Rhett.” My drummer, Nick, approaches, dragging the very reluctant blonde behind him by the arm. “I’d like to introduce you to my cousin, Korie Potter. Korie, this is Rhett.” He gives her a little shove, landing her on her feet, right in front of my bent knees.

My eyes peruse her sweet little body. Her long blonde hair is pulled back in a low ponytail. There’s not an ounce of makeup on her face. Her eyes are a vibrant shade of emerald,

and she has the most delectable little freckles dotting her cheekbones. She's wearing a black Rolling Stones tee—slightly fitted, the collar ripped so it droops a little, exposing one shoulder. One creamy, slender, tantalizing shoulder. I clear my throat, reaching around the raven-haired beauty presently situated in my lap for Korie's hand.

"I'm good," she says, not reaching back, her face scrunched like she's just gotten a whiff of something foul. "Just carry on with whatev—umm *whoever* you're doing." She whirls back on her cousin, eyes flaming. "I'm gonna go get some air."

In her haste to get away, she trips over my foot and is sent hurtling face first to the floor. Like in the movies, the music stops and every pair of eyes in the room are on her.

"Oh, shit." I slide Monica to the side. "Scuse me," I rush out, blundering to my feet, the alcohol throwing off my balance as I hop around, trying to right my pants zipper before reaching her. "My fault," I say, shoving the little douche aside who's trying to help her up. "I've got it."

He throws his hands in the air, backing away.

"Are you all right?" My fingers curl around her upper arm, and inexplicably my pulse begins to race.

Then, she turns toward me, and our eyes truly connect for the first time. Fireworks burst in my chest, and I can't seem to locate my voice. The attraction is instantaneous.

Well, it is for me at least.

She visibly stiffens. "Get your hands off of me. I'm fine."

"Just wanted to make sure you were oka—"

She shrugs out of my hold, popping to her feet and righting her clothes. "I said, I'm fine." She glances around at the slew of eyes fixed on her, sneering at all the snooty females whispering, pointing their manicured nails, and giggling in their Louboutin shoes and designer cocktail dresses. What I found hot not even five minutes ago suddenly seems pretentious and well, *boring*. "You're just making it worse," she grits.

“Right.” Nodding, I withdraw my hand and bring it to my chest. “You all act like you’ve never seen a person trip before,” I say, addressing the crowd. “Get back to it.” I clap my hands loudly toward the DJ, “Music!”

With an annoyed huff, she rolls her eyes and storms off in her black Converse.

Sneakers at a Hollywood party... Who is this girl?

“Don’t take it personally,” Nick says, coming up behind me and clapping me on the shoulder. “She’s Jax’s daughter.”

Jax Potter...Nicholas’s washed-up rock star uncle, who hooked us up with our agent and helped get The Rhett Taylor Band off the ground. So, that explains why her name sounded familiar. But still doesn’t account for her odd reaction toward me.

“Did I umm...Have we met before?” I stare after her until she disappears through the balcony door. “Did I offend her in some way?” I’m beginning to wonder if we’ve maybe hooked up and that’s the reason, I feel this strange connection. But I’m positive I’ve never felt like this before, and she certainly doesn’t seem like someone I’d easily forget.

“Nah, man. This just isn’t her scene. You know Jax... wasn’t easy being the one at home with her mom while he uh...did his thing.” He shrugs. “I’m honestly surprised to see her here at all.”

“Right,” I agree as Monica’s hands slink around my waist from behind. She’s shimmying to the beat of the sultry music, her breasts pressed to my back, but I’m just not in it any longer. “I’ll find you later,” I lie, kissing the tips of her fingers and sending her off to her friends.

She pouts like a child, running a hand over my chest. “Don’t forget me.”

Nick laughs after she walks off. “That’s probably what uh...what did it. She thinks we’re all like her pops.” He gives his shoulders another shrug. “Thanks for the party, man. You’re the best. I’m gonna go check on Korie.”



“Ahh, there you are,” I say, finding Korie perched on a wicker couch with a drink in hand. It’s a dark, clear night. She’s staring out at the stars, all alone on the balcony off Nick’s room. “So, I think maybe we got off on the wrong foot.” I take a pull from my beer then clear my throat. “I wanted to find you and reintroduce myself—start over again, you know, in less...*awkward circumstances.*”

Her head slowly rolls in my direction. The look in her eyes tells me she’s over this conversation before it even begins. “No need. Everyone with the internet knows who you are. You’re Rhett Taylor—bad boy of country music. Playboy. Womanizer.”

“Ouch.” I suck in a breath, bringing a hand to my chest. “Yeah...well, you see what the media wants people to see.”

She rises to her feet, closing the distance between us in a few strides. The wind blows through her hair, and I get a whiff of her floral shampoo. My dick twitches. She’s so close— inches away. I have to stop myself from giving in to the urge to reach out and touch her again. “What I saw when I walked in was nothing less than I expected.” She plants a hand on her hip. “That wasn’t the media. That was a rock star in his natural habitat.” She taps a hand lightly on the front of my shirt. “I know it’s probably real hard to believe, but I’m not here to go gaga and fall all over you.” She smiles a lazy smile. “As disappointing as that may be for your huge...*ego.*”

Did I just imagine her eyes dropping to my crotch?

“I came to see my cousin, who I haven’t seen in years. The rest of this”—her hand circles the air—“is just unfortunate.”

She stalks back into the house, leaving me to scrape my jaw up from the floor. Something about that sassy mouth of hers only makes me want her more.

I spend the rest of the evening lurking in the shadows of my own home, stalking a girl who wants nothing to do with me. It doesn’t take her long to befriend all of the girls who were making fun of her earlier tonight, including Monica. It

would seem we're all under her spell. But for some reason she's decided to give them another chance. Me? Well, I think she'd written me off before walking through the door.

I'm green with envy. I don't know what it is about this particular girl that has me feeling things I haven't felt in years... but it makes me realize just how numb I've allowed myself to become.

For the first time since I can't remember when, I'm *feeling*, and even jealousy feels a hell of a lot better than indifference.

Chapter ONE



“You’re serious right now?” Anika, my manager, paces the studio in four-inch stilettos while gnawing on the back of a pen. “You want to cancel studio time to go to...to *camp*?”

She’s kinda cute when she’s all riled up like this, her pale cheeks flaming red and daggers shooting from her amber eyes. I sink down further into the plush couch, crossing my arms on my chest. “It’ll be fun. I’m in need of some fun. You said so yourself. A few days on the coast with other single, college-aged adults. Real people, Anika. A break from Hollywood.”

“I said *after* we finish the album. Not right in the middle of recording it.” Her heels clack on the wood floors as she moves to crouch before me, resting her manicured nails on the arms of my chair. Her frustration is evident in the heaviness of her breaths. She shakes her head, tossing her long chestnut braid over her left shoulder. “It’s her, isn’t it? She’s going to be there?”

“Yes,” I answer, trying to cover a smirk. “Yeah...So, there’s no way I can put this off.” I realize the timing isn’t

ideal, but it's the perfect chance to work my magic on this girl, whom I can't seem to get out of my head.

Pushing up from my knees, she's again wearing a hole into the floor. "She hates you, Rhett. This is a terrible idea. Not only for your career, but because you're going to end up *disappointed*."

What she means is depressed. My first Hollywood girlfriend did a number on me, but that was before I knew how industry relationships worked. I keep my heart guarded now—locked up tight in a suit of armor. I just want the chance to play with my sword.

"I'm curious about her," I say with a shrug, my mind wandering to my drummer Nick's birthday party, about three weeks ago. To his cousin, Korie Potter. Her long, wavy blonde ponytail, faded jeans, and Rolling Stones tee. She stood out among the sequins and glitz. Her attempt to fade into the background had the complete opposite effect. Only adding to her appeal was the easy manner with which she carried herself. She had a confidence—an honesty—about her that I don't see much in the circles I run. I can't help but smile, remembering how unimpressed she was with everything Rhett Taylor. What did she call me again? Oh, yeah. *The bad boy of country music*. Someone's been paying a little too much attention to TMZ.

At any rate, life gets rather boring when you can literally have anything you want. *Anyone* you want. I hadn't realized how willing I'd become to settle until life dangled temptation, in the form of a sassy-mouthed, blonde-haired, green-eyed, fiery little vixen, right under my nose and shook things up a bit—shook *me* up a bit.

Yeah, Korie is just the challenge I need.

"The label won't like it."

Having had about enough of her negativity, I rise to my feet, towering over her five-foot frame. It's not often I ignore her advice. We've been best friends since elementary school; she's one of the few people in my life I actually trust. "I don't

give a damn what they like or don't like, Anika. I'm tired. I need to rest. The boys and I *are* taking this trip."

Her pointed jaw ticks as she stares me down, arms crossed on her chest in a stance that I'm assuming she means to be intimidating. "Does she know you'll be there?"

I snort. "Of course not."

She gives one final resigned shake of her head, blowing out a laugh. "You're gonna regret this."

"Or," I say, thumping her nose because I know how much it pisses her off, "I could enjoy it very, *very* much."

"And Nick is okay with this?"

"Abso-fucking-lutely," the hulking, six-foot-three, tatted oaf himself announces, entering through the back door. "A week of tits, booze, and fun in the sun? *And* I get to watch him follow Korie around like a lovesick puppy while she hands him his balls in a sling? Sign me up for that shit."

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About THE AUTHOR

Heather M. Orgeron is a Cajun girl with a big heart and a passion for romance. She married her high school sweetheart two months after graduation and her life has been a fairytale ever since. She's the queen of her castle, reigning over five sons and one bossy little princess who has made it her mission in life to steal her Momma's throne. When she's not writing, you will find her hidden beneath mounds of laundry and piles of dirty dishes or locked in her tower (aka the bathroom) soaking in the tub with a good book. She's always been an avid reader and has recently discovered a love for cultivating romantic stories of her own.

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