

INVISIBLE SCARS HURT THE WORST

TRUCK *Me*

 MUTTER
BROTHERS

ARIA BLISS

Truck Me

A Grumpy Sunshine Small Town Romance

The Mutter Brothers

Book 2

Aria Bliss



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To my Papa.

You're one of the best men I've ever known. No disease, not even dementia, can ever take your awesomeness away from me. Love you always.

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Trigger Warnings

This series deals with some heavy themes including abandonment, anger and rage, physical and mental abuse, fear and helplessness, growing up too young, guilt, loss of childhood, jealousy and hatred, substance abuse, emptiness and inadequacy, self-harm, neglect, self-loathing, self-doubt, low self-esteem, domestic violence, and poverty. While all themes are not presented in every book, there may be hints to them throughout the series. However, this is still a romance and a happily-ever-after will be delivered with a heavy dose of humor along with all the big feels you expect from an Aria Bliss novel.

Chapter 1

Lists are life.

Charlotte

Ten reasons I'm in hell:

1. I'm thirty years old and moved back in with my parents.

2. I haven't slept well in ten days. (Probably because I'm sleeping on a twin-sized mattress that's almost as old as me. Yes, it's in my childhood bedroom that is still decorated the same as it was when I was twelve. I'm surrounded by princesses.)

3. I'm unemployed.

4. This town smells.

5. My hair is a frizzy mess. I'm out of my favorite hair product, and there's nowhere I can buy it locally.

6. My niece is making me watch Barbie movies because she thinks it

will help her relate to me.

7. I stepped on a rock in my favorite Jimmy Choo heels and twisted my ankle.

8. My parents' washing machine died on me in the middle of a load.

9. The only functioning washing machine at the only laundromat in a twenty-mile radius also died on me in the middle of a load.

10. I'm hungry and there's nowhere to get food.

To say I'm having a bad day is an understatement.
More like a bad start to my year.

It's only February—Valentine's Day to be exact—and all my goals for the year are impossible to achieve. I am one giant epic failure.

I had it all planned out. My list was perfection.

Or so I thought before the douche bag I called my boyfriend shit on my list—and me—and all my dreams.

First, I was going to get engaged. That didn't happen, and for the first time in over seven years, I'm alone on Valentine's Day. *Yay me!*

Then I was going to open my own hair salon in Chicago. Married *and* a business owner by thirty has been my number one goal for the past nine years. This was supposed to be *my* year. The one I've been planning for my entire adult life.

Instead, I'm single, jobless, and sitting in a rundown laundromat with zero working washing machines, waiting for the repairman to show up. The manager on duty promised he would be here in less than fifteen minutes. That was forty minutes ago.

If I have to keep breathing through my mouth to survive the sour stench in the air, I'm going to pass out. I never realized until now how hard it is to breathe through my mouth for an extended period of time. But it's either this or breathe in the lovely smell from the paper mill thirty miles north of us. Why the wind always seems to blow south is beyond me.

I've been gone long enough that I forgot how bad it smelled here.

I moved to Chicago about a year after graduating high school. I'd attended the county vocational school for cosmetology because I was eager to jump start a career. I'd learned a lot while there, but not the cool, trendy stuff that was being taught in larger cities. So, I headed off to Chicago to train with some of the best.

Until just before Christmas, I thought my life was on track. I thought I had it all.

Boy was I wrong.

I went from a posh master-stylist position where I styled the rich and famous to sitting in a rundown laundromat with frizzy hair.

At least I remembered to bring my notebook so I can make a list about how much this change sucks.

Silly? Maybe. But I don't care. Without my lists, I cannot function.

I create lists for everything. It doesn't matter what it is. If I can imagine it, I will make a list.

I create lists of things I like or don't like. Pros and cons. Dos and don'ts. I have lists of the fantasies I dream about and lists of things that annoy me. Sometimes my lists are all the things I need to get done in a day. Those are my favorite—my to-do lists are the best. There's something about being able to

cross items off a list that makes me feel more productive than if it were never on a list to begin with.

Lists are my life.

Do I need them?

Hell yes!

And I have journals full of them.

I love them so much, I start another one without really giving it much thought.

Five things I'd rather be doing right now:

- 1. Sitting on a warm beach with my feet buried in the sand.*
- 2. Drinking fancy martinis with my best friend (or fiancé if I had one of those).*
- 3. Planning the fall wedding of my dreams (again, I need that fiancé to do that).*
- 4. Eating chocolate pie.*
- 5. Shopping for commercial real estate for my business venture.*

“AUNT CHAR, WHAT ARE YOU DOING?” MY TEN-YEAR-OLD niece, Rayne, whines with her nose still buried in my tablet.

“You’re supposed to be watching this movie with me.”

“Sorry. I had to write this down before I lost it.” I close my journal and lean in close to my niece. “What did I miss?”

“Don’t worry about it. You don’t really care, anyway.” She huffs.

I wrap my arm around her shoulder and squeeze her close. She’s so much like my younger sister in both looks and attitude. If my sister were still alive, I imagine their personalities would clash, and they’d fight like cats and dogs all the time.

When she insisted on watching Barbie movies, I was a little surprised. They seem juvenile for a kid her age and not her style. She’s kind of a tomboy. She prefers playing outside and getting dirty over doing her hair or learning about makeup.

But she insisted we could bond over them like they’d somehow make us closer. I think she sees me as a real-life Barbie. Not so sure how I feel about that.

“I *do* care. I’m just distracted. Today hasn’t gone like I’d planned.”

That’s an understatement. I should be on my computer looking for jobs. Not that there are a lot of desirable options for a master hair stylist with references from Chicago’s rich and famous and even a few Hollywood stars. No one in this small town cares whose hair I styled or for what event.

Until three weeks ago, I had my dream job and was working my way to opening my own salon. I was one of the most highly sought after stylists in the city. Hollywood actors would seek me out when they were in the area. I worked hard for my success. I sacrificed time with my family, my personal life, and never ever vacationed, just to have it all ripped out from under me after one night of public humiliation.

Now I’ve moved back to the one place I swore I’d never return to. My hometown of Beaver, in southern Ohio. It’s as backwoods and country as country gets.

Nothing like the luxuries I’d grown accustomed to in Chicago.

Things I miss about my Chicago life:

- 1. My amazing, high-profile job.*
- 2. My posh apartment.*
- 3. My best friend, Sierra.*
- 4. High-fashion.*
- 5. Designer shoes.*
- 6. Unlimited access to all the best shopping.*

CHICAGO REALLY DOES HAVE THE BEST SHOPPING. PEOPLE FLY in from all over the country to shop in our city. There's a magical air about the atmosphere the stores create that keeps people coming back just as much as the great designer products.

I had the life everyone in my hometown expected a former beauty queen like me to have. Great job, great boyfriend who I thought was going to marry me, gorgeous apartment, and more money in the bank than most people in this town see in their lifetimes.

I had it all. Now, it's all gone. Well, except the money. I still have my life's savings.

But the reputation I'd built is gone thanks to one stupid night, and a cheating, lying boyfriend.

"You're still not watching." Rayne's voice cuts through my thoughts. She may be ten, but she has all the attitude of a teenage girl. "You promised to watch movies with me."

“I know. I know. Sorry.” I close my journal and stuff it back in my purse. “I’m distracted. I wish the repairman would hurry up. I didn’t plan on being stuck at the laundromat all day.”

“Got somewhere better to be?”

“Well.” I think about that for a moment. There are definitely places I’d *rather* be, but they aren’t options for me right now. So ... “No, I don’t.”

“Then stop stressing. You can’t control things like broken washing machines. Grandma says you should relax and enjoy life despite the troubles it throws your way.”

I smile and brush a strand of Rayne’s dark hair behind her ear. She’s wise beyond her years. “Grandma is a very smart woman.”

“She is. Now watch Barbie with me.” Rayne snuggles into my side, clearly signifying that this conversation is over, and I am to watch Barbie. No questions asked.

I hold back my chuckle. Despite the million reasons this girl has to be unhappy, she’s the happiest little girl in the world.

My sister died within hours of giving birth due to complications during the delivery. Rayne has grown up without a mother, and we don’t know who her father is. Carol insisted she didn’t know who he was either. I’m not exactly sure how that happens. Unless my sister was sleeping around and didn’t know which man was the father. Or else she had a one-night stand with a stranger and had no way of tracking him down.

Neither option sounds like my sister, and unfortunately, she died before we could get answers.

Then there’s the business with my dad and the second reason I’ve moved home. My parents’ announcement that my dad has dementia and is deteriorating quickly came at the exact moment my life imploded in Chicago.

My dad is the only father figure Rayne has ever known. I don’t know how she remains so happy considering the state of

her life. The kid is an inspiration.

My phone buzzes in my purse, and my instinct is to grab it. But I stop myself and focus on the screen of my tablet. I promised Rayne I'd watch this with her. My phone can wait.

Rayne nudges my side. "You can check that. I don't mind."

"You sure?"

She nods, and I don't push it. I dig my phone out of my purse. My nerves heightened at who might be messaging me. It's been eleven days since I last heard from Brad, my ex-boyfriend of seven years. I keep having moments of weakness where I find myself holding out hope that he'll change his mind and realize he made a huge mistake. Then I scold myself for holding onto that hope. Even if he did change his mind, I'd be a fool to take him back.

I smile when I look at the message. It's from my best friend. I think I miss her more than I miss Brad. Or is it the idea of Brad that I miss so much and not him? I can't decide my feelings on the matter.

SIERRA

How's it going in Beavertown?

CHARLOTTE

It's just Beaver. And I'm in hell.

SIERRA

I'd be in hell too if I were stuck in a village named after a woman's vagina.

CHARLOTTE

It's named after the animal. And that's gross. I still wish you never told me that.

THE NIGHT I MET SIERRA, WE WERE AT AN AFTER PARTY FOR A conference we were both attending. She's a stylist too, though she doesn't take it as seriously as me. I had just moved to Chicago to start my career and my southern Ohio accent was still strong. When she asked me where I was from, I told her Beaver, thinking nothing of it. She laughed so hard she almost fell off her seat. When she calmed down enough to speak, her first words were, *Oh yeah? Me too.*

I had no clue what she meant. Sadly, I was nineteen when I learned that Beaver was a nickname for a woman's vagina. I've never been able to tell anyone where I'm from again.

SIERRA

Meet any hot men to help you get over Mr. Douche yet?

CHARLOTTE

Nope. No hot men in sight. Just me, a ten-year-old little girl, and my parents.

SIERRA

Have you gone out and looked?

CHARLOTTE

Gone out where? I'm in a village that banned alcohol. Where am I supposed to go?

SIERRA

I can't believe you grew up in a dry German village. That just seems wrong. Are there no cities nearby?

CHARLOTTE

Well, yes. But that reeks of effort. I'm still mending my broken heart.

SIERRA

Your heart isn't broken. It's your pride that he smashed.

CHARLOTTE

Don't be an asshole.

SIERRA

But you love my asshole ways.

BEFORE I CAN RESPOND, THE DOOR TO THE LAUNDROMAT opens, bringing with it a gust of cold air. It's been in the single digits all week and shows no signs of warming up.

Rayne squeals like she just won a prize. She jumps up from the seat next to me—her movie forgotten—and runs to the bearded man standing in the doorway.

“Garret! I hoped it'd be you that came.” Rayne bounces on her feet before she wraps her arms around his waist and hugs him tight.

A smile tugs at his lips, and he hugs her back. That is, until he looks in my direction. His expression quickly morphs into something closer to disgust than joy.

Do I look that bad?

I run my fingers through my hair, attempting to calm the fizzy strays, but I'm not sure it does any good. Glancing down at my outfit, I determine I look stylish, yet appropriate for country living. Well, everything except my Jimmy Choos. But classy heels are appropriate anywhere. That's a life rule I refuse to let go no matter where I live.

Otherwise, I'm in my favorite dark jeans and a deep purple sweater that compliments my skin tone and dark hair. If it weren't for my frizzy hair and the dark circles under my eyes, I'd argue I look presentable, if not bordering on good.

When I look up, he's still eyeing me like I'm his worst enemy. *What did I ever do to him?*

It's a damn shame too.

Garret Mutter just might be the sexist man in all of southern Ohio. All the Mutter men are hot, but there's always been something about Garret that drew me in. Maybe it's the whole grumpy, wounded man thing that screams *please fix me*. The last thing I need is another man who needs *fixing*. Been there. Failed at that.

I crushed on Garret hard back in high school, but he was the older boy who never once glanced in my direction. He was too busy sulking in the shadows, growling at everyone who dared to speak to him. But damn, it was a sexy growl. I wonder if he still does that?

From the way he's looking at me now, I'd say yes.

Too bad, because I'd ride him in a heartbeat. He's not my typical type. I usually go for the clean cut, well-dressed business type, but I could get down with the rugged, country bad boy. Tall, broad shoulders, thick biceps, and a very large bulge between his very long and solid legs. I bet he even has rock hard abs underneath that thick coat he's wearing.

Yeah, I could definitely get down with that.

I lick my lips and stifle a groan. God, I miss sex. Brad may have turned out to be a cheating douche, but he was damn good in bed. He never left me unsatisfied. And I thought I did the same for him, but his cheating ass suggests otherwise.

"Garret! You made it." The manager of the laundromat rushes out of the back room with his hand held out. Garret takes it in a firm shake. "Sorry to call you on such short notice, but all my machines are now down. We had just the one, but it stopped working on Miss Charlotte mid-cycle."

"You're here to fix the machine?" I ask.

He nods but doesn't speak or make eye contact with me.

Of course, he's here to fix the machine. Just what I need. I'm at my worst and the universe throws the sexist man alive

in my face. *Thanks universe.*

The manager looks at me and smiles. I didn't catch his name. He probably told me, but I'm too distracted by my bad day to remember. He's an older gentleman, probably older than my dad, and seems nice enough. I wonder if he's new to town since I moved away because I don't remember him. It makes me feel bad that I didn't try harder to remember his name or at least ask for it. I should add that to a list of things I need to improve on.

"No problem, Stan." Garret turns his attention to the manager. *Stan*. I make a mental note to remember that. If we don't get my parents' washing machine fixed soon, I'll be back here again next week. "I'll do my best to get you up and running again," he continues in a polite and respectful tone.

The way he addresses Stan after snubbing me, rubs me the wrong way. I haven't seen Garret since high school, and I don't recall ever doing anything to deserve such a poor greeting.

"Do you know my aunt?" Rayne asks after Stan heads back to his office.

"I do." Garret's voice is flat when he responds.

"She's living here now. Did you know that?"

His eyes dart to mine, but only for a second, before he sets his tool bag on the large table in the center of the room. He shakes his head instead of speaking.

"Well, she is. She just got here like a week ago. Maybe two. I can't remember." Rayne's voice is cheerful. It's as if she doesn't notice or pick up on Garret's grumpy state. "It's why I haven't been to see you in so long. We've been busy getting to know each other. Until now, I only saw her, like, every other Christmas."

I cringe at her last statement. I hate that I stayed away for so long. It's been three years since I came home for Christmas. After losing Carol, home never quite felt the same. Now that Dad's sick, I regret staying away for so long.

“Did you know Aunt Char like you knew my mom?” Rayne’s question surprises me.

“You knew Carol?” I narrow my eyes on Garret, but he doesn’t look at me.

“He tells me stories about my mom all the time.” Rayne answers for him.

“Huh.” I cross my arms over my chest and stare at him. “I didn’t know you and Carol were friends. Especially with her being a couple of years younger than me and I’m two years younger than you.”

“Oh, they weren’t friends.” Rayne adds. Garret glances at her, and if I’m not mistaken, I see a hint of nervousness in his expression. “But they hung out sometimes. At least that’s what he told me.”

“Is that so?”

Rayne nods with a huge smile on her face while Garret frowns at his tool bag.

I’m about to push Garret more on the matter when he finally decides to grace us with his voice. *And oh, what a sexy deep voice it is.* “I better get to work or else this machine won’t get fixed today. Got another job waiting for me.”

“Where you going next?” Rayne asks as if questioning Garret is the most normal thing in the world for her to do.

“Rayne. It’s not polite to ask him that. Let him get to work.” They both look at me with deep furrows in their brows and hard frowns. It’s confusing and doesn’t make much sense to me. “Why are you looking at me like that?”

Rayne glances over at Garret, and then starts laughing. A slight smile tugs at his lips too.

“Did I say something funny?”

Garret meets my gaze, and all semblance of a smile is gone. *What is with all the frowns he keeps giving me?* “Rayne is not impolite. She can ask me anything she wants.”

“Because we’re friends.” Rayne gives a single curt nod.

“Friends?” I quirk a brow. “With a thirty-two-year-old man? Did I get your age correct?”

“Yes.”

I wait for him to elaborate, but he doesn't.

“Huh,” I say again, even more confused than I was a moment ago when Rayne mentioned that Garret knew my sister. “Pray tell, how does a grown man become friends with a ten-year-old girl?”

Rayne rolls her eyes. Something she does a lot when she thinks I'm being silly or dumb. Now that I think about it, she rolls her eyes at me far too much for my liking.

“Aunt Char! Why are you making a mountain out of a molehill? Grandma is right. You make things more difficult than they need to be.”

“How am I making things difficult? I'm just trying to understand how an unlikely pair like you two became friends.”

“Oh.” Rayne stands a little straighter. Her typical smile is back on her face. “I follow the trail through the woods that separates his property from ours. The trail leads right to his house. I visit him as often as I can. He doesn't mind.”

Garret smiles at her and ruffles her hair. “That's right. You can visit me anytime you want.” Then he looks back at me and he drops that smile like a hot potato. “Now, if you don't mind, I'll get this washing machine fixed for you.”

I stare at him, completely baffled by his attitude toward me and his affection toward my niece. But my day is already shitty enough, so I decide to let it go. No need to poke the bear more than I've apparently already done.

“That'd be great. Thanks.”

I dig my journal out of my purse, ready to ignore him while he works. If he can be an ass, then I can be a bitch.

Chapter 2

*Beauty queens, laundromats, and
princess-labeled underwear.*

Garret

She doesn't belong here.

My life is already complicated enough. I don't need Charlotte Weber back in my life.

Not that she was ever really *in* my life, but she grew up next door to me and Beaver is a small village. It's impossible to not know everyone. Beaver is one of those places where everyone knows everybody, and secrets are an impossibility. Once one person finds out your secret, everybody knows. It's why I keep to myself.

I dare a glance in her direction. She's somewhat of a hot mess at the moment, but a very beautiful one at that.

Her long, dark hair is a little wild. Back in high school, she was always so perfectly put together, without a strand out of place. Seeing her like this with her curls out of control is hot. I like her better this way.

She's wearing tight jeans with a bulky sweater. I can't help but wonder what her ass looks like in them. I'd ask her to come here, turn around, and bend over, but she might hurt herself in those heels. Who in the hell wears fancy ass high-heeled shoes to a laundry mat in the dead of winter?

I guess former beauty queens do.

Charlotte is hands down one of the most beautiful women I've ever seen. She's a couple of years younger than me, so our circles didn't cross often when we were young, but I still noticed her. All the guys did.

It's impossible not to remember a former homecoming and Oktoberfest queen that eventually became Miss Ohio. I think that's where her beauty pageant days ended, but I lost track of her life once she moved away.

"What are you doing here?" I grumble as I unpack my tools.

She shoves her pen in her notebook and shuts it. She's been frantically scribbling ever since she picked it up. "Um, trying to wash and dry my clothes."

Her response is filled with contempt. I glare at her. "I know that, smartass. Why aren't you washing them at Lois's and Jim's house? Is something wrong with their machine?"

She slams her notebook down on the chair next to her with a furrowed brow. "As a matter of fact, yes."

I furrow my brows right back. "Why didn't you call me?"

"Why would I do that?"

Exacerbated, I let out a long sigh and rub the bridge of my nose. "To fix it. That's my job."

"Garret fixes everything when it breaks." Rayne pipes in. "Grandma calls him Mr. Fix-It."

"Oh." Charlotte's shoulders slump a bit and her expression softens. It makes her look younger and innocent and far sexier than I have any right to notice. "Why didn't you tell me that?"

"Dunno. You seemed set on coming here, so I let you." Rayne turns her attention back to the tablet in front of her. She's watching one of her girlie movies that she's made me watch with her a time or two. They're awful. She doesn't seem to love them either, but she asked me, so I endured them.

I fight to hide the smile tugging at my lips. Rayne always has a way of making me smile even when I'm in the worst of moods. Which seems like all the time these days.

I grab one of the rolling baskets and pull it up to the washing machine in question. It's still filled with Charlotte's clothes, so I open it up and start digging them out.

“What are you doing?” Charlotte’s high-pitched voice causes me to flinch.

My scowl deepens when I look over my shoulder at her. “What does it look like?”

She huffs and pushes to her feet. She glides across the room—her high-heeled shoes clanking with every step—like the beauty queen that she is. Her hips sway back and forth as she places one foot in front of the other. If it weren’t for the sound of her shoes, I’d say she was floating. It’s effortless and has my dick hardening in my jeans.

“I don’t need you getting your greasy hands all over my delicates.” She grabs the article I’m holding, and when I look down, I realize it’s a satin nightgown—soft, smooth, and pale pink. My mind instantly pictures her in it. Wet, a little see-through, and clinging to her gentle curves like second skin.

I swallow hard and try to think about anything else except what her pert nipples would look like. Despite the draft coming from the front door, I suddenly feel overheated because I’m not sure anything will wipe that image from my mind. I unzip my coat and fan it out.

“My hands aren’t greasy.” I continue to remove her clothes from the washing machine, doing my best to avoid looking at what I’m pulling out.

“Let me do this.” She grabs at a pair of shorts at the same time I do and our hands touch. A spark lights up my insides, and my dick thickens even more. She pulls away almost as quickly as she reached for the shorts. The way she rubs her hands together, I have to wonder if she felt that spark too.

I want to look at her. See if her expression gives anything away, but I stay focused on my task. The sooner I get this done the sooner I can get the hell out of here.

I make the mistake of looking at the shorts in my hand. They’re tiny and look like they’d barely cover her ass. *Fuck, I want to see her in these and nothing but these.* I flip them over and growl. Princess is scrolled across the back in sparkly big letters.

How fitting.

“Do you really need shorts that say you’re a princess? Don’t you have like a dozen tiara’s or something?”

“Don’t be an ass.” She grabs them from me and tosses them in the basket.

“I’m not. Just stating a fact.” I turn my attention back to unloading the washer, doing my best to avoid looking at her. She’s pissed and it shows in the intense way she’s glaring at me. A pissed off Charlotte is far sexier than the softer version I saw earlier.

I pull a few more items out and have to swallow my groan. This appears to be a load full of her underwear and other delicacies. And by others, I mean sexy negligees and nighties. How many of these things does this woman have?

The next one I pull out is a shimmery silver negligee. It’s so short, I doubt it covers her ass. It’s made from a combination of satin and lace with the cups for the breast being mostly lace. I bet it looks fucking amazing with her curves.

My breath gets caught in my chest and I’m forced to clear my throat. I make the mistake of looking up at her, and she’s watching me. She huffs and grabs the negligee from my hand.

“I can get these out of your way.” She pushes the basket toward me, forcing me to step back. I don’t fight her. I let her finish unloading them, if for no other reason than to have a moment to get my dick under control. Her undergarments are sexy as fuck and causing my imagination to run wild.

“There. All done.” She pulls the basket out of the way and places it on the opposite side of the center table where, thankfully, I can’t see it anymore.

I turn my attention to the washing machine, doing my best to pretend she’s not here. Unfortunately, my body is fully aware of hers. How? I don’t fucking know. I haven’t seen Charlotte Weber since her sister’s funeral over ten years ago.

Carol’s death was hard on her family. Hell, it hit our entire community hard. Her parents, Lois and Jim, have found ways

to move past the loss, but from what they say, Charlotte never did. It's why she rarely came home. It was as if Lois and Jim lost two daughters that day.

I understand Charlotte's need for distance. The sisters had been close. I can't imagine what I'd do if I lost one of my brothers like that. Knowing me, I'd retreat further into myself.

I may have gotten to know Carol some before her death, but Charlotte and I weren't close. Why my body is suddenly acting like hers is a toy it desperately wants to play with is beyond me.

Nostalgia? I jerked off plenty of times as a teenager to her yearbook pictures. What can I say, she was hot back then. Still is. Whatever it is, I wish it would go away.

With a couple of minor adjustments and the replacement of the belt, the washing machine is up and running within twenty minutes. After doing a quick test run, I determine it's safe for Charlotte to restart her load.

"I'll call your mom and make arrangements to fix her machine this week," I say as I pack all my tools back in my bag.

"We'll appreciate that. Thank you." Charlotte rolls the basket back to the machine and tosses her soggy clothes back in.

Rayne rushes to me and wraps her arms around my waist for a tight hug. "Aunt Char says she'll make cookies soon. I'll make sure you get some when she does."

I smile down at her and ruffle her hair. "I'd appreciate that. I best be going."

"Bye Garret." Rayne waves as I head for the door.

I'm almost out of earshot when I hear Charlotte mumble to Rayne. "Why does he smile at you and frown at me like I'm the spawn of Satan?"

"Dunno. I guess he likes me. Maybe you should be nicer to him."

I can't help but smile at her logic. Although Charlotte being nicer to me won't change a damn thing. As long as my body reacts to hers like it did today, my frown will be permanent.

FIVE MINUTES LATER, I PULL UP IN FRONT OF MRS. ENGLE'S hair salon. It's right in the middle of town next to Frank's Frosty Kreme, the only restaurant in town.

The hair salon is the hotspot for local gossip. If it happens within a two-mile radius of the salon, the entire town knows about it within an hour. If Mrs. Engle catches wind of a secret, forget keeping it hidden.

It wouldn't surprise me if she already knows I was at the laundromat down the street, and that I handled Charlotte's underwear. To her, that's scandalous news, even though it was completely innocent. Gossip like that will keep this woman yakking for weeks to come.

When I step out of my truck, a gust of icy wind hits me in the chest. I was hot while at the laundromat, and never zipped up my coat when I left. We haven't had much snow yet this winter, but all the experts say it's coming. We've had unusually colder temperatures, so a good snowstorm seems likely.

Before I wrap my hand around the doorknob to let myself in, the door swings open.

"Took you long enough." Mrs. Engle *tsks*. "I've had the worst time doing hair with a broken chair."

As expected, she's worked up and ready to throw a fit. I ignore her attitude and walk past her to the chair in question. Despite all the extra space she has in this building, she's only got one chair. I realize it's just her, but if she had a spare, this wouldn't keep happening. Hell, if she'd just get a new chair, I wouldn't have to keep coming back to fix it.

“Told you I had another call that came in first. Got here as soon as I could.”

“Well.” She presses her hand to her chest like she’s so put out. “But this was an emergency. Surely that trumps whatever else needed fixing.”

“Depends on who you ask.”

She rears her head back like I just offended her. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“It means that the broken washing machine I just fixed was an emergency to the person trying to use it. They might even say that it was more of an emergency than your chair.”

“I highly doubt that.” She *tsks* again and takes a seat at her small desk by the entrance.

I shake my head as I crouch down next to the chair. It only takes me about three seconds to determine it’s the same problem it always is. The lock on the lift keeps slipping because of a broken spring. This chair is so old, the lift is stiff and puts too much strain on the spring. It breaks every few months.

Digging into my bag, I pull out the bundle of spare springs I purchased last year. As long as she keeps refusing to buy a new chair, I’m going to need every one of these springs.

“Same problem as last time and every time before that,” I say. “You need a new chair.”

“Pish posh.” She huffs. “As long as you can fix it, it’s fine.”

“Fine, fine,” I grumble. “I’ll get it fixed in a few.”

“Thank you. I appreciate that.”

The silence I so desperately want to hang onto only lasts for about two minutes before Mrs. Engle starts. “Heard Charlotte Weber is back in town. Everyone says she came to help with her dad. That poor, poor family. It’s got to be so hard dealing with dementia. Such a horrible disease. And after the way they lost Carol. She was so young. I can’t imagine losing a child *and* having to raise a grandbaby with no clue who the

father is. I mean, Carol keeping that secret was bad enough. Then she had to go and die like that. So unexpected.”

“I’m sure Carol had her reasons. Besides, Rayne is a great kid.” I add that last part, hoping to redirect this conversation.

“Oh, yes. Rayne is just darling. And a blessing to that family. I don’t know how Lois is handling it all. She has enough to worry about with Jim. She doesn’t need Charlotte’s problems too, on top of everything else. I would just die if one of my kids embarrassed me like that. Not that it was Charlotte’s fault, but still. I can’t believe—”

“This should hold you for a few more months.” I cut her off. I have no clue what happened to Charlotte, and I don’t care. It’s not my business. Besides, the less I know about her, the better.

“Oh, well. Thank you, Garret.” She pushes to her feet and comes over to test the chair. Apparently happy, she pats my cheek. “You’re such a sweet boy. Your Grams must be so proud.”

I fight to hold back my groan. I hate when she talks to me like I’m twelve.

“And you’re past due for a haircut.” She adds as she rushes to her desk to grab her appointment book. “Let’s make you an appointment for next week. I think I have a spot open.”

“I’m busy,” I say as I zip my tool bag closed and start for the door.

“But you don’t even know when it is.”

“Still busy.”

“The following week then.” She continues flipping through her appointment book as if I didn’t just tell her I’m busy. She acts like she’s oblivious to my objections, but it’s just that, an act. “I’ll just pencil you in, and then let you know when it is. Don’t want that hair covering your ears, now do we?”

“Fine,” I grumble. No use arguing with her. She’s going to write me down whether I like it or not. “Got another job. Have

a nice day, Mrs. Engle.”

“You too. Thanks again.” She calls long after I step outside. Just when I think I made an escape, she sticks her head outside and calls out. “I’ll see you in two weeks. I’ll call you with the day and time of your appointment. I’ll be sure to let your Grams know when it is too. She’ll make sure you don’t miss it.”

And there it is. The reason I’ll be here for that damn appointment. I hate that Mrs. Engle uses Grams against me. Anyone who knows me knows I’ll never say no to Grams.

Chapter 3

*When life gives you lemons, hide in
a dark hallway and cry your eyes
out.*

Charlotte

“Are you ever going to tell me what happened?” Mom leans against the counter by the sink, where I’m keeping myself busy washing up the morning dishes.

“What happened with what?” I play dumb. The collapse of my life is not a topic I’m ready to discuss.

“You know what, Char. With Brad. Your job. I thought you two were going to get married.”

I pick up a mug and give it a good rinse before placing it in the dishwasher. “Didn’t you read the gossip rags? It was plastered all over Chicago’s Lifestyle pages. Even a few national tabloids picked it up.”

“I don’t read those things.” She huffs. “I’ve heard talk, but I’ve tried not to listen to it. Call me crazy, but I’d rather hear about my daughter’s life directly from her.”

Her voice cracks at the end, and it makes me feel worse than I already do.

After losing Carol, I checked out of this family. Carol wasn’t just my sister. She was my best friend. I nearly lost myself when we lost her. I met Brad shortly after that, and he saved me. And in a way, I saved him too. We were both broken and in need of fixing. Now, I realize I was just a stupid girl with a broken, empty heart, desperate to mend it and fill it back up. Brad did that for me until ... Well, until he didn’t.

I close my eyes and sigh, taking in a few deep breaths before I respond. “I’m not ready, Mom. Just give me a little

more time. It's still too fresh."

I feel her eyes on me, but I keep my focus on the last of the dishes. Once this chore is done, I'll make my escape and avoid this conversation for another day. Or year. Better yet, let's just pretend none of it happened.

"Just tell me if it's fixable." Mom brushes a strand of my long dark hair behind my shoulder. "Are you going to get back together with him?"

I snort. "Highly unlikely."

I wouldn't take Brad back if he was the last man on earth. Not after what he did to me.

Cheating on me was bad enough but telling me in a very public way was cruel and unnecessary. Why couldn't he be like other men and just let me find out by accident or catch him in the act? *In private*. That still would have hurt, but at least then I'd have my job. *Maybe*.

But no. Brad had to shock me with it by telling me at a charity event in front of Chicago's rich and famous and half of my clients.

"But you two were so good together," Mom whispers. When I glance over at her, a tear runs down her cheek.

I pull her in for a hug, both loving and hating that she's crying on my behalf. I've shed enough tears over Brad and what he did. I don't want him to be responsible for any more. Not even my mom's tears.

"I thought so too. But I was wrong. Just give me some more time, okay?"

"But how much time? You've already been here a few weeks, and you and Brad broke up before Christmas. It's been a couple of months. Don't keep this bottled up inside you."

I let out an incredulous laugh. "Trust me. It's not bottled up inside me. I let it all out for the world to see."

"What does that even mean?" Mom looks confused.

“Like I said, if you read the gossip rags, you’d know all the sordid details, and a few made-up ones.”

“Those made-up ones are the reason I’m not reading them.”

Once the last of the dishes are washed or in the dishwasher, I dry my hands and turn to face my mother. She’s staring at the floor with a wrinkle in her brow that makes it look like she’s trying to solve all of life’s problems.

She also looks older than I recall her ever looking before. Her once dark hair is now mostly gray and pulled back in a low bun at the nape of her neck. The wrinkles around her eyes and mouth have deepened, and her skin has lost all its glow. She’s still a beautiful woman, but she looks sad and tired and completely rundown.

Life’s not been easy on my mom and it’s starting to show. Between losing my sister, my dad’s dementia, and how my life imploded, it’s amazing that she’s still standing and fighting for her family. I could learn a thing or two from how she handles life’s crises.

Mom may have moments where she lets her emotions and sadness win, but she always lets it out. She’s not afraid to cry or express herself. She lets herself have a moment and then picks herself back up and starts fresh the next day as if she has the perfect life.

I wish I could be more like her.

I sigh, knowing I should just get it over with—tell her what happened. It’s not that I don’t want her to know. Anyone who reads gossip rags knows what happened to me. I feel foolish and stupid and naïve.

I’d been with Brad for seven years. I thought I knew him. Sweet, attentive, affectionate, and a great lover. He told me he loved me, and that he’d always take care of me. I believed him. But I was blinded by my love for him and never saw who he really was.

“How much time before Dad’s appointment?” I ask, needing to change the subject.

Mom checks the time. “Two hours.”

I nod. “I’ll get Rayne ready to go over to Grams’ house.”

“Thanks, and please apologize to Mila for any inconvenience. I really didn’t know today was a teacher’s workday and Rayne would be home.”

I nod. “Is Dad ready, or do you need me to help?”

“No, I’ve got him. He’s in the living room watching TV until it’s time to go.”

Before heading back to Rayne’s room, I pull my mom in for a hug. “I love you. I’ll tell you everything soon. I promise.”

She sighs and tightens the hug. “I love you too.”

“I know you do.”

When I release her and head down the hallway, I’m grateful that I’ve avoided this conversation for another day, but the relief I desperately need doesn’t come.

Instead, I’m filled with dread at the fact that an even tougher conversation is poking its head around the corner.

I’m not looking forward to hearing what my dad’s doctor has to say about his dementia.

DESPITE MY INSISTENCE THAT I DRIVE RAYNE TO GRAMS’ house, we’re walking along the path that cuts through the woods separating our property from theirs. It’s not that far. Maybe a couple of city blocks, but it’s freezing outside.

Even bundled up in my heavy coat, gloves, and scarf, it’s not enough. Especially under the canopy of the trees. I swear the shade makes it twenty degrees colder.

While I’m shivering, Rayne is bouncing along the trail, seemingly unaffected by the cold.

“Do you think it’s gonna snow soon?” She looks up at me with a hopeful grin.

“It’s supposed to. All the predictions say we could be in for a blizzard this year.”

She claps her hands. Her excitement is muffled by the thick wool gloves she’s wearing. “I hope so. We haven’t had a good snow in a few years. I love making snowmen. If it snows, and you’re still here, will you play with me?”

I furrow my brow. “Why wouldn’t I be here?”

“Dunno.” She shrugs. “I heard Grandma talking on the phone, saying she was afraid you would leave again.”

I stop. “I’m not leaving. I moved home.”

“I know.” She gives me a worried glance. “But what if your life gets put back together in Chicago? Will you leave then?”

I let out a huff. “That’s highly doubtful. My life in Chicago is over.”

“But what if—”

“There are no *what ifs*.” I cut her off. “I’m here, and I’m staying. I will most definitely play with you in the snow. I happen to love making snowmen too. Now, come on. Let’s get you to Grams’ house before we both turn into icicles.”

I continue walking down the trail with Rayne close behind. When I look back at her, she’s fidgeting with the fingers of her gloves and looks up at me with doubt written all over her face. I don’t know when my word became useless to my family, but I hate that they don’t believe me when I say I am home to stay.

Was this in my plan? *No*.

Did I want to move home? *Hell no*.

But this is the hand I was dealt. Even if I wanted to move back to Chicago, I can’t. Not with how sick Dad really is. *Another detail Mom hid from me for far too long*. If I’d known she needed this much help with him, I would’ve come home sooner.

That thought causes me to pause. *Would I?*

If my life hadn't imploded, would I have come home sooner if Mom had told me how quickly Dad was declining? I'd like to think I would have, but a nagging voice deep inside me is screaming no.

We exit the woods and I stop when I see a tiny house and a large garage that wasn't there before I moved away.

"Who built this?"

"That's Garret's house."

With my hands on my hips and a furrowed brow, I ask, "Garret lives here? It's so ... Tiny."

Rayne just nods with a grin. "Isn't it cute? It's like a playhouse, but for grown-ups. He says it's all the space he needs."

"Huh." I continue walking across the field. "How long has he lived here?"

"Dunno. As long as I can remember. Why?"

I shrug. "Just curious. Didn't know he moved out of the main house. I thought those boys would live there forever, taking over the house once Grams couldn't anymore."

"That's Liam's job. Technically, the house is his now. They all own the garage though. Even Garret, but he built his own garage over here. Warren's gone. I've only met him twice. He's a lot like you and hardly ever comes to visit. But everyone else still lives in the house."

"You know a lot about the Mutter brothers."

She shrugs. "They're part of my family."

I blink several times, amazed at how definitive that statement is to her. The Mutters have always been close friends with my parents, but we never called them family. I wonder what else has changed while I was gone.

There are seven Mutter brothers, with Garret being the third oldest. Liam and Warren are older and share the same mom with Garret. I went to school with the twins, Chase and

Christian. Those two boys are complete opposites. Chase is outgoing, charming, and funny, while Christian is quiet, aloof, and broody. I don't know the two younger brothers as well, Ash and Mac.

The twins, Ash, and Mac all have different moms than Liam, Warren, and Garret. None of the moms stuck around for long after they were born. I don't know what really happened, but they were the topic of a lot of gossip growing up. I always felt bad for them. They weren't responsible for their parents' actions and yet they paid the price with whispers and pointed fingers.

The main house comes into view and Rayne picks up her pace. By the time we reach the back porch, I'm out of breath, trying to keep up with her. When she reaches the door, she opens it and runs in.

"Rayne! What are you doing? You don't just barge into other people's houses."

"It's okay, Aunt Char." Rayne calls over her shoulder. "I do it all the time."

"Rayne!" I call after her again, but she ignores me and passes through a mud room as she enters the house unannounced. I hesitate for a moment before I follow her. The Mutters may be close family friends, but it still makes me uncomfortable entering their house through the back as if I live here too.

The mud room opens up into the large kitchen. Rayne is standing next to Grams with her arms wrapped around her waist. Grams is smiling, so I assume that means she's not upset with Rayne.

"Sorry," I say with a hint of nervousness in my voice. "She just barged in before I could knock."

"Oh, don't you worry about that." Grams gives me a gentle smile. "You all don't have to knock. Our house is always open to your family."

"See, I told ya." Rayne looks up at me with a mischievous smirk. Then her eyes widen, and her smirk turns into a broad

smile. “Garret! You’re here!”

She releases Grams and runs past me. When I turn around, Garret is standing right behind me next to the large dining table. His tall, broad frame sucks up all the available space in the room, leaving me feeling a little breathless.

Rayne wraps him in a tight hug, which he returns. There’s even a hint of a smile on his face. He’s a handsome man, but when he smiles, he’s heart-stoppingly gorgeous.

But then his gaze shifts to mine and those warm chestnut brown eyes turn to stone. His smile fades.

“Why are you here?” He asks in an accusatory tone.

I don’t even bother to stop myself from rolling my eyes. “Why are you such an asshole?”

Grams laughs, Garret growls, and Rayne huffs. “Aunt Char. Don’t use bad words.”

Garret looks down at her and his expression instantly softens again. The way he looks at her is confusing and endearing and makes him so much hotter than he already is. I kind of hate him a little for it. He has the kind of relationship with my niece that I should have.

“So, Charlotte,” Grams says, dragging my attention back to her. She’s smiling at me like she knows a secret. “How long are you back in town?”

“For the foreseeable future. This is likely a permanent move.”

“You don’t say.” Her eyes dart between Garret and me a few times before she settles on me again. “I bet that makes your parents happy. They’ve missed you something fierce.”

“I hope so. I’ve missed them too. Plus, I’ve missed out on too much of Rayne’s life. I’m enjoying getting to know her better.”

Rayne releases Garret and rushes to me. “I’m so glad you’re here.”

I smile down at her before wrapping my arms around her and kissing the top of her head. I'm about to say something else when she releases me and runs back to Garret.

"Where's Bullet?" she asks with all the excitement you'd expect from a ten-year-old girl.

"Who's Bullet?" I ask.

"Garret's dog." Rayne answers.

Garret's eyes are trained on Rayne as he answers her question. "She's at home. Didn't know you'd be here or else I would have brought her."

"Can we go see her?"

"Sure." He glances up at me before he looks back at her. "As long as it's okay with your aunt."

"It's fine." My voice cracks and I clear my throat. I hate how nervous he's making me.

Garret gives a single nod. "Got a car to work on. You can help."

"Yay!" Rayne claps her hands and follows Garret out the back door and into the cold.

"He's always been so good with her." I glance back at Grams, and she is staring at the door they just left through. "Rayne follows him around like she's his shadow. The bond they share is special."

"What bond?" I ask even more confused about their relationship.

"Oh, I imagine it's how they both came into the world. They both lost their moms as newborns. That's not an easy thing for a child to grow up with. It's what connects their souls."

"I hadn't thought about that," I whisper. The way Garret looks at her suddenly doesn't feel so confusing. Of course he'd feel a connection with Rayne with the way they both lost their mothers.

“How’s your father doing?” Grams asks before I can get too lost in my thoughts.

“Not good. Mom can’t handle him alone anymore. Not with Rayne, at least.”

“Then it’s a good thing you’re here.” She pats my arm before she turns to fill a mug with coffee. “Would you like some?”

“No, thank you. I’ve already had several cups this morning.”

She nods, takes a sip, then speaks again. “You’re one of those fancy hairstylists, right?”

I chuckle. “I don’t know about fancy, but yes. I am a hairstylist.”

“I hear Mrs. Engle is looking for someone to take over her shop so she can retire one day. Might talk to her about a job. That is, if you’re sticking around.”

“Thanks. I’ll do that.” Choosing to ignore her last comment, I add, “Well, I better head back. We need to get Dad to his appointment. Thanks for watching Rayne.”

“You’re welcome, dear. Glad you’re home.”

I smile with a nod and make my way back outside. The bite from the frigid air causes me to shiver, and once again, I wish I’d insisted a little harder on driving over.

Because now I have to walk past Garret’s house. Just knowing he’s in his garage, probably sweaty and covered in grease, gives me wild fantasies that make no sense. For one, he is not my type. And two, he’s been rude toward me, not once, but twice now.

I have no reason to be thinking about his hard body, big hands, or beard-covered face. But Lord help me, I am.

“I THINK IT’S TIME WE TALK ABOUT FULL-TIME FACILITIES FOR Jim,” Dr. Chiles says to Mom and me. He’s sitting behind his desk while Mom and I are on the opposite side. It feels a little like I’m in the principal’s office and about to be scolded. I’ve never been in a doctor’s personal office before, and it’s uncomfortable. “I’ve made a list of some great facilities that specialize in dementia for you to consider.”

“Absolutely not.” Mom huffs. “I told you I’d never put Jim in a home. I’d rather hire in-home help when the time comes.”

“I understand your hesitation, Lois, but his decline is sharp. It won’t be long before you can’t handle him at home.”

“I can handle him just fine.” Tears prick at the corners of Mom’s eyes. “I will not shove my husband in a nursing home. I can’t do that to him.”

“I’m sure you’re handling him fine for now. I know this is hard, but the day will come when he’s no longer himself. You need to be prepared for when the bad days outweigh the good.”

“I said no.” Mom pushes to her feet and shoves her purse over her shoulder. “I’m going to go sit with Jim in the exam room. I can’t listen to another word of this.”

She marches out, leaving me alone with Dr. Chiles. I let out a low breath and force a smile. “It’s going to take her some time to get used to this idea, and that Dad has made me his medical power of attorney.”

“I know this is tough for everyone involved, but especially Jim. The more his memory slips, the worse he feels. I’m going to start him on a new medication which may help, but there’s no guarantees. He’s expressed his desire to be removed from the home before he completely goes, but your mother has refused to accept that. I just want what’s best for everyone. I hope you know that.”

“I do. And deep down, Mom knows that too. She’s struggling to accept that we’re losing Dad.” My voice cracks, and I take a deep breath attempting to get my emotions in check. This is not the time to lose it.

“I know. This is a tough disease on everyone involved. You and Lois can get as mad at me as you need to get. I can handle it.” He gives me a gentle smile that suggests he’s being sincere.

“I’ve only been home for a couple of weeks now. He’s had some rough days since my return, but it hasn’t been that bad.”

“He’s had a few good weeks since the holidays. That’s not uncommon after a bad episode.”

“Bad episode?” I lift a brow. As far as I’ve been told Dad hasn’t had any bad episodes at the house.

“Yes. About a week before Christmas, he woke in the middle of the night and didn’t know where he was. He thought he was a teenager and didn’t recognize the woman sleeping next to him. It scared him, and he wandered out of the house in the middle of the night. The police found him walking along the highway. He was cold, in his pjs with no identification, and couldn’t tell the police who he was.”

“Oh God.” I squeeze my eyes closed to hold back the tears. “Mom didn’t tell me about that. That had to freak everyone out.”

“It did. Your dad more than anyone. I think that was the first time he really understood the severity of his disease. He’s worried about how this is going to affect all of you, but especially Rayne.”

“That makes sense. My niece has already been through so much. Dad is a protector. He wants to shield her from more pain.”

“He wants to shield all of you from the pain of living with his decline. But if Lois refuses to consider these options, I’m afraid it’s going to hurt everyone worse than it already has.”

“Can Dad still make the decision for himself?” I ask, maybe a little too hopeful. If dad does this himself then I won’t have to. Me doing it would put even more of a strain on my relationship with Mom. Years of being absent has made things bad enough. I can only imagine how putting my dad in a facility will make Mom feel about me.

“For now, yes. He’s still sound enough but it’s only a matter of time. He chose you over your mother because she can’t make this decision objectively. And I don’t think he’ll do it against her wishes. When the time comes, he’s hoping you can and will do what’s right for the family, not just him.”

“When the time comes,” I whisper.

“Yes, and I’m afraid that time is much closer than any of us would like to admit.”

“And those are the facilities you recommend?” I nod toward the folder he tried to hand Mom before she stormed out.

“Yes. These are the best in this area for dementia. Any of them will take great care of your father. I marked one that I work closely with, but you don’t have to choose that one. I’ll still be Jim’s primary no matter what you decide.

“Thanks.” I take the folder from him and flip through it.

“All of those facilities fit within Jim’s budget. His social security will cover most of it. That was important to him.”

“You’ve already talked to Dad about these?”

“Yes. Shortly after he was diagnosed, we sat down and talked about his options and financial situation. He didn’t want to wait until it was too late, and it all fell on you and your mother. He’s been very proactive. He asked me not to share this with you until I felt it was time. As much as it pains me to say, it’s time.”

Despite my efforts, a tear breaks free and runs down my cheek. “How long have my parents known?”

Dr. Chiles tilts his head with a quizzical stare. “How long have they known what?”

“That Dad has dementia.”

“Oh.” He clears his throat. “I’ve been treating him for about two years now.”

“Two years!” My shock is evident in my voice. I close my eyes and drop my face into my hands. Pain, anger, fear, and

regret all rush through me as I process this information.

“I take it they didn’t tell you until recently.”

I nod, no longer able to stop the tears. “They told me just after the new year.”

Dr. Chiles winces and lets out a deep sigh. “I’m sorry to hear that. I know this is a lot to process. Take this with you. Read over it. Call me if you have any questions.”

“I will. Thank you.”

“I would say take all the time you need, but I’m afraid that’s the one thing I can’t give you. But I can promise that I will do everything in my power to give your father the best care that I can.”

With one final nod, I gather my things and leave Dr. Chile’s office. As I make my way back to the exam room, my emotions consume me. My legs wobble and a sob escapes. I dart into a darkened hallway and fall against the wall. My legs give out and I slide down until I’m sitting on the floor.

Alone. Scarred. Lost. That’s how I feel.

I don’t know how long I sit there, sobbing, before I finally get my emotions under control. But I still don’t move. I’ve no clue what I’m supposed to do.

Just when I thought things couldn’t get any worse, life proves to me that I don’t know shit.

Chapter 4

The princess strikes again.

Garret

“G arret. Your tea is getting cold,” a raspy, weak voice calls to me from the kitchen.

I scrub my hands over my face and swallow my groan. Every time Mrs. Moore calls me to *fix* something, she tries to stuff tea and cookies in me. I’ll take the cookies, but I don’t drink fucking tea.

“Give me a minute. I’m almost done,” I call back from her living room. Mrs. Moore is eighty-three, and I can’t disrespect her by refusing her hospitality no matter how much I don’t want it.

Despite how much the old lady drives me crazy, I’ve never been able to say no to her. She used to live in Beaver and is good friends with Grams. She moved to Chillicothe, a city about forty miles north of Beaver, a few years back, to be closer to her kids.

I always fixed things for her before she moved, and despite how many times I’ve given her the name of someone local, she refuses to use anyone but me.

This time it’s a broken window lock. Something small that doesn’t take much time to fix and costs me more in gas to drive all the way to Chillicothe than it does for the supplies and man hours to get the job done. I rarely accept jobs this far from home for this exact reason.

Other times it’s more worth my while. Last month her dishwasher broke, and it took more time. I didn’t mind taking on that job. But then she’d called me because the lid to her

trash can broke. When she stepped on the lever, the lid wouldn't lift. Because it was stuck. All it needed was a little cleaning where she'd spilled something sticky on the edge. I couldn't even bring myself to charge her for that one.

But like always, she'd insisted I drink tea and eat cookies.

I finish screwing the new lock into place and clean up the dust that I'd stirred around. Once I've put my tools away, I grab my bag and head to the kitchen. Might as well get this tea drinking over with. I'm not getting out of here until I do.

"There you are!" Mrs. Moore smiles when I enter. I set my tool bag next to the back door, so I don't forget to grab it when I leave. "Why don't you take your coat off and sit? You must be warm."

"You're all set. The new lock is smooth and should be easy for you to work." I take a seat opposite her at the small eat-in table in her kitchen, ignoring her comment about my coat. Leaving it on will make it easier to escape once I drink my tea.

"Thank you, dear." She slides the sugar bowl in my direction despite how many times I've told her I don't put sugar in my tea. Fuck, I don't drink tea except with her. "I don't know how it broke, but I'm grateful that you came out so quickly to fix it for me."

"Of course. Happy to help." I say through a fake smile. I *am* happy to help her. I just wish she either lived closer or would only call me for the jobs worth my time. I still need to run a profitable business.

"How's Mila doing? I haven't spoken to her in a few weeks."

"She's good." Mila is my grandmother. Most people call her Grams, with the exception of a few people who grew up with her like Mrs. Moore. "Baking as always. We've got that fundraiser for this next year's Oktoberfest coming up soon. So she's keeping us fed with treats."

"That sounds like Mila. I miss baking with her. Did you know that I'm one of the few people who's ever beaten Mila in a baking contest?"

I fight back another groan. I've heard this story for what feels like a million times. "Yes. I did know that. You've told me the story."

"Well, yes. Mila sure can bake, but I make a better cake than her. No one can beat my moist white cake with whipped cream cheese icing. It wins every time."

"It's a good cake." I typically prefer chocolate cake but her white cake is something special. She's not wrong about that.

"You know, I was never one to enter all these contests like Mila. I don't like the pressure like she does. The last cake baking contest I entered was in 1995 and it was with my white cake that I took home the grand prize. Mila was happy for me, even though it frustrated her that I broke her winning streak. She's always trying new recipes and never fails to perfect it in time for the contests she enters. I just can't do that. It's too much stress."

"Well, I guess we trained Grams well when it comes to stress." I add, taking a big gulp of my tea. "Helping Dad raise seven boys and all. She handles it all well."

"Oh, yes. You poor boys. All of you having to grow up without a mother. Thank the Heavens for Mila. She's a good, strong woman."

I down the rest of my tea in one long gulp, regretting that I mentioned how Grams raised us. The last thing I want is to hear Mrs. Moore's recount of *those* events.

"Sorry to have to rush out," I say as I push to my feet with my cookies in hand. I'm not leaving those behind. "Bullet's in the truck, and she's probably cold. Plus, I got an early job in the morning. I best get on the road."

My leaving now will not affect me getting up in the morning. And Bullet loves cold weather. She's a rottweiler with short hair, but she's like a little furnace with how much heat she puts out. Mrs. Moore doesn't need to know any of that.

"Well, why didn't you bring her in? I've told you I don't mind dogs."

“I appreciate that, but Bullet is comfortable in my truck.”

She lets out a long sigh that suggests she’s disappointed, but not enough to stop me from leaving.

“I guess you do have a long drive back to Beaver, don’t you? You’re such a sweet boy for coming all this way to help me out. I really do appreciate it.” She reaches behind her and picks up her purse from where it’s sitting on the counter behind her. “How much do I owe you?”

I lift my hand and shake my head. “Nothing. It didn’t take but a few minutes to fix it.”

“But what about the part?”

“It only cost a few dollars. Consider the tea and cookies payment enough.”

“Oh, I couldn’t do that. If you’re not going to take my money, let me send you home with more food as payment.”

She doesn’t give me a chance to object further before she’s up and putting several cookies in a container for me. Then she heads to her refrigerator and pulls out a covered dish and a couple of bowls.

“You like fried chicken, mashed potatoes, and green beans? I canned the green beans myself.”

My mouth waters at the mere mention of it. I didn’t eat dinner before rushing out here, and fried chicken sounds damn good. I tell myself to say no, but I don’t. “Yes, ma’am. I love fried chicken, and not much beats home-canned green beans.”

“Then let me send you home with some of this. I made way too much for just me. I thought maybe I could entice my son and his wife to come over and eat with me, but they had some school event for my granddaughter and said they couldn’t make it. Might as well send most of it home with you, since I’ll never eat it all. I so hate wasting food.”

She wasn’t kidding when she said she was going to give me most of it. She packs it all up, except one piece of chicken and enough sides for just herself. Then she hands it to me,

along with the cookies. “This is very kind of you. Thank you. I’ll enjoy eating it.”

She beams at me. “Good. I’ll gladly feed you anytime you wanna come visit. A good man like you needs to find a woman to cook for you. I hate seeing all you Mutter boys still single. You ever gonna settle down?”

I give her a closed lipped smile and shrug. “It’ll take a special woman to win me over. Far as I’ve seen, that woman doesn’t live around here.” I lift the containers and grab my tool bag. “Thanks for the food. I’ll see you next time.”

“Okay, sounds good. You drive safe and be sure to tell Mila I said hello. If I can get a ride down, I’ll come to the fundraiser. I just love all the treats and games they set up.”

“I’ll let her know,” I say as I walk out the back door. If I don’t keep moving, she won’t stop talking, and then I’ll never get out of here. “Bye now.”

I wave as I walk to my truck. With the sun long gone, the night air is cold. I zip my coat further up and hunch my shoulders in like that’s going to do any good.

Mrs. Moore continues talking, but I keep walking. I can’t make out her words now that I’m outside anyway.

There’s a strong wind tonight whipping around my head and filling my ears with a rumbling sound. When I reach my truck, I give her another wave and hop in. Bullet lifts her head from where she’s curled up in the passenger seat. She gives me a quick glance before she buries her head back in the blanket as if she’s too content to be disturbed. I keep a thick wool blanket in my truck for moments just like this.

After setting my tool bag and the leftovers on the bench seat behind me, I start up my truck and don’t bother waiting for her to warm up before I throw my truck into gear. Mrs. Moore is still waving at me from her opened back door. Poor woman is lonely, living in this house all by herself.

I know the feeling.

I get lonely sometimes too in my tiny home.

But I want solitude and escape from my family. I need it.

It's the only way I know how to keep my scars hidden and buried deep inside me.

THERE'S NOT A LOT OF TRAFFIC AS I LEAVE THE CITY AND turn onto the highway. It's late enough that I've missed all the evening traffic from people making their commutes home from work, but not so late that I'm alone on the roads. Not that there's ever much traffic in this area. Even at the busiest time, there's hardly ever a slow down or back up.

Bullet is snoring next to me, so I flip on the radio. I like the silence most nights, but tonight I'm in the mood for some music. I flip through a few stations before I settle on a classic rock station. Most folks in this area listen to country music, but I've always been more of a rock and metal fan.

Just as I get comfortable and settled in for the rest of the drive home, flashing hazard lights come into view up ahead. I only see one car, so I decide to pull over and see if they need help. It's late enough that most people wouldn't bother to stop, but I can't do that. I always imagine it's Grams. I'd hate for her to get stuck out after dark like this.

I toss my truck into park and flip the radio off before I lean in closer to the window to get a look at the car. It's an older Volvo wagon in dark blue with an out-of-state tag.

"You coming, Bullet?" I ask as I open the glove box to get my flashlight. She gives me a low ruff and stands up on the seat. Bullet is a good dog, and I don't have to worry about her running away or straying from my side.

She hops out with me, and I shut the door, keeping it running so it doesn't get cold. Then I make my way to the front of the Volvo, where the hood is up.

Before I reach the front, a woman steps out from the front and stares at me. She immediately relaxes when her eyes connect with mine.

“Oh, thank God it’s you.” Charlotte presses her hand to her chest. “I had no idea what to expect from someone stopping.”

I look her up and down and can’t stop the low growl that escapes me. She’s not dressed appropriately for country living.

She’s wearing a coat that looks like it’s more for show than warmth. It’s short, light pink, and I think it might be leather. There’s a scarf around her neck but it’s thin and see-through. There’s no way that’s providing her any warmth.

Her dark skirt is loose-fitting and looks like it barely covers her ass. Her legs are bare and she’s wearing another pair of those damn sexy heels that I’d love to see on her while she’s in my bed with nothing else on.

My dick thickens at the image. I shake my head and bite back my attraction. *Dressed like a princess when she should be thinking about comfort and practicality.*

I’m about to get onto her for being out here late, dressed like this, when my eyes land on her hand at her side. If I’m not mistaken, she’s gripping a can of pepper spray. *Maybe she’s smarter than I thought.*

Bullet runs past me and stops at Charlotte’s feet. She circles her, sniffing her feet then her ass. When Bullet’s nose nudges her, she yelps and hops forward, stumbling right into my arms.

I grab hold of her and keep her from falling to the ground. She looks up at me, but it’s too dark to read her expression. Hopefully, that means she can’t read mine because having her this close to me is doing crazy things to my body.

She rights herself and steps back. “Sorry about that. I wasn’t prepared for your dog to poke me in the ass.”

She lets out a soft chuckle while I growl. *I’d like to poke her in the ass with something.*

“Don’t worry about it.”

Bullet steps around her and rubs her nose on Charlotte’s hand. Charlotte’s smile grows, and she coos and pets my dog. Bullet eats it up.

“Traitor,” I mumble.

“What was that?” Charlotte turns her smile to me, and my chest constricts. She’s a beautiful woman, but when she smiles, her entire face lights up.

“Nothing.” I point to the front of her car. “What seems to be wrong?”

“I don’t know. I heard a grinding noise, and then my car jerked and came to a stop. I don’t know why I popped the hood. I know nothing about cars.”

I shine my flashlight under the hood, but it’s too dark to really see anything. Besides, what she described doesn’t sound good. “Well, I can’t say for sure until I get it in the garage, but it sounds like the transmission. Common problem with older Volvos.”

“Great. Just what I need.” She sighs and opens the driver’s side door. A few seconds later, she stands with her phone in her hand.

“What are you doing?”

“Calling Mom to come get me. Then a tow truck.”

I growl and narrow my gaze. “Why would you do that?”

She looks up at me with raised brows. “Um, because my car broke down.”

“I can take you home. You live right next door to me.”

She stares at me like she doesn’t understand what I said.

“Okay.” She drags out the word. “But what about my car? I can’t leave it here.”

I shake my head and a low rumble vibrates in my chest. “You do know my family owns a garage, right?”

“Yeah.”

“We have a tow truck. I’ll come back for it.”

She looks genuinely confused. “Why would you do that?”

“Why do you think, Princess?”

Her eyes narrow into thin slits. “Don’t call me that.”

“Why not?” I grumble. “You earned it. Get whatever you need and come on.”

I shut the hood of her car and pass by her toward my truck, doing my best to avoid looking at her long, sexy legs.

“Do you have to be so grumpy all the time?”

“Yes,” I grumble and keep walking. When I reach the passenger side, I open the door and then stare at her over the top of it.

She stares at me but doesn’t make a move. If I could see her expression, I’d bet all the cash in my wallet that she looks angry. Good. She’s being ridiculous right now if she thinks for one second that I’d leave her along the side of the road at night alone. We may not get the same level of crime she’s used to living in Chicago, but bad things still happen out here.

Then she huffs and reaches into her car. I hope to get her purse and keys.

I whistle for Bullet to come before I move her blanket over to the center of the seat. Bullet doesn’t move until Charlotte has locked up her car and is heading toward me.

Yeah, my dog is definitely a traitor.

For a second, I feel like the asshole I’m sure she’s silently accusing me of being. Especially since her arms are full of bags. I should help her carry those.

It’s not like me to be *this* outwardly grumpy with someone. I may complain and groan inwardly, but I still do the right thing. For reasons I can’t explain. I don’t trust myself around Charlotte. The bigger an asshole she thinks I am, the better.

When they reach me, Bullet hops in first. Then I offer Charlotte my hand to help her up. A zap of electricity shoots up my arm the second her delicate, soft hand slides inside my large, rough one. She flinches, and I wonder if she felt it too.

Once she’s settled in the truck, she sets her bags at her feet and looks over at me. We’re almost eye level now and there’s

enough light coming from the dash of my truck that I can see the apprehensive look on her face.

“Thank you,” she says as she brushes a strand of hair behind her ear. She’s shivering, and I stifle another growl as my eyes rake over her bare legs. *Fuck, she’s got nice legs.* I reach behind the seat to grab one of the extra blankets I keep in my truck.

“Here.” I spread it over her legs without asking her if she wants it. I don’t need to hear her objections. They’d be lies anyway. I can see that she’s cold.

Once her legs are covered, I shut the door, head to the driver’s side, and climb in. We’re silent as I pull back onto the highway. Bullet rests her head on Charlotte’s lap, making her smile. She pets her head with her eyes trained out the side window.

After a few minutes, I nod to the bags at her feet. “Shopping?”

Her eyes snap to mine like she’s surprised to hear me speak. Can’t say I blame her. It’s not like I’ve made any effort to start small talk with her the couple times I’ve seen her since she moved home.

“Yes.” She sighs and her body relaxes into the seat. Bullet snuggles in closer to her and a sudden wave of jealousy washes over me. *Fuck, I can’t be jealous of my damn dog.*

“Please tell me you bought some appropriate shoes.” I mumble just loud enough she can hear me.

“What’s wrong with my shoes?”

“There’s nothing to them. Your feet have to be freezing. Why on earth would you wear shoes like that around here?”

“Not that it’s any of your business, but I had a job interview this afternoon. I wanted to look my best. Then I had to wait for one of Dad’s prescriptions, so I did some shopping while I waited.”

“How is he? Your dad?” I ask, keeping my eyes focused on the road ahead of us.

“Not good. It’s just a matter of time before we’ll have to put him in a facility.”

“Sorry to hear that. He’s a good man. Hate to see him decline like that.”

“Thanks.”

I dare a glance in her direction and she’s smiling down at Bullet while she pets her head. My chest constricts again and I can’t stop myself from rubbing it. I don’t like what this woman is doing to me. It’s strange and uncomfortable.

“You okay?” she asks.

“Yeah,” my voice croaks, and it comes out all scratchy and rough. I clear my throat. “I’m fine. Why?”

“I don’t know. You always seem so tense and angry. Is it just me, or are you like this with everyone?”

I furrow my brows. The answer on the tip of my tongue is to tell her yes, but I keep quiet. I don’t want to hurt her feelings. I’m not sure why I care. Pissing her off would solve my problem. It would make her stay away. But I can’t bring myself to be that mean to her.

“What’s up with you and Rayne?” she asks. Her sudden change in subject confuses me.

“What do you mean?”

“She seems to like you. Can’t say I see why. You’re so grumpy all the time. But not with her. She actually drags smiles out of you. Why?”

I shrug, not liking the direction this conversation has taken. “She’s a good kid.”

When I don’t say more, she pushes again. “Yeah, I know. But why does she get your smile and no one else?”

“Because I like *her*,” I say a little too harshly and with more emphasis on *her* than I should put on it.

She slinks back in her seat. “Okay, fine. You like Rayne and no one else. I get it.”

I clench my hand around the steering wheel and swallow a groan. “Sorry. I didn’t mean to snap like that.”

“It’s okay. Don’t worry about it.” Her voice is a little wobbly, suggesting it’s anything but okay. “Maybe we should keep the talking to a minimum for the rest of the drive. I seem to bring out the worst in you.”

My grip tightens on the steering wheel, and my urge to protest confuses me. Because she’s right. She does bring out the worst in me, but not in the way she thinks.

If she knew the inner workings of my mind and knew the things I imagine doing to her—naked, still wearing those fucking shoes—she’d run back to Chicago without a backward glance.

So, a quiet ride home might be exactly what’s best for everyone.

Chapter 5

All it takes is a cookie.

Charlotte

Six things not going well since I moved back home:

- 1. Dad's health and the fact that my parents hid it from me for two years.*
- 2. Being dad's power of attorney and the fact that Mom won't talk to me about it.*
- 3. Rayne doesn't trust me. She thinks I'm going to leave.*
- 4. Finding a job is proving to be more difficult than I expected.*
- 5. My car broke down.*
- 6. Garret Mutter.*

I give the dough one last stir before I set down the large wooden spoon and prep the cookie sheet. After yesterday's

disaster of a day, I need something to take my mind off it. Baking always calms my nerves and centers my soul.

I'm jobless, my car broke down, and I can't get the grumpy neighbor next door out of my head.

Disaster.

After we finished breakfast, I cleaned up the kitchen and got to work. Mom needed to run some errands so it's just me and Dad in the kitchen while Rayne is in her room getting ready for school.

It feels weird baking this early. If I were still in Chicago, I'd already be at the salon, prepping for a busy day. I haven't had a busy day since I lost my job and I'm feeling adrift.

I still can't believe I was fired because of Brad's actions. Apparently the rich and famous can get caught in scandal after scandal and still keep their jobs, but not their hairstylist. That's grounds for immediate dismissal.

So instead of doing the one thing I love more than anything else, I'm stuck in the backwoods of southern Ohio, baking cookies, and babysitting my dad.

"Your mom said your car's not in the driveway," Dad says over the newspaper he's reading.

"Yeah, I had some trouble last night while driving home from Chillicothe. Thankfully, Garret Mutter was passing by. He stopped to help me."

"That was some luck."

"It was." I nod, trying not to remember how handsome Garret looked last night. Or the way his dislike for me seems to intensify every time we run into each other. "I wasn't sure what I was going to do since it was so late and dark out."

"What seems to be the problem?"

"Not sure. When I described what it did to Garret, he said it might be the transmission. Apparently, that's a common problem with older Volvos. After he dropped me off, he went back for it and towed it to his shop."

Dad's silent for a moment, so I glance over my shoulder at him. When our eyes meet, he gives me a sharp nod. "Garret's a good, honest mechanic. All the Mutter men are. He'll do you right."

"Good to know," I whisper. Not for the first time wishing I'd see that side of him.

Garret doesn't treat me like he'd do me right. He treats me like he'd tear me to shreds. That sends a shiver through me as my mind drops into the gutter. Garret is a big, broad man. I wonder if he's *big* everywhere.

I add the last scoop of cookie dough to the tray, and I slide them in the oven and get to work with the next one.

"Do you mind pouring me some more coffee, sweetheart?" Dad asks.

"Of course." I wipe my hands and grab the half full pot. This is the second pot I've made this morning. I typically only drink two cups of coffee a day, but I've drunk way more than that since coming home. My parents drink coffee throughout the day and after every meal. It's a wonder they can sleep at night.

I refill his mug and decide to have a little more myself. We're silent while Dad reads and I prep more cookies. The ten minutes it takes to bake the first batch flies by and before I know it, the timer is buzzing.

"Those smell amazing," Dad says as he folds his paper and takes a drink of his coffee. "You're gonna give me one, right?"

I chuckle. "Yes, Dad. You're my official taster this morning. You have to tell me if they're keepers."

"Do I get one?" Rayne asks as she rushes into the room. "If Grandpa gets one, I do too, right?"

"Only if you're ready for school. The bus will be here in fifteen minutes."

"I'm ready." She falls into a chair next to Dad.

"Where's your backpack?"

“By the front door?”

“Did you pack your lunch?”

“It’s pizza day. I’m gonna buy my lunch.”

“Money?”

Rayne heaves a heavy sigh and nods.

“Water bottle?”

She rolls her eyes. “In my backpack. I’ve got *everything*. Promise.”

“Okay!” I lift my hands in surrender. “Just making sure.”

Once the cookies are cool enough, I plate one for each of them. I hand them over and wait on bated breath to see if they like them.

I’ve never made this recipe for my family before. My best friend, Sierra, loves them, but Brad wouldn’t eat them. He wouldn’t eat anything I cooked. That should have been a sign we would never work together long-term.

A huge smile covers Dad’s face after he takes his first bite. “Wow! Don’t tell your mother this, but these are the best cookies I’ve ever eaten.”

Rayne nods her agreement. “Yeah, so good. Can I have another one?” She asks around a bite.

I chuckle. “No, but there will be plenty here when you get home. You can have another then.”

“You should bake these for the spring fundraiser coming up,” Dad says. “It’s to raise money for the Oktoberfest. I bet you’d sell out.”

“Spring fundraiser?” I raise a brow.

“Yeah. Started it several years ago. Lots of baked goods and fun games for the kids. They hold it at the old elementary school in town. Converted it to a community center after the new school was built. But then, you’d know all that if you came home more often.”

I cringe at his dig but decide to ignore it. He's not wrong. I didn't come home often. It was too hard with Carol gone.

"I'll definitely consider that. I love to bake, and it's nice to finally have someone who appreciates it."

Dad's brow furrows. "Didn't that fellow of yours like your cooking?"

I shrug. "I don't know. He never really seemed to care one way or the other. He usually wanted to order takeout."

Dad's frown deepens. "And you wanted to marry this man?"

Before I can defend my relationship with Brad, one of my carnivorous plants snaps closed, causing Rayne to jump up from her seat. "Did it catch something?"

"Not sure." I smile. "It's possible. It's about time for them to come out of plant hibernation."

"That's so cool. My mom loved plants, right?"

"She did." I walk up behind Rayne and rest my hands on her shoulders. "She wanted to go to school for botany."

"Is that why you keep these? To remember my mom?"

I nod. "Plus, I really like them. They're challenging. It takes skill and care to keep them alive. And they're really cool."

Rayne looks over her shoulder and smiles at me. "Will you teach me how to take care of these?"

"Sure. I'd love to."

Carol had been obsessed with plants and gardening growing up. She often talked about caring for carnivorous plants when she got older. After her death, I found myself wandering around the garden section of a home improvement store, looking at all the plants. When I came across a pitcher plant, I bought it without having a clue what to do with it.

That started my collection of carnivorous plants that now reside in the bay window in my parents' kitchen. The window faces south and gets the best light.

“All right, kiddo.” I wrap my arms around Rayne for a hug. “Give Grandpa a hug and go wait by the front door. The bus will be here any minute.”

A few minutes later, Rayne is off to school. I rejoin Dad in the kitchen so I can finish baking the cookies. That’s when an idea hits me.

“Dad, do you think you’d be okay alone for a few minutes while I run some cookies over to Garret? You know, as a thank you for helping me last night.”

“Of course, sweetheart. I’m just going to finish up my coffee and go watch TV. Besides, I’m having a good day so far. I’ll be fine.”

I smile and nod. It has been a good morning with him. A great one, in fact. That makes me both happy and sad because I have no clue how many more days like this I’m going to get with him.

Rather than dwell on the unknown, I decide to count my blessings and get back to work. It’ll take me another thirty or forty minutes to finish baking, and I’d like to run these over to Garret before he gets too wrapped up in his day.

No need to poke the bear more than I already have if I can help it.

He may be a grumpy asshole, but maybe he’s a grumpy asshole who appreciates fresh baked goods.

ONCE I HAVE DAD SETTLED IN THE LIVING ROOM WATCHING TV, I bundle up and make my way to Garret’s house. The temperatures have dropped even more, and it’s barely above zero out. With the wind chill, it probably feels more like negative five.

The sun is shining brightly—giving us a rare sunny winter day instead of the gray overcast we’re usually stuck with—but it’s not enough to combat the frigid temperatures. We’re in the heart of winter now.

When I exit the trail that cuts through the woods, I notice there's a light on in Garret's garage and the bay door is open. I head there instead of to his house.

I don't make it halfway up his driveway before Bullet greets me.

"Hey, girl." I lean down and pet her. She bounces on her feet in excitement. "You're such a good girl. Is your master here?"

She lets out a low ruff and runs back up the driveway, spinning around and running back to me just before she reaches the open door.

"Bullet. Get in here." Garret's rough voice shouts from inside the garage, but I don't see him.

Bullet slows when she reaches me, does a quick circle around me, then walks the rest of the way to the garage by my side.

"Is he in a bad mood?" I whisper to Bullet like she can understand me.

She gives me another low ruff, making me chuckle. I don't care what anyone says. She understood me and that was a clear *yes* in response.

"Hello!" I call out when I reach the open door. A waft of heat washes over me as soon as I cross the threshold.

Garret steps out from behind my car and frowns. "What are you doing here?"

I give him my biggest smile and his frown deepens. "I brought you some cookies."

"Why?" he grumbles. Then his eyes rake down my body and settle on my feet. He stares at them for far too long. I look down at my leather boots. They're the only flat bottom shoes I own. Not the best winter boots for the country, but they're semi-practical.

He makes a grunting sound, and my eyes snap back to his. *Oh, right. He asked me a question.*

“For helping me. Just wanted to say thank you.”

“Then why not just say thank you?” He furrows his brow, and the deep timbre of his voice sends a shiver from my head to my toes. He stares at me with so much intensity, I involuntarily take a step back.

“Because.” My voice cracks, and I clear my throat. “Because cookies are a nice gesture. They say thank you better than simple words.”

I don’t know how it’s possible, but the man’s furrowed brow deepens even more. “I don’t understand.”

I shrug. “I thought you might like them. And since you helped me out, I decided to repay you with cookies. That’s not a crime, is it?”

“No.” He crosses his arms over his chest and his expressive eyes glare at me. “You can’t stand it when someone doesn’t like you, can you?”

I scoff. “I couldn’t care less. Plenty of people don’t like me.”

He takes a step toward me. First one. Then another. His movements remind me of a predator slowly approaching its prey so as not to scare it away. I’m not scared, but I want to flee all the same. Mostly because of the way my insides are burning with desire.

Why in the hell does he have this effect on me?

He doesn’t stop until he’s eliminated most of the distance between us. Something resembling a smirk lifts his lips. “Maybe, maybe not. But around here you’re used to being the center of attention, the most popular girl in school, and everyone’s favorite homecoming queen.”

His words ignite something deep inside me, and it’s not lust. It’s anger. I shove the container of cookies at him, and it hits him in the chest.

“We’re not in high school anymore. Just take the damn cookies, Garret!” I say a little too loudly.

He doesn't take them. He doesn't react at all to my outburst. Instead, his damn chocolate-brown eyes stare down at me as he pops the lid and pulls out a cookie.

He takes a bite with an unimpressed look on his face as if he expects them to taste like shit.

Then the unthinkable happens.

His eyes roll back in his head and the sexiest moan I've ever heard rumbles up from deep in his chest. My legs wobble and a wetness builds between my legs unlike anything I've ever felt before.

"Oh my God." He groans. "What are these?"

"Um," I clear my throat, and a smile lifts my lips. "Oatmeal toffee. They're good, right?"

"Good?" He takes the container from me, grabs another cookie, and stuffs it in his mouth. "These are the best damn cookies I've ever eaten." Then his eyes narrow and he points a finger at me. "Don't you dare tell Grams I said that."

"Wouldn't dream of it." I nudge his side, and a zing of energy shoots up my arm from the touch. I quickly pull my hand back. "Don't worry. Your secret's safe with me."

He holds my gaze, and if I'm not mistaken, there's heat building in those deep brown eyes.

He clears his throat and turns around. "So, your car."

I take a deep breath and press my hand to my belly. It's doing little flips making me feel light and airy. "Yeah. My car. How bad is it?"

"You're not going to like it." He sets the container on the bench behind him, then grabs a stack of papers. "Your transmission is shot."

I wrinkle my nose. "How much is that going to set me back?"

"Not sure yet. Several grand at least."

I moan and cover my face with my hands. He puts his hand on my shoulder and that damn zing is back. When I look up at

him, all I want to do is lean into him. Kiss his pink lips. Feel the roughness of his beard against the softness of my face.

For a second, I think he might want that too. Then Bullet barks and we jump apart.

He runs a hand over his beard and stares down at the papers he picked up. “I’ll make some calls. See what I can find out. I’ll do everything I can to keep the costs to a minimum.”

“Thanks. I appreciate that.” I take another step back and point over my shoulder. “Well, I’ll let you get back to it then.”

I spin around and practically run in the opposite direction.

“Charlotte!” He calls out before I reach the door. I stop and look over my shoulder. “Cookies are my favorite, and these are really good. Thank you.”

A genuine smile covers my face and my chest warms. “You’re welcome.”

He gives me a slight nod before he takes a bite of another cookie, and if I’m not mistaken, he was smiling while he did it.

Maybe there’s hope for Garret and me to be friends yet. Who knew all it would take to tame the beast were some oatmeal toffee cookies?

I PARK OUTSIDE MRS. ENGLE’S HAIR SALON. WHEN I READ the sign, the urge to back out of here and go home is strong. All it says is hair salon, not unlike a barber pole with stripes as the only marker that the business is a barber shop.

I’ve fallen far and hard if this is my only job option.

I was a master stylist—second best to the owner—at Fringe for crying out loud. It’s the hottest, most highly sought after salon in all of Chicago, maybe even all the East Coast. I cut and styled Vince Vaughn and Harrison Ford’s hair, plus their wives. I even styled Oprah Winfrey a few times. That’s how freaking good I am at my job.

But that's all over now. It's either this, or I sit around my parents' house bored to tears every day for the rest of my life.

Instead of leaving, I shut off the engine to my parents' Buick and head inside to see about a job. I can't imagine the demand for a master stylist is all that high in a village of three hundred people and its surrounding area, but it's worth a shot.

When I step inside, I'm immediately greeted by a blanket of warmth. It's a large open room with a crackling fireplace along one wall. I hadn't expected that, but it's a nice touch.

Opposite the door is a single station set up against a mirrored wall. There's only one chair and bench, even though at least three or four would easily fit in the space. Just inside the door is a deep maroon couch with big white flowers all over it. The end tables and coffee table are a light oak and they're all decorated with bowls of potpourri.

It's clean and screams country. Not my style, but it's not awful either.

"It's my lucky day. Charlotte Weber, as she lives and breathes." Mrs. Engle's voice croons from the doorway in the back corner. "I was hoping you'd grace me with a visit."

I give her my best pageant smile. "Hi, Mrs. Engle."

"Are you here for a cut? Or maybe a touch up in your color. I actually have an opening this afternoon if you'd like."

I inwardly cringe at the thought of Mrs. Engle touching my hair. As a stylist, I take great pride in my hair and only let the best of the best touch it. I've no clue what I'm going to do now that I've moved back home.

"No, actually. I heard you might be looking for some help. I'm going to be in town for the foreseeable future to help Mom with Dad but I'm starting to get antsy just sitting around the house all the time."

"Oh, well!" She presses her hand to her chest, her eyes widening, and her jaw slightly dropped. "I'd be honored to have someone with your experience and expertise working beside me. And a former beauty queen. That would surely bring in the younger girls. I've been struggling with that

growth, you know. They all want to go to those fancy salons in Jackson or Waverly. Some even drive all the way to Chillicothe to get a cut. Which is ridiculous since I'm right here."

I do my best to hold my smile, all the while thinking to myself that I don't think driving to Chillicothe is far enough to find a great stylist. I might be driving all the way to Columbus to find one. A two-hour drive isn't too far for hair, is it? Not in my opinion.

"I'd be happy to help out however I can."

She beams at me like this is the best news she's received in years. "Then consider yourself hired."

"Really?" I ask, sounding hopeful. "You don't want to see my resume?"

She waves me off like that's the dumbest thing I could say. "Dear, I know your reputation. You're probably the best stylist in the state, if not the entire tri-state area. Now, the pay won't be anything like you're used to, and I'm sure you'll balk at our rates. But I'll let you keep eighty percent of all your sales, plus tips. I guess maybe I should really consider that second chair now if you're going to be working here. Can't share a chair now, can we?"

"No, not very well."

"Then again, I'm hoping to step back and work less. Can't keep doing this forever. Either way, we'll figure it out. When would you like to start?"

A little caught off guard by how quickly she hired me, I stumbled over that question. "Um ... I guess ... Whenever. There's nothing stopping me from starting right away."

"How about first thing Monday morning? That gives me time to get the word out that you'll be working here. I'll transfer some of my appointments to you and investigate what it'd take to get a second chair in here. Sound good?"

"Yeah." I chuckle, both excited and a little queasy at the prospect of working here. No more rich and famous styles for me. "Sounds great."

Over the next twenty minutes, she shows me around the shop. It's really a converted house. There's two bedrooms in the back that serve as an office and storage. The kitchen is still fully functioning and there's two bathrooms. One is for customers, and one is private, for employees only.

After filling out some paperwork, I'm heading out the door with a smile on my face. For the first time since losing my life in Chicago, something has gone my way. Working at a small-town hair salon may not be much, and it's certainly not Fringe, but it's something.

And that's all I need to give me a little hope that everything will one day be right again in my life.

Chapter 6

*Once a fissure forms, it can't be
stopped.*

Garret

I've been here for five minutes, and I already regret coming.

Grams so rarely stops by my house, so when she showed up today to invite me to dinner, I couldn't tell her no. I've never been able to tell Grams no, and she knows it.

I may be a thirty-two-year-old man, but when she asks me to do something, I do it. Thank fuck she doesn't abuse that power of hers. Lord only knows what she'd have me doing.

Tonight, my brothers are in rare form, joking and teasing each other like it's a sport.

I'm doing my best to sit quietly in my seat at the table and mind my own damn business. If I don't engage, then maybe they won't either.

I love my family. I just don't like talking about myself or getting too involved in all the personal stuff. Personal stuff makes me uncomfortable.

"You playing in the poker game next month?" Chase asks as he plops down in the chair next to me. Chase is younger than me by two years. He also has an identical twin, Christian, but Chase is the friendlier of the two. Too friendly if you ask me. Christian's quiet, broody demeanor is more my style. But he's not here tonight as far as I can tell.

I take a drink of my beer and nod. "Planning on it."

"I hear it should be a good one. Rumor in town is that two of the Koch brothers plan on playing. Don't let them goad you

into doing something stupid.”

I shoot a glare at my brother. “I never do anything stupid.”

Chase chuckles. “Sure you don’t. We all do stupid shit at some point. All I’m saying is, don’t let your first act of stupidity be with those assholes. They want this house and land.”

“They can keep dreaming. That’ll never happen.”

The Koch’s insistence that we stole their family’s land is the reason there’s a multi-generational feud between our two families. They insist our great-great-grandfather stole the land from their great-great-grandfather.

In reality, their great-great-grandfather was a dumbass and a piss poor poker player. He lost hand after hand, and in an act of desperation, he bet this homestead in an attempt to win back his losses.

Didn’t work out that way. He lost this house, and all sixty acres to the Mutters in a single hand of poker.

Over the years, they’ve tried to take legal action against us, but we have the signed deed and all the transfer paperwork showing it’s ours. Since that didn’t work, the Koch family has been trying to goad us into a rematch ever since.

As if any of us would ever be that stupid.

“I’m joining Grams in this year’s Euchre tournament. We’re going to take on Ben and Johanna. Shut them up once and for all.”

I nod and take another pull from my beer. Ben and Johanna Koch, a.k.a. the parents to Linden, Aaron, Tanner, Amelia, and Jason. They’re not quite the assholes that their sons are, but they’re still fucking Kochs. Amelia and Jason aren’t that bad. And Aaron mostly keeps to himself now that he’s the town doctor. But Linden and Tanner are a different story. They’re probably the two entering the poker game. Their presence will certainly make for an interesting night.

“That means, next year it’s your turn.” Grams points at me with the wooden spoon she’s using to stir the soup beans.

“And don’t you dare try to get out of it.”

I hold my hands up in surrender. “Wouldn’t dream of it.”

That’s a lie. I’d do anything to get out of the Euchre tournament. Not because I don’t like playing Euchre, because I do, but I’d rather play with the guys at the bar with beer and liquor involved.

But it’s tradition that we take turns playing in the tournament with Grams. It’s something she enjoys doing, so we do it for her. Even a grumpy bear like me.

“Heard you picked up Charlotte Weber the other night,” Liam says. He’s the oldest of us Mutter brothers. He takes his usual seat at the table across from me. “Didn’t picture a beauty queen as your type.”

“I didn’t pick her up.” I growl.

“Frank saw you dropping her off at her house.” Liam smirks as he leans back with his hands clasped together behind his head. “How did he put it?” Liam looks up at the ceiling like he’s thinking. “It was after dark, so it had to be a date. I think that’s what he said.”

“Frank needs to stop staring out his window and watching his neighbors.”

Frank Haas is a nosy old man that has nothing better to do than document the comings and goings of his neighbors. It’s bad enough that he joins Mrs. Engle on all the town gossip. He owns the only restaurant in town, Frank’s Frosty Kreme, and it just happens to be across the street from Mrs. Engle’s hair salon.

“You went on a date?” Sophia, Mac’s new girlfriend, asks with way too much excitement in her voice. Typically, I’d say I like her. She’s got a lot of spunk and she keeps Mac on his toes. She’s good for him. But right now, she’s annoying me with her question, though it didn’t really sound like a question. It sounded more like a statement of fact.

“No!” I bark. “I didn’t go out on a date. Her car broke down on Highway 23. I just happened to be the first person to come up on her. I drove her home. That’s *all*.”

“Then you took the tow truck and pulled her car back to *your* garage,” Liam adds. “And at no charge, as far as I can see.”

“Saw her walking to your house the next morning too,” Mac says. He grins at me from the other end of the table as he pulls Sophia onto his lap, looking smug, like he knows something I don’t. “Imagine my surprise when I saw Bullet cozying up to her like they were old pals.”

“Ooh, Garret’s got a girl,” Ash teases from where he’s standing next to Grams, helping her cook. He’s my second youngest brother and probably the biggest goofball of all of them. It’s a toss-up between him and Chase. They both care more about having fun than anything else.

I glance around the room, and everyone is staring at me, waiting for an answer. Growling, I slam my empty beer bottle on the table and stand. “I shouldn’t have come tonight.”

I make for the door, but Grams calls out before I take two steps. “Sit your ass back in that chair.” I cut her a glare, and she puffs her chest out. She may be a tiny thing at five feet three inches, but she’s a fierce old lady. “Don’t test me, Garret. Your brothers wouldn’t razz you this much if you came around more often. Sit down and deal with it.”

I stare at her for a moment, trying my damndest to communicate how much I want to leave with my eyes. Her expression softens, but only slightly, suggesting she understands but doesn’t give a shit. I’m stuck here until after we eat.

Growling, I head to the refrigerator and grab another beer before I take my seat at the table, avoiding all eye contact as I do.

“Well, then.” Grams claps her hands. “Now that that’s settled, will one of you boys set the table for me? Dinner is just about ready.”

I fight the smile that tugs at my lips. Those few simple words are Grams’s way of telling my brothers to leave me the fuck alone. As long as they listen, I might still make it through

this dinner. That is, until I hear my father's voice from the doorway.

"I'll do it, Mom. You boys stay put." Dad strolls into the kitchen and heads for the cabinet where the plates and bowls are kept.

The room falls eerily silent except for the noise Dad makes banging the dishes around. None of us have a great relationship with our dad, but mine might be the most strained. He's the main reason I moved out and the reason I stay away as much as possible.

He's never said the words, but he blames me for Mom's death. Out of all his sons, I'm the only one he refuses to look at, talk to, or even acknowledge the existence of.

Because Mom chose me over herself. She put my needs over his, and he hates me for it.

She was diagnosed with cancer just after she found out she was pregnant with me. Much to Dad's dismay, she refused treatment. The doctors gave her a choice. It was either they save her life at the risk of losing me, or she could forgo treatment and carry me to full term. She carried me to term. And from what Grams has told me, she barely made it to that point. She held me once, then quietly passed away.

Dad has apparently never been the same since. But I don't give a shit. He should have been man enough to care for his kids. Instead, he lost himself to the bottle and whatever woman would spread her legs for him. That's when Grams stepped in and became the parent we needed.

Liam was only three, and Warren was two. She completely altered her life to care for two toddlers and an infant without question.

But Dad kept knocking up woman after woman until there were seven of us. There are four mothers between us. Chase and Christian, identical twins, share a mother. Ash came along a couple of years after the twins. His mom took off right after he was born. That didn't stop Dad from finding a new woman to warm his bed. Not a year later, Mac was born.

All three of their mothers are deadbeats. They took off the first chance they got, leaving Grams to raise seven rowdy boys on her own.

Dad sets the plates around the table while conversations about work start up. The seven of us co-own a garage and racing company, Mutter Truckers Auto & Racing. All but Warren and I work there full-time.

Warren is older than me by two years. He left for college right after high school and rarely ever comes back. He's living down in North Carolina designing race cars. I hear rumblings every now and again from one of my brothers that they're trying to get him to move home. Not sure that will ever work. He rarely visits as it is. Clearly, he doesn't want to be here.

Can't say I blame him. We've got nothing but bad memories anyway.

Dad works his way around the table. I don't look at him, but I'm acutely aware of his position at all times. When he reaches my side, he sets a plate and bowl in front of me.

"Son. It's good to see you," he says, and all the rumbling of voices momentarily stops. Dad and I don't talk. Ever.

I don't return his sentiment. Instead, I take a long pull from my beer and ignore him.

"All right, boys." Grams' voice cuts through the tension. "Beans and cornbread are ready. Sophia, you're up first."

Sophia hops off Mac's lap and he slaps her ass as she walks away.

"Hey." She turns to him with a frown. "What was that for?"

"For knocking me off the baby pedestal. I'm no longer the youngest in the house."

"Never gonna happen," Chase teases. "Afraid you'll always be the baby."

Mac glares at him. "Better to be the baby than the prissy one. I can smell your girlie cologne all the way over here."

We all laugh, including me, because both statements are true. Chase is the pretty boy in the family. He cares more about his hair than anyone in this family should. We're gearheads and farm boys. Getting dirty and a little messed up is in our blood.

But the baby thing? Grams started that. When we were younger, we always had to fix our plates in order of age, from youngest to oldest. This was mostly to avoid fights over the food, but also to make sure my younger brothers got plenty to eat before the teenagers ate everything. Seven boys eat a lot.

Once everyone has a plate and is seated at the table, Grams makes us all hold hands to say grace. Something else she has always made us do. If it were up to her, we'd all still go to church with her every Sunday too. Liam still goes, but the rest of us avoid it if we can.

"Where's Christian?" Dad asks before Grams can start. His is the only empty chair at the table.

"He delivered a bike this afternoon and hasn't returned." Chase offers.

Christian builds custom motorcycles, mostly for the local motorcycle club in the area, but occasionally he builds one for a hobbyist. He's also a recovering addict. He's relapsed several times and it's hard for us not to question his absences. That was always the first sign he was using again.

Chase is always quick to step up and defend his brother anytime one of us questions his whereabouts or actions. Tonight is no different.

"He told me he'd be late," Liam says, further supporting what Chase said. "One of his buddies wanted to talk to him about some upgrades to his bike. He said not to wait for him. He'll warm something up when he gets home."

Everyone nods, wanting to believe our brothers. They're probably right, but old habits are hard to break.

We've all worried about Christian since he was a teenager, and we'll probably still be worrying for years to come.

THE REST OF THE FAMILY DINNER NIGHT WAS UNEVENTFUL. WE ate. My brothers mostly talked about the garage or racing. Dad didn't speak much, as was typical when I was around. And Grams spent most of the evening trying to convince Sophia to move into the big house with Mac.

No one mentioned Charlotte again, which I was grateful for, but I still left the moment I cleaned my plate. I didn't even wait around for dessert. I made up an excuse that I had to let Bullet out. Not a lie, but Bullet would have been fine for another couple of hours.

Typically on cold nights like this, I let Bullet run out behind the house while I wait by the back door. But tonight I need some fresh air, even if it is cold enough to burn a hole in my chest.

Before I realize where we're headed, Bullet leads the way to the trail that cuts through the woods connecting to the Weber property. She's busy sniffing the ground and running around the trees while my eyes are trained on the faint outline of the house up ahead.

A light flips on in an upstairs room on the side facing the trail, and I stop before we exit the treeline. Bullet also stops and sits down at my feet. I'm not close enough that I can see every detail, but I can clearly make out that Charlotte is standing in front of the window.

She keeps picking up different items, examining them, then putting them down just to grab another. I watch her for a moment, mesmerized by her graceful movements. Her long dark hair flows down her back in waves. She's wearing a bulky sweater so I can't see her figure, but I'm sure it's stunning underneath it.

I can't take my eyes off her, and I don't know why. Watching her like this is wrong. I keep telling myself to look away. To turn around and go home. But I don't. She's not

doing anything fascinating, but I find I like looking at her, even if it is from afar and through her tiny bedroom window.

Just as I'm about to make myself turn around, she does the unthinkable. She grabs the hem of her sweater and pulls it over her head.

Fuck. Me.

I get a clear view of her in nothing but a soft pink bra that makes her pale skin look even lighter. I'm instantly hard as steel.

I grab my crotch and give my cock a squeeze to ease some of the pressure building.

Her hair falls around her shoulder and hugs the line of her breasts—her very full and plump breasts. My hands itch to grab hold of her hips and slowly slide up to her narrow waist. Charlotte is a very curvy and sexy woman, and I'm totally creeping on her.

“Fuuuuuck,” I let out a low growl and spin around. Scrubbing my hands down my face, I take off like a shot, back toward my house.

I had no right to invade her privacy like that, and I feel like a total piece of shit.

At the same time, I want to go back there and yell at her to close her curtains before she strips out of her clothes. The thought of another man walking up and seeing her like that causes an anger to boil inside me that makes no sense. Charlotte means nothing to me, and she never will. She's just my next-door neighbor and a friend to the family. Nothing more.

Lies. All lies.

I practically run back to my house, with Bullet on my heels, whining. She's clearly confused as to why her master is suddenly tense and angry. Can't say I blame her. My mood shifted the second I saw Charlotte's bare skin. I'd hate to think how I'd react if she hadn't had a bra on. Seeing her bare breasts is an image I don't think I'd ever be able to forget.

The image I have is bad enough. So much so that the second I'm inside my house, I strip out of my clothes and step into a cold shower. If I can just get my dick to calm down, then I'll be fine.

But it doesn't work. Images of her are too fresh and I can't stop myself from grabbing my cock and squeezing hard. I let out an involuntary groan at the small amount of relief that gives me.

Giving in, I turn the water to hot, and let my imagination run wild as I picture Charlotte on her knees, taking me into her soft, warm mouth. I'm a big guy and few can handle my girth, but I imagine her doing it. Taking all of me, swallowing me whole, until my cock hits the back of her throat and her pretty pink lips strain to stretch around me.

Fuck. I want to see her like that. I want that image to be real so badly it causes my chest to ache in a way I've never felt before. *What the fuck is happening to me?*

I fuck my hand hard and fast, all the while imagining it's her mouth that I'm fucking. It doesn't take long to reach my climax. Within seconds, my body jerks and I'm painting the shower wall with my release. It's intense and painful and the best orgasm I've had in ages.

I don't hook up often. The women around here are too much trouble and the sex isn't typically that great. But this self-induced orgasm causes my legs to shake to the point I have to brace myself against the wall or else I'll fall.

I feel like a fissure has formed in my heart and if I'm not careful, Charlotte Weber will crack it open and completely shatter the protective boundaries I've worked so damn hard to build around me.

She needs to fucking go back to Chicago so my life can get back to normal.

Because there's no way in hell I can let myself give in to her.

There's way too much at stake.

Chapter 7

*Bartering for services is something
I think I could get used to when it
involves my grumpy, sexy
neighbor.*

Charlotte

I t's almost nine o'clock at night when I finally talk myself into following through with my plan.

My parents are in the living room watching TV, and Rayne is in her room reading while I've stared at the extra pan of lasagna I made for far too long, debating on whether or not to deliver it to Garret.

I haven't seen Garret since I brought him the cookies last week. I keep waiting for him to call or come over to tell me the status of my car, but he's been annoyingly scarce.

My plan was simple.

Make two pans of lasagna. One for us, and one to take over to him after we finished eating. Even my mom thought that was a great idea.

But for some reason, I've turned into a chicken shit. I can't seem to get myself to put on my coat and walk it over to him.

This isn't a big deal.

It's lasagna.

Everyone loves lasagna, right?

It's not like I'm heading over to his house to be a nuisance. It's a friendly, neighborly thing to do.

Plus, I need to know the status of my car.

I press my hand to my stomach in an attempt to squash the anxiety swirling around in my gut. I've no clue why the thought of seeing him again is making me queasy, but it is.

“Stop being stupid, Char.” I scold myself and grab my coat from the hook by the back door. After slipping it on, I wrap a scarf around my neck and put on some wool gloves. I look down at my boots and decide they’re perfect for a walk to the neighbor’s house. Simple. Flat. Practical.

Neighbor. That’s all Garret is. He’s just a grumpy neighbor that I’m being nice to.

There’s no reason to be nervous.

Before I can talk myself out of it again, I grab the pan of lasagna—that’s now cold—and head out the back door. Despite how well I’ve bundled up, the bite of the night air cuts right through me.

I move quickly, doing my best to pretend my nose didn’t instantly freeze when I stepped outside. It’s way too cold for a leisurely walk, so I’m more speed walking through the wooded trail.

Thankfully, it doesn’t take long before I’m stepping out onto the other side of the woods. I sigh in relief when I see his lights are on. I don’t make a habit of calling upon friends this late, let alone grumpy neighbors. Hopefully, he won’t be too much of a bear about me coming over at this hour.

A sharp bark from Bullet follows my knock on his door. Moments later I hear a low rustling sound, then a thump, almost as if his feet hit the floor hard.

When he opens the door, he’s in the middle of pulling a Henley over his head. It’s covering his face, but his chest is bare.

Mother of God and all that is Holy.

His chest and abs are what dreams are made of. Or at least, like those of professional athletes or models who spend countless hours in the gym. But not backwoods gearheads who spend their time fixing appliances and cars.

My eyes fall to his defined abs and how his jeans hang loose around his hips.

And the tattoos. Every inch of his chest and abs and what I can see of his arm are covered with art. I've never seen so many tattoos up close before.

I gasp at the sight of him. I might even moan. My mouth definitely falls open, and I quickly snap it shut. My gaping is embarrassing enough. I don't need to make lusty sounds too.

My eyes unabashedly follow the line down the middle of his chest. It's highlighted by deep ridges and valleys of nothing but hard muscle covered in ink.

Lord have mercy, he has a clearly defined Adonis belt. That sexy V-shaped muscle that I've always dreamed of touching on a man but have yet to meet one that actually has it.

Thank God both my hands are occupied holding the pan of lasagna, or else I'd probably be fondling his abs right about now.

I'm sure that would go over really well, considering how much he seems to dislike me.

When I look up and meet his gaze, my shoulders sag. The scowl on his face confirms his feelings toward me haven't changed. I'm oddly disappointed by that fact.

"Why are you here?" The question is accusatory, but there's a hint of something else in his tone that I've not heard before.

I smile brightly and hold up the pan. "Brought you more food."

His brow furrows. "Why?"

"Because you liked my cookies."

He places his hands on either side of the door frame. If there were a wall behind me, I'd be caged in. "So, you thought you'd bring me more food?"

I square my shoulders, refusing to let his grumpy demeanor intimidate me. "Yes. It makes me happy when people like my cooking. I like feeding people. Is that okay?"

He stares at me and his nostrils flare, but I'm not convinced it's because he's angry I'm here. There's a twinkle in his eyes that suggests he's amused, or pleased, or God forbid, turned on.

When he doesn't say anything, I ask. "Are you going to invite me in? It's cold out here. If I stand outside any longer, this lasagna is going to be frozen solid."

His eyes drop to the pan. "You made lasagna?"

I lift it up with a smile, but before I can say anything else, he takes it and spins around. He only has to take a couple of steps before he's at his kitchen counter, or what he has of a counter, and is popping the lid off the pan.

"You made garlic bread too?" he asks, his words laced with awe.

I take this opportunity to step inside and shut the door behind me. I'm immediately engulfed in a blanket of warmth. His tiny house is quite cozy and warm. I pull my gloves off, unwrap my scarf, and unzip my coat.

His house looks bigger on the inside than it does from the outside. There's a large open room just inside the door with a single plush chair and an end table. Beside it is a bookcase overstuffed with books.

Garret is a reader. I didn't see that coming.

Beyond that is a two-seater table next to a small galley kitchen. He has a full-sized refrigerator, stove, and dishwasher, with the only counter space being above the dishwasher. His only cabinets are the four above the appliances.

There's a narrow hallway leading toward the back that makes me question how Garret's broad shoulders fit through. It's too narrow for me to tell what's back there.

Above it is a loft with stairs to one side for access. All I can see up there is a hint of his bed. Unlike what I've seen in other tiny houses, his ceiling looks high enough that he can stand upright.

Despite my desire to walk around and get a better look at his house, I stay by the door. He hasn't invited me in yet.

"I did," I say, finally responding to his question about the garlic bread.

He glances over his shoulder, and I think I see a hint of a smile. It's not much, but swear to God, my ovaries flip at the sight. This man's looks are dangerous to my libido.

He wastes no time grabbing a plate and cutting himself a piece. He doesn't even bother warming it up. He just digs in like it's the first meal he's had in days.

Then his eyes fall shut, and his head tilts back slightly on the sexiest deep groan I've ever heard. Forget my ovaries. My entire body is tingling with need—need to press my chest against his and feel the vibration of that rumble run through me.

"Fuck, Princess. This is so good." His voice is gravelly and rough, and the way he says princess has me clenching my thighs together. It's confusing because I hate being called princess.

I stuff my hands in my coat pockets because I have no idea what else to do with them. I want to touch him. Feel how solid and hard his body is.

Needing to take my mind off these dirty thoughts, I say, "You should try it warmed up."

"Later," he says as he shovels more into his mouth.

I chuckle, if for no other reason than to remind myself I'm here to be a friendly neighbor and nothing more. "Have you not eaten?"

His eyes shift from the plate to me as if he's just now remembering I'm standing here. He clears his throat and sets the plate on the counter next to the pan. "I did, but it wasn't this good. Ate a can of soup."

"Well, that won't do. I'll have to bring you dinner more often if that's how you eat." Since he seems to have relaxed a little, I take a couple steps into his house.

“Thanks for this, but you don’t have to bring me food. Grams gives me plenty.”

I turn to look at him, and we’re closer than I expected we’d be. The front room may look open, but it’s still small for two people.

Especially when one of those people is Garret Mutter.

“I really don’t mind. I love to cook.” I smile up at him. Standing this close to him, I have to crane my neck up to meet his eyes, and I’m five-eight. “How tall are you?”

He lets out a low chuckle which lights up my body. “A little over six-four.”

“Huh, you’re tall.”

He quirks a brow as our eyes meet. The heat in his gaze has me leaning in closer. “Was there any doubt about that?”

I shake my head. “Just stating an observation.”

My voice is breathy and raspy, and this time he’s the one that leans in. We’re as close as two people can be without actually touching. The tension building between us is different from before.

This doesn’t feel like he hates me.

This feels like he wants me.

“Garret,” I whisper his name.

He lifts his hand and runs his finger along my jawline, lighting my skin on fire. He’s leaning down. His lips inching closer and closer to mine. For a second, I think he’s going to kiss me.

I want him to. *Badly.*

Then he says in a low guttural tone, “You should go.”

His words catch me off guard and are the complete opposite of what I was expecting. He’s still caressing my face with his finger, leading me to believe he wants me to stay.

“Why?” I ask, sounding a little too desperate.

He leans down even closer until our lips are almost close enough to touch.

“Because this can’t happen.” Then he drops his hand and steps back, leaving me feeling like someone dropped an ice bucket over my head.

Refusing to let him see my disappointment, I lift my chin and ask, “Why not?”

“You know why,” he whispers.

I take a step closer to him, gaining back some of the distance he took away. “No, I don’t. Why don’t you tell me?”

He grumbles and his eyes slowly fall shut. He may have said it can’t happen, but he still wants me. I can feel his desire oozing off him.

“I’m not a good man, Princess. You should go home to that fancy boyfriend of yours back in Chicago.”

My hackles rise and I feel my lips pinch together. Despite how much I’m trying to keep my emotions in check, that comment tips me over the edge. “I don’t have a boyfriend.”

“Okay.” He shrugs as if what I’ve said means nothing. “Then find a new man like your *ex*-boyfriend. That’s the kind of man you should be with.”

“Why?” I snap, more pissed off at that statement than I probably should be. “Because he has money, a fancy degree from an Ivy League school, and a high-profile job?”

“For starters, yeah!” His voice rises and his expression turns stony cold.

My anger and frustration get the best of me. The intensity of my glare is enough to cause him to fall back and lean against the counter. He crosses his arms over his chest like that will somehow protect him from what’s coming.

“Newsflash, Garret.” I step forward and poke him in the chest. “Money and status aren’t the makings of a *good* man. I’d go as far as to say, it makes them worse. Money is no different from the makeup I put on my face. All it does is hide the flaws. But take it away, and you expose everything that’s

wrong with the person. And let me tell you, some of them are nothing more than trash.”

“And you think I’m not?” He growls. “I’m not good for you. I’m not a *good* man.”

“Well, I guarantee you, you’re a better man than my ex.”

“Oh, yeah. How so? What makes you an expert on what kind of person *I am*? You don’t know anything about me.”

“I know enough!” I yell so loudly it snaps me out of the rage swirling around inside me. I didn’t come here prepared to have my ex thrown in my face and my reaction is way too intense. Garret doesn’t understand what kind of person Brad really is.

Taking a deep breath, I rub the bridge of my nose and continue. “I know you stopped and helped me when I broke down late at night, drove me home, then went back for my car. You didn’t have to do any of that, yet you did. You’re nice to Rayne and help show her some level of normalcy when you don’t have to. And you’re fixing my car when you haven’t even bothered to tell me how much it’s going to cost. If none of that makes you a *good* man, then there’s no such thing and we’re all fucked.”

The tension in his shoulders relaxes. “Anyone would do those things.”

That makes me laugh. “No, Garret. No, they wouldn’t.”

He shakes his head and everything about his demeanor suggests he doesn’t believe me. “It doesn’t matter what you think. I know what I am. I am a bad person, Princess. Nothing can happen between us. Got it?”

“Kiss me or don’t. I don’t care. But do not tell me it’s because you’re a bad person. Do us both a favor and find a different excuse.”

He pushes off the counter and stalks toward me. He grabs my arm and pulls me flush against him. Every inch of his hard body engulfs mine.

And I do mean every inch.

I've been so focused on arguing with him that I hadn't noticed his growing erection. But now it's pressed against my belly, igniting a fire inside me that only he can put out.

"Make no mistake, Princess." The deep rumble of his growl runs through me just like I wanted to feel, and oh boy, does it feel electrifying. "I want to kiss you. I want to do a hell of a lot more to you than that. But I won't. This. Can't. Happen."

We hold each other's gazes for several beats—his nostrils flaring, and my breathing labored. The desire and lust swirling around us is unmistakable. And so is his restraint. There's something in his eyes that tells me he would still push me away if I tried to kiss him, even though he wants it as badly as I do.

"Fine." I push him off me and back away toward the door. "Just tell me the status of my car, and then I'll get out of your way."

My abrupt change in subject throws him off, and he stares at me for a moment as if he doesn't understand what I'm asking him. Then he lets out a low groan and rubs his hands over his face.

"I can rebuild the transmission. I've ordered a few parts, but they haven't arrived yet."

"How much is that going to cost?" I keep my tone neutral and businesslike.

He stares at me for a moment as if he doesn't want to tell me. Then he sighs. "Typically, around four grand. But it's mostly labor. So, I'll—"

"Shit." I rub the bridge of my nose. "That's more than I want to spend."

"I'll cut you a deal. It'll be fine."

I narrow my eyes, completely confused by how this man responds to me. One minute he wants to kiss me, the next he's yelling at me to leave, and now he's offering to cut me a deal on the labor to fix my car. I don't understand him at all.

“I can’t let you do that. I also don’t want to dip into my savings, so don’t fix it. If you’ll let me know how much it’s cost you so far, I’ll pay you for that.”

“We’ll work something out.” He insists. His voice is a little firmer this time.

“How? In case you didn’t know, I lost my high-paying job. I’m not prepared for an expense like this.”

“I said I’d cut you a deal on the labor.” He sounds just as frustrated as I feel.

I huff. “And why would you do that? You’ve made it clear how you feel about me, so why help at all?”

“That’s what neighbors do.” A faint smile tugs at his lips. “Isn’t that what you told me, Princess?”

I place my hands on my hips and glare at him. “Okay, if that’s how you want to play it, then you’re taking all the food I decide to bring you and you’re going to like it. Is that clear?”

He glares back at me like he’s going to object, but then he nods. “Give me a couple of weeks. I’ll work on it when I can between jobs.”

“Thank you. I appreciate it.”

We hold each other’s gazes for a moment as if neither of us knows what to do next. The tension between us is still high, and nothing either of us said has done a damn thing to dampen the attraction I know we both feel.

“Well, I better get home.” I point over my shoulder toward the door, but I don’t make a move to leave. Not yet, at least. Instead, I step toward him, press my hand on his chest as I lift up on my tiptoes and lightly kiss his cheek. “And stop calling me Princess.”

He lets out a heavy sigh, and I feel his entire body shudder.

Without another word, I turn around and leave.

Chapter 8

*Complicating my already overly
complicated life.*

Garret

Saturday mornings are my favorite.

When I wake up, I can start my day doing whatever the fuck I want, but the best part is they're quiet. No one is calling me to fix their broken shit, and my brothers are too busy sleeping in to take the time to bother me. Even Grams leaves me alone on Saturday mornings. I've got at least four hours of uninterrupted *me* time, and I love it.

This morning, I use the time to work on the 1965 Honda Super Hawk motorcycle I bought a few months ago. A client asked to help with some general contracting work on a home remodel in Athens County, and the owner had a garage full of classic cars. This bike was among them and caught my attention. When he told me he was looking to unload it, I jumped at the chance to make it mine. It's definitely a fixer upper. It barely runs, the seat is worn to the point it pokes me in the ass when I sit on it, and it needs a serious paint job.

Christian could do a much better job at restoring it—and he'd gladly do it for me if I asked—but it's a project I want to do myself.

Today's task is to tear her apart, figure out what parts I need to hunt down and order, and make a game plan for putting her back together again.

I'm just about ready to get started when I hear footsteps crunching on the gravel outside my garage, and I groan. I'm not in the mood for company, and if it's Charlotte again, I'm afraid of what I'll do.

I meant it when I said nothing can happen between us. There are too many things she doesn't know about me. I'm damaged beyond repair and am no good for her.

She has no idea how tempting she is—like a siren so beautiful and sweet she doesn't need a damn song—and I need to fucking resist her.

A few moments later, the door cracks open and Rayne's head pops around it. I visibly relax. My mood lifts and my frown shifts into a smile, same as it always does when she visits me.

“Hey, kid. You're up early.”

She nods and steps through the door, shutting it behind her. She falls back against it with a frown on her face and red, puffy eyes.

“What's wrong?” All the tension I felt a moment ago is back, and I'm rushing across the garage toward her before she has a chance to respond. When I reach her, I place a gentle hand on her shoulder, which is in complete contrast to how the sadness on her face is making me feel. I want to tear whatever made her sad to shreds. “Talk to me.”

“Grandpa's having a bad morning.” She crumbles into my arms and cries like I've never seen her cry before. My chest physically aches for her.

Rayne is a tough kid, and she rarely cries. I once watched her fall from a tree she was climbing and break her leg. Not one tear. Not when she fell and not when the doctor had to reset the bone.

I hug her close, hating that she has to watch Jim's dementia steal him away from them. “I'm so sorry, Rayne. I know this is tough. Do you wanna talk about it?”

She shakes her head and sniffs before she mumbles into my chest. “Can I just hang out with you for a bit?”

“Does your grandma know you're here?”

“Yeah. She said it was fine as long as you didn't mind.”

“You know you’re always welcome here.” I release her and smile. “I’m starting on that bike I bought. You wanna help?”

“The Honda Super Hawk?” Her face lights up and her smile returns. The pain in my chest instantly lifts and relief settles over me.

“That’s the one.”

“Yes!” She claps her hands and bounces on her feet. This is the version of Rayne that lights up my life.

“Come on. I was getting ready to take her apart when you showed up. You can help me.”

I lead her over to a bench where I’d already set out several boxes to hold the parts as I tore apart the bike. Each box is labeled according to the part’s function and where it fits into place.

“As I take the bike apart, I’ll hand you the pieces and you can put them in the right box. Sound good?”

She nods, looking far more excited than I’d expect from a ten-year-old girl. But Rayne isn’t like typical girls her age. She’s more like me. A tomboy through and through and prefers tinkering in the garage or playing outside in the dirt over anything else.

“This is a dirty job,” I say. “Do you want a pair of gloves to keep the grease off your hands?”

“Are you wearing gloves?”

“Nah, I don’t mind the grease. In fact, I like the smell of it.”

She takes a deep breath and smiles. “Is that what it smells like in here? Grease?”

I sniff the air and nod. “That’s what that is.”

Her smile grows. “Then no. I like it too. Plus, I want to be just like you.”

And just like that, my chest tightens again. She has no idea how that comment affects me. She’ll probably never know.

For the next several minutes, we mostly work in silence. She's quieter than she usually is. I assume because she's upset about Jim. Then again, she doesn't always feel the need to fill the silence with talk. That's another thing we have in common.

"Why aren't you working on Aunt Char's car? Shouldn't you get that done first?" Rayne asks, causing me to drop the tool I had in my hand at the mention of Charlotte.

"It's Saturday, and Saturdays are for me. I'll work on her car next week. Plus, I'm waiting on the parts I need."

She nods and the look in her eyes suggests she has more to say. "I'm really glad Aunt Char moved home. I like having her here. I hope she stays."

"Yeah, I bet it's nice having her around."

She nods, but still doesn't look happy. "She looks a lot like my mom. Her being here makes me feel like Mom is closer. I sometimes pretend she's my mom in my head just to know what it would be like. Is that wrong?"

"Well, I suppose there's no harm in using your imagination as long as you know it's not really true. You should love your aunt for who she is, not for who you wish she could be."

She's quiet for a moment before she speaks again. "I know. And I do love Aunt Char like that. I just wish I knew what it was like to have a mom. You knew my mom, right?"

"I did." I answer, hesitantly. "You know that."

It's been a long time since Rayne asked me about my connection to Carol. A few years back, she grew more curious about her mom and where she came from. She even went as far as asking me about all the men that lived in the area that Carol knew. It was as if she was trying to figure out who could be her father.

"Do you think Aunt Char and my mom look alike? Grandma says they could have been twins, they were so similar."

"I supposed they did. I wouldn't call them twins, but they had the same dark hair and blue eyes. Their smiles were

different, as were their personalities.”

“Aunt Char said the same thing. She said my mom preferred quiet nights with a book and had no interest in hair and makeup. Not like Aunt Char at least.”

“I’d say that’s true. Your aunt has always enjoyed being in the limelight. Dressing up, the pageants, her hair and makeup. Suppose that’s why she became a stylist and lived a life in the city. Your mom, however, was happy working at the library, where she rarely had to talk to people. But they’re both beautiful.”

“Does that mean I’m beautiful too?”

“What?” My eyes shoot to hers. “Of course you are. Why would you even ask that?”

She shrugs. “Just trying to figure out if I look like them or ... You know ... My father.”

“You’re beautiful, Rayne. It doesn’t matter who you look like. You are a beautiful girl.”

“Grandma says I look like my mom, and I guess my Aunt Char too. But I have brown eyes. I must get those from my dad, right?”

The way she says that causes me to pause. She’s staring at me like she’s studying my face, looking for clues.

It makes me think *she knows*.

Or at least suspects that I could be her father.

But how? Hell, I don’t even know if I’m her father. Only that it’s a possibility. Carol died before we could figure it out.

I snap my eyes closed and shake my head. Rayne doesn’t know anything. I’m imagining the look on her face. Nothing more.

No one knows about the fling I had with Carol. *No. One.*

I clear my throat and shift my eyes back to the bike. “That’s possible.”

“I hope so.” She continues. “I like to think I get something from him. I like my brown eyes. I want that to be what I share with him.”

My hands shake and my stomach drops to the floor. She can't know. There's no fucking way. But everything she says makes it sound like she's fishing for information or clues that point to me.

Or maybe it's my paranoia getting to me. I've struggled for ten years over my decision to not say anything about the brief fling I had with Carol. I wanted to do what was right for Rayne and her family. They were hurting, and they didn't need someone like me making it worse.

I'm only feeling this way because Charlotte has me all tied up in knots. Her presence in my life—and my desire to claim her—is stirring up old wounds. Wounds that I need to keep buried deep inside me.

That's all this is.

The alarm on my phone goes off, reminding me it's time to head inside to clean up. I have that damn hair appointment today that Mrs. Engle scheduled for me, even though I didn't want it.

I swipe my phone from the counter and silence the alarm. “Alright, kid. I've gotta go. You wanna come back later and help me?”

She nods. “Can I go to Grams' house instead of home?”

“As long as it's okay with your grandma. I'm sure Grams would love to have you. I'll text them and find out.”

I send off a couple of text messages before I take Rayne to the sink to wash up. Both Lois and Grams get back to me right away and say it's fine. Lois informs me that the home care nurse is still at the house helping with Jim anyway. She'd prefer Rayne not be there to see him in this state.

Once we're cleaned up, I walk Rayne to Grams' house and tell her I'll come back for her later.

As I'm walking back to my house, I can't stop thinking about the things Rayne asked me.

The Weber family has been through enough over the years. They don't need me complicating matters by telling them the secret I've held close to my heart for far too long.

It's also another reminder of why I need to stay as far away from Charlotte as I can. No matter how much I want her, I can't have her. It would be a betrayal to both her and Carol.

And I can't tell her my reasons for pushing her away.

If the Webers ever found out, they'd never forgive me.

AN HOUR LATER, I'M PULLING UP OUTSIDE MRS. ENGLE'S HAIR salon for the appointment she forced on me. I would've preferred to stay home on my day off, but Saturdays are the only days that wouldn't interfere with my work schedule. At least she knows that much about me.

Aside from not wanting to deal with Mrs. Engle's wrath if I didn't show up, I do *need* a haircut. My hair is starting to curl at the ends and is tickling my ears.

I grumble when I see the truck in the space next to me. *Tanner Koch*. Of course that fucker would be here right before me. I'm already in a shitty mood, so let's go ahead and make it worse.

I'll be sure to give Mrs. Engle hell about it when I get inside. She knows better than to schedule us back-to-back.

Hesitating, I debate on saying screw it, and leaving despite my long hair. It doesn't bother me *that* much. I'd rather deal with my hair than Tanner.

But I stay put. I don't need more drama in my life and being a no show on Mrs. Engle would definitely create unwanted drama.

I turn off the ignition and hop out. I don't have to acknowledge the asshole. I'll pretend he's not even there. I've

mastered the skill of not talking or responding to people that annoy the fuck out of me. I can do the same with him.

But that all changes when I open the door and hear *her* laugh. It's sweet and melodic and instantly calms the jumbled emotions inside of me. There's something calming and alluring about the lyrical way her laugh rolls out of her chest and fills the air. I want to listen to it on repeat because it makes me feel that fucking good.

Until I realize Charlotte is laughing like that for Tanner. He's sitting in the chair while she runs her fingers through his hair and snips the ends. Every carnal instinct inside me rises to the surface and screams *mine*.

I stumble back at that thought. I have no claim over Charlotte. If one of us has a claim over her, it's *him*. And that pisses me off even more.

Charlotte and Tanner were in the same grade growing up, and they dated in high school. They were even homecoming king and queen together. It sickens me to remember how he used to hold her, dance with her, kiss her. I want to rip his—

"I'll be with you in a few minutes, Garret." Charlotte's smooth, calm voice drags me out of my head and back to the moment. "I'm almost done here."

I meet her gaze, and it instantly calms the raging bear inside me. She's happy to see me, and I like that realization way too much.

"Where's Mrs. Engle?" I ask, though it sounds more like a demand with the way it grumbles out of me.

Her smile widens. "She's off today. I just started working for her and took over Saturdays. So, you're stuck with me."

I grumble my nonverbal response and take a seat in one of the chairs lining the wall. Then I cross my arms and glare at Tanner. He's got that shit-eating grin on his face that makes me want to punch him. *Is this what Mac felt like when Tanner kept flirting with Sophia before they started dating?*

The very idea of being jealous about anything related to any of the Koch brothers makes my stomach turn. They don't

have anything I want. Charlotte isn't his anymore, and I *don't* want her.

Keep telling yourself that, asshole.

While they take a trip down memory lane, I close my eyes and rest my head against the wall and try to pretend I can't hear them. They're talking about something they did together in high school that's apparently funny because they both laugh.

Instead, I focus on my bike restoration. I didn't get as far on it this morning as I wanted, but I at least have a good list of parts that I need to hunt down. I also got the fuel tank and airbox off so I can get those painted. The fenders will probably need to be replaced. They've got too much rust on them, and the edges are brittle in places. The rest of the frame looks to be in good shape. I didn't find any major issues there.

"Come out to the house sometime." Tanner's voice cuts through me like a knife and my eyes fly open. He and Charlotte are now standing next to the desk by the entrance. "Mom would love to see you. I don't think she ever got over us breaking up."

"Your mom is so sweet. I'd love to see her again."

Sweet my ass. Johanna Koch is just as bad as the rest of them. Every time she loses a baking contest to Grams, she accuses Grams of stealing some sacred Koch recipe. As if Grams would need to steal a recipe to kick ass. No one can bake like Grams. Except for maybe Charlotte. Those cookies she brought me were damn good.

"Don't be a stranger," Tanner says as he takes his card back from Charlotte. "See you around."

"Bye, Tanner." The smile she gives him makes me growl, and they both turn to look at me. Charlotte chuckles and Tanner's smile grows.

"See ya at the poker game, Garret." Then he fucking winks before he walks out the door.

I turn my angry glare back at Charlotte once the door clicks shut. "Why are you nice to him?"

“Tanner isn’t quite the asshole you all think he is. He’s actually a nice guy.”

“The fuck he is!” I growl way louder than I should. It only seems to make Charlotte laugh harder.

“Come on, big guy.” She waves me over to the chair that’s now clean and ready for the next customer. “Let’s get that hair trimmed up.”

She pats the chair like she’s calling over an unruly child who refuses to listen. Or maybe it’s a dog. *Is she treating me like a damn dog?*

My brows furrow deeper, but I push to my feet and cross the room to where she’s waiting. I tower over her. I have a strong urge to wrap her up in my arms and demand she never speak to Tanner Koch again.

If he picked up on my reaction to him talking to her, he’s going to use that against me. The feud between our two families is bad enough. I don’t need to add fucking around with his ex-girlfriend to the mix.

Another reason I need to keep my hands and mouth off her.

“Sit.” She demands.

“I’m not a dog.” I growl.

She laughs. “No, but you are a beast.”

I fall into the chair without another word while she grabs a clean cape. She drapes it over my shoulders and snaps it into place.

“You play poker with Tanner?” she asks, like the idea of that surprises her.

“No.”

“Then why did he say he’d see you at the poker game?”

“Because we both play.”

“How is that not playing with Tanner?”

“A lot of people play. We both just happen to be there.”

She chuckles. “Okay, big guy. Whatever you say.” She pats my shoulder, and I relish her touch. I also really like how she keeps calling me big guy. It makes me want to show her exactly how big I really am. “Can I ask where you play?”

“Posey’s Lounge.”

“Isn’t that the biker bar?”

“Not so much anymore. Calmed down over the past several years.”

“Oh, so I can come and watch then?”

I frown. “Why would you want to do that?”

She shrugs with a smile. “I like poker. Played all the time with friends in Chicago. It would give me something to do besides sit at home and worry about Dad.”

I shrug. “Can’t stop you from coming.”

“Don’t sound so enthusiastic. I might start to think you don’t like me.”

I snap my eyes up and meet hers in the mirror on the wall opposite us. She must see something in my expression that she thinks is funny. She chuckles and pats my shoulder.

Leaning down close to my ear, she says, “Relax. I’m joking. I know you like me. Everyone does.” Her teasing tone calms my inner beast, but not enough that I can relax. “So, what are we doing?”

My eyes meet hers again. “Um, cutting my hair.”

She snort-laughs. “I know. But I’ve never cut your hair before. How do you like it?”

“Shorter.”

She stares at me for a moment like she’s going to ask me more questions, but then she turns to the counter and grabs a comb instead. “Alright. I’m just going to do what I think will look best. If you hate it, it’s on you.”

“It’s just hair. How bad can it be?”

She gasps and presses her hand to her chest like she's offended by my words. "You take that back, Garret Mutter. It's never *just* hair. Our hair is a part of our personalities, an expression of who we are, and how we want others to see us."

I grunt.

She rolls her eyes. "Such a typical country boy response."

Then she runs her fingers through my hair, and her nails lightly scrape against my scalp. My eyes fall shut and a deep, rumbling groan escapes me.

I hear her suck in a breath just before she does it again, and I am done. D.O.N.E. Done.

My cock swells, and all decent thoughts or reasons to why I can't touch are gone. All I can think about is feeling her soft fingers touch other parts of my body, and doing really dirty things to her.

Thank fuck for the cape over my lap, or else she'd see exactly where my mind has gone.

Chapter 9

*Maybe being called Princess isn't so
bad after all.*

Charlotte

Time moves slowly in a small town.

Maybe it's the quiet peace that having few neighbors brings, or that there's no nightlife to really speak of. There are no events to attend, or happy hours to relieve the day's stress, or restaurant openings that are required to keep up appearances in our high-profile social circle.

In Beaver, all I have is nature, my family, and a few friends from high school. No one expects me to attend events or social gatherings. There isn't a bar that offers happy-hour specials. Posey's Lounge doesn't run specials. Come and drink, or don't. No one cares.

No one cares.

That's an interesting concept to ponder. It's not that the people living here don't care about others. They do. It just doesn't matter if you go out or stay home.

I lived the fast-paced city life for so long, I forgot how different it is here. In Chicago, the only way to remain relevant is to make appearances at all the events. I was relevant until Brad destroyed my life.

It's been a little over a month since I moved home, and I'm finding I don't care much about being relevant anymore. I miss my job, my apartment, and my best friend, but that's about it.

I don't miss the pressure or the constant stress it put on me.

My life in Chicago was always about doing more, more, more. I like this slower paced life a lot more than I expected I would. I'm more relaxed and carefree than I've been in years, even with my dad's health declining.

To my surprise, I even like working at Mrs. Engle's hair salon. There's no judgment, no snooty clients, no backstabbing coworkers, and no pressure to meet sales quotas or lose my chair.

The money sucks, but my cost of living is practically nothing as long as I'm living with my parents. And since I have no social life to speak of, the arrangement is working just fine.

The only roadblock I'm struggling with is the sexy, grumpy big guy next door, Garret Mutter.

But I keep seeing cracks in his facade. Like last week when I brought food over for him. He wanted to kiss me—I felt it all the way to my bones—but he wouldn't let himself give into it.

And then the way he moaned when I ran my fingers through his hair when he came in to get his haircut. That hit me right between the legs. Thank God I'm a woman, and my attraction isn't on display for the world to see like a hard dick.

I spent the entire time I was cutting his hair wondering what he was hiding under the cape. Was he hard under there? Did I have the same effect on him that he was having on me?

It took every ounce of my control to not stare at his crotch when I removed the cape.

But I did learn one very important piece of information. He doesn't hate me. It's all an act. What I don't know is why.

Today I hope to find out.

Since my cookies and lasagna went over so well, I decided to make him more food. I wish I could come up with other reasons to see him, but I'm at a loss.

I refuse to be that girl who bugs him constantly about my car. Not having it isn't even that much of a hardship. I can use

my parents' car whenever I need to.

Stopping by because I was just out for a walk sounds stupid. I could always walk over with Rayne. She's constantly wanting to go see Garret. But then she'd be there too. I want some time alone with him so we can figure out this attraction between us.

So, more food it is.

I just hope he loves chicken enchiladas and brownies as much as he loved the lasagna.

We just finished eating dinner, and my parents and Rayne have settled in front of the TV to watch a movie. Just like with the lasagna, I made two pans of enchiladas, so I'd have extra to take to Garret. I'm not hesitating tonight. As soon as the kitchen is clean, I put on my coat and gloves and head out the back door.

The sun hasn't completely set behind the hills, so there's still plenty of light to guide me across the yard and through the woods. When I reach Garret's house, his door is cracked.

I give it a light knock. "Hello? Are you in here?"

I wait. When he doesn't answer, I knock again, only this time louder. He still doesn't answer. After a quick scan of his yard, I don't see him or Bullet. His truck is parked in the driveway, so I know he's home.

Not wanting to carry the dishes back to the house, I slowly push open the door. His light is on, but I don't see him.

"Garret!" I call out, but I'm greeted with silence.

After waiting a few more seconds, I step inside. I'll just leave this on the counter for him with a note. Once I've set the food on the counter, I slip off my gloves and stuff them in my coat pocket.

Glancing around, I don't see a desk or anything that suggests it'd hold pen and paper. The few drawers he has in his kitchen contain a limited selection of utensils and flatware. The cabinets are stocked with food and even less cookware. He has one pot and one skillet. Nothing more.

He might have a desk in the loft, but there's no way I'm climbing up there. I don't want to be caught anywhere near his bed. Instead, I walk down the narrow hallway where all I find is a laundry room with a stacked washer and dryer, a walk-in closet, and a full-sized bathroom.

I half expected to find a tiny bathroom like the ones I've seen in RVs with barely enough leg room to sit on the toilet, but his bathroom is *nice*—like *luxury* nice. He has a tub and everything. And not one of those prefab fiberglass tubs, either. It's a free-standing soaker tub with a waterfall faucet and shower head. He even has frameless glass doors blocking off the shower and tub from the rest of the bathroom.

The flooring throughout is a mix of light and dark brown pebbles, and the walls of the shower are some kind of light-colored rough stone. The rest of the walls are painted a pale blue. The vanity is a dark wood that looks more like a converted antique piece with a marble countertop and blue glass bowl-style sink. There isn't any decor on the walls, but this bathroom doesn't need it. The features speak for themselves.

Color me impressed. Garret Mutter has style. The rest of his tiny house is nice, but this bathroom is a dream.

I step out of the bathroom, head back down the short hallway, and freeze when I come face-to-face with a very angry Garret. When our eyes lock, his expression softens, but only slightly. Then he crosses his arms over his chest and forces his scowl back into submission.

Bullet rushes toward me, wagging her little stump.

“Hey, girl.” I kneel next to her and rub her neck.

“Bullet!” Garret barks. “Go lay down.” She immediately stands, drops her head, and makes her way to her doggy bed in the corner. When I look back at Garret, he's frowning. “You shouldn't enter someone else's home when they're not here.”

“Sorry.” I wince. “Your door was open.”

“That doesn't mean you have the right to enter.”

“I know. I brought you more food, and I didn’t want to carry it back to the house. I was looking for something to write on so I could leave a note.”

The scowl on his face melts away, and he drops his arms to his side. “You brought more food?”

I can’t stop the smile that lifts my lips. He sounds almost hopeful, and that pleases me way more than it probably should. “I did.”

He nods toward the dishes I sat on the counter. “What did you bring me this time?”

He doesn’t sound put out anymore. Now, he sounds almost excited about what it might be.

“Chicken enchiladas and brownies.”

His head drops back, and a low groan rumbles out of his chest, making me laugh.

“Have you eaten yet?” I manage through my laughter. “I can warm some of this up for you, if you’d like?”

“Yes.” His one-word response comes out all deep and throaty, and it causes my laugh to instantly drop. A tingling sensation starts in my chest and quickly runs through my entire body.

I shake my hands at my sides, trying like hell to hide how his response affects me. I find his plates quickly and dish up a couple of enchiladas before I pop them in the microwave. They don’t need long since the pan was still warm when I left the house.

When I turn around, Garret is standing right next to me. He’s so close I can feel the rise and fall of his chest against my arm. His eyes flicker back and forth between me and the plate of food in my hands. The heat in his gaze is intense, and I’m not sure if it’s for me or the food. It could be either.

“You really shouldn’t be here.” The low tone of his voice reverberates in my chest.

I swallow, and it feels like rocks scratching my throat. I don’t want to have a repeat conversation from the last time I

was here. “Are you saying you want me to leave?”

“No.”

His answer surprises me, and my heart flutters. “Then what are you saying?”

He lifts his hand and rubs a strand of my hair between his fingers. There’s a tortured look in his eyes that makes me ache to hug him, hold him tight until it goes away.

“You’re a good girl. I’m not what you need.”

I slowly lower the plate I’m still holding until it’s on the counter, while the other finds its way to his chest. He sucks in a breath at my touch. “How do you know what I need?”

He lowers his head until he’s close to my neck and takes in a deep breath. My legs feel weak, and my stomach feels light.

“You need someone like you,” he whispers, and yet his voice still sounds rough and growly.

I lean into him until my head is almost resting on his chest. “What does that even mean?”

He swallows hard, and it feels like a wave of anguish washes over his body. He pulls back, his breathing heavy. After a beat, he takes several steps away from me until it feels like there are miles between us.

“Someone good.” he says as if he’s suggesting he’s not a good person again. His insinuation about himself frustrates me.

“Not this again. What is *good*, Garret?” I try to keep my voice calm. I don’t want to poke the beast inside him, but I refuse to accept he’s anything other than a good man. A little rough around the edges, sure, but good, nonetheless.

“Not me. That’s for sure.”

I close my eyes and take a deep breath. “Don’t be ridiculous. You may be a grumpy bear who growls and glowers at me all the time, but you’re still a good man.”

“Then someone nice,” he says with a little more fight behind his words. “Someone who will treat you the way you

deserve to be treated. Like a real princess. *I'm not nice*. I'm an asshole. Demanding and controlling. I take what I want. I'm rough and hard and would tear someone like you to shreds."

"No!" I take a step toward him, and he takes one back. "I had a so-called *nice* guy. Someone I thought would treat me right. Take care of me and love me. Like the so-called *princess* you seem to think I am. Turns out, he wasn't so nice after all. So maybe I need something different. Fuck the nice guy. I just want someone who wants me."

We hold each other's stare for several beats. We're both breathing hard and the tension in the room is palpable. There is so much need and want swirling around us, I can almost see it in the air. I struck a nerve with my last statement. He definitely wants me.

He shakes his head before he spins around and runs his fingers through his hair. "I can't. I'm not a relationship kind of guy."

"Who said anything about a relationship? I was just publicly dumped by my boyfriend of seven years. Right after I foolishly proposed to him. A relationship is the last thing I want."

He slowly turns around to face me. The look in his eyes is positively feral. "What do you want?"

I square my shoulders and lift my head high. "A release. A really, really good release."

His nostrils flare as his breathing increases. "I'm not sure you can handle me, Princess."

My eyes narrow at the nickname that's starting to grow on me. "Try me."

His eyes flicker down my body and back again. "You sure about that?"

"Yes."

He reaches for his belt buckle, undoes it, and swiftly pulls it off. "On. Your. Knees."

I drop, not hesitating for one second to obey.

“Take off your coat.” He commands.

Without breaking eye contact, I lift my hand and slowly unzip my coat. His gaze shifts to follow the movement. Then he grabs his crotch and squeezes.

Only then do I let my eyes fall. This time it's me that gasps when I see his erection straining against his jeans. He's hard and long and thick. I clench my thighs together in anticipation of what *that* will feel like between my legs.

“Last chance, Princess.” He growls. “Are you sure you want this?”

I snap my eyes to his. “Yes.”

“Then crawl to me.”

I toss my coat to the side and then lean forward, putting half of my weight on my hands. Without taking my eyes off his, I move slowly, like a cat on the prowl, and make my way across the room until I'm right in front of him. Then I sit back on my knees.

“Now what?” I ask.

“Lift your hands.”

Again, I follow his instructions and hold my hands up to him like an offering. He quickly does something to turn his belt into two loops, slips it over my hands, and jerks the end. The belt tightens around my wrists, effectively immobilizing my arms.

There's a part of me that thinks I should be scared. No one has ever tied me up before. But I'm excited. The ache between my legs intensifies and I can feel my excitement soaking my panties.

I stare up at him, panting from the anticipation of what he'll do next. He reaches for his zipper and slowly undoes his pants, but I don't break eye contact. Not even when he shoves his jeans down and frees his cock. But from the corner of my eye, I can see just how big he is.

“You want me to fuck you?” He asks in a low growl. “Is this why you keep coming over here? Because you want my

cock?”

I lift my chin, refusing to let him intimidate me. “Yes.”

“Prove it. Show me how much you want this.” He fists his cock and points it at my mouth. “Then I’ll give you what you want.”

A slow smile lifts my lips. If he thinks fucking my mouth will cause me to run, he’s sadly mistaken. This may be my first time restrained, but I’m not opposed to rough, dirty sex. In fact, I like it that way.

I part my lips and lean forward, licking my lips before I take his tip between them and lightly suck. He’s thick and long, and for a second, I worry that he’s too big for me to handle. But I push that thought aside and suck a little harder.

He gasps and thrusts forward, shoving himself further into my mouth, but not enough that I can’t handle it.

He pulls back, but I suck harder, keeping him right where he is. Moving in slow, steady strokes, I lick and suck his cock until he’s groaning.

“Fuck, Charlotte.” The desperation in the way he says my name encourages me to continue. The way he says *Charlotte* sounds so much sexier than *Princess*. It’s more needy and lust filled rather than mocking contempt. I love how it sounds in his deep, husky voice.

He runs his finger along my jaw, and I glance up at him. He’s watching me with awe and amazement in his eyes. “You look so good taking my cock.”

I smile around him and take him deeper. As deep as I can handle and still breathe. It’s enough to cause him to shove his hands into my hair and hold my head while he slowly glides himself in and out of my mouth. I suck with each pump he makes.

His grip on my hair tightens, and his movements become faster. With my hands tied together and his hold on my head, I’m immobilized. He’s in complete control.

He thrusts deeper into my mouth, and his swollen tip hits the back of my throat. Tears sting my eyes and it's hard to breathe. But I push through it and suck and lick his dick like it's my favorite lollipop.

“Charlotte.” My name sounds like a prayer. I suck harder. “If you don't want me coming down your throat, stop now.”

I meet his heavy gaze. His expression is pained. He's relentlessly fucking my mouth and yet he looks worried that I might not like what he's doing. I do my best to let him know I'm fine by sucking and licking through his thrusts. If I could grab hold of his hips to hold him in place, I would.

He's close. So fucking close, and I want it. I want to make him come like this more than I've ever wanted to before. I'm not sure if it's because I want to prove him wrong about me, or that I just want him that badly.

Either way, I don't stop.

His grip on my hair tightens as he fucks my mouth harder, hitting the back of my throat with each thrust. I squeeze my eyes shut, fighting back the tears. I refuse to stop now. I want his release.

His body jerks, and then he stills as his climax consumes him. A loud rumbling sound rolls up from his chest and fills the surrounding void.

I continue sucking and licking. I take every bit of his release and swallow it down.

He falls back against the wall behind us, pulling his semi-hard cock from my mouth with a pop.

We're both breathing heavily, and we take a moment to come back down from what just happened.

He's the first to move. He leans down, lifts me up off the floor, and slips my restrained hands over his head so my arms are around his neck. I wrap my legs around his waist as his hands cup my ass.

“Fuck, Charlotte,” he whispers against my mouth. “I didn't think you had that in you.”

“You shouldn’t judge people before you truly know them.” The words are strained from where I’m still recovering from sucking him off.

His response is to grip the back of my neck and press his lips to mine. He moves slowly, like he’s testing how I feel and taste. His lips are soft between the scratchy hairs of his beard. I like the contrast and suddenly wonder what that beard will feel like on other parts of my body.

His tongue teases the seam of my mouth, so I open and let him in. The way he strokes it across mine and slowly moves his lips is in complete contrast to how he fucked my mouth. He feels almost gentle ... *Calm*.

He abruptly breaks away and heads deeper into his house.

“My turn to take care of you,” he says, just before he reaches the stairs. He grips tighter to my ass with one hand and wraps his other arm around my waist and presses me closer to his chest. It feels protective and claiming and tugs at my heartstrings.

When we reach the loft, he lifts my arms from around his neck and then tosses me on the bed. It’s large and soft and takes up most of the space.

He steps around the bed to a small nightstand and pulls a roll of condoms out of the drawer before he steps back and starts unbuttoning his shirt.

“Did you like the way I fucked your mouth?” he asks. His harsh demanding tone is back as if he still doesn’t believe I enjoyed it.

I lift my chin in challenge. “Yes.”

My one-word answer causes him to growl. He strips his clothes off until he’s standing before me, completely bare like an offering. His cock is already hard again and bobbing against his solid abs. He has the body of a man who works hard. Thick shoulders and arms with more ridges and valleys from his cut muscles than I’ve ever seen on a man before. And the tattoos. His upper chest, shoulders, arms, and thighs are covered in ink.

He grabs my feet and pulls me to the edge of the bed. “Hands above your head.”

His command leaves no room for negotiation. I don’t hesitate to comply. First, he strips my shoes and pants off me before he lifts my sweater and bunches it above my head. He lightly runs a fingertip from my neck then down my chest and stomach, his eyes following the movement. The way his deep brown eyes darken suggests he likes what he sees.

Reaching underneath me, he unhooks the clasp of my bra and shoves it above me with my sweater. His mouth is on my nipple, sucking it hard, before I even have a chance to adjust to the feel of his mouth on me.

I cry out at the sensation.

He’s not gentle. The way he sucks and bites at my nipples is a delicious pain that’s making me even more wet for him than I already am.

“Garret,” I moan and lift my hips, searching for friction against my clit but I don’t find any.

“Tell me what you want, Princess.” His hands grip my hips and press them down into the mattress as he continues his assault on my body with his tongue. “Do you want my cock or my mouth?”

“Both,” I don’t hesitate to say.

He chuckles, and it sends a shiver through me. “Greedy little thing.”

“Yes.” His mouth inches closer to my core. “Please, Garret. Fuck me with your tongue.”

He groans, loops his fingers around my panties, and rips them off me in one fast movement. “You’re my dirty princess, aren’t you?”

“Do you like me dirty?” I ask, my voice raspy and harsh. I’m not sure where that voice or those words came from. I like good, rough sex, but dirty talk isn’t something I’ve done a lot. Brad may have been great at sex, but he was quiet.

“Fuck, yes. I like a woman who’s not afraid to tell me what she wants.”

I open my mouth to tell him again, but he licks up my center and sucks my clit between his teeth, causing me to cry out instead. My back arches, and I press harder against his mouth.

“That’s it. Take what you want, Princess.”

He licks and sucks while I grind against him with no shame. His fingers dig into my skin as his hands grip tighter around my hips. He slides his tongue inside me while his teeth scrape across my clit. Add in the feel of his beard against my thighs, and the action is so rough and intense. My body reacts violently in response.

I come so hard. My body convulses, and I cry out.

He doesn’t relent. He continues to lick and nibble and suck at me until I’m begging him to stop. Even then, he doesn’t listen.

My release is so powerful, it almost hurts. *Almost.*

When he finally lets go of me, my body sags. I’m both grateful for the reprieve and miss his touch at the same time.

He grabs the condoms as he pushes to his feet. I watch with rapt attention as he rips open the wrapper and slowly rolls it over his impressive cock. I just had that thing in my mouth a few minutes ago, so I know he’s big, but damn. He *looks* like he really could tear me to shreds.

He fists his sheathed cock and gives it a tug. “You ready for this?”

I nod.

“Good girl.” He crawls over me, looping his arms under my shoulders and dragging me up onto the bed. “Let’s see how you like my cock spreading that tight little cunt wide open.”

Then he slams into me in one hard thrust, filling me completely. I cry out at the invasion and the slight tinge of pain as my body stretches to accommodate him.

Then he moves, and Oh. My. God.

So deep.

So full.

And so wonderfully good.

He hits that spot deep inside me like no man ever has before. Garret Mutter's dick is magical.

"Oh God." I can barely speak, let alone breathe with how good he feels as he slowly pumps inside me. I expected fast and hard, but he's giving me slow and methodical.

It's otherworldly.

"I only want to hear my name on your lips while I'm fucking you." He growls against my neck, and I shudder. "Is that clear?"

"Yes," I breathe.

"Let me hear it." He demands as he lifts one of my legs up against his shoulder and thrusts deeper.

It feels so good that all words and thoughts are stolen from me. All I can do is feel.

He does it again and again until my body is on the edge, ready to tip over. But he doesn't let me. Just when I think I'm going to come again, he backs off.

"My name, Princess." The guttural tone of his words has me panting.

"Garret," I say in a whisper.

"Louder!" He pulls out of me with nothing but his tip inside me.

"Garret, please!" I cry. I'm so close and yet feel miles away from another release. The way he's denying me a second release is worse than when he wouldn't stop licking and sucking me after my first.

He slams into me one more time, causing me to cry out his name again. Then he pulls out and flips me over onto my stomach as if I'm a rag doll.

He lifts my hips to meet his, lines his cock up with my entrance and fucks me from behind. It's fast and hard, and exactly what I expected from Garret.

"Oh, fuck, Princess. You're such a good girl. You take me so well." He grunts with every slam against my ass. From this angle, he hits me deeper than I ever thought possible. "This is too good. You need to come again. *Now!*"

"So close." I moan, and struggle to push back to meet his thrusts. With my hands tied, I can't grab onto anything.

Then he does something with his hips that causes his cock to stroke my insides just right, and my release detonates.

"Garret!" I cry out his name so loudly it wouldn't surprise me if they heard it back in Chicago.

Garret's thrusts become more erratic, and his own cries follow mine. "Fuck, fuck, fuck!"

He slams into me one last time before he collapses on top of me and stills as his climax consumes him. His cock continues to pulse as he fills the condom. The sensation causes his dick to lightly pulse against my core and it adds to the pleasure of my release.

He rests his head against my shoulder blade and places light kisses across my skin. It's almost sweet and in complete contrast to the way he fucked me tonight.

"Is that the kind of release you were looking for?" he whispers in my ear.

"Yes." I breathe into his pillow, still struggling to catch my breath.

Then he pushes up on his knees, pulling out of me. I instantly miss the weight of his body over mine. He gives my ass a light slap before he squeezes the cheek. "Next time, I'm going to spank this ass and make it good and red before I fuck you."

"Oh God," I groan.

He laughs and leans over me to untie my wrists. The rumbling sound his laugh makes just might be the sexiest thing

I've ever heard come from his lips.

“Princess.” He growls into my ear. “The only name I want to hear from your lips when you're in my bed is Garret. I thought I made that clear.”

Then he slaps my ass harder and climbs out of bed.

Chapter 10

*Dirty thoughts are nothing but
trouble.*

Garret

I t's late when I finally leave my garage and head to the house. Once again, I glance toward the trail that leads through the trees, hoping for a glance at Charlotte. She's never there, and I can't see her parents' house because of all the trees. But I keep looking anyway.

I hate myself a little more every time I look. I never should have given into my desire for her. But when she stepped out of the bathroom like she belonged there, I lost all sense of self-control.

Because I wanted her to belong in my house. I wanted her to be mine.

But she can't be mine no matter how much I want to claim her, even though the beast lurking inside me says I already have.

It's been four days since she left my bed, and I haven't seen her since. Within minutes of fucking her, she scrambled for her clothes and left without so much as a goodbye. She wouldn't even look at me.

I warned her.

I told her I'd be too much for her, and she didn't listen. She had to push me until I cracked. And now I'm afraid I've pushed her away.

She may have willingly dropped to her knees and let me fuck her mouth, but I shouldn't have allowed it to happen. I should have locked up the monster inside me—the scarred and

damaged man that aches to dominate and own the woman in my bed.

Unfortunately, that monster has his sights on Charlotte Weber.

The one woman I can never have.

And yet I still took her to bed. Now I have to live with the knowledge of how she feels, tastes, and sounds when she comes around my cock.

No matter how much I want her again, I can't let that happen. She can never know about my past with her deceased sister, or that I could be Rayne's father.

The time to share that secret has sailed. I've completely fucked myself with that one.

I never should have put off telling them. If I had been a *good* man—the kind Charlotte insists I am—I would have told the Webers about my relationship with Carol from the start. A *good* man wouldn't hide from the truth.

What is the truth?

That I don't know if I'm Rayne's father, or I know but refuse to let myself accept it?

Sometimes I look at Rayne and I swear I see some of me in her expressions—the way she laughs, the deep furrow in her brow, and even her expressive chocolate brown eyes.

But then I talk myself out of it. Carol was adamant that I was not the only possible sperm donor. She wouldn't give me details, but she made it sound like there were several possible contenders.

Deep down, I want it to be me. I want to be her father even though I doubt my abilities to be a good one. With the shitty example of a father I have, chances are high I'd suck at it just as much as my dad.

I don't know why I'm allowing myself to ponder this again. Rayne is better off without me. Besides, I've waited too long to say anything. At this point I'd hurt everyone involved.

And now that I've fucked Charlotte, I've complicated matters even more.

Definitely not a *good* man.

I turn away from the trail and continue my walk to my house. Bullet is bouncing around my feet, letting me know she wants to play. I pull a tennis ball from my pocket and toss it. Bullet takes off down the hill after it, catches it, brings it back, and drops it at my feet. We do this a few times before I reach my front door.

"Come on, girl." I call out for her. "Let's eat dinner."

She immediately runs toward me and crowds past my feet to get inside. She stops by the small pantry door where I keep her food and whines.

"I know. I know." I grumble. "We stayed in the garage too long, didn't we?"

Once she's taken care of, I open the refrigerator and frown. The leftovers are gone. I'd finished the last of the enchiladas Charlotte brought me last night. The empty pan is sitting on the counter, taunting me.

I grab a beer, pop the top, and take a long pull before I look in the pantry for something to make. All I have are cans of soup, and after the enchiladas, that sounds about as tempting as cardboard.

Bullet's ears perk up and she rushes to the door we just came through.

"What is it?" The question comes out of me so rough and full of frustration, my dog sinks back and sits like she's in trouble. Before I can comfort her, there's a knock on my door.

My mind instantly jumps to Charlotte, and my cock twitches.

I scrub my hands over my face and groan. "Fuck, this is a problem."

I've got to get that woman out of my mind. If she ever finds out my truths, she'll hate me. My wounds and hidden

scars are too deep and too painful. They've already destroyed my life. I can't let them destroy anyone else's life either.

There's a second knock. This one is louder than the first. "Garret! I know you're in there. I saw you walk in."

My shoulders relax and my dick wilts at the sound of Liam's voice. I'm both relieved and disappointed it's not Charlotte.

My boots pound against the hardwood floor as I make my way across the small room, and the sound rings in my ears. My house is always so silent, and my heavy steps annoy me.

My brother at my door annoys me. I annoy myself.

I'm disappointed in the decisions I've made, and the secrets I've kept. Why can't everyone just leave me the fuck alone and let me wallow in my self-pity in my tiny house with no one but my dog to keep me company?

I open the door with every intention of telling Liam to fuck off, but he doesn't give me a chance to speak before he's pushing past me.

"Here." He shoves a container at me. "This is for you. Grams made it up and asked me to bring it to you. She's worried you're eating too much processed food. Too much salt intake or some shit like that."

My brows furrow while my heart does a little leap, knowing I'm eating a home-cooked meal tonight. I barge past Liam and straight for the flatware drawer. I don't even bother warming it up. I grab a fork and dig in—fried chicken, mashed potatoes, and corn. It's orders of magnitude better than canned fucking soup.

Liam chuckles, then his eyes fall on the cleaned, empty pan that Charlotte brought over with enchiladas in it. He nods toward it with a knowing grin on his face. "Someone else bringing you food too?"

I cut him a glare as I take a bite of chicken. I swallow a groan. Grams makes the best fried chicken.

“Yeah,” I say with a mouth full of food. “What’s it to you?”

“Wouldn’t happen to be Charlotte, would it?”

My glare hardens, and my hands freeze midway to my mouth. “Why would you ask that?”

He shrugs and smirks. I hate it when my brothers fucking smirk. “Rayne was at the house the other day telling us how much Charlotte loves to cook and bake. Told Grams Charlotte can bake as good as she can, and that she’s been bringing you food. Grams took that as a challenge.” He points to the leftovers in my hands. “Hence her insistence that I bring you food.”

I scowl. “I don’t understand. What does Charlotte bringing me food have to do with Grams?”

Liam’s smile grows. I growl as I realize my mistake. I just admitted to Charlotte bringing me food. Now, my entire family is going to think there’s something more going on between us. That can’t happen. It was just one night. A fucking great night, but one I can’t repeat.

“I think Grams is equal parts excited and jealous that another woman is cooking for you. Tonight, her jealous side won, and she wanted to be the one to feed you. You know how she is about taking care of her *boys*.”

I grunt at the emphasis he puts on boys. ‘Cause he’s not wrong. But it’s not just us Grams loves to feed. She’d feed the entire town if she could.

“Tell her I said thanks. This is way better than canned soup.” I conceded.

He nods, then takes a seat in the only chair I have in this small space. He drops his head back and crosses one leg over the other like he’s settling in to get comfortable for a while. “Finish eating, then go shower. We’re going out tonight.”

“No.” I glare at him.

He raises a single brow at me as if to tell me I don’t have a say in this. “Yes, you are. It’s karaoke night at Posey’s.”

“Don’t care,” I say around another bite, only to scrape the bottom of the container to find it’s empty. On instinct, I turn to the sink to wash it. Grams taught us at a young age to never leave dirty dishes in the sink. It’s a habit that’s stuck with me.

“Your brothers want to spend time with you. *I* want to spend time with you. Now go shower.”

“I don’t want to go out.” I grumble.

He shrugs like my protests don’t mean a damn thing. “You’re going. Get to it.”

He crosses his arms over his chest and closes his eyes like he’s going to take a nap. *A fucking nap.*

I stare at him for a moment, feeling the scowl on my face deepen. I want to shove this container at him and toss him out of my house. Instead, I spin around, head down the narrow hall to my closet, and grab a change of clothes.

Looks like I’m going out.

IT’S NOT OFTEN ALL MY BROTHERS GET TOGETHER IN ONE place at the same time. And tonight, we’re all here except for Warren. I’ve no doubt if he lived close by, he’d be here too. My brothers keep trying to convince him to move back home, but so far, he’s resisted.

Right before he left for college, he and Liam had a huge fight. He left and rarely comes home. When he does, he and Liam don’t talk that much. No one knows what they fought about, and neither of them will speak of it. We all suspect their fight is largely why Warren stays away.

Maybe I should have moved away too. I thought about it, but just couldn’t get myself to leave. No matter how many bad memories this place holds for me, it will always be home.

Although, I don’t know why I’m here tonight. I never come out to the bar to just *hang out*. The only thing I come out

for is poker night. I can sit around bored, drinking beer, in the privacy of my home. I don't need an audience for this shit.

My brothers, along with Mac's girlfriend Sophia and Ash's childhood best friend Clara, are all sitting around this table wasting oxygen by talking about the most useless things ever. I'm not one to engage in small talk like them.

Who cares how Chase stubbed his toe on the new bumper for a racecar, or how Ash keeps flirting with every pretty girl that gets within fifty feet of the garage—which apparently has been a lot lately.

Then they went on about how Sophia has made it her mission to make Christian smile. It sounds like she succeeds sometimes. Although I have to admit that conversation was kind of interesting. Like me, Christian rarely smiles. Neither of us has a lot of reasons to smile.

All Liam wants to talk about is business. They're expanding the racing team and looking for fresh blood. Racing has been a huge part of Mutter Truckers Auto & Racing since Mac was a teenager. I'm glad to hear they're expanding. I just don't know why I have to be here to listen to it. It doesn't affect me since I'm not involved in the day-to-day management of the garage. I trust my brothers to do what's right to keep it successful and growing.

It's all boring talk that I'd rather not be here for.

But it's the talk about Mac and Sophia making out in the garage all the time that's really getting to me. That's the last thing I want to hear about. It's giving me all sorts of ideas of what I'd do to Charlotte if I got her in my garage again.

It makes me think about kissing her. Her lips were so full and soft and greedy for mine. I didn't kiss her nearly enough that night. Fuck, what I wouldn't do to get the chance to kiss her again. This time I'd appreciate it. I'd take my time with her—savor every touch and lick and taste.

But I can't let myself go there. The secret I harbor would destroy her and her family.

Maybe if I found someone else to fuck, it would help get her off my mind.

I take a quick sweep of the bar. It's not like there are a lot of options in this small town. Besides, I know everyone. It's impossible not to when our population is so low, and it's not like new people move here often.

Most of the women here are either already taken or else I wouldn't touch them with a ten-foot pole. The only single woman in the bar that has possibility is Lina Lange. She's by far the most beautiful woman here tonight. She's not as stunning as Charlotte, but she's a close second.

With long dark hair, curves for days, and one of the nicest racks I've ever seen, Lina is definitely good on the eyes. But she carries a bad girl vibe that's not really my style. I may have told Charlotte I was all wrong for her because she's a good girl. But her good girl qualities are what attract me to her the most.

But maybe Lina would be alright for one night just to clear my head. I stare at her for a moment, then immediately kill that thought. There's no sexual attraction toward her. Not even a little. Besides, I think she has a thing for Christian. She can't seem to take her eyes off him tonight.

"Dude!" Ash punches my shoulder. "Are you even listening?"

I turn a scowl on him, and on instinct, I ball my hands into fists. "What?"

"Grams' birthday later this year?" He stares at me like I've lost my mind. Which, for the record, may be true considering my recent actions. "That's why we're all here tonight. It's her eightieth and we want to make it special."

"Okay." I narrow my eyes on him. "But did you have to punch my arm? Just tell me what to do, and I'll do it."

"You know," Liam points his beer bottle at me with a frown, "it wouldn't hurt you to participate in the conversation."

I turn my glower to him. “I don’t know shit about planning parties. Why would you even want me to participate?”

“Oh, I don’t know. Maybe because she’s your Grams too.”

“Thanks. I never would have known that if you hadn’t told me.” I deadpan, and now Liam’s the one to glower.

I shake my head and go back to drinking my beer. Thankfully, he doesn’t push me further and they go back to making plans without my input. As if I’d have any.

A few minutes later, the front door slams open, causing all conversations to fall to a whisper. Even the music seems to fade.

All eyes turn toward the door, and Liam grumbles. “Fucking Charlie.”

We all mumble in agreement. Charlie Fisher is one of those men who acts like he’s your best friend to your face, but then talks shit about you behind your back. Everyone lets him get away with it because of his family’s money.

Not very many people in the area are from money. Most of us are poor or have worked our asses off learning a trade to make an honest living. We’re no strangers to poverty in this county.

Not the Fishers. Charlie’s dad, Charles Watson Fisher, Sr., is a retired congressman. They could live anywhere, but they maintain a home in the hills of southern Ohio and raised their kids in the same public schools as the rest of us.

Charlie hasn’t had to work for anything a day in his life. Every penny in his bank account was handed to him by his dad or the opportunities his dad helped him get.

He’s the same age as Liam, and they grew up together. They were friends in high school, but shortly after they graduated, they stopped hanging out. It was a weird time. One day, they were friends, and the next, they weren’t.

It probably had something to do with how fake he is all the time.

“Well, if it isn’t the entire Mutter clan,” Charlie says as he approaches our table.

“Not quite,” Ash says with a huge smile on his face. “Warren isn’t here, but then again, you know that don’t you?”

Charlie’s smile grows. “Yes, I suppose I do.” He takes a quick scan around our table before his eyes settle on Liam. He holds his hand out for a shake, but Liam doesn’t take it. He just stares at him with something resembling contempt in his expression. “Good to see you, Liam. It’s been a while.”

“Surprised to see you here. I thought a place like Posey’s Lounge was beneath the mayor of Waverly.”

Waverly is the closest city to Beaver, and the seat of our small county. It’s not much of a city with a population barely over four thousand, but Charlie thinks it makes him God in these parts. I guess that’s what happens when you have a retired congressman for a father and you’re the highest public official in the county.

Aside from Waverly, there are only two other villages in the entire county—Beaver and Piketon. The rest of the county is spotted with countless unincorporated communities. That’s largely why so many struggle with poverty. With no big cities, there aren’t a lot of jobs.

I don’t know how, but Charlie’s smile grows. “I get out now and then. Gotta stay in touch with my community. Might need their support next year. Looking to run for state representative.”

Liam snorts. “Figures.”

Charlie’s smile falters, but only for a second. If I weren’t glaring at him, I would’ve missed it.

“Well, I’ll leave you boys to your evening.” He knocks his knuckles on the table and nods like he’s our father or something. “Don’t cause any trouble.”

“We rarely do,” Chase says, his smile far wider than Charlie’s. Those two would be fun to watch in a pissing contest to see who can be the most charming. My money’s on Chase.

Charlie nods toward the back corner. “I see the Koch family is here, and I know how much y’all like to stir up trouble with them boys. I’d hate to drag Ricky away from karaoke night on account of a fight.”

Ricky is the local law enforcement around here, and our resident Elvis impersonator. He lives for karaoke night.

“We’ve been here for an hour and so have they,” I say, surprising everyone at the table. All eyes turn to me. “Ain’t no one fighting, so I guess you can keep your warnings to yourself.”

Ash and Chase snort. Christian pushes to his feet, gives Charlie one last look of disgust before he heads to the back room where the pool tables are located. Liam crosses his arms and glares.

“Come on, Red,” Mac says as he takes Sophia’s hand. “Let’s go pick a song to sing before we miss out on karaoke.”

“No way.” She jerks her hand back. “I *am not* singing.”

“You don’t have to.” He pulls her to her feet. “I’ll do all the singing. You can just sit there and look like the beauty that you are.”

My brothers make a series of gagging noises, I groan, and Charlie gives us one more nod before he leaves.

“Fucking douche,” Liam mumbles after he’s out of earshot.

“Once a piece of shit, always a piece of shit,” Ash says with a huge grin.

“Here, here!” Chase raises his beer.

“Boys.” Clara rolls her eyes like we’re all acting like children.

“Don’t look at us like that.” Ash narrows a playful stare at her as he makes to stand. “He’s all those shitty things and more.”

“Maybe so, but what good does it do to get into little pissing contests with him? He’s never gonna let you guys win.

Like ever.”

“Because it makes me feel better knowing it pisses him off,” Liam says as he lifts his beer bottle up in salute.

The music shifts to a slow song. Mac is on the stage with a microphone in his hands, ready to sing the sappy love song to his girl. Ash walks around the table and holds out his hand to Clara. “Come on, bestie. Let’s dance.”

Clara looks up at him like she’s going to refuse. Instead, she sighs, takes a big gulp of her drink, and pushes to her feet.

My baby brother is such a dumbass. He and Clara have been best friends since they were toddlers, but everyone with eyes can see she has been crushing on Ash for years. Everyone except Ash, that is. He seems to be oblivious to her feelings.

Within moments, the dance floor is overly crowded with couples, and I’m left alone at the table with Liam and Chase. We’re quiet as we watch the couples dance. I’m glad for the reprieve in conversation but being left with my thoughts while I watch other people dance is not doing me any good. All I can think about is Charlotte and what it would feel like to hold her close like that.

I can’t say I’ve ever really danced with a woman. Not even in high school at dances. I never went to prom or homecoming, and as an adult, I’ve avoided these things like the plague.

I bet Charlotte can dance. She was into all that shit back in school. Knowing her, she’s gone to plenty of events as an adult, where dancing was the highlight of the night. She’d probably feel soft and warm and glide across the floor like a damn angel while I’d be more like a tumbling boulder dragging my feet around the dance floor.

But oddly enough, I want to know what it’s like. With her. I want to hold her and kiss her and make her cry out my name again.

And now my fucking dick is getting hard.

I swallow my groan and take a long pull from my beer as I adjust myself. These thoughts are going to cause me nothing

but trouble.

Chapter II

*Even backwoods country folks read
the tabloids and act like it's the
gospel.*

Charlotte

I stare at the blank space next to item number seven on today's list, tapping my pen against the page. For the life of me, I can't think of another reason I should stay clear of Garret. I should be able to fill up a journal with all the reasons he and I are wrong for each other.

Because he *is* wrong for me. Right?

I keep telling myself he was right when he said I should date someone more like me. More like Brad. Brad shared my interests and fit the professional mold I thought I wanted.

My Chicago life fit me well. It's what I'd always dreamed of having—a great job, designer clothes, a busy social life, and a successful life partner. And for a short time, I had all of that and I was happy.

But being back home has shown me that this life fits me too. I'm happy and relaxed in a way I never was in Chicago. And despite how different we are, I can't deny Garret fits me too.

That thought has me rereading my list, begging my mind to come up with more reasons we're all wrong for each other.

*Reasons I should not like Garret
Mutter*

1. He's not my type.

2. He's grumpy and angry all the time. I don't like grumpy and angry.

3. We may have chemistry, but I'm not convinced he really likes me.

4. It's just sex to him. I don't care what I told him. I don't do just sex.

5. He's too close to Rayne. Having a casual relationship could make that awkward.

6. He's my next-door neighbor for the foreseeable future. Again, that could be awkward.

7.

I DROP MY HEAD BACK AND SIGH.

Nope.

It didn't work. Instead, my mind is overflowing with reasons he and I should do it again.

I've never had a one-night stand before, and that's all it was. I insisted I wasn't looking for a relationship, and that's the only reason he gave into his desire for me.

It was one glorious night of the best, dirtiest sex I've ever had. It was so good it shocked me. I ran out of there without a word. I didn't know how to react, and it freaked me out.

The way he commanded me to drop to my knees and crawl to him still has my insides tingling with need. Who knew I

liked it when a man talked to me like that? I sure as shit didn't.

So fucking hot.

Did he see it that way too? As the best sex he's ever had. Or just one night?

He definitely enjoyed it as much as me. But that doesn't mean he wants to do it again.

"Ugh," I groan and slam my notebook closed.

I shouldn't be thinking about him. I should fill this dead space in my schedule with something productive.

I'm working today, and Mrs. Engle isn't here to talk my ear off for a change. She comes in most days when I'm working and acts like I can't handle it on my own. If she only knew how stressful my job was in Chicago. She wouldn't be able to handle it, that's for sure.

I look at the schedule again as if an appointment is going to magically appear since I last checked it twenty minutes ago. Just like then, my next appointment isn't until one o'clock. I've got another twenty minutes to kill.

Picking up my phone, I pull up Sierra's name and shoot her a quick text.

CHARLOTTE

Can you talk?

SIERRA

Sure, what's up?

CHARLOTTE

Calling you if that's okay.

SIERRA

Oh, boy. That good, huh?

RATHER THAN RESPONDING, I DIAL HER NUMBER. SHE PICKS UP on the first ring.

“If someone is talking shit about you in that backwoods town, I’m on the next plane out of here.”

For the first time all day, an easy smile spreads across my face. “This is why I love you so much. You’re always ready to fight for me.”

“Don’t drag this out. Tell me what happened.”

“Why do you automatically jump to conclusions? Nothing *bad* happened, just—”

“Don’t downplay your feelings. You always do this, Char. You are allowed to feel when it comes to the things that happen to you. Like that shithead of an ex-boyfriend of yours. You’ve made up one too many excuses for him since he broke things off with you.”

“I didn’t call you to talk about Brad.” I pause, taking in a deep breath. Telling her about Garret isn’t going to be an easier conversation. She’s going to freak out, and probably in an it’s-about-damn-time kind of way.

“Then what’s wrong? Is your dad worse? Do you need me to come and help? I’ll leave on the first plane out of Chicago, if that’s what you need.”

“No, it’s not my dad either. I may have met someone,” I say hesitantly.

“What?” she yells so loudly through the phone I have to hold the receiver away from my ear. “Someone new *new* or someone you’re reconnecting with from your past?”

“Well, he’s from my past, but we were never really connected back then. So I guess somewhere in between.”

“Okay, so not a complete stranger. Please tell me you fucked him. Pretty please.”

I squeeze my eyes closed and nod, even though I know she can’t see me. I can’t get myself to say the words out loud. It’s

so unlike me.

“Oh my God! You did!” she yells again.

“Will you stop yelling? I think the entire town can hear you. And trust me when I say this is not news I want to get out about me. There’s enough gossip as it is.”

“Alright, sorry. I’ll try to calm down, but it’s not every day my newly single best friend meets a guy.”

“I’ve only ever dated Brad since you’ve known me.”

“Exactly. Now tell me all about him. Does he have a big dick?”

“Gawd, Sierra.” I sigh and sink back into the chair. “Everything about Garret is big.”

“Garret, huh? Love the name. Screams BDE.”

“What’s BDE?” I frown. “You know I hate acronyms.”

She scoffs in only the way my best friend does. If I were next to her, I’ve no doubt she’d be rolling her eyes at me too.

“Big dick energy,” she says with enough sass behind it that it makes me chuckle.

“If that means he doesn’t have to tell anyone he has a big dick and possesses all the growly-don’t-fuck-with-me attitude to match, then yes. Garret has big dick energy.”

“You lucky bitch. Was it good?”

“Oh, sighhhh.” I sink further into the chair until my body is slouching. “It was the best sex I’ve ever had.”

“Whoa. For real?”

“Yes.” I drop my head onto the back of the chair and stare at the ceiling. “This is bad. I can’t be doing this. I’m not equipped for casual relationships.”

“Does that mean you’re going to do him again?”

“I don’t know. I want to, but then I don’t. Does that make sense?”

“No. It makes zero sense. If he makes you feel good, then do it. Stop making lists about your life and get your ass out there and live it for once.”

“Hey!” I clutch my notebook close to my chest. “Who said anything about making a list?”

Sierra bursts out laughing—like laughing so hard she probably has tears in her eyes. Once she’s calmed down enough to speak, she says, “That’s a good one. You can’t lie to me. We both know you’ve probably already made a dozen or more lists about this man since you reconnected.”

I frown and stare at my notebook, counting in my head how many I think I’ve made. *Shit, she’s not far off.*

“Lists help me focus and make decisions.” I argue. “Don’t knock ’em until you try ’em.”

“Sure. I’ll get right on that. Soooo ...” She drags the word out, then pauses for a few beats. “When are you doing Mr. BDE again?”

“I don’t know that I am.”

“Char! Why the hell not?”

“Because I didn’t move home to have dirty hot sex with my neighbor. I need to focus on helping with my dad and getting to know my niece. She could use a female role model.”

“Wait. He’s your neighbor? Like walk-next-door-for-a-booty-call neighbor?”

I roll my eyes. “Yes, I can walk to his house, but there will be no more booty calls. At least, I don’t think there will be.”

“Oh, I bet you a hundred bucks there will be more booty calls.”

“I’m not wasting a hundred bucks on a bet. Working at a small-town hair salon is nothing like the high-end salon I worked at in Chicago. Good thing I don’t need to worry about rent.”

“Business slow?”

“So slow.” I sit back up and stare at the date book. “I haven’t had a client in almost two hours. This shit has got to change, or I’ll go insane with boredom.”

“More reason to spice up your life with Mr. BDE.” If I could see her face, I’ve no doubt she’s wagging her brows.

“Did you not hear the part about being a good role model for my niece?”

“I did, but I’m choosing to ignore that at the moment in favor of hearing more about this dirty hot sex you had with your neighbor.”

“You’re impossible.”

“Eh, you love me.”

“Psh, love has nothing to do with this.”

“Just do me a favor and consider it. As long as you’re stuck in that small town, you might as well have a little fun. You can help with your dad and get to know your niece all while getting a good piece of ass on the side. Don’t neglect your needs while taking care of everyone else’s.”

“Trust me. He took care of my needs so well, I’m good for a while.” The image of his large body moving over mine flashes before my eyes. I cross my legs and squeeze my thighs together to fight the ache forming.

“I really hate you right now.”

“Ha. No, you don’t. You’d be miserable here. You love the city too much to move to a map dot like Beaver.”

“Maybe so, but I have to visit at some point. I need to see the sights for myself.”

“And by sights, you mean Garret.”

“Maybe,” she says in a seductive tone that tells me I’m spot on.

I let out a deep sigh. “I better go. My next client should be here soon, and I still have to set up. Not that there’s a lot to do or prepare for these people. This salon has never heard of customer care cards.”

“Oh no! However will you function?”

“Oh shush.” I chuckle. She’s always picked on me about the detailed note cards I kept on all my clients. “I’ll talk to you later.”

“Later.” I can hear the smile in her voice. “Love you.”

“Love you too.”

I hang up and drop my phone on the counter next to me.

Maybe she’s right. Maybe I can have a little fun with Garret while still being here for my family. It’s not like my family needs me twenty-four seven. I can take a little time for myself.

That is, assuming Garret is interested in a repeat of the other night.

I guess there’s only one way to find out. I just have to be brave enough to ask him.

I’VE NEVER SEEN SO MUCH GRAY HAIR IN ALL MY LIFE. NOT that there’s anything wrong with a woman embracing her gray. Gray is stylish and sexy. But the women who frequent Mrs. Engle’s hair salon aren’t just gray. They’re all over the age of seventy. None of them are interested in my skills or knowledge of trending styles and cutting techniques.

These women all have the same perm and bobbed cut that falls just below the ears. Even if it doesn’t look right on them, they do it. It’s like they’re all stuck in a 1950s sitcom and don’t realize time moved on.

“You know, Mrs. Hoffman, I think your hair would look good if we cut it a little shorter. With your bone structure, taking it up in the back with clippers would look really good on you.”

Her face falls into a deep frown and she stares at me in the mirror on the wall opposite us. She’s been here for about ten

minutes and spent most of that time gabbing instead of letting me get to work on her hair.

“Oh, I don’t know. That sounds so different from what Mrs. Engle does.” She presses a hand to her chest and mock gasps. I fight to stop from rolling my eyes at her theatrics. “I just don’t know if I can do it.”

“We could start with an inch or so. See if you like that.” I rest my hands over the ends of her hair and push it up slightly so she can see what I mean. To my surprise, her eyes light up and a small smile lifts her lips.

“Maybe a little wouldn’t hurt. It’ll always grow back if I don’t like it.”

“Yes, it will. That’s the beauty of hair.” I pat her shoulder before I grab the cape to wrap over her. “I promise to make you look fabulous. It’s my specialty.”

Her smile grows. “Well, now. I suppose it is. I mean, with that fancy job you had in Chicago and all. I reckon you’re the most skilled stylist in the state.”

“I don’t know about that.” I chuckle. “But I do know a thing or two about hair. Now let’s get you shampooed.”

“We’re lucky to have you, dear,” she says as I lead her to the sink. “Good riddance to that city and its gossip rags. I just can’t believe they let people print such things.”

I give her a tight smile as she leans back in the chair and positions her head in the sink, but I don’t respond. I still haven’t spoken to anyone other than Sierra about what Brad did, and I don’t want to start now.

Thankfully, she stops talking while the sprayer is on and I suds up her hair. Unfortunately, the moment I’m done washing it, she starts up again.

“And the way that man treated you. I have never in all my life seen someone behave so poorly. Not that I saw him do that to you, but I read all the papers and they made it sound just awful. And to think he did it right as you proposed to him. That must have broken your heart.”

“Broken hearts happen,” I say through gritted teeth, though I don’t think she notices. “I’m recovering just fine.”

“Oh that’s good. A pretty girl like you probably has suitors lining up. I bet if your daddy was feeling better, he’d be beating them away with a baseball bat. How is your daddy doing, by the way? I haven’t seen your parents at church in some time now.”

I let out a deep sigh. I don’t want to talk about Dad any more than I want to talk about Brad, but I guess I don’t get a choice in that.

“As good as can be expected with dementia. He has his good days and his bad.”

“I suppose. I just hate that your family is going through that. We pray for him and your momma every Sunday.”

“I’ll be sure and tell Mom that. She’ll be happy to hear it.”

“You do that. And tell her we miss them dearly. We’re praying for you too, just so you know.”

I frown. “Why are you praying for me?”

“Because of *that* boy,” she lowers her voice like the mere mention of him is scandalous. “I can’t believe he’s already engaged to that *other* woman. And after he cheated on you with her. No taste whatsoever. He should hide his face with the way he treated you. And to think he’s not only responsible for breaking *your* heart, but *you* lost your job because of him too. Just awful, I tell you. But then again, I don’t guess I have to tell you that. You’re living it.”

I nod and roll my lips between my teeth. I saw the headlines on a tabloid when I was at the grocery store last week, but I didn’t bother reading the article. Brad Sweeney’s very public engagement to Renee—a locally famous morning show host and the woman he’d been cheating on me with—was plastered all over the tabloids. And, of course, they had a picture of me looking my worst, making me out to be the heartbroken, scorned ex-girlfriend of the big shot Chicago attorney.

Renee had also been a client of mine. Turns out that's how they met.

That fact is also what led to the loss of my job.

Famous people don't want to be associated with non-famous people whose lives get publicly dragged through the mud because of a scandal. Doesn't matter that said scandal wasn't my fault or that I was the victim in all of this. My clients still distanced themselves from me.

I'm so sorry this happened to you Char, but I can't risk this kind of bad publicity.

I hate him for doing that to you, but my manager wants me to distance myself from you. You know, to play it safe in case the paparazzi go digging into the lives of your other clients.

I know this isn't your fault, but I can't let you do my hair anymore. I can't handle the backlash that will come if anyone finds out you do my hair. You understand, right?

No. No, I do not understand.

There were way too many examples of clients saying some variation of that to me. After the sixth client dropped me, my boss called me into her office and fired me.

Who gets fucking fired after they propose to their boyfriend of seven years, only to find out he'd been cheating on me for the past three years, and he announces that fact while rejecting my marriage proposal?

I do, that's who.

I look up and meet Mrs. Hoffman's worried gaze in the mirror. She's staring at me as if she's afraid I'm going to break down and cry at any moment.

Not gonna happen.

I clear my throat and force a smile. "I appreciate that, but I'm fine. Really. I'm keeping busy and have hardly had time to think about Brad." Not a total lie but she doesn't need to know that my thoughts have been preoccupied with my grumpy neighbor. "Plus, it's so good to be home. I've missed my parents and Rayne."

She gives me a big, warm smile. “I bet they’re all happy you’re here too. Rayne really could use a wonderful role model like you.”

“Thank you. I appreciate that.” I pat her shoulders and dust the last of the hair off the cape before I grab the hair dryer. “Now let’s get you dry and styled. I can’t wait for you to see your new hairstyle.”

With the hair dryer going, conversation is halted, and I couldn’t be happier. I’m done talking about Brad and Renee and my old life in Chicago. I’m not getting any of it back anyway, so I might as well let it go and forget about it. Dwelling on it doesn’t do me any good.

Besides, focusing on my parents and Rayne are what’s important now. They need me just as much as I need them. They’re more than enough to keep me busy and occupied.

I don’t need a man. *Any man*. Not even the sexy, grumpy big guy next door.

Chapter 12

Snow days are the best days.

Garret

My garage feels like a meat locker. It snowed last night, dropping almost sixteen inches on the ground. At least that's what the weatherman said this morning when I listened to the news.

I'd say that's about right. With the drifts, some areas are even worse—like around my house. I had to dig my way out of a wall of snow from the front door this morning. The wind must have whipped around all night long with as much snow I found piled up against my doors.

When I opened my front door, I was staring at a white wall of snow and could only see a hint of sunlight at the top.

That's always fun to clean up.

I debated on shutting the door and going back to bed. I won't be working today anyway. It's my general rule. When it snows, I don't make house calls. Everything can wait until this shit clears up.

Instead, I grumbled my way through shoveling it aside. Thankfully, my back door wasn't as bad, and I avoided getting snow in my house.

Since I don't have to work today, I decided to get some work done on Charlotte's car while I've got a break. It's the least I can do since ... Well ... I don't really know. Since I fucked her?

I haven't seen her since that night. My mind has been so distracted with thoughts of her that I don't even know how

much time has passed. A week? Two? I feel like I'm losing my damn mind.

My *want* to see her as turned into *need*. And I don't need anyone.

That's why I'm freezing my ass off in my garage, working on her car. If I get her car fixed, then that's an excuse to go see her.

"Fuck," I mumble and scrub my hands over my face. When did I become such a chicken shit? When I want to see a woman, I go see her. Period.

Since the woman you're dying to see, touch, taste, and fuck is Rayne's aunt—that's when.

I head over to the wood-burning stove and add a couple more logs. It takes a while for it to warm up this large space, but once it does, I'm usually sweating. I could've put in central heating and cooling, but this old stove was in my grandfather's garage before he passed. It had been in storage for years. When I decided to build my own garage, Grams said I could have it.

I didn't get to know my Gramps before he passed, but I wish I had. Grams always talks so fondly of him. He sounds like he would have been a great father figure. Then again, it wouldn't take much for someone to be a better father than my own. Having this stove here makes me feel like a part of Gramps is with me.

I check the thermometer, and it's only two degrees outside and forty-seven degrees inside. That's ten degrees warmer than it was before I started up the stove. In another hour or so, it should be warm enough that the chill no longer bothers me.

I turn to head back to the bench to get back to work on rebuilding Charlotte's transmission, but I don't make it two steps before Bullet is at my feet whining.

"What is it, girl?" I scratch behind her ears before I keep walking.

She runs in circles around me before she darts off toward the door and sits in front of it. A low growly whine comes out

of her.

I frown. “You don’t need to go out again yet. Go lay down.”

She drops her head and slowly makes her way to her bed, close to the stove.

Bullet loves playing in the snow. If I’d let her, she’d run around out there for hours on end, but I don’t have time to keep an eye on her, nor do I want to freeze my ass off right now. I already did enough of that this morning, clearing a path to my garage.

I don’t get far into the transmission rebuild before my mind wanders back to Charlotte. Images of her long dark hair wrapped around my fist while her lips stretched around my dick have haunted me for days. The way she felt—all soft and warm to my hard and cold—has kept me up at night.

How many times am I going to do this to myself? She clearly doesn’t want a repeat. She hasn’t been back to visit me since that night.

I should let her go.

Forget *it* ever happened.

I shouldn’t have done *it* anyway.

Not with the history I have with Carol. She may be gone, but that doesn’t negate what we did or the relationship we had.

I cared deeply for Carol. We weren’t in love, but we enjoyed spending time together and the sex was fun, even a little adventurous. I knew I wasn’t the only one she was seeing, and we always used condoms. That’s largely why I never said anything to her parents after she died. I didn’t want to stir up shit when there was a high probability that I wasn’t Rayne’s father.

But now I’m not so sure. I see resemblances of me in her all the time. Especially our eyes. I don’t know if it’s wishful thinking or paranoia or regret. Regardless, I genuinely love that kid.

I’d do anything for her.

Even keep my damn mouth shut if it meant her life was never turned upside down and destroyed because I made the wrong decision ten years ago.

It's why I can't think about Charlotte in that way ever again. I have to get her out of my mind and life for good. Seeing her means risking this secret. Her family has enough problems. They don't need me dropping a bomb on them that might destroy their family.

But Carol didn't make me feel the way Charlotte does. I could go weeks without seeing Carol and I was fine. There were times we'd gone a couple months without so much as a conversation between hook-ups. We didn't have that kind of relationship.

Charlotte haunts me. And it only seems to get worse with each passing day.

Somehow, despite my distracted thoughts, I get some work done on the transmission before I decide to take a break.

I glance over at where Bullet is curled up on her bed, watching me with hopeful eyes. She's been quiet, letting me work, so I decide it's time to reward her.

"You wanna go out for a run?"

Her eyes perk up, making me smile. *That's a yes.*

After washing up, I grab my coat. I don't even have one arm in a sleeve before she's on her feet and bouncing in front of the door.

I chuckle as I have to fight to reach around her to get it opened. "Down girl. Can't open it if you're pushing against it."

She whines but takes a step back. As soon as the door is open, she takes off for the treeline. I'm still standing in the doorway, fighting to get my gloves on, when she disappears down the trail. *Of course she'd head right for the Weber's house.*

Then I hear laughter. With all this snow, school was closed. I should have known Rayne would be outside playing in the

snow. She loves it just as much as Bullet does. In fact, I'm surprised she hasn't been over to ask if Bullet could play with her.

Then a different laugh fills the air. A much sexier, older laugh that has my dick standing at attention. I groan and adjust myself as I follow my dog.

BEFORE I EVEN MAKE IT HALFWAY DOWN THE PATH, I HEAR Rayne squeal, followed by a bark from Bullet. They both sound happy to see each other.

But it's Charlotte's voice that has me picking up my pace.

"Hey there, girl." It's silent for a few seconds as I picture Charlotte kneeling down to pet my dog. "Did your master let you out to play?"

Fuck. Me.

The way her voice sounds low and raspy—so very different from her normal soft, sweet tone—is giving my dick all sorts of ideas.

Wrong ideas.

Bad ones.

Things I do not need to be thinking about.

Her voice is probably strained from being outside in the cold and nothing more. It's not because she's thinking of me as *her* master or that she wants to *play* with me. She's talking to my dog, for fuck's sake. I've got to stop thinking so many dirty, sexual thoughts about her.

When I step out of the treeline and into their backyard, my eyes instantly lock with Charlotte's. Her eyes darken, and I swear she sucks in a breath before a wide smile covers her face. It's a fake smile, same as she used in her beauty queen days. I fucking hate it.

She gives my dog another pat before she pushes to her feet. “Hey. Haven’t seen you in a few days.”

I shake my head. “At least a week, I think.”

Her smile fades, and a pained expression replaces it. But before she can say anything, Rayne barrels toward me and wraps her arms around my waist.

“You’re here!” she says against my chest. “I wanted to come see if you could play with us, but Aunt Char said we should leave you alone.”

I narrow my gaze on Charlotte, not liking that she kept Rayne away. I return Rayne’s embrace by wrapping my arm around her and hugging her closer. “You can come see me anytime. You know that.”

“That’s what I told her, but she wouldn’t listen.”

I shift my gaze to Rayne and give her a smile. It’s forced, and anyone who really knows me can probably see that. Hopefully Rayne doesn’t. “I’ll be sure to let her know you’re always welcome.”

Rayne lets go of me and turns to her aunt. She places her hands on her hips like she’s about to give her all kinds of what fors. “Did you hear that? I can visit Garret anytime I want.”

“Hey.” I give a strand of Rayne’s hair a tug. “Don’t sass your aunt like that.”

“It’s okay.” Charlotte waves off my comment and smiles. “I know she’s allowed to visit you. I just wanted her all to myself for a while.”

“Why didn’t you just say that?” Rayne sounds frustrated and maybe even a little hurt.

Charlotte shrugs, looking a little sheepish. “I guess I was afraid you’d choose him over me.”

“But ... You didn’t give—”

“Why don’t we all play?” I ask, cutting Rayne off. “Maybe I can help with the snowman.”

I point to the two large balls of snow they've formed on the ground. One is bigger, clearly meant to be the base, but the second one looks too big for them to pick up.

Rayne bounces on her feet and claps her hands. "Yes! Can he, Aunt Char?"

We both look at Charlotte, who's smiling for real this time. That's the smile that causes my chest to tighten. "Of course. Someone has to put this snowman together. I think we both already proved we can't do it."

I step closer to the two balls and point at the smaller one. "I assume you want this one on top of the other."

Charlotte nods. "We tried once and failed. The ball broke into several pieces when it slipped out of our hands."

I step up next to her and the closeness of her body to mine instantly warms me. I take a deep breath and try to will my body into submission, but that ends up being a mistake. She smells so sweet—like flowers on a spring day. I have to fight back a groan.

I clear my throat and assess their work. "I can get it for you. Let me round out the side a little more first."

I spend the next several minutes shaping it into a firmer ball. By the time I pick it up, it isn't going anywhere. I gently place it on top of the larger one and pat some snow around the join to make sure it stays in place.

"Wow!" Charlotte chuckles. "You made that look easy."

I lift my gaze to hers. "Did this a lot as a kid."

She wrinkles her nose, and it's the most adorable look I've ever seen. It makes me want to pull her close to me. "Yeah, I didn't. I always hated the snow. Still can't believe I'm out here now."

Before I can respond, a snowball hits Charlotte right upside the face. Her mouth falls open as she lets out a low screech. I glance in the direction the snowball came from to find Rayne laughing as she quickly forms another one. She's standing upright and patting the snow into a tight ball and

tosses it at me before I can react. She's got great aim because she hits me right between the eyes.

"Uh oh," I hear her say through her giggles as I wipe off my face with my gloved hand. It's ineffective because my gloves are bulky wool-lined leather meant to keep me warm and not much else.

"Oh, you better run!" Charlotte calls out. I pull my glove off to clean the snow away from my eyes and open them just in time to see Rayne running away from us. She heads right for the large oak tree at the edge of the back porch.

Tossing my gloves aside and going for mobility over warmth, I scoop up a handful of snow and take off after Rayne. I can see she's working on forming her own snowball again, but this time I'm prepared. As soon as I'm within reach, I let it fly and hit her in the chest.

She laughs and tosses her own snowball, but I duck. She misses me, but then I hear Charlotte groan. When I turn around, I see the snowball meant for me hit Charlotte in the face.

I pull my lips between my teeth and fight back a laugh. I fail. After she clears off her face, she glares at me.

"Now, you're going to get it."

"Me! I didn't throw it."

"But you're laughing at me."

"Maybe." I shrug.

Her eyes narrow even more and her nostrils flare. She's not really mad, but she's putting on a good show.

We both reach for a handful of snow at the same time. I take a few steps back, ready to run, while I form my ball. I'm faster than her and toss it at her before she's even upright again. This one hits her in the shoulder.

She mock-scoffs and tries hard to hide her smile. "Not fair."

"How is that not fair, Princess?"

Her eyes widen and something resembling desire flashes in her eyes. She sucks in a ragged breath but doesn't answer me. Instead, she winds her arm back and throws a snowball at me. I don't bother ducking. I let it hit me right in the chest.

There's something passing between us that I haven't felt since that night last week, and I really want to explore where this is going.

I know I shouldn't, but I walk toward her, taking slow, deliberate steps. For everyone I take toward her, she takes one back. But my legs are longer than hers and I'm gaining ground.

When I'm within reaching distance of her, she throws a handful of snow at me, then spins around and takes off running. I didn't even know she still had snow in her hands. It covers my chest and I brush it off.

"Go get her, Garret!" Rayne yells from where she's still hiding behind the tree. "Don't let her get away."

I take off after her. She tries to grab another handful of snow but isn't able to get much with how fast she's running.

I catch up to her quickly. Sensing that I'm right behind her, she glances over her shoulder. The grin on her face causes me to falter and I stumble over my own feet. I feel myself falling forward and decided to use my fumble to my advantage. I reach out and wrap my arm around her waist, tugging her close to my chest before I twist so my back hits the ground.

She's laughing and tries to free herself from my hold. Instead, all she manages to do is get turned around, so she's facing me while lying on top of me. My hands find her waist and my grip tightens.

Our eyes lock. All the playfulness between us vanishes and is replaced with desire.

We're both breathing hard. Her head slowly inches closer to mine as I lift up to meet her. Our lips are mere millimeters apart. I feel her breath brush across my mouth, and I get a whiff of chocolate and mint.

A rough growl forms deep in my chest and rumbles out of me. My need to kiss her, taste her lips with mine, far outweighs any other emotion I have. Right before our lips meet, a snowball hits Charlotte in the back of the head, knocking her forehead to mine.

My head falls back to the ground, and I loosen my grip on her waist. Her head drops to my chest, and her body shakes. At first it confuses me, but then I realize she's laughing. The sound combined with her body moving above mine, is too much. I'm hard as fucking nails.

"I really need you to stop," I growl.

She lifts her head. Her smile is so wide and bright it makes my growing problems worse. "I know. I feel it."

A sound comes out of me that can only be described as beastly. "You're making it worse."

She pulls her bottom lip between her teeth and bites down on it. I'm not sure how my face looks, but from the way her eyes darken, I can only assume she sees every ounce of the lust and need I'm feeling written all over me.

She quickly lets go of her bottom lip and rolls off me.

"Girl, you better run!" she yells out to Rayne as she forms another snowball. "I've been hit one too many times, and now it's your turn to take a few hits."

Rayne takes off. Charlotte pushes to her feet and chases after her.

I stay put and bury my dick deeper in the snow. I need to cool off before I get up, or else Rayne might have a few questions I'm not prepared to answer.

Chapter 13

A damn near irresistible laugh.

Charlotte

I t's as if he's a new man.

After the almost kiss when we tumbled down to the ground in a tangled mess of hands and legs, his mood improved drastically. Now he's currently in the middle of a snowball fight with Rayne, and they're both laughing so hard they can barely stand upright.

He really loves that girl. He has too. Why else would he allow her to come and go as she pleases from his house? I should feel happiness from knowing Rayne has had a man like Garret in her life. But a sense of dread washes over me, and I don't know why.

Am I jealous of my ten-year-old niece? I'd like to think that I'm partly responsible for the smile on Garret's face right now, but it's all because of her. Rayne makes him happy, not me.

"Charlotte!" Mom's panicked voice calls out the back door. I spin around and meet her tired gaze.

"Everything okay?"

She gives me a slight shake of her head, her frown deepening. "I need your help. Do you mind?"

"Of course not, Mom." I shoot a quick glance at Rayne and Garret. Rayne doesn't seem to notice my mom looks upset, but Garret does. He's watching me with an intense, concerned expression on his face.

I give him a quick wave and shake of the head as if to say it's fine. His eyes narrow more, as if he's saying he doesn't believe me. It's a weird exchange that leaves me feeling uncomfortable. My chest tightens and I suddenly feel like there's a heavy weight pressing down on me.

What in the hell is that all about?

I rub my hand over my heart and press. Hard. It does nothing to relieve the pressure I feel. Garret takes a step toward me, but I spin around and head toward the back door before he makes it very far. I assume he stops because he doesn't follow me inside.

Moments later, laughter fills the backyard. Rayne has captured his attention again.

"Char!" Mom's voice snaps, dragging my attention to her. She looks worse than I thought. Her eyes are bloodshot, and her hands are shaking. "Your dad's being difficult this morning. He doesn't know me."

Her voice cracks and tears break free from her eyes. I rush to her and pull her into a tight hug. "It's the disease, Mom. It's not Dad's fault."

"I know," she says through a sob. "It's just ... It's so hard seeing him like this."

"Where's he at?"

She steps back from my embrace and wipes her eyes dry. "In the living room. He's really angry today."

"Okay. I'll go check on him. Why don't you make yourself some hot tea? Once I've got him settled, I'll make some cookies. He always likes cookies."

Mom nods and immediately turns to the cabinet, where she keeps her selection of hot teas. She needs to keep busy or else she's going to crack. I hate seeing her like this, and something tells me I'm going to hate how I find my dad even more.

Dad is sitting on the couch, staring at the space in front of him as if he's completely lost to his thoughts.

“Hey, Dad,” I say tentatively, being sure to keep a little distance in case he lashes out. The doctor told me this could happen. That if he had a complete lapse of memory where he didn’t recognize any of us, he could lash out in anger.

He looks up at me and narrows his eyes. “Dad? Why are you calling me dad?”

“Because that’s who you are.” I take another step into the living room. “Do you know who I am?”

He scoffs. “That’s a silly question. Of course I know who you are, Lois. You’re my wife.”

My chest tightens again, but this time it’s nothing like how I felt when I was outside. Now I feel like the weight of the world is crushing me, pushing all the air and life out of my body.

The doctor warned me this could happen too. I look a lot like my mom. He’s not seeing his daughter right now. He’s seeing a younger version of her.

He’s trapped in the past, and there’s nothing I can do for him.

My eyes sting and I squeeze them shut in an attempt to fight back the tears. The sense of helplessness that washes over me is so intense and painful I almost buckle over in agony.

Instead, I spin around and rest my hand against the wall and take in deep, shallow breaths.

“Lois,” he says. His tone is much softer now. “I’m not feeling so great. Can I just watch some TV and rest?”

I nod as I respond. “Of course Da—” I swallow my response and it hurts going down. “Jim. Yes. Let me get the remote for you.”

I wipe my face and force a smile before I turn around. He’s watching me with a curious and sad look in his eyes. It’s almost as if he knows he’s got this all wrong but doesn’t know why. I’m familiar and yet a complete stranger to my own

father. I'm not sure anything has hurt this much before in all my life.

I swallow back my emotions and focus on what's important—making my dad comfortable. “What would you like to watch? Those game shows you enjoy?”

“Those aren't on yet. It's too early in the day.”

“There's a cable channel dedicated to game shows. They play them all day long.”

He rears his head back as if that's the most ridiculous thing I've ever said. “Since when?”

I shrug. “Don't know. All I know is it exists.”

I don't wait for him to confirm if that's what he wants to watch. I turn it on, and his attention is immediately captured. His shoulders relax and he sinks back on the couch.

I set the remote next to him in case he wants to change it to something else. He seems calmer now, so I risk resting my hand on his shoulder. A small smile lifts his lips when he looks at me.

He's not seeing me, his daughter. I know that. But there is still recognition in his gaze and that makes me happy. Sort of. I lean down and kiss his forehead. He lets out a soft sigh, closes his eyes, and completely relaxes.

“I'm going to go make some cookies. I'll bring you some when they're ready.”

“That would be nice. Thank you.”

I step back and watch my dad for a moment. All his attention is now on the TV, and the anger I saw in him when I first came in is gone.

MOM IS SITTING AT THE DINING TABLE HOLDING HER MUG OF tea close to her face when I enter the kitchen. Same as how I'd found Dad, she's staring blankly at the space in front of her.

“Mom,” I whisper. She doesn’t stir so I say it again, this time with more firmness. “Mom.”

Her eyes snap to mine. “Yes?”

“Are you okay?”

She takes a deep breath and gives me a single nod. “It’s hard seeing him like that. I hoped we would have more time.”

“I know. He thought I was you. He’s currently stuck in his memories. The doctor warned us about this. He also said to give the new medication some time. It could take a few weeks to see positive results.”

She nods again but does speak. She’s back to staring at the emptiness in front of her.

“I’m going to make some cookies. Dad loves those coconut cream macaroons, right?”

Mom nods but doesn’t look at me. “They’re his favorite. If he remembers that.”

“Then I’ll make those.” I head to the pantry to gather the ingredients I need. When I come back, Mom looks a little better. “Do you want to help? Might take your mind off Dad.”

“No.” She pushes to her feet and heads toward the refrigerator. “I think I’ll get a pot of chili on the stove. Your dad loves chili on cold, snowy days.”

I give her a gentle smile. “I think that sounds like a great idea. I’ll even make up a batch of those baked cheddar crackers he likes.”

“He’ll love that.”

We get busy with our chosen tasks, neither of us talking for the next several minutes. Mom is using the counter space next to the stove to prepare the chili while I’m next to the sink mixing up the cookie dough.

There’s a small window above the sink that gives me a perfect view of the backyard. I watch Rayne and Garret playing in the snow. They’re still tossing snowballs at each

other but break every few minutes to work on what I think is going to be a fort.

I try to keep my eyes focused on making cookies, but I find I'm watching them more than what I'm doing. When I finally have the first tray of macarons ready to bake, I turn toward the oven to find Mom watching me. She has a knowing smile on her face.

"What?" I furrow my brow. "Why are you looking at me like that?"

Her smile grows. "You like him."

It's not a question and my face heats at the meaning behind those words.

"Who? Garret?" I ask, playing dumb.

"You know that's who I'm talking about."

I shrug and move past her to open the oven. I slide the tray in and set a timer.

"He's alright. He's great with Rayne. Have those two always been this close?"

She nods. "Since she was old enough to walk."

"Really?" That answer catches me by surprise. I'd expected her to tell me Rayne started visiting him more over the past couple of years.

"Grams has helped us out with Rayne since she was a baby. All those Mutter boys think of her as family. But I'll admit, she's the closest with Garret."

I'm back at my workstation by the window and glance back up just in time to see Garret take a snowball to the face. It makes me chuckle.

"He smiles when he's with her."

I feel Mom's gaze on me, but I don't look at her.

"What are you getting at?" she asks.

"Nothing. Just that it's nice to see him smile. She seems to bring out the best in him."

Mom doesn't respond to that. She returns to the stove to give the onions and peppers she's sautéing a stir. They must be softened to her liking because she dumps the ground beef in to brown.

We continue to cook in silence. She's focused on her chili, and I'm focused on watching Garret with my niece.

"Was he close to Carol?" I ask after a few minutes of deliberating. If they were, it would make his attachment to Rayne make so much more sense. I don't know why I can't just accept that they're close without any other reason than being neighbors. But something just feels off to me and I can't put my finger on it.

Mom frowns at me. "Not that I know of. I mean, they obviously knew each other. Everyone in this small town knows everyone else. But that's about it. Why do you ask?"

"Just curious. I don't recall them being friends when we were younger, and I was just wondering if that changed after I moved away for college. Carol and I didn't talk as much that last year before ... Well, you know."

"Yeah, I know." Mom sighs. "And no. They weren't friends that I'm aware of."

Sensing Mom is about to probe more about why I'm asking so many questions, I quickly change the subject. "I think I'll make some hot chocolate too. The fancy kind from those dark chocolate bars I bought. With whipped cream. Rayne will love that when she comes in from the cold."

"That's a great idea." Mom grabs a hand towel and wipes her hands clean. "I'll invite Garret in too. That poor man needs someone to take care of him. He has to be lonely in that tiny house of his with no one to cook for him."

"Maybe he likes being alone," I say under my breath.

Mom scoffs. "No one *likes* being alone, dear. We're not built that way. Everyone needs at least one person that's theirs."

I turn around, expecting to find Mom watching me, but she's not. She's already at the back door getting ready to call

Rayne in.

I think about what she said while heating up the milk. Do we all need one person to call our own? I have Sierra. We'd do anything for each other, but I don't think that's what Mom meant. She's referring to a life partner, the other half of a couple, a lover, a soulmate.

I thought Brad was that person for me, but I was so very wrong about that. In fact, I've hardly thought about him since my conversation with Sierra last weekend. Even before that, my thoughts were sparse. What does that say about my feelings toward him?

If I'd truly been in love with him, I'd still be broken. Right?

What does that say about my ability to choose *my* person?

I'm guessing whatever it is, it's nothing good.

RIGHT AS I FINISH WHIPPING UP THE HEAVY CREAM, RAYNE comes rushing into the kitchen with Garret trailing behind her. While she barges right up next to me, he stops just inside the entrance.

"Is it true?" Rayne bounces on her toes. "Are you really making us hot chocolate? Like, the *good* kind."

I chuckle and tap my finger on her red nose. It's so cold it feels like an ice cube. "Yes. I am. But you have to go clean up first and put on dry clothes."

She claps her hands but doesn't turn to leave. "And you made cookies. You make the best cookies, Aunt Char." She looks over her shoulder and grins at Garret. "Do you see these, Garret? Coconut cookies. They smell so good."

He nods but doesn't smile. "I do. But I'm going to head out. Leave you all to your afternoon snack."

"Nonsense," my mom says at the same time Rayne cries out, "No!"

“Stay.” Mom steps up next to him and reaches her arm out. “Let me hang up your coat, then take a seat at the table.”

“I don’t want to intrude.”

“Pish posh.” Mom *tsks*. “No such thing in this house, and you know it.”

“You might as well sit,” I say as I give the hot chocolate in the pan another stir. “I made some for you too. Plus, they’re not going to let you go easily.”

I meet his heavy gaze. He nods but still doesn’t smile. There’s no more laughing or playful demeanor in him now. He’s back to being grumpy Garret.

But he removes his coat and gloves and hands them over to Mom. She hangs them on a hook by the back door and shoos him into the kitchen. “Might as well get washed up. Char will have the hot chocolate ready in a minute.”

Garret heads to the sink to wash his hands while Rayne sidles up next to me. “Can I have a cookie?”

I frown down at her. “You need to go change first like I asked.”

She clasps her hands together and holds them close to her chest. “Please!”

“No.” I chuckle. “The faster you get out of those wet clothes, the sooner you get a cookie and hot chocolate.”

“Just one?” She begs.

I roll my eyes. I don’t know why I’m arguing with her. We both know I’m going to give in to her. “Alright. Just one, and then you go put on some dry clothes.”

I plate up a cookie, but before I hand it to Rayne, I say, “Give this one to Garret. Guests first.”

She doesn’t argue with me. Just smiles broadly before she takes the plate and bounces over to where Garret is still standing. When she returns, I have two plates ready for her. “One for you and one for Grandma.”

“Who are those for?” Rayne points at the two other plates I prepared.

“One is mine and one is for Grandpa. I’ll go give it to him after I pour the hot chocolate.”

“Oh, honey, I’ll do that. Just let me know when it’s ready.”

“Thanks, Mom.” I give her a quick smile before I prepare all the mugs of hot chocolate.

I hear a chorus of moans and a smile slowly spreads across my face.

“Charlotte Lois Weber,” Mom says. “These just might be your best cookies yet. Aren’t they good, Garret?”

He grunts, then his words that follow cause me to suck in a breath. “Gives Grams a run for her money.”

That’s the second time now he’s suggested he likes my cookies better than Grams’ cookies. That’s a high compliment for sure.

“Jim and I keep telling her she should have a booth at the bake sale coming up. She’d sell out in a heartbeat.”

“I’d buy them.” Garret’s rough voices rolls out of him and right down my spine, leaving me trembling all over.

“Thanks, Aunt Char. Can I have another one after I change?” Rayne’s sweet, cheerful voice cuts through my lust-filled reaction to Garret like a knife.

I take a deep breath before I glance over my shoulder and smile. “Sure thing. Now go change before your hot chocolate gets cold.”

She runs off to her room while I place some cookies and two mugs of hot chocolate on a tray for Mom to take to Dad. I’m hoping he’s calmer now and she can enjoy this with him.

“Okay, Mom. This is ready for Dad. Let me know if you need help.”

When I turn to hand it to her, she’s giving me a not-so-subtle smile. “Oh, I’m sure we’ll be fine. Thanks for making this for everyone.” She turns with the tray in hand and pauses

next to Garret. “Be sure to ask Char to get you some chili to take home with you before you leave. I made way more than we’ll eat.”

Garret nods at her but doesn’t speak. A moment later, we’re alone in the kitchen and the silence between us is awkward. I don’t like awkward.

I keep busy by fixing up his mug of hot chocolate. I add an extra dollop of whipped cream and extra chocolate shavings because I’ve already learned he has a soft spot for sweets.

“Here you go.” I hand it to him but don’t walk to where he’s standing. I want to see if he’ll come to me.

I pull my lips between my teeth when he does. He stops right next to me—his body almost touching mine—before he takes the mug from my hand.

He holds my gaze as he lifts the mug to his lips. His tongue darts out and licks the top of the whipped cream before he takes a sip. His eyes fall closed and the groan that comes out of him is so erotic and seductive I have to squeeze my legs together to relieve the tension building there.

“Damn, Princess.” He licks his lips, still not opening his eyes. “This is really good.”

“Umm.” I clear my throat. “Thanks.”

His eyes fly open, and he stares at me for a moment. They dart around my face like he’s taking in my features for the first time. Then he looks past me and tilts his head slightly.

“What are those?” He points over my shoulder before he steps around me.

I follow his gaze and smile when I realize what he’s pointing at.

I step up next to him and say, “This is my plant collection. I have a thing for carnivorous plants.”

He looks down at me with something resembling a smirk on his face. “Why?”

I shrug. “Why not? Some people collect orchids or African violets or succulents. I collect carnivorous plants. I think they’re really cool. Like this one here. It’s a *Drosera derbyensis* or more commonly called an octopus plant. I had to special order her. She requires a little more care than the others, but she’s worth it.”

“Hmm.” His gaze intensifies. “You’ve surprised me yet again, Princess.”

“You say that like it’s an unusual occurrence.”

“It is.” His voice drops to a near whisper. “From my experience, people tend to be predictable. You, are anything but.”

He lifts his hand and rubs a strand of my hair between his fingers. It’s an innocent enough action, but it feels way more intimate than it should. I find myself leaning into him, and if I’m not mistaken, he’s leaning into me too.

I sense he wants to kiss me, and dammit, I want him to kiss me. I’ve been dreaming about his lips against mine again. Once wasn’t enough.

“What’s happening between us?” I hear myself say out loud even though I don’t think I meant to say it.

He stares at me, the lust and desire evident in the flare dancing around his dark pupils.

“I don’t know,” he says. His voice is rough like gravel.

I start to lift my hand to rest it on his chest when Rayne comes barreling into the kitchen. “I’m ready for my hot chocolate now.”

We jump apart, both of us startled by the interruption. I turn to her to find her leaning over the pot on the stove. She didn’t notice what was happening between us, which is good. I’m not ready to explain whatever this is.

Truth be told. I’ve no clue what’s happening. I’m in no position to enter into a relationship with someone. Not even a sexual one. My breakup with Brad is still too raw, too fresh.

I cannot be this attracted to Garret. I just can't. Maybe if I say it enough, I'll convince myself it's true.

Chapter 14

The princess and the beast.

Garret

There's a buzz in the air that has me on edge. It's poker night at Posey's Lounge. This night is always tense when both a Mutter and a Koch are sitting at the table. Tonight, it's two against one. Me being the only Mutter.

But that's not what has me on edge.

Charlotte just walked in the door with none other than Amelia Koch and her group of friends, Nova and Hadley.

What the hell is she doing with Amelia Koch? Were they friends back in high school? It's not something I recall, but then again, she dated Tanner.

They're in the bar area, sitting at a table close to the dance floor, but still in perfect view of the poker table in the separate game room where I happen to be sitting.

With my bad luck, I'm sitting in the chair facing the main room. As a result, my focus is shit. I keep watching her instead of the other players. Half the battle in poker is being able to read my opponents. If I can't focus, I might as well call it a night.

Apparently, I like pain and suffering because I'm not moving. I'm losing money and I don't give a fuck because I get to see *her*.

Edge deals the next hand, dragging my attention to the cards in front of me. He's the president of the local motorcycle club that owns this bar. He's a decent guy. Much nicer than what I'd expect from the president of a club called the Unholy Ghosts. According to the ladies, he's also the best-looking club

member too. Even for a man in his early fifties. I guess silver foxes really are a thing.

Edge isn't his real name. That's something that very few people know. It's one of those need-to-know things that no one outside the core members of the club knows.

As motorcycle clubs go, they're pretty mild. They used to deal with drugs and guns before Edge took over about ten years ago. He cleaned house and took the club legit. At least as far as we know.

I pick up my cards and inwardly smile. It's the best hand I've been dealt all night—three aces, a five and a two. I keep the aces and toss the other two cards down, requesting two more cards from the dealer.

Before he deals the new cards, laughter from the main room causes my chest to tighten. Because I'd recognize that laugh anywhere.

Charlotte Weber has unknowingly dug her claws into me, and I can't shake her hold, no matter how hard I try.

I stare at her from across the room. Her smile is bright, and she looks happier than I've seen her since she returned home. She smiles often, but there's something in her expression tonight that suggests she's more relaxed than she's been in a long time.

I know she's running from something that happened to her in Chicago. I've heard the mumblings from the rumor mill, but I've purposefully ignored the talk. She'll tell me if she wants me to know.

Edge nudges my arm from his seat next to me. "You playing or staring at the pretty girls?"

I jerk my head in his direction and narrow my gaze. "What?"

He chuckles, and it comes out rough and dark. "The girls." He points to where Charlotte is sitting. "You watching them or this game?"

"The game." I grumble.

“Then how about you look at your cards and place a bet?”

I look down at the two new cards he dealt that I haven't picked up yet. I quickly swipe them up and hold them with my three aces.

Despite my efforts to maintain a neutral expression, I feel my eyes widen when I see the new cards—two jacks. I've got a tough hand to beat.

Without a word, I toss some chips onto the table.

“Someone thinks he has a good hand,” Tanner says from his seat across from me. He's got a huge smile on his face. His brother Linden mumbles something under his breath, but I don't make it out.

I don't respond to him, and I do my damndest to not react. Instead, I stare at him with as little emotion as I can muster.

I know my bet makes it clear I've got a good hand. That was my intention. Let's see if he's a big enough dumbass to meet my call.

Tanner breaks our staring contest first and looks over his shoulder. When he looks back at me, his smile is gone. “I can't imagine which pretty girls you'd be looking at. 'Cause it better not be my sister or her friends.”

I scoff and hide behind my glass of whiskey. I swallow it down, sucking one of the ice cubes into my mouth with it. Then I wave down the waitress for a new glass.

“It better not be Char either.” Tanner continues, his voice low and serious. “As my former girlfriend, she's off-limits too.”

“Didn't you two break up senior year?” Billy asks. He's several years older than us, and a local accountant that sometimes plays with us. Since he's older than any of the Mutters or Kochs, he's always remained neutral in our rivalry. “That was over ten years ago, right? Not sure you can claim ownership of her anymore.”

“The hell I can’t. She’s *my* ex-girlfriend, not his, making ownership clearly mine.”

“Who are you claiming ownership of?” Charlotte asks. Her voice sounds sweet, but her stance says something very different. She’s standing behind Tanner with her arms crossed over her chest and her brows raised in question.

My gaze rakes down her body without my permission. She’s wearing tight as fuck jeans and a sweater that looks more like a fashion statement than for comfort or warmth. It’s black with a big bow in the front and hangs off one shoulder. With no bra strap in sight, she’s either braless, or she’s wearing a strapless bra. Both options make my dick hard.

Her fancy high-heeled shoes look painful and also lack the ability to keep her warm. They barely cover her feet, and from what I can tell, she’s not wearing socks. *Does she not get that it’s below zero outside?*

Despite my annoyance over her comfort, she looks sexy as fuck. I want to see her in my bed with nothing else on but those shoes.

“I know you’re not talking about me, Tanner Koch.” She adds, dragging my eyes back up to her face.

“Char, baby!” Tanner’s full smile is back. He hops out of his chair and pulls her in for a tight hug. Too tight. So tight, in fact, it feeds my anger. When she lifts her arms and returns his hug, an audible growl escapes me.

Every eye at the table turns to me.

Tanner turns to face me with his arm draped over Charlotte’s shoulder. His hand grips her bare shoulder and I grit my teeth. He’s smirking like he knows why I’m pissed, and she looks worried. “Something you want to say, Garret?”

“Nope,” I say as I pick up my glass, only to find it’s empty. I glance around for the waitress but she’s nowhere in sight.

I set it back down and pick up my cards instead. “Are we playing cards or what?”

“Yeah, we’re playing cards,” Tanner says. He leans forward and tosses his chips into the pot without letting go of Charlotte. “I call and raise your bet.”

I lift a brow. He’s trying to get a rise out of me, but I refuse to give into his bullshit. When he straightens, he leans in close to Charlotte’s ear and whispers something to her. She gives him a tight smile, but she doesn’t look pleased. That gives me some comfort.

Not that I should find comfort in anything Charlotte does. She’s not mine, and she can’t ever be mine.

The rest of the table places their bets or folds, and Edge calls for us all to show our cards. We all flip over our cards. My hand wins.

“Would you look at that,” Tanner says. “Mutter wasn’t bluffing after all.”

I collect my chips and push to my feet.

“I’m calling it a night.” I mumble to the table. I hear lots of moans and protests at my declaration, but I don’t give a shit.

I can’t sit here and watch Tanner flirt with Charlotte, even if she’s not returning his advances.

I ignore them all, head to the bar, and cash in my chips. I have to get out of here before I do something truly stupid.

Like kissing Charlotte senseless and publicly claiming her as mine.

I’M ALMOST TO MY TRUCK WHEN I HEAR CHARLOTTE CALLING after me.

“Garret, wait!”

I glance over my shoulder and freeze when I see she’s running toward me in those damn high-heeled shoes. She’s going to slip on a patch of ice and fall flat on her face.

I reach my hand out, signaling for her to stop, but she doesn't. She keeps running toward me like she does this every day.

"How do you run in those shoes?" I bark out when she reaches me.

She furrows her brow and looks down. "What? These?" She lifts her foot in front of her and wiggles it. "Used to it, I guess. Wear them long enough and they feel completely normal."

"Well, they don't look normal. They look cold."

She rests her hands on her hips and gives me one of her wide smiles. "Aw, are you worried about my wellbeing?"

I growl.

Her smile grows.

We stare at each other for a few moments, neither of us speaking. She's the first to break.

"Are you going to tell me why you're upset?"

"I'm not upset."

She tilts her head to the side and gives me a don't-lie-to-me stare. I growl again before I spin around and continue walking toward my truck.

"Garret, don't be like this." She rushes ahead of me and blocks my hand before I reach my door handle. How she moved that fast in those shoes is beyond me. "Please. Talk to me."

"Charlotte," I say in warning. "I can't do this."

She lifts her chin, giving me a determined stare. Her heels add a lot to her height, but I still tower over her. "Can't do what?"

"This! You and me. It's too much."

"There's nothing going on between Tanner and me. That was just him being, well ... Tanner."

I step closer to her, my nostrils flaring, and I box her in. “Don’t care. I didn’t like it.”

“Why?” she asks, her chest rising and falling rapidly as if she’s struggling to breathe.

“Charlotte,” I whisper as I drop my forehead to hers.

“Why do you call me that?”

“It’s your name.”

“But everyone calls me Char. Always have. Except for you.”

“I like Charlotte. Is that okay?”

“Yes.” Her hands slide up my arms and slip around my neck. My lips are so close to hers. It wouldn’t take much to claim her mouth with mine.

“Why did you stop bringing me food?”

Her head jerks back, and she looks up at me in confusion. “What?”

“You stopped bringing me food. Why?”

“I ... I didn’t think you cared.”

“I do. Not that I expect you to cook for me. But I like it. And I like that you seemed to do it because you cared.”

She nods. “Then I’ll start doing it again.”

“I’d like that. Not that I only want you for food, I like the food, but I also—”

“Garret.” She cuts me off. “Will you shut up and kiss me already? I really need to feel your—”

I don’t let her finish before my mouth covers hers in a deep passionate kiss. I don’t wait for her to part her lips to let me in. I plunge my tongue into her mouth and take her like she’s mine. Like the way I want to make her mine.

I engulf her, and she melts into me like her body was made to fit against me. She kisses me back with the same fervor I kiss her. It’s hot and wet and leaves me feeling breathless.

When I pull away, we're both panting. My body is on fire with my need to have her. I don't even feel the cold temperatures anymore.

"My place. Now." I bark out. It's not a question. I want her and don't intend to leave any room for interpretation.

She nods. "I drove my parents' car. I can't leave it here."

"Follow me."

"Okay."

"Where are you parked?"

She points behind me, and I look over my shoulder. Her parents' car is only a few cars away.

I nod and step away from her. "I'll wait until you're safely inside."

She stares at me for a second before she steps away from my truck. She doesn't make it three steps before I pull her flush against me and kiss her again. This kiss catches her off guard and it takes her a moment before she catches up and kisses me back.

"Fuck. I like kissing you."

She smiles against my lips. "I like you kissing me too."

I release her and step back before this turns into something more. I refuse to fuck her in the parking lot of a biker bar.

"Go." I slap her ass, and she lets out a little yelp that makes my dick harder. "I'll see you in a few."

She gives me a broad smile as she backs away from me. "Be ready for me, big guy. This dirty princess is ready to play again."

I drop my head back and groan. Her laugh fills the air around me, and I know without a doubt I am completely and totally fucked.

I WAIT FOR HER TO PULL UP BEHIND MY TRUCK BEFORE I GET out. A part of me was afraid she'd bail and not come, while another part told me it would be for the best.

I'm glad she came.

I stand next to my truck and watch her as she gets out of her car. I should be worried someone will see her parents' car here. It's a small town, and it's easy to spot others' cars. But right now, I couldn't care less. I want her too badly.

Besides, you can't really see my house that well from the road with the line of trees out front. Someone would have to be really nosy to see it.

She steps up in front of me and juts her chin out. "Well, are we going to stand outside freezing to death or go inside, big guy?"

I growl and pull her roughly against me. "You're getting mouthy, Princess."

A smile lifts her lips, and she runs a finger along my jawline. "I think you like me mouthy."

I slide my hand around her neck, gripping it tightly. Tugging her closer, I whisper against her lips. "I like you naked."

Then I kiss her hard and deep and until we're both breathless and gasping for air. I release her almost as fast.

"Inside. Now." I grumble, then smack her ass. The sound echoes through the valley.

She gasps, and I head toward my front door and unlock it. I swing it open and wave her in. She complies with a seductive grin on her face that has my dick harder than steel.

Bullet comes running from her bed in the corner and jumps up on Charlotte, excited to see her.

"Hey, girl." Charlotte cups the sides of Bullet's face and pets her. "It's good to see you too."

Her laughter tells me she doesn't mind my dog jumping on her, but I do. "Bullet. Down. You know better."

Bullet immediately complies and sits at Charlotte's feet. Charlotte crouches down to her level and continues petting her. "She's a good girl. I don't mind."

"I know," I say roughly. "I need to take her out. I want you in my bed naked when I come back."

She raises a brow and smirks up at me. "And if I'm not?"

The growl that comes out of me says it all, but I still put words to it. "I'll spank that round ass of yours so hard my handprints will still be there a week from now."

She pushes to her feet, still holding that seductive smile, and steps close to me. "Sounds like fun."

Then she walks past me—her hips swaying side-to-side and her heels clanking on my hardwood floors—and heads for the stairs to my room, leaving me speechless.

Once she's out of sight, she calls down. "I'll think about it, big guy. Just don't leave me waiting for long."

I drop my head back and scrub my hands down my face, swallowing another growl. This woman is going to be the death of me.

"Leave the damn shoes on," I yell as I head down the narrow hallway toward the back door. As soon as it's open, Bullet darts out into the darkness. I follow her, shutting the door behind me. I wait on the porch for her to do her business. It's cold enough that she doesn't take too long.

She leads the way back inside and immediately heads toward the stairs. "No girl. Down here."

She stops, drops her head like she's in trouble, then heads to her bed in the corner. I kneel next to her and give her a pat. "You're not in trouble. I just need some time alone with my girl upstairs. Okay?"

She nuzzles into my touch before she curls into a ball and closes her eyes. Satisfied that she's okay, I head upstairs.

When I reach the landing, I stop.

“You’re not naked.” The words come out rough and gravelly. No doubt she can hear my displeasure in the tone.

She turns to face me in nothing but her bra, panties, high-heeled shoes, and a huge smile. That smile has my nostrils flaring. My eyes rake down her body, and my dick thickens. It’s a matching white lace and satin set that leaves nothing to the imagination. The material covering her breasts is mostly see-through. At least she left the shoes on.

“You didn’t give me much time.” Her voice is almost sickly sweet in her response, and I can’t believe how much I love it.

I kick my boots off and pull my sweater and undershirt over my head and toss it to the side before I charge toward her. She doesn’t flinch. I love that even more.

I wrap my hand around her neck, gripping it tight. “Don’t care. I’m still going to spank you.”

She sucks in a breath right before my mouth claims hers. While I’m plundering her mouth like I’m digging for treasure, she reaches for my jeans and has them undone and pushed down my hips in a matter of seconds. When her hand wraps around my erection, I break the kiss and gasp.

She pushes up on her tiptoes and whispers in my ear. “Shall I get on my knees again?”

“No.” I growl.

I flick the clasp of her bra to unhook it and pull the straps down her shoulders. I step back from her and stare at her full breasts. My mouth waters in anticipation of sucking on them.

“Take your panties off.” I order. “Then get on your hands and knees.”

She doesn’t hesitate to comply, but she takes slow, controlled movements to make it happen. She’s teasing me, and for that, I’ll spank her even harder.

Once her panties are off, she turns just as slowly and takes her sweet ass time crawling onto my bed. When she’s in position, she shakes her ass, taunting me.

Crack! The sound of my hand slapping her ass fills the silence. She cries out and then moans in pleasure.

I do it two more times before I speak. “Do you enjoy making me spank you, Princess?”

“Yes,” she gasps.

“Is that tight cunt of yours wet for me?”

“Oh my God, yes.”

Crack! I lean over her, rubbing the red marks on her ass before I give it a hard squeeze. “I thought I told you only to call me Garret when you’re in my bed.”

“Garret!” she cries. “I want to feel you.”

“Be specific, Princess.” Before she can answer me, I slip my hand between her legs and tease her entrance with my fingers. “Fuck, you’re so wet.”

“Your cock. I want your cock,” she says in a rush. “Please.”

I slide two fingers inside her, slowly spreading her open. Then I lightly bite her shoulder before kissing the same spot.

“Nah, I think I’m going to make you wait for that.” She whimpers at my words. “I need to taste you. Feel you come on my tongue.”

Pushing to my feet, I pull my pants, boxers, and socks off before I grab the condoms from the drawer next to my bed. Like the good girl that she is, she doesn’t move. She’s panting and trembling all over, but she remains exactly how I told her to.

I give my cock a hard tug before I drop to my knees next to the bed. I don’t give her any warning. I grab her hips and pull her back until her sweet center is right in my face. I lick her from her clit to her opening, and then I shove my tongue inside her.

I groan at how sweet she tastes, and she gasps at the roughness of my tongue stroking her and my beard scratching the soft skin of her inner thighs. I do it again and again,

rotating between fucking her with my tongue and sucking on her clit. When her climax detonates, I spank her ass again and again and until she's writhing uncontrollably and collapses on my bed from pleasure.

Grabbing the condoms, I quickly sheath my cock before I flip her over to her back. She's breathing heavily and her eyes are closed. I'm not sure she's coherent enough to even notice that I'm spreading her legs wide and settling between them. My cock presses against her entrance, but I wait.

"Princess," I say as a demand. Her eyes fly open and meet mine. "Look at me while I fuck you."

I slam inside her in one fast thrust, causing us both to cry out. Nothing about how I fuck her is easy. It's hard and fast and rough and the best fucking sex of my life. No one has ever felt as good as her.

Her body is still reeling from her first release, and it doesn't take long to build her up for a second. "That's it, Princess. Come on my cock. I need to feel you squeezing me, sucking me dry."

She lets out a soft whimper as if she can barely handle the pleasure that rips through her body. Her head falls back, and her mouth opens wide like she's trying to cry, but no sounds come out. It's the sexiest look I've ever seen.

She clamps around me, and I come harder than I think I ever have. I continue to slam inside her until all my strength is zapped out of me and I collapse on top of her. We stay like that for several beats. Then she wraps her arms and legs around me and holds me close like she's afraid I'm going to leave.

I'm not. But I am afraid I'm crushing her, so I press up on my elbows and gently kiss her. I start to pull away, but she leans into my lips, kissing me back. It's soft and sensual and makes me feel things I shouldn't be feeling.

Like how much I really want to keep her.

I pull back and stare down at her. She meets my gaze and smiles. It's sweet and caring and makes my heart constrict.

Then she runs her fingers through my hair, her nails scraping along my scalp, and I'm done for.

"Stay," I say before I can talk myself out of it. "Don't move an inch. I'll be right back."

I slowly pull out of her and immediately miss the warmth of her body around my cock. With one more kiss to her lips, I push to my feet and rush downstairs to the bathroom. I discard the condom, clean up, wet a washcloth, and grab a clean towel before rushing back upstairs.

Charlotte is exactly as I left her.

"Good girl," I say as I crawl over her body. She gives me a sated smile that has my dick waking back up.

Nudging her legs open with my knee, I clean her up with the washcloth before drying her. Once she's clean, I roll onto my side and pull her close so she's facing me. She curls into me like she's made to fit there.

"I should go before I fall asleep," she mumbles through a yawn.

"I said *stay*."

Her eyes fly open and meet mine. There's apprehension there at first, but then it fades into something resembling hope. Then she rests her hand on my chest and nuzzles her face into my neck.

This is probably a terrible idea, but I don't care. I want Charlotte. I want her here. And for tonight, I'm going to let myself believe she's mine.

I'll worry about the consequences tomorrow.

Chapter 15

It's just breakfast.

Charlotte

The room is hot, and there's a heavy weight pressing down on me. My eyes slowly open to a dark, unfamiliar room and a big body curled up around me like a blanket.

I blink a few times to clear the confusion fogging my brain. When my vision finally comes into focus, I look up to see Garret's neck. His chin is resting on the top of my head. My head is on one of his arms while his other is around my midsection. His hand is gripping my waist like he's afraid I'll disappear if he loosens his hold. One of his legs is tossed over mine and looped around my calf.

Who would have thought Garret Mutter likes to snuggle? Not me. That's for damn sure.

He's grumpy and unhappy and acts like he'd prefer to be alone rather than have someone close like this. But the way he's holding me says the exact opposite.

And I like it.

I like him, and I don't really know why. I'm drawn to him on a primal level that doesn't make much sense.

I don't know him all that well, and it's not like we were close back in high school. He was the hot guy that kept to himself. I'd admired his looks from afar, but I don't think we ever had a conversation worth noting.

We've interacted enough for me to know he has a good heart, but he's not let me see his true self. It's clear he's holding back, and he doesn't want anyone to see him that closely.

None of the Mutters had it easy growing up. I know Garret's mom died right after he was born, but I don't really know the specifics of her death. I think it was cancer. My parents have said on more than one occasion that Paul never got over her death, and that affected his ability to be a good father to his sons.

Grams did most of the raising after that. None of the women who followed amounted to anything. That was hard on all of them, I'm sure.

I squeeze my eyes closed and try to push the feelings stirring inside aside. I can't catch feelings for this man.

I just can't.

For one, I just experienced a bad breakup. I'm in no position to start another relationship so soon after breaking up with Brad. We were together for seven years. A few months is not enough time to move past that.

I need to give myself time to heal. I need to adjust to being home and starting a new job. Then there's all the issues with my dad and working to build a stronger relationship with Rayne. I still haven't dealt with the loss of my sister. I have too much that needs my attention. There's not enough of me left to give to Garret.

Not that he's indicated he wants more from me than sex.

And food. He's made it quite clear he likes my cooking. That actually makes me smile. I'm happy to make him all the food he can eat.

But the sex? I'm not sure I can keep my feelings out of it if we keep doing what we did last night. Being in his arms like this gives me the wrong idea. He made it clear he wasn't the relationship kind of guy. Just because I stayed the night and cuddled with him, doesn't mean he's changed his mind.

With panic building inside me, I decide it's time for me to go. As carefully as possible, I slide out from under Garret's warm, hard body. As soon as I'm free, a shiver runs through me. I miss his heat and touch instantly.

The sun isn't up yet, making it harder to find all my clothes. I at least had enough sense last night to fold my clothes on a chair in the corner, but Garret tossed my bra and underwear when he took them off me.

Once I'm certain I have everything, I quietly tiptoe barefooted downstairs and into the bathroom. I close the door behind me, then I flip on the light.

I stand there, unmoving for far too long, staring at myself in the mirror.

Who am I, and what am I doing here?

I don't do this sort of thing.

I don't sleep with men I'm not in a relationship with, let alone a man I hardly know.

I guess I can argue that I've known Garret my whole life. We grew up as neighbors in the same small town and went to the same school.

He's hardly a stranger.

I close my eyes and take in a few deep breaths. *If he's not a stranger, then why do I feel like what we're doing is wrong?*

Choosing not to dwell on my mixed-up feelings, I shake my hands out to my sides and get dressed. Then I clean up by washing my face and brushing my teeth with my finger.

This might be a first for me. I've never woken up from a one-night stand and snuck out in the wee hours of the morning.

But is this a one-night stand since we've had sex before? What qualifies as a one-night stand? Sierra would know. I make a mental note to ask her the next time we talk. If I know my best friend, she'll know what to say to make me feel better about all of this.

Once I feel presentable, I quietly exit the bathroom, grateful that Garret's house is relatively creek free. The door doesn't make a sound as I open it, and in my bare feet, the floorboards are solid and silent.

I stop in his kitchen, the sun just now rising above the hills on the horizon.

I should leave, but something is keeping me rooted in place.

I turn to his refrigerator and open it. Spotting a package of bacon and a carton of eggs, my mind is made up. I'm making Garret breakfast before I leave.

Besides, it's not an invitation to date or to even see him again, let alone have another round of sex.

It's just breakfast. Where's the harm in that?

I'M ABOUT TWO MINUTES INTO FRYING THE BACON WHEN I hear him stir. It could also be the coffee brewing. Both are making a little noise and adding the most delicious fragrance to the air.

There's some shuffling around, followed by his heavy footsteps. A moment later, he's thumping down the stairs.

I don't look at him. Not because I'm afraid he'll be upset that I'm still here and cooking breakfast. But because I'd bet my last dollar, he looks sexy as hell first thing in the morning.

He grumbles something that I can't make out as he steps up behind me. I feel his heat before his hands rest on my hips. He gives me a slight tug back, then kisses my cheek.

"Mornin'," he says in the scratchiest, sexiest deep voice I've ever heard. It's all rough and gravelly from sleep. Another thing to add to the list of things I really like about Garret.

"Morning." I smile and make the mistake of looking over my shoulder.

Oh, my heart, be still.

I was right. He's shirtless. His hair is all disheveled, and his expression is one I've never seen on him before. He

doesn't look grumpy or happy. There's a vulnerability there that makes me want to spin around and hug him tight.

I clear my throat and turn back to the pan on the stove and flip the bacon. "The coffee should be ready. Why don't you sit, and I'll pour you a mug."

He doesn't move from where he's standing right up against me. His hands tighten slightly on my hips before he buries his face in my neck and takes in a deep breath. A soft groan escapes him that has me clenching my thighs together. My breathing hitches and I sink against his chest.

We remain like that for a few moments before he releases me and walks away.

When I glance over my shoulder, I regret it. His ass looks so good in those jeans. I stare unabashedly until he disappears into the bathroom.

I'm still standing there staring at where he stood when he comes out of the bathroom. He gives me a knowing smirk before he plops down in the chair facing me. His jeans are undone. I can see a hint of his black boxers underneath. His ab muscles are taut, and the splatter of chest hair is just too much.

What was that about my heart being still?

I turn my focus back to getting him coffee. I'd already set out mugs and plates. I fill one for him then ask, "Do you drink it black? You seem like a black coffee kind of man."

"Why do you say that?"

I shrug, ignoring how rugged his voice sounds. It's way too sexy for this early in the morning.

I close my eyes. *Rugged is not my type. I like clean cut, city boys. Don't forget that, idiot.*

"Two sugars," he says a moment later.

A slow smile spreads across my face. "I should've known, considering your affinity for sweets."

I add the sugar to his coffee and almost drop it when I turn around. Facing his intense heated stare first thing in the

morning is a completely different experience.

He looks so big in this small space. And it's not just his size. It's him. He has a way of sucking up all the oxygen and filling up every empty space in the room with himself.

I try to steady myself as I walk the short distance and set the coffee in front of him. I quickly pull my hands back and ring them together, hoping he didn't notice how they trembled.

"Scrambled or fried?" I ask.

He takes a sip of his coffee and moans. "You don't have to make me breakfast."

"I know. I want to. Now, how do you like your eggs?"

He stares up at me for a moment. There's a battle warring inside him. I can see it playing out in his eyes. He wants to object, but he's also hungry.

"Fried," he finally says with so much finality. "Sunny side down, please."

"How many will you eat?"

"Four."

"Coming right up." I spin around and can't contain the smile that spreads across my face. It's ridiculous how happy it makes me to cook for him.

I thought I was okay with the fact that Brad never wanted me to cook. I was wrong. Having people in my life that enjoy my food makes me insanely happy.

We remain silent while I finish frying up the bacon and start on the eggs. Sunny side down is my favorite way to eat eggs too, and I find way too much satisfaction in that. They're just eggs. Just because we like our eggs the same way doesn't mean anything.

Once everything is ready, I set his plate in front of him, and I take the seat on the opposite side of the table.

He takes a few big bites and then groans. "This is really good. Thank you."

“You’re welcome.” I smile around a bite of food. He continues eating, shoveling it down like he’s been starved for days.

“It’s nice to have someone to cook for,” I say, to break the silence. “Cooking for my family has been one of the few perks of moving home.”

He looks up at me, his brows furrowed. “You didn’t cook for that man you had in Chicago?”

I feel queasy at the mention of Brad. Garret knows I had a boyfriend, but the thought of him knowing exactly what happens makes me uneasy.

I take a sip of my coffee before I respond. “Nope. He preferred takeout or going out every night.”

Garret mumbles something then follows it up with, “Damn fool.”

I can’t hide my smile. “With a grandma like yours, I bet you never tire of having home-cooked meals. Do you eat dinner with them often?”

He doesn’t answer me, but I think I see a slight shrug as he continues shoveling food in his mouth.

“With as close as you are to Rayne, I’m surprised my mom hasn’t been sending her over with leftovers every day. Do you ever have dinner with my family? I mean, I know you haven’t in the time since I moved home, but maybe in the past?”

He still doesn’t respond. He’s good at avoiding small talk if he’s uninterested in participating.

“Did you know my sister that well?” I notice he tenses, but he doesn’t look up at me. “I mean, you’re so close with Rayne. I thought maybe you and Carol had become friends after I moved away. She and I didn’t talk as much that last year. I think she was mad at me for leaving.”

He drops his fork with a loud clunk. “What is this? Why all the questions?”

Feeling defensive from his harsh response, I say, “Oh, I don’t know. We’ve had sex twice now. I guess I thought it

would be nice if I actually knew something about you.”

“Why?” He looks confused.

“You ask that a lot, you know that?” I huff and take a drink of my coffee.

“Ask what?”

“Why?” I throw my hands up in exhaustion. “Every time I want to know something about you or do something nice for you, you ask me why.”

“Oh.” He sinks back in chair looking remorseful for how he responded. He takes a bite of bacon and stares at his plate. After he finishes chewing, he says, “Not used to it, I guess.”

I nod, but don’t say more. If he wants to talk, he will. I can’t force it on him.

He finishes up his eggs and pushes his plate aside before he leans forward and rests his elbows on the table. He runs his hand through his already messy hair and tugs at the ends.

“I did know your sister,” he says after a few awkward beats. His answer surprises me. “We’d sorta become friends. It hit me hard when she died. It reminded me of my own experience.”

“You mean your mom?”

He shifts his gaze to me and there’s a sadness there that has my heart cracking right down the middle.

“She died right after giving birth to me. Even though I never knew her, it still had a huge impact on me and my life. I know what it’s like. It’s hard. No kid should ever have to live with that. I guess you could say that drew me to Rayne. She deserves to have a normal, balanced life. If I can help give her that, even in small ways, I will.”

We hold each other’s gaze for a few minutes before I finally pick up my coffee and take a drink. It’s enough to break the growing tension between us.

“I hate that you experienced that. I see how hard it’s been on Rayne. She’s so curious about Carol, and I wish I could

give her what she needs. She needs a female role model, and I'm trying to be that for her. But she needs more. A dad, maybe. At least you had that."

He huffs. "If you can call it that. Dad was there, but not really present. He never recovered from losing mom."

His eyes glaze over, and I can't help but wonder if there's more he's thinking. More he's feeling. Does he blame himself?

My instinct is to tell him I'm sorry, but I don't. He doesn't need my pity. I suspect he needs a friend more.

I reach across the table and squeeze his arm. He gives me a faint smile before he picks up his coffee.

"You miss Carol," he says it as a statement not a question. "I can't imagine losing one of my brothers."

I nod. "Losing her is largely why I rarely came home. It's hard being here without her. She wasn't just my sister. She was my best friend." I pause, feeling my eyes stink with tears. I squeeze them close to fight them back. "And yet I feel like she had so many secrets she kept from me that last year."

His eyes snap to mine in a way that draws concern. "Like what?"

"Well, like who Rayne's father is. She refused to tell us. She used to tell me everything, but we grew apart that last year. It felt like she was punishing me for moving away. Then we lost her and ..." I feel myself getting choked up again, so I pause, take a drink of my coffee, and take a few deep breaths. "Losing her like we did broke me in a way I can't describe. It took me a few years before I felt like I could breathe normally again. I lost my sister before we could mend our relationship. Living with that is hard."

This time he's the one to reach across the table. He takes my hand and laces our fingers together. It's an intimate and caring gesture that has my heart pounding in my chest.

"I should probably get going. With any luck, I can sneak home before everyone else gets up. No need to feed the town gossip."

He nods and releases my hand. I go to stand and grab the plates.

“Don’t.” He rests his hand on mine. “I’ll clean up. It’s the least I can do since you made breakfast.”

I smile and set the plates back down. “Okay. So, I guess I’ll see you later.”

I turn and grab my coat from where I hung it by his front door. Just as I get both arms in it, he grabs me and pulls me into him.

He cups my cheek and stares down at me with an intensity that has my nerves on high alert. “Thanks for breakfast. It was nice.”

Then he kisses me. It’s soft and sweet, almost loving. And it leaves me even more confused and tied up in knots.

Because now I like Garret Mutter even more than I did before.

Chapter 16

When I can't turns into I must.

Garret

Today has been an unusual day. I got the same number of calls I expect to get to fill the open spaces in my schedule. I've been busy, but not swamped. Workwise, it's been a fairly typical day.

The difference is I'm happy.

I can't recall the last time I've truly felt happy. Hell, I'm not sure I've ever been happy before. My life hasn't been easy.

Living with the invisible wounds I have doesn't lead to a life of happiness. It leads to misery, anger, self-loathing, and an unwavering and unhealthy level of self-hatred.

I've got all of those things in spades.

And yet ... There's a bright spot of sunshine that's broken through my defenses and soothed all of those ugly scars that have marred my soul for far too long.

That sunshine has a name, and it's Charlotte Weber.

It's not even been twelve hours since she left me this morning, and I miss her. I don't miss anyone.

She's consumed my thoughts and distracted me from my work in ways nothing ever has. Normally, a distraction like that would piss me off.

But not today.

That's why today is so fucking unusual.

I welcome her as a distraction, and I'm not so sure that's a good thing.

Rather than dwell on what this means, I do something else I rarely do. I head over to Grams' house for dinner.

I probably should have warned someone I was coming over because the looks of surprise I get when I walk through the back door are alarming. You'd think I killed someone's puppy with how silent the kitchen falls.

"Garret!" Grams rushes to my side and cups my cheeks. "You're just in time for dinner. Let me set you a place."

"Thanks, Grams." I pull her in for a hug and kiss the top of her head before I hang up my coat and kick off my boots in the mudroom.

"I'm sorry to say you missed Mac and Sophia," Grams says as she rearranges the table to make a place for me. "They went out to dinner tonight, but everyone else is here."

I glance around the table and all my brothers are staring at me. Liam and Christian wear matching frowns, but Chase and Ash are grinning like they know something and are about to drop it on me like a bomb.

As is typical when I'm around, Dad doesn't look up from his damn newspaper.

Grams finishes setting all the food on the table—chicken fried steak, mashed potatoes, and corn. It smells so good my stomach growls loudly in anticipation.

Grams chuckles when she passes me and pats my back. "If you came over more often, you'd get a lot more meals like this, boy."

I don't respond. Instead, I drop my head and wait for her to take her seat. She always leads us in grace before we're allowed to dig in.

Dad folds up his paper and stuffs it under his chair. I feel his eyes on me, but I don't look in his direction. He and I have never gotten along, and I'm not interested in ruining my good mood. They come along so rarely, and I want to savor this one.

"Ash, you're up," Grams says once she finishes grace. Youngest always eats first.

Ash digs in, then Chase and Christian. Since I'm here, those two take their sweet time filling up their plates. I'm sure, in part, to piss me off. They know I hate waiting to eat. Too bad for them, my good mood is making it so I don't care.

But they don't know that. So they interpret my body language and glare accordingly.

They both take their seats and share a confused look. I didn't respond like I normally would. I struggle to hide my smile and it shows. Chase raises a brow, his own lips turning up into a grin.

I ignore him and fix my plate. As soon as I sit back down, Ash starts on me.

"So, it's true," Ash says. "You and Charlotte?"

My eyes snap to his and I frown. "What do you mean?"

"Rumor has it you two got in a little tiff in the parking lot outside of Posey's last night."

The kitchen falls eerily quiet.

Grams gets up from her seat and grabs a beer from the fridge. Then she sets it down in front of me as if she knows I'm going to need it for this conversation. Maybe coming over for dinner was a mistake.

I take a long pull before I meet Ash's teasing gaze. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Sure, you don't." He chuckles. "Rumor also has it her car was seen leaving your house early this morning. Is there something you'd like to share with the rest of us?"

I glare at him, and his smile grows. Normally I'd tell him to fuck off or growl or grumble some other objection under my breath. But I don't. Instead, I turn my attention back to my plate without responding to him.

"Be careful with her, Garret," Liam says in his typical fatherly tone. I hate it when he does that with me. I'm only three years younger than him, and at age thirty-two, I don't need a father figure.

“You don’t really know her. None of us do anymore.” He continues when I don’t say anything. “Besides, she just got out of a long-term relationship. She was practically engaged to the guy.”

“I don’t need your words of warning.” I grumble around a bite of food. “There’s nothing going on.”

Ash snickers and slaps at his leg as if I said the funniest thing he’s ever heard. “Let me rephrase my earlier remark. I saw Char leaving your house early this morning. The jig is up, big brother.”

“You’re spying on me?” I growl. It’s not a question. My family knows my privacy is important to me. If they’re violating that, we’re going to have a problem.

“Easy, Garret.” Liam cuts in. “No one is spying on you. Ash left early for the track to test Sophia’s new car. That’s all.”

I cut a glare at my older brother. His answer is plausible, but I still don’t like it. What I do in my house is my business and no one else’s.

Instead of responding, I focus on my plate and finish eating. My good mood is squashed, but I can at least still eat a good meal before I bolt.

“Garret,” Liam says my name with so much authority I can’t help but look up at him. The kindness and worry in his eyes cause me to pause. “Just be careful. Okay?”

I hold his stare for a long beat before I give him a curt nod. That’s all the acknowledgment any of them are getting.

Assuming Ash is being honest, and he really saw Charlotte leave my house this morning, then they already know too much. My family won’t spread the gossip, but if they know, that means others will soon too.

If this spreads before I tell Charlotte my deepest secret, I’m screwed. Because secrets always have a way of coming out. And this is one that could push a wedge so far between us, there’d be no coming back.

AFTER DINNER, I CAN'T RELAX. MY NERVES ARE ON HIGH alert and the tension in my body will not subside. With nothing to do in my tiny house to distract my thoughts, I head to my garage. Working on my bike restoration for a few hours is the only thing I can think of that might help.

The garage is still warm from earlier. It may be below freezing outside, but my garage is well insulated. Once my wood-burning stove kicks in, it holds the heat.

I relight it anyway, just to be safe. No use being uncomfortable if I can avoid it.

The snowfall from last week never completely melted, and they're calling for another big storm by the weekend. I make a mental note to pick up a few more books before then. If we get as much snow as they say, I'll be holed up in my house for a few days with nothing to do.

I toss my coat over the chair in the corner, causing Bullet's head to snap up from where she's sleeping on her bed. If I were to assign an emotion to my dog, I'd say she's pissed or irritated that I disturbed her.

I chuckle and rub behind her ears. "Sorry, girl. Go back to sleep."

She lets out a loud yawn before she spins around a few times and plops back down. Her eyes immediately close and her breathing falls to a soft whimper.

I grab a beer from the fridge and turn to my bike restoration project. I stare at it for a few minutes and can't decide where to start. Instead, I turn to the Harley I've had for a few years now. It's a cruising bike, and one that I enjoy riding often when the weather is nice.

There's something about being alone on a bike, riding through the hills on a warm summer day, that clears my head. I could use a ride like that right about now.

My head is so full of noise that I can't concentrate. Maybe if I sit on her for a bit, it'll help.

I toss a leg over the seat and straddle my bike. I take a long pull from my beer before I set it at my feet. With my hands on the handlebars, I close my eyes and think.

My mind immediately jumps to dinner with my family. The conversation has me all tied up in knots. I didn't expect them to know anything about Charlotte and me. Their questions and words of warning threw me off. Now I can't get it out of my head.

I know what I'm getting into where she's concerned. That's not the problem.

The problem is she doesn't know what she's getting into with me.

Liam's words play on repeat in my mind. Not the warning about her ex-boyfriend, but the one where he said I don't really know her.

Is he right?

Maybe I don't know all her likes and dislikes or how she spent the past ten years of her life, but I feel like I know her character. Isn't that all that really matters?

She's kind and generous and has one of the sweetest smiles I've ever seen. She's also strong and determined. At first glance, she comes across as someone who needs taking care of, but she can handle herself just fine. I may tease her about being a princess, but she's tough as nails.

And a fucking queen in the bedroom.

There's a light knock on the door. I drop my head back and groan. I know it's her. There's a shift in the air that has every nerve ending in my body buzzing with excitement.

It's as if my thoughts conjured her or summoned her to my side.

I don't respond. A part of me hopes that if I ignore the knock, she'll go away.

Is that really what I want?

It's what I *should* want.

But that option flies out the window when the door creaks open. I grip the handlebars and brace myself for her presence. When our eyes lock, my chest feels heavy and my dick swells.

Fuck me.

I like her.

And that's a problem.

"Hey," she whispers. She shuts the door behind and falls back against it, holding my stare.

"You shouldn't have come," I say almost too quietly for even me to hear. From the way her eyes drop, she heard me.

"Why?" she asks. But her expression tells me she knows why. She's just as hesitant as I am about continuing whatever this is we're doing.

"I don't do this." I say the words, but there's no conviction behind them.

She pushes off the door and walks toward me. She doesn't speak again until she's standing right next to me. "Do what?"

I have to stare up at her from where I'm sitting on my bike. Having her looking down at me is hot and makes my dick even harder.

"Fuck a woman more than once. Not since ..." I stop myself from finishing that sentence. She's not ready to hear that the last person I had sex with more than once was her sister.

I grab my beer from the floor next to me and lift it to my lips, downing the bottle in one long pull. Then I toss it behind me into the recycling bin.

"Finish that statement. Not since what?"

I hold her gaze and slowly shake my head. "Does it matter? All you need to know is that I don't do this. Ever."

She nods and glances around my garage before her eyes settle back on mine.

“Then what do you call what we’re doing?”

“I don’t know.” I answer her honestly. “Like I said, I don’t do what we’ve done. I’m a one and done kind of guy.”

She takes a step closer. Her leg brushes against mine and my dick takes notice. That simple touch has my body coming alive with need.

“Would you like me to leave?”

I suck in a deep breath, my nostrils flaring. “The answer to that question is complicated.”

She tilts her head to the side and narrows her gaze on me. “How so?”

I slip my arm around her waist and tug her toward me. She slips her leg over the seat and straddles my bike, facing me.

I brush my knuckle along her jawline and drop my forehead to hers. “Because I should want you to leave, but I really want you to stay.”

“I should want you to want me to leave too,” she says as she wraps her arms around my neck. “I told myself not to come. Yet my feet still carried me here.”

“I’m a broken man, Princess,” I whisper. I don’t know why I feel the need to tell her that. It’s not like that will absolve me of my wrongdoings.

“I know. I’m a broken woman. Maybe that’s what’s drawing us toward each other.”

I shake my head and lift her chin until her lips are close to mine. “You’re not broken. Not really. Just a little wounded.”

“I could say the same thing about you.” Her hands slide up my neck and into my hair. She gives it a light tug and I’m done.

My lips crash to hers, and she meets me with equal fervor. We’re all lips and tongues and hands. She pulls at my shirt at the same time I shove her coat down her arms. We break away

only long enough to rip our shirts over our heads and toss them aside.

Then our lips are locked again.

She undoes my jeans and has my cock out so fast it makes my head spin. Her grip is so tight and firm, I groan into her mouth.

“I love hearing those sounds from you,” she says. Her voice is raspy and heavy with need.

“I love that you make me make those sounds.” I grab at her jeans, but with the way she’s sitting, I can’t get them off. “Up.” I slap her hip. “Take these off.”

While she does what I ask, I dig a condom out of my wallet. I quickly roll it over my cock, never once taking my eyes off her.

“Bra off too.” I command. “I want to suck on your perfect tits while I sink my cock inside you.”

“So bossy.” She sasses, but does as I ask.

“You know you love it.” I pull her back onto the bike and line my cock up with her entrance. “You ready for me?”

“Yes,” she breathes.

“Good. This is going to be hard and fast.”

Without preamble, I grip her hips and pull her down on me. At the same time, I suck one of her pretty pink nipples into my mouth.

She whimpers and sags against me. Her body is pliant and ready for everything I have to give. As promised, I fuck her hard—slamming her down on my cock over and over again until she’s crying my name.

Her body cinches around my cock and I come like a rocket. It’s fast and intense and leaves me feeling light-headed.

She falls against me and lets out a ragged breath. “That was ... There are no words.”

I cup her cheek and lift her face to mine. Then I plant a light kiss on her lips. “I didn’t expect you.”

She holds my gaze. “I didn’t expect you either.”

“I’m not equipped to handle whatever this is that’s happening between us.”

She nods and swallows hard. “I feel that. More than you know.”

“So what are we going to do?”

She wraps her arms around me and squeezes me tight. My dick is still buried deep inside her, and her warm affection has me getting hard again.

“Do we have to have the answers tonight?”

She peppers light kisses along my jawline and down my neck.

“No, I don’t guess so.”

“Then let’s take it one day at a time. No labels. No promises except honesty.”

“Honesty,” I whisper against her lips. A darkness passes over me. I’m breaking that before this even begins, but I push it out of my mind. “And just you and me. No one else.”

She pulls back, her eyes wide as if my request surprises her. “As in, exclusive?”

Putting that word to it makes me a little nervous, but it is what I mean. “Yes. Exclusive.”

She nods slowly. “Okay, but if either of us wants to stop, we say so.”

“I can agree to that.” I brush a strand of her hair behind her ear before I slide my hand around her neck. “You can handle that?”

She raises her brow and smirks. “I can if you can.”

I return her smile before I press my lips to hers. “In that case, let’s head over to my house and do this again.”

Her smile grows against mine. “I thought you’d never ask.”

Chapter 17

*This isn't an innocent crush on the
hot guy next door anymore.*

Charlotte

The house is quiet, and for the first time since moving back home, I feel all alone.

Rayne is at school. It'll be at least an hour before she's home for the day.

Mom took Dad to his check up without me. I wanted to go, but she insisted on going alone since he's having such a good day. I think she wanted this time alone with him. Who knows how many more opportunities like this she'll get.

In fact, he hasn't had a bad day since the snowfall. I don't know if it's the disease giving us a reprieve or if the medication the doctor prescribed is finally working.

Regardless, they both insisted I stay home and rest.

Rest. Ha! That's code for I look like shit.

Probably because I haven't been sleeping much these past few days. Staying up late having sex with your sexy neighbor has consequences. Sex or sleep? I've chosen sex.

Until now, I've kept busy. As long as I'm always doing something, my mind doesn't have time to wander its way over to my thoughts and feelings about Garret.

I don't work today, so I can't use that to keep myself occupied. With Rayne and my parents gone, the house is so quiet all I hear are my thoughts screaming at me. And they are definitely screaming.

I like Garret. Way more than I should.

He likes me too.

I cover my face with my hands and groan. I sound like the sixteen-year-old version of me who had a stupid crush on him in high school.

Only now, my feelings for Garret are so much deeper than a crush. And that's not fair to him.

I'm still somewhat emotionally unavailable. It's only been a few months since Brad and I broke up. That left a scar on my heart that hasn't healed yet. I don't know if it will ever heal.

I flip back through my journal, searching for the list of reasons I should not like Garret Mutter. It feels like it's been ages since I made that list when, in reality, it's only been a few weeks. Time goes so slow in this backwoods town and yet everything feels like it happened so long ago it's a distant memory.

I stare at the list and draw a line through item number one and counter that with something so opposite it, even I'm surprised.

1. ~~He's not my type.~~ His rugged demeanor and personality is a good balance for my more sophisticated tastes. He brings me down to earth. I like his rough and rugged ways. Who knew?

WRITING THAT DOWN INVIGORATES ME, AND I TACKLE opposites for every item on the list.

2. ~~He's grumpy and angry all the time. I don't like grumpy and angry.~~ I love his grumpy attitude. It's cute and such a turn on. His growly noises get me all worked up.

3. ~~We may have chemistry, but I'm not convinced he really likes me.~~ He likes me. He really, really likes me. I feel it in the way he touches me and kisses me.

4. ~~It's just sex to him. I don't care what I told him. I don't do just sex.~~ We have a connection that goes so much deeper than just the physical chemistry between us.

5. ~~He's too close to Rayne. Having a casual relationship could make that awkward.~~ His closeness to Rayne is good. It means my family already likes him and will accept him in my life as something more than just my friend.

6. ~~He's my next-door neighbor for the foreseeable future. Again, that could be awkward.~~ He's right next

*door. I can see him every day if
he's home.*

I STARE AT MY NEW LIST AND MY EYES FOCUS ON ONE NEW
line I added.

AS SOMETHING MORE THAN JUST MY FRIEND.

MY HEART RATE KICKS UP, AND A SURGE OF PANIC RUSHES
through me. I slam my journal closed and push to my feet.

What in the hell am I doing?

I pace around the living room, worrying my bottom lip.
This isn't the life I want for myself.

I may have moved home for the foreseeable future but a
huge part of me is still hanging onto my life in Chicago. I miss
my fancy clothes and designer shoes and attending parties or
going to happy hour at the martini bar for drinks after a
grueling day at work. I miss my job and my crazy high-profile
clients. I miss Sierra and my apartment.

Or should I say Brad's apartment?

I may not want Brad anymore, but I still want the life I
thought he and I were building.

Don't I?

Needing my best friend, I grab my phone and dial Sierra's
number. She answers on the second ring.

"I need you to talk me off this ledge," I say before she
even gets out the word hello.

She chuckles. "Let me guess ... The sexy lumberjack next
door?"

"He's not a lumberjack."

“It’s a fantasy, Char. Go with it. Besides, tell me you’re not picturing him shirtless, swinging an ax. The curves and ridges of his naked chest and arms dripping with sweat. I bet that’d be a sight to behold.”

“Oh my God. Will you hush,” I whisper-yell as if there’s someone around that might overhear our conversation. “I am not picturing him like that.”

“Because you don’t need to. You’ve already seen the goods.”

I let out a frustrated growl, and she laughs harder.

“You’re impossible. I don’t know why I called you.”

“Alright, alright. I’ll stop. What ledge are you on and how can I help get you off it?”

I pinch the bridge of my nose and sigh. “I don’t even want to tell you anymore.”

“Oh come on. You know I’m just picking on you. I’ll stop. Tell me what’s going on with the hottie next door.”

I’d been pacing around the house ever since I dialed her number, and I suddenly find myself in the kitchen. I fall into a chair at the table and drop my head back. “I think I agreed to date him. Sorta. Maybe.”

“How do you sorta maybe date someone?”

“Well, we kinda did it again.” I wince at how weak and tentative my voice sounds. “And then a third time. After that, we both admitted that we liked the other. The next thing I know, we’re agreeing to keep doing it while not doing it with anyone else. Is that dating? We used the word exclusive, but can you just *exclusively* fuck someone without it being considered dating, or is that still dating? I’m completely out of my element here and don’t know what to think. I think I’ve lost my mind.”

“Whoa! Calm down. Take a deep breath and relax.” She pauses for a moment before she asks, “Are you breathing? I can’t hear anything.”

“Yes.” I squeeze my eyes closed to fight back the tears stinging the corners. “This is way too soon. I’m not ready for this.”

“There are no time frames on these things. They happen when they happen.”

“I guess,” I sigh.

“So you like him? Like, really like him? This isn’t just about good dick?”

I snort. “Have I mentioned that I miss you?”

“No, you haven’t, but it would be nice to hear every once in a while.”

“Well, I do.” I chuckle. “I needed a good laugh to help get me out of my head.”

“Are you out now? Is it safe to analyze your earlier ramblings?”

“Yes, it’s safe. I can’t promise I won’t break down on you, but please tell me I’m not crazy and mean it.”

“Babe, you are not crazy. You’re a gorgeous woman who found herself a fine piece of ass to brighten up her otherwise gloomy life. Let yourself have this and don’t overthink it. Dating doesn’t mean you’re going to marry the guy. It doesn’t even mean you’re super serious.”

“Then what does it mean?”

“It means exactly what you said to each other. You’re gonna fuck each other and no one else. Unless there’s more you’re not telling me.”

“No. I think that about sums it up.” I worry my bottom lip. “You don’t think I’m crazy for agreeing to this?”

“No.” She pauses for a moment. “Just be careful though. Okay?”

“What do you mean?”

“Char, you’re not a fling kind of gal. You’re a commitment gal. You want the happily-ever-after. The husband. The kids.

The cute little house with the white picket fence. Just make sure you keep your wits about you, and you'll be fine."

I nod, even though she can't see me. "He's nothing like Brad."

"Brad's a douche, so I'd say that's a good thing."

"I mean he's ..." I let out a low breath, not really sure how to explain what I'm feeling. "Brad was everything I thought I wanted—classy, professional, well-educated, career-focused. Garret is a country boy through and through. He's a handyman because it's convenient and easy. Not because he's fulfilling some lifelong dream."

"Why does any of that matter?"

"I don't know. Just something I've been thinking about lately."

"Is this really about him or about you?"

"Him ... or me. I don't know. Maybe both of us. You're asking me really hard questions that I don't know how to answer."

"Do you remember when our friendship was new?"

I furrow my brows. "What does that have to do with anything?"

"Just bear with me for a moment. Okay?"

"Okay."

"I helped you get the apartment next door to me. You were fresh from beauty school, and—"

"Cosmetology school," I correct.

"Yeah, yeah. Whatever. Let me finish."

I toss my hand up in surrender. Despite sharing the profession with me, Sierra has always gotten a kick out of picking on me about calling it beauty school because she knows I don't like it. She's done it so much over the years, it's become a habit. "Fine. Please go on."

“Within that first year of our friendship, you lost your sister.”

I suck in a breath and close my eyes. Sierra and I have never really talked about my sister and how losing her affected me. Carol has been an off-limits topic of conversation in our relationship.

“You refused to talk about her, and I never pushed you to. You lost one of the most important people in your life and then you hid from everyone back home and rarely went back.”

“Until now,” I whisper, finishing that thought for her.

“Until now. I love you, Char. You know that. And I want nothing more than for you to come back to Chicago. I miss my best friend, something fierce. But ...” I hear her take a deep breath. “I think for the first time in a really long time, you are exactly where you need to be. I hate that Brad hurt you the way he did, but you two weren’t happy. Not really.”

“Yes, we were.”

“Char, be honest with yourself. You two were complacent at best. That is not the kind of love I want for my best friend. You deserve to be worshipped and adored by the man who’s lucky enough to call you his. That wasn’t Brad.”

“Why are you just now telling me this? You knew I was going to propose to him.”

She sighs. “I don’t know. I didn’t know how. You were so insistent he was it for you. If he was what you wanted, who am I to tell you no? If I had known what he was really doing, I would have told you, but his cheating even caught me by surprise.”

“What do I do now? I feel so lost.”

“I don’t think you’re lost. You’re just a little stuck. And to get unstuck, I think you need to deal with losing your sister. It’s time, babe. Reconnect with your family and let yourself heal. Be with your dad. You need this time with him before you lose that too. You may fit into my world in Chicago just fine, but that world fits you too. And that’s okay. You’re allowed to be more than one thing. Embrace it and be happy.”

Sierra never has been one to tiptoe around the truth, and she's certainly not doing that now. But these are all things I need to hear.

This time, I let the tears fall from my eyes. I don't fight it. Her words mirror my thoughts from the other day. I think I needed to hear someone else say that I fit in both of these worlds before I could let myself truly accept it.

I ran away after Carol died, and I lost myself in a man that never really loved me. Not the way I deserve to be loved, at least.

I bottled my pain up and locked it deep in the recesses of my mind. In doing so, I've robbed myself of finding joy in the memories I have with my sister.

It's time to find the joy I'd lost. And that joy is right here in this house. That joy is bottled up inside the little girl my sister left behind.

Carol may be gone, but her memory lives strong through Rayne, and I refuse to miss out on another moment of her life.

"You're right." I wipe my face and grab hold of my emotions.

She chuckles. "Of course I'm right."

"And humble." I deadpan. "Let's not forget about humble."

"I know, right?!" She laughs harder before silence falls over the line. "Do you feel better?"

"A little. If nothing else, I know what I need to do."

Before she can respond, the front door opens, and Rayne calls through the house. "I'm home."

I smile and my insides warm. It hasn't taken long for that girl to completely win over my heart.

"I better get off here. Rayne is home from school. I'd like to spend some time with her before Mom and Dad get back."

"Okay, babe. Call me if you need anything else."

“I will. Thanks for listening.”

“That’s what besties are for. Love you.”

“Love you too.”

She makes one last kissing sound before the call disconnects. Rayne runs into the kitchen with a huge smile on her face. “Can we make cookies?”

I chuckle. “No hello or how are you? Just cookies?”

“Hi, Aunt Char. How are you? Can we make cookies now?”

“Come here.” I reach for her and pull her into a tight hug. “Of course we can make cookies. Pick what kind.”

I release her, and she runs to the pantry. My smile grows as I watch her disappear through the door.

Carol was the same way. She loved cookies too and always liked to help make them.

I may not have everything figured out, especially where Garret is concerned, but I feel better.

I’m finally ready to heal and do something I haven’t done in over ten years. If she’s up to it, Rayne can help me make it happen.

“STOP!” I SLAP AT RAYNE’S HAND AS SHE REACHES FOR another cookie from the cooling rack. “You’ve already eaten, like, twenty cookies. You’re never going to eat dinner.”

She scoffs. “I’ve had three, Aunt Char. Three. That’s not very many.”

“It’s enough. That’s for sure.” I point at her with narrow eyes, but it’s all for fun. “No more until after dinner. You got me?”

“Fine.” She rolls her eyes. “Can I help with dinner too?”

“Of course. We’re making Sloppy Joes tonight. Should be an easy dinner.”

She furrows her brows. “Sloppy Joes? What’s that?”

I press my hand to my chest and look at her in mock horror. “You’ve never had a Sloppy Joe?”

She shakes her head.

“We’re changing that tonight. A Sloppy Joe is only one of my favorite comfort foods of all time. We used to eat them all the time as kids. I can’t believe Mom hasn’t made them for you.”

She wrinkles her nose as if she’s not sure she believes me. “But what is it?”

“It’s a sandwich. Grab me that package of ground beef from the fridge and I’ll show you how to make them.”

She still looks skeptical, but she gets it anyway. I get the onion chopped while she watches. “Can you also get me a red pepper from the fridge? I need to chop that up too.”

“Can I try it?”

I look over at her. “What? Chopping it up?” She nods. “Sure. Let me finish the onion and you can do the pepper.”

Her smile returns, and it warms my heart. I love that she wants to spend this time with me. Despite the distance I’ve kept between us all these years, she’s not holding it against me. She could very easily hate me for never being around, but she doesn’t. The joy she finds in spending time with me makes me far happier than words can express.

She returns with a pepper and leans against my side after she sits it on the counter. I give the onions a few more chops with the knife before I transfer them to a bowl.

“First you need to rinse off the pepper. Always wash your vegetables before you use them.”

“How come? It doesn’t look dirty.” She picks up the pepper and inspects it before she takes it to the sink.

“Just because you can’t see dirt doesn’t mean it’s not there. You don’t know where that pepper has been before it made it to our house. Wild animals could have been roaming the field this pepper was growing in or the farmer could have used pesticides to keep the vegetables safe from bugs before harvesting. So washing them first is safest.”

“Okay.” She shrugs. “Makes sense. Now what?”

She steps up to the cutting board, shifting the now washed pepper from hand to hand.

“Now you julienne it.”

“Julie-what?”

I chuckle. “Julienne. It’s a type of cut for vegetables. Cut the pepper in half, remove the pit, and then cut it into long slivers.”

“So I’m cutting it in slices?” She looks confused.

“Yeah, I guess.”

“Then why the fancy name?”

I laugh harder and ruffle her hair. “I don’t actually know. I didn’t name it that. But that’s what everyone calls it.”

I show her how to do it and then how to dice them into smaller pieces. She catches on quickly and seems to enjoy it. Her happiness gives me the courage to ask her something I’ve been thinking about ever since I got off the phone with Sierra.

“So I was thinking.” I start. My voice sounds shaky, and I hate it. “I’d like to visit your mom’s grave site sometime. I haven’t been since her funeral, and well ...” I close my eyes and take a deep breath. “I think it’s past time I visit her. Talk to her. I was wondering if you’d like to go with me.”

She stares at me with a blank expression on her face for a few beats too long, and I think I made a mistake in asking her. Then she lunges forward and wraps her arms around me in a tight hug.

“I’d love to. I always want to go more often but grandma doesn’t like visiting. It makes her sad.”

I nod and choke back my tears. “It’ll make me sad too. I’m sure I’ll cry a lot. But I think it’s something I need to do.”

She smiles up at me. “Don’t worry. I’ll be there to hug you.”

I bop her on the nose and smile. “You’re a great kid, you know that? I’m sorry I stayed away for so long.”

“It’s okay. You’re here now, and that’s all that really matters.”

“Thanks, kiddo.” I give her another tight hug before I release her and take in a deep, calming breath. “Let’s get dinner done before Grandpa accuses us of trying to starve him.”

She chuckles, and it makes me smile too.

For the first time in a really long time, I feel like I can breathe a little easier. I feel a little calmer. I still have a lot to work through, but I think everything is going to be okay.

Chapter 18

Maybe she really can be mine.

Garret

I rarely leave my house or garage on Saturdays and will often go all day without seeing or speaking to anyone other than my dog. That's the way I always liked it.

Now that Charlotte is in my life, I don't want to spend my Saturdays alone. I want to share them with her.

Strange how quickly one person can change my outlook on life.

I built my house on the edge of my family's property to put as much distance between them and me as possible. My house is tiny by design. There's no room for anyone else to stay with me because I want to be alone.

Except for Charlotte.

She's the only person who's ever stayed the night at my house. I'm still trying to wrap my brain around that, and the fact that it doesn't bother me.

Hell, I wish she would stay the night with me every night.

Another snowstorm hit yesterday that dropped several inches on us. It's the good kind of snow that looks light and fluffy but then it packs really well, making it ideal for sledding.

Or, in my case, tubing.

After I finish breakfast, I pour the last of my coffee into a travel mug and head outside. The sun is bright and blinding as it reflects off the blanket of snow that covers everything. Rushing back inside, I grab my sunglasses.

I rarely need them in the winter. We can go months on end without seeing the sun. But this is a rare winter storm that's leaving us with clear skies for the day. With any luck, it'll last a few days before the gray Ohio winter skies return.

Bullet remains close to my side as we make our way through the snow to my garage. I should spend the morning clearing a path, but I have other plans in mind.

When we reach the garage, Bullet looks up at me like she doesn't understand what I'm doing.

I furrow my brows. "What is it, girl?"

She lets out a low whine as I unlock the door, then she pushes through and rushes over to her bed.

I shake my head and chuckle. "Is it too cold for you?"

She barks in reply.

"What if I tell you we're going to see Rayne and Charlotte? Does that make it all better?"

Her ears perk up, but she doesn't speak. She watches me as I dig out the tubes I've had buried in the back of my garage for years. It's been a long time since I've gone tubing, so I'm hoping these are still intact. I can't even recall the last time they were used.

They're deflated, and upon initial inspection, I don't see any holes. The only way to really know if they're fine is to blow them up.

Flipping on the air compressor, I blow up the first one I grabbed out of the box. It seems to be fine, so I fill it until the plastic is taut, then set it by the door.

Three of the four tubes I have are fine. A large rip made itself known the minute I started pumping air in one of them. It could probably be patched, but I decided to toss it. They're old enough that I might as well buy a new one instead.

But three tubes are plenty for the excursion I have planned.

I open the door and carry two of the tubes to my truck. I tie them down, so they won't blow away when I drive down the

highway.

When I turn back toward the garage to grab the last one, Bullet is standing in the doorway watching me.

“What?” I ask. “Is this a bad idea?”

She sits in the doorway, blocking my way in. The look on her face suggests the answer to my question is yes.

“It is, isn’t it?” I let out a low huff and push my way around her. Once inside the garage, I pause.

Running my fingers through my hair, I glance around. Maybe I should stay home and work on Charlotte’s car instead. I’ve still got several more hours of work to do before it’s done.

Or my bike. I’ve got a few weeks of work left before it’s functional. Spending the day tubing with my two favorite girls is not the best use of my time.

But I want to see them. I want to spend the afternoon having fun for a change. It’s been so long since I allowed that for myself, and I don’t want to walk away from that need like I always do.

My life may have been tough, and I might have a secret that could destroy the connection I’ve formed with Charlotte—and Rayne—but I still deserve a little fun in my life.

“Fuck it,” I mumble.

I grab the third tube and wave Bullet out the door. Once the last tube is tied down, I open the driver side door and Bullet hops in. I start the truck before I grab the ice scraper and clean off the windows. Thankfully, it’s mostly snow and wipes off with ease. That makes the job quick, and I’m sliding into the driver’s seat in a matter of minutes.

“Ready to go see our girls?” I rub the top of her head and she wags her nub of a tail.

My already tense nerves heighten during the short drive to the Weber house. Maybe I should have called or texted Charlotte first. We don’t exactly have the type of relationship where unannounced visits are the norm.

We said we'd be exclusive, but that doesn't mean we're telling the world we're an item.

Are we an item? We didn't put very many parameters on what we're doing. We're having sex with each other and no one else. That's not the same thing as being an item. For all I know, she has no desire to be seen with me.

Before I can change my mind, I'm pulling into their driveway.

I exhale deeply when I see Rayne's smiling face looking at me out of the bay window from the house. That should relax me, but it has the opposite effect. I'm glad she's happy to see me, but it's Charlotte's reaction that has me worried.

"Too late now." I turn off my truck and pocket my keys. "Well, girl. Stay put while I go see if they want to go tubing."

Before I make it halfway to the door, Rayne is running outside—barefooted, I might add—and jumps into my arms.

"Kiddo, it's freezing out here." I chuckle as I wrap my arms around her waist.

At the same time, Charlotte calls after her. "Rayne! You'll catch a cold."

"What are you doing here? Not that I'm upset to see you. It's just you rarely come over and never on a Saturday. Is it because of the snow? We had so much fun the last time it snowed. Do you want to build another fort or maybe have another snowball fight? We could gang up on Aunt Char and bury her in the snow. That would be super fun. Don't you think?"

Rayne pauses and takes a deep breath, causing me to laugh.

"Well, let's see. I am here because of the snow, but not to ask if you want to build a fort or have another snowball fight."

Her face falls, and a deep frown replaces her smile. "Why not? We had so much fun."

"We did, but I have something else I'd like to ask you."

I step inside and Charlotte closes the door behind. My nerves calm considerably when I see the smile on her face. She doesn't look the least bit upset that I showed up unannounced.

"Garret!" Lois smiles at me from her seat on the couch. Jim is sitting next to her with a similar smile on his face. "What a pleasant surprise. What can we do for you?"

"I was hoping to ask this girl if she wants to go tubing over at Divide Hill. Should be a good day for it."

"Well, doesn't that sound fun?" Lois asks.

Rayne bounces in my arms, forcing me to tighten my hold so I don't drop her. "Can I? Can I?"

"As long as it's okay with your grandparents and aunt, I'd love to take you." I turn to Charlotte and give her a small smile. "You're welcome to come as well."

Charlotte opens her mouth to answer but her mom cuts her off. "Of course she would. Wouldn't you, Char?"

Charlotte's eyes widen as she glances back and forth between her mom and me. "Um, I don't know. I haven't—"

"You have to come, Aunt Char!" Rayne says, cutting her off. She must have sensed the same no coming that I did. "I love tubing, and it would be so much more fun with you there."

"I haven't been tubing or sledding in over a decade. I doubt I even remember how."

"Garret will show you. Won't you?"

I nod and try not to sound too eager when I look at Charlotte. "There's not much to it. The tubes I have are big enough for all three of us if we want to ride together."

"No way!" Rayne pushes against my chest and drops to her feet. "I want to ride by myself. You and Aunt Char can ride together."

I fight to hide my smile when Charlotte's face blushes a deep pink. Rather than responding to that, I focus on Rayne.

“Go get dressed. It’s more fun if we get there before too many others and the snow is still fresh.”

“Okay!” Rayne runs upstairs and disappears down the hallway before another word is spoken.

“I guess I should change too.” Charlotte looks down at her thin yoga pants. My gaze follows hers. My eyes appreciate the way those pants hug her curves. “These definitely aren’t warm enough.”

“No.” I clear my throat as my mind wanders in the wrong direction. “Those would be soaked in a matter of minutes.”

Her wide eyes snap to mine and I inwardly cringe as the innuendo in my words becomes clear.

A slow smile lifts her lips. “Be back down in a few.”

“Sounds good.” My voice cracks and I fake a cough. *Doing great, asshole.* “I’m gonna wait in my truck. Bullet’s out there and it’s cold.”

“Okay.” She nods. “We won’t be long.”

She slowly makes her way up the stairs, and I can’t take my eyes off her. Her ass sways back and forth in the most hypnotic way with each step she takes. It has my dick perking up.

When she reaches the landing, she turns to look at me. Our eyes meet, and the desire that passes between us is visceral. She gives me a soft smile and wave before she vanishes around the corner.

I glance over at Lois and Jim. Thankfully, they seem oblivious to the private exchange between Charlotte and me. Their attention is back on the TV.

“Thanks for letting them come. I appreciate it,” I say as I go to open the door. “You two enjoy the rest of your morning.”

“Of course, Garret,” Lois says. “You guys have fun. No need to rush. Spend as much time with those girls as you’d like. We have no special plans for the day.”

I give them a curt nod and exit without another word. Once in my truck, I start it up so it'll be warm by the time they come out.

Then I turn to Bullet and sigh. She's staring up at me with sleepy eyes. "I hope this isn't a mistake."

Bullet lets out a loud yawn and then closes her eyes like I didn't say a word.

I guess that means she doesn't think there's anything for me to worry about.

I wish I felt the same way.

I'm afraid I like Charlotte a little too much. If I keep spending this much time with her, I'm going to get more attached than I already am.

When the truth finally comes out, it's going to break my heart.

Because there's no way she's going to let me keep her when she finds out the secret I've kept from her family.

I TOSS THE TRUCK IN PARK AT THE BOTTOM OF DIVIDE HILL just off to the side of the road. There are a couple of cars here already, but it looks like we arrived before the crowd. I give it another hour and half before all the kids in Beaver are here.

Divide Hill is one of the steepest slopes in the area and dumps into a large open field at the bottom. With no trees or other obstacles in the way, it's the perfect spot for endless sledding and tubing.

"You want to tube by yourself, correct?" I ask Rayne as I step out of my truck.

"Yes!" she says as she hops out from the small bench seat in the extended cab. Bullet is hot on her heels.

"How about you?" I glance over to where Charlotte is standing on the other side of the truck, watching me untie the

tubes.

“She’ll ride with you,” Rayne says. “She doesn’t know what she’s doing, remember?”

“Hey!” Charlotte scoffs and gives her niece a disbelieving glare. “I didn’t say I didn’t know what I was doing. Only that it’d been a long time since I did this.”

Rayne shrugs and rolls her eyes. “Same difference.”

“Is not,” Charlotte retorts.

I hand Rayne a tube and she takes off without another comment. Bullet takes off after her. I chuckle as I watch her stumble a few times as she first carries and then drags the tube behind her.

I turn back to Charlotte with a raised brow.

“So, you want your own tube?” I ask in a low, gravelly voice. She meets my stare, and her pretty blue eyes light up with desire.

“I didn’t say that.” Her voice is low and seductive.

“Then what are you saying?”

“I can handle my own tube.” She holds my gaze with a hint of defiance in her eyes.

My expression must betray me and show every ounce of my disappointment, because the smile that spreads across her face says she knows what I want.

She leans forward and rests her elbows on the truck.

“But ...” she pauses and watches me closely, “I’d prefer to ride with you, big guy. If that’s okay.”

I narrow my eyes. “You’re lucky we’re in public and your niece is here.”

“Oh, yeah?” She laughs and steps around the truck. When she stops next to me, she runs her gloved finger along the edge of my coat. “And why is that?”

I lean into her touch and lower my voice to a low grumble. “Because otherwise, I’d bend you over my knee and spank you

for teasing me like that.”

She sucks in a breath. “Is that all you’d do?”

“No.” I lean in closer to her ear. “After I turned your round ass red, I’d show you just how big of a guy I am.”

She swallows and turns her head, so her lips are just touching my ear. “I’m counting on that later.”

Then she pats my chest and walks toward the hill. I groan and adjust myself before I grab the tube. It’s an uncomfortable walk with the tube positioned in front of me. Thankfully, by the time I make it to the top, my dick has calmed down.

“Is that Jerry?” Charlotte points at the man standing close to the treeline at the top of the hill.

“Yep. That’s Jerry. He’s probably watching for deer.”

Gerald Mayer, otherwise known in this town as Jerry Deer, is the resident drunk who rides around town on his bicycle. He’s famously known for his bizarre and unusual accident when he hit a deer riding his bicycle while completely wasted. Unfortunately, the deer didn’t survive, and Jerry was hospitalized for several days. Ever since then, he insists the deer are evil and out for revenge.

“Huh,” she says. “I’m surprised to see him. I guess there’s a part of me that always assumed he’d be gone. Is that bad of me?”

She looks up at me with a pained expression. I shrug. “Considering he still drinks enough to drown half this town, no. So don’t feel bad.”

She stares at me for a moment, then takes off toward Jerry. I watch with rapt attention as she walks right up to him as if they’re long-lost friends.

“Hey, Jerry. You probably don’t remember me, but I saw you here and wanted to say hi.”

Jerry turns to her, studies her for a moment, then a wide smile spreads across his face. “Of course I remember you, Miss Charlotte. I couldn’t forget a beauty like you. You were

the prettiest Miss Oktoberfest Queen this town ever saw. From the looks of you, you're still the prettiest."

"Thanks, Jerry. That's really sweet of you." She gives him her beauty queen smile, the one that I don't particularly like because I know it's fake. She glances toward the trees before she looks back at Jerry. "What are you doing over here?"

He leans in close and drops his voice. "Guarding the kids."

"From what?"

"The deer. They're hiding in the woods, just waiting for everyone to turn their backs so they can attack. Can't let that happen."

"Oh, come on, Jerry," I say as I squeeze his shoulder. He jerks his head in my direction as if he's just now realizing I'm here too.

"Garret! I didn't see you there." He smiles and the smell of alcohol on his breath as me wincing. "Are you here with Miss Charlotte?"

"I am. We brought Rayne to go tubing."

Jerry looks behind us just as Rayne pushes off the ground and goes flying down the hill. Bullet manages to keep pace and is running right next to her. She squeals in excitement as she picks up speed before she reaches the bottom. Bullet barks out when Rayne gets too far ahead of her.

"Good, good." He nods. "I'll keep a close watch then. Wouldn't want those damn deer hurting her. Or any of the kids, for that matter. You've got my word. I'll keep this place safe."

"Alright." I reach for Charlotte, and she takes my hand. It feels nice, natural even to do so. "If you need anything, you be sure to ask me, okay?"

He nods once, then turns his attention back to the woods.

I lead Charlotte back toward the edge of the hill and place the tube on the ground. I motion for her to sit, but she stares at Jerry instead.

“Is he okay?” she asks. “He seems a little ... Off.”

I shrug. “He’s been like that for years. Doesn’t matter what anyone says to him, he insists the deer are out to get us all. We finally stopped trying to convince him otherwise. He’s not hurting anyone, so we let him be.”

“That’s so sad though. He even looks sad.”

“Yeah, I suppose. Then again, we all have our own sad stories. Some of us just handle it better than others.”

Her gaze shifts to mine, and the sadness I see there makes me uncomfortable. She knows I have my own sad story, and she thinks she knows just how bad it really is.

But there’s one part of my story I’m not sure I can ever tell her. From the way she’s looking at me, I sense she knows there’s more I’m not telling her too.

“Are you going to climb in or not?” I ask, my voice rougher than I intended. I clear my throat before I meet her gaze.

“Yes.” She turns quickly and climbs in.

She scoots her body close to the front, leaving plenty of room for a normal sized person to fit. Since I’m bigger than the average person, it’s going to be tight. I can’t believe I thought all three of us could fit in one of these things.

I step around her, placing a foot on either side of her. She glances over her shoulder and quirks a brow, giving me a teasing look. Holding her gaze, I slowly lower until I’m squeezed in behind her. There’s plenty of room for my ass, but my long legs are scrunched up and pressed way too close to my chest.

“Here, let me adjust.” She scoots back, pressing her ass into my cock. I instantly grow hard. She must feel it because she laughs. Then she crosses her legs, crisscross style, and pats my knee.

“Wrap your legs around me. It’ll be more comfortable.”

“For whom?” I grumble. “If I do that, my dick is going to be doing a lot more than just poking you in the ass.”

She wiggles her ass, pushing me even closer to the edge.

“Princess.” I warn. “You need to stop doing that.”

“Or what?” She tosses me another one of those seductive grins that makes me want to spank her hard.

I lean forward and whisper to her. “Come over tonight, and you’ll find out.”

Before she can respond, I reach behind me and push us forward. We fly down the hill before she’s ready. She cries out in surprise and clings to my legs for dear life.

It’s a feeling I love way too much.

I wrap my arms around her midsection and hold her close to my chest. She leans into me and rests her head on my shoulder. Having her in my arms like this makes me feel more alive than I have in a really long time. I want to keep her here, and that’s a dangerous thing to want.

My feelings for Charlotte are growing stronger and stronger with each passing moment we share. I want to protect her, keep her safe, and shield her from all the pain this world has thrown at her so far.

I want to make her mine and forget about all the reasons we shouldn’t be together.

Unfortunately, it’s me I should protect her from.

If she finds out the truth about my past, I’ll hurt her far worse than anyone or anything else ever has.

I’m not sure I’ll be able to live with myself if that day comes.

Chapter 19

*Secrets never remain secrets for
long.*

Charlotte

I t's a little after six when I make my way downstairs. I told my parents I'd be eating out tonight. I didn't tell them where or with who, only that I'd be leaving before they sat down for dinner themselves.

Mom didn't ask questions, and I didn't provide her with any details.

Dad and Rayne are in the living room watching TV. A Simpsons rerun is playing and Homer does something ridiculous that makes Dad laugh.

Rayne frowns. "Grandpa, why is that funny? He just strangled Bart."

Her obvious dislike of how Homer treats Bart only makes Dad laugh harder. "It's their dynamic. It's funny."

She stares at the TV for a minute before she shakes her head. "I guess this show is too old for me."

Dad scoffs. "Honey, this show is still on."

"I thought these were reruns?"

"They are. But this show has been on for over thirty years."

"Really?" She wrinkles her nose in disgust. "It's not *that* good."

"Girl!" I say as I step into the room. "Might wanna hold your tongue. This is one of our favorite shows. Isn't it, Dad?"

I fall down on the couch next to him and rest my head on his shoulder. He squeezes my leg and drops a kiss on my forehead. “Sure is. We used to watch this all the time with Carol. It was the one thing we always did together. Just the three of us.”

“My mom loved this show?” Rayne asks, sitting up straighter.

“She did.” I smile. “This was her favorite show. She wouldn’t miss it. Especially the Halloween episodes. She lived for those.”

“I’ve seen a few of those.” She stares at the TV as if she’s seeing the cartoon through a new light. “I didn’t know she liked this. Why didn’t you ever tell me?”

She’s looking at Dad when she asks that question.

He glances at me like I’m going to have the answer she seeks. When I don’t say anything, he looks at her and shrugs. “I don’t know. I guess it never came up.”

Rayne glances between the TV and Dad a few times before she asks, “Will you tell me more shows she liked?”

Dad gives her a smile. “Sure.” Then he pats the other side of the couch, calling her to come over. “We can watch them together.”

I lean over and kiss Dad on the cheek before I push to my feet. Then I pull Rayne in for a hug. “I’m going out. You’ll be in bed by the time I get home, so enjoy your evening.”

“You too,” she says as she curls up next to my dad. I smile at them and give them another wave before I head into the kitchen to grab the chocolate pie I made and say goodbye to Mom.

Mom is at the stove, finishing up dinner. I walk up behind her and rest my chin on her shoulder. “Smells good. Sorry I’m gonna miss it.”

She’s making breaded pork chops, stuffing from a box, and green beans. It’s a simple meal but was always a staple growing up.

She looks over her shoulder at me and smiles. “I’m sure whatever that boy feeds you tonight will be just as good, if not better.”

I jerk my head back and frown. “What boy?”

Mom chuckles. “Oh, sweetheart. You’re not fooling anyone. I know you’re going to see Garret.”

My mouth falls open and I blink several times, unable to formulate thoughts, let alone words.

My stunned expression only makes her laugh harder.

“You didn’t really think I didn’t know you’ve been sneaking over to his house, did you?”

My eyes shift around the kitchen before they settle back on her. “Um. Yeah.”

It’s been almost a week since he took us tubing over at Divide Hill, and I’ve snuck over to his house every night since then. I waited until everyone was in bed and made sure I came home long before anyone was up.

“You’re not as sneaky as you think you are.” She grins and bops me on the nose like I’m a child.

“Well, damn.” I sigh. “Does Rayne know?”

Mom gives me a confused look. “I don’t think so, no. Why do you ask?”

I shrug. “I don’t want her to be upset about it. She’s close to him, and I don’t want her to think I’m trying to take him from her or anything like that.”

Mom thinks on that for a minute before she nods. “I can see why you’re worried about her feelings. She thinks the world of Garret. She might see you as a threat if you don’t handle it right.”

“And how do I make sure I handle it right?”

“Well, for starters, don’t let her find out by accident. So if this isn’t serious, don’t let her catch you.”

I nod. “Okay. It’s not like we’re flaunting it around or anything. I didn’t even know you knew.”

Mom wipes her hands on a towel and turns to face me. “Do you like him?”

“Of course I do. What kind of question is that?”

“Listen, sweetheart. I like Garret. He’s a good man. A troubled man, but a good one all the same. Those Mutter boys have been through enough. Be careful with him.”

“Mom!” I press my hand to my chest, my breathing increasing at her unspoken accusation. “What are you trying to say?”

She sighs and gives me a small smile. “I’m not saying you’re doing anything to deliberately hurt him. But I also know your last relationship just ended. A relationship that you thought would lead to marriage. Just make sure you’re not using him as a bandage for your wounded heart. He deserves better than that.”

My eyes drop to the floor as I think about what she said. Her words make sense, and I get why she’s concerned, but I’m not using Garret like that. I actually like him. Way more than I should.

When I look back up at Mom, I see nothing but love and support. “I hear you, Mom. And I’m not. I really like him. I don’t know where this is going or if it will last, but I do know I like him. And he seems to like me. For now, that’s enough.”

She smiles and pats my cheek. “Good enough, sweetheart. Enjoy your evening. I’ll see you in the morning.”

I pull her in for a tight hug. “You too. Call me if you need anything.”

“We’ll be fine. Your dad is doing good.”

“He is, isn’t he?”

His doctor confirmed the medication he prescribed him is reducing his number of bad days. This is the longest he’s gone without an episode since I moved home.

“He is. Now, go on. Get before you’re late.” Mom waves me toward the back door.

“But the car is out front.” I argue.

She rests her hands on her hips and looks down her nose at me. “You can walk, the same as you do every night you sneak over to his house. The charade is up.”

I shake my head and chuckle. “Okay, fine. I’ll walk.”

I grab the pie from the refrigerator, and she smirks at me. Without another look in her direction, I head toward the back door and grab my coat off the hook. Once it’s on, I slip on my gloves then wave bye to Mom. She gives me one last smile before she turns back to the stove.

There’s a lightness in my step that hasn’t been there any of the other times I walked to his house. Is it because Mom knows and approves of Garret? I expected her to be upset if she found out what I was doing. I never even considered she’d approve of Garret and me.

This knowledge has me smiling even wider than I typically am when I’m sneaking over to his house.

And I’m not sure what that means. I didn’t want anyone to know that I was seeing Garret. But knowing that I no longer have to keep this a secret from Mom makes me feel better. It makes this thing between us feel more real. Like what we’re doing means something so much more than sex.

If I’m honest with myself, it’s felt like something so much more than sex for quite some time now. I’m just not sure how to process these feelings yet.

But I do know that I’m looking forward to figuring it all out.

THE LOOK ON GARRET’S FACE WHEN HE OPENS HIS DOOR HAS me taking a step back. His dark brown eyes are full of anguish. The smile I was wearing drops, and that causes him to wince.

He runs his fingers through this perfectly combed hair, messing it up, and looks over his shoulder as if there's a disaster waiting.

“Garret?” I say his name as a question. “Is everything okay?”

He rests his hand around his neck. The tension in his body is palpable. His eyes fall closed, and he lets out a deep sigh. “No. I'm trying to cook for you. It's not going well.”

“Oh.” My smile slowly returns. I'd expected him to get takeout, but knowing he's cooking makes this evening so much better. “That's so sweet. Can I help?”

His eyes snap open and meet mine. I'm not sure I've ever seen him look so vulnerable before. “But you always cook for me. I wanted to do it this time.”

Now that I know something truly bad hasn't happened, I take in his appearance. Not only is he trying to cook for me, but he's also dressed up. Well, Garret's version of dressed up. He's still wearing jeans, but they're stain and hole free. They look new, as does his dark blue button-down shirt.

He's trimmed his beard, so it's closer to his face and until he mussed up his hair, it was perfectly combed.

I step forward, resting my hand on his chest, and press a kiss to his cheek. “You look really nice.”

“Thank you.” His response is rough and gravelly. Then his eyes peruse down my body and get snagged on the pie in my hands. “What's that?”

“A chocolate cream pie,” I say in a sickly-sweet voice as I walk past him and put it in his refrigerator. “It's my favorite, so I hope you like it too.”

“You made it. Of course I'll like it.”

When I turn back to face him, a frown covers his face again. “Now what's wrong?”

“Did you walk here in those?” He points at my feet.

I look down at my high-heeled boots and smile. They're not practical for walking through the woods or across gravel driveways, but I don't care. I love them.

Calling them boots is a stretch, especially in this small town, but they're Jimmy Choos. They're meant to be worn, not stuffed in a box in a closet. They have three-inch heels and are covered in gold glitter. They come up just high enough over my ankle that they hide the hem of my jeans.

I lift a foot out in front of me and wiggle it. "I did. Aren't these cute?"

His brow furrows. "I don't think cute is the right word. How did you walk here in those?"

I chuckle. "Very carefully and on my tiptoes. Now, about dinner."

I push past him and hang my coat on the hook by the door. It's been warmer ever since the last snowstorm. Two days after it dropped several inches on us, the temperatures rose to the fifties. All the snow has melted, and hints of spring are finally visible. The evenings still get cold, but with any luck, warm weather and sunshine are right around the corner.

I turn back to his kitchen and place my hands on my hips. Every available inch of counter space, which isn't much, is covered. Dishes and supplies are piled up two to three layers high. I think I see a slow cooker underneath the plates, but I can't be sure. It's such a disorganized mess, I can't tell what he's attempting to make. But whatever it is, it smells great.

I glance over my shoulder at where he's still nervously waiting by the door. "Whatcha making?"

"Spicy shredded beef tacos. The guy on the TV made it look easy. It's not easy." He grumbles and looks past me to the mess in his kitchen. He suddenly looks ten years younger and like a wounded boy instead of the sexy, grumpy man I've grown to like.

"Well, it smells delicious. I can't wait to try it." I turn back to the kitchen and survey the mess. Now that I know what

we're eating, I can better assess how to help him get it on the table.

But before I step forward, his arms wrap around my waist, and he hugs me close to his body. My back presses tight against his chest. He drops a soft kiss on the exposed skin on my shoulder. Then peppers light kisses along the curve of my neck that has my body shaking with need.

"You look beautiful. Even if those damn shoes are all wrong for this town. I still love how they look on you."

"Thank you," I whisper, barely able to get the words out.

"And this sweater. You're driving me crazy with how it hangs off your shoulder. Are you even wearing a bra?" Rather than waiting for me to answer, his hands drift up my stomach until he's cupping my breasts. "Fuck, Princess. You're not."

I smile at his reaction.

I'm wearing a light blue off the shoulder sweater that's sexier than it is warm. I could've worn a strapless bra, and if we had plans to leave his house, I would have. But since we're staying in, I didn't see the point. He's going to take it off me later anyway.

He kneads my breasts and licks my earlobe, making it hard to breathe. "Garret, you better stop."

"Why?" he grumbles.

"Because I'm hungry."

He lets out a strangled groan and removes his hands from my breasts. "Fine. But I'm warning you in advance, it might taste like shit."

I chuckle. "It smells too good to taste like shit. Let me help pull this together."

He places one last kiss to my neck then releases me. "Tell me what to do to make it right, and I'll do it."

I survey the kitchen. My eyes settle on the plates, doing their best to hide the slow cooker.

Turning to face him, I hand them to him. “Start with setting the table while I get this organized.”

He looks at me hesitantly for a moment before he nods and takes the plates. We work in silence for several minutes. Him setting the table, and me cleaning up the mess he made.

Once I have all the dirty dishes out of the way and loaded in the dishwasher, it’s not so bad. He’s done a better job than he thinks. There’s rice on the stove that has a few minutes left to cook before it’s ready and black beans are warming in another pot.

When I lift the lid off the slow cooker, I take in a deep whiff and smile. It smells even better than it did before.

“Is it done?” Garret steps up behind me, his body so close he’s pressed against my back.

“I’m about to find out,” I say, a little breathless. I grab a fork, and it slides into the beef with ease. “Perfectly tender. Should I shred it in the pot?”

“That’s what the guy on TV did.” He reaches around me and takes the fork from my hand and grabs a second one. “Let me do this.”

Rather than stepping away so I can move, he stays right where he is behind me, boxing me in. I brace my hands on the counter while his arms reach around my sides. He’s tall enough that he can see the slow cooker and works with ease as he shreds the beef.

It’s a strangely intimate position to be in, and one that has my body buzzing with need. If he’s trying to turn me on, mission accomplished.

I’m starving for two very different things right now. A hell of a lot more than my mouth is watering.

“Here,” his deep baritone voice has my eyes flying open. I hadn’t even realized I closed them. He’s holding a fork out for me to try a bite of the beef.

I part my lips and lean forward, taking it into my mouth. When the burst of flavors hit my taste buds, the moan that

escapes me is a little too erotic.

He chuckles. "I take it, it's good."

"So good." I drop my head back, resting it on his shoulder.

He sets the fork down and cups my chin, shifting me so I'm facing him. "Give me a taste."

Leaning closer, he licks my bottom lip. A deep, bellowing growl vibrates his chest before he dives in, plunging his tongue into my mouth. I'm powerless to do anything except kiss him back.

He breaks the kiss way too soon, leaving me even more breathless than I was a few moments ago. His hand is still cupping my face. When I open my eyes, he's staring down at me. The look we share is intimate and filled with more feelings than any look we've shared so far. I still see his desire and need for me. But there's more behind his chocolate brown gaze.

And that has me a little scared.

Because it looks a hell of a lot like love.

Chapter 20

Time flies when you're happy.

Garret

The days quickly turn into weeks, and before I know it, March is coming to a close. The cold wintry months typically drag on for me and leave me feeling depressed and more lonely than normal.

But not this year. Having Charlotte in my life has made me happy, and I can't stop smiling.

Which is not a good thing right now since I'm pulling up outside of Mrs. Engle's hair salon to replace her chair. If she sees me smiling, she'll know something is going on. She might not know the why, but she's a relentless gossip and will make it her mission to find out.

Charlotte's been the topic of enough gossip to last a lifetime, and I don't want to be the reason she's subjected to more.

To say it surprised me when Mrs. Engle called to schedule a time to install a new chair is an understatement. I didn't think anything would get that woman to replace that old chair.

A tinge of disappointment washes over me when I don't see Charlotte's parents' car outside the salon even though I know she's not working. She only works a few days a week. Mrs. Engle isn't ready to give up more shifts yet. It's one of the few things Charlotte has complained about. I sense she really misses her job more than anything else about her life in Chicago.

Other than that, I think she's happy here. She hasn't once mentioned her desire to move back. Any time talk of the future

comes up, which isn't that often, she only talks about Beaver as her home.

I hope that means she not only plans on staying after things settle with her dad, but that she *wants* to stay.

Although her staying means, I have to tell her the truth. I can't keep seeing her with this secret between us. The longer it goes on, the harder it will be for her to accept it. Assuming she can accept it at all.

Grabbing my toolbox from the bed of my truck, I head inside to get to work. Installing this chair will take me half the day. Maybe longer with the way Mrs. Engle likes to talk.

I stop just inside the door and stare at her in confusion. There's a client in her old chair and she's chatting like she always does. Next to her station on the wall is a second station with a new cabinet and counter space.

She looks up from where she's working and gives me a huge smile. "Garret! You're here."

I glance around until my eyes land on a large box sitting behind her desk. "What's going on? I thought I was swapping out your old chair today."

"Oh, no." She waves at me like I just said the silliest thing she's ever heard. "You must have misunderstood. I'm not replacing this chair. I'm adding a second one. For Charlotte. She's doing so well here, and the younger girls are finally coming in. She's getting so many requests that she needs more hours. I can only give her that if I have a second chair."

A slow smile lifts my lips. "Does she know you're doing this?"

Mrs. Engle tilts her head to one side like she's studying me. I quickly school my features and wipe the smile off my face. "Well, I mentioned it at one point, but never brought it up again. I wanted to surprise her. Why do you ask?"

I shrug. "Just curious. She lives next door to me, and I see her out with Rayne a lot."

“Oh.” She looks like she wants to ask me more. I brace myself for more questioning but am relieved that it doesn’t come. “She’s been doing such a great job here. This is the least I can do for her. Did you know she was so successful in Chicago? She styled the rich and famous. Can you imagine having a career like that? I’d hate for her to run back to that life once all the bad publicity fades. I mean, what that man did to her was shameful. Here she was, putting herself out there and proposing to him. That man should have been over the moon for that girl. Instead, he was cheating on her. Humiliated her at that fancy event. I even heard he was the one who sold the tabloids the pictures of her crying. Just shameful, I tell you. Shameful.”

I remain motionless, staring at Mrs. Engle like she grew two heads. I knew something happened to Charlotte before she moved home, but I didn’t know the details. She mentioned her ex-boyfriend cheated, but I’ve never asked her more about it, and she’s never brought it up again.

Hearing this additional information angers me. Every protective instinct in my body ignites, and I want to race off to Chicago, find this guy, and beat him to a pulp.

My princess deserves better than that.

“Garret?” I shake my head and refocus my eyes on Mrs. Engle. She’s watching me with concern. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah.” I clear my throat. “I’m fine.” I point to a spot marked on the floor with tape. “Is that where you want the chair?”

She glances over her shoulder. “Oh, yes. Right there would be great. It should line up perfectly with the new station.”

Without further response, I head over to the large box and cut it open.

It pleases me immensely that Mrs. Engle is doing this to surprise Charlotte. She loves her work and has complained a few times about being bored. She wants more hours and the fact that Mrs. Engle is making that happen makes me happy.

But I can’t get her words out of my head.

Here she was, putting herself out there and proposing to him.

She proposed to that asshole? That knowledge feeds the primal beast inside me and has me ready to rush to her house and demand she be mine and *only* mine.

Would she, if I asked? It's only been a few months. That's hardly long enough for her to get over a broken heart and open it up to someone new.

Especially someone like me.

Damaged. Broken. And keeping secrets.

My phone buzzes in my back pocket. I pull it out and smile when I see it's a text message from Charlotte. When I open it, my smile grows. It's a picture of her holding a cookie in front of her, covering half her face. All I can see is the laughter dancing in her bright blue eyes.

GARRET

Are you baking for me?

CHARLOTTE

Sorry, no. I'm prepping for the bake sale this weekend.

GARRET

Mean. Teasing me with cookies.

CHARLOTTE

I'm not teasing you. I'm tempting you.

GARRET

Again. Mean. If you're baking that means you're too busy to come over later.

CHARLOTTE

True, but you can come over here.

GARRET

What about your parents and Rayne?

CHARLOTTE

They're gone and won't be home until tomorrow afternoon.

GARRET

Where'd they go?

CHARLOTTE

To visit relatives in Columbus. My uncle went with them just in case Mom needs help. But Dad has been doing so well these past couple of weeks, they figured visiting now was for the best. You know, in case he gets worse again.

GARRET

So they won't be home tonight.

CHARLOTTE

Nope. I'm all by my lonesome. Care to keep me company?

GARRET

Do I get to eat the cookies?

CHARLOTTE

That can be arranged.

GARRET

I'll come over after work.

CHARLOTTE

I can't wait. {kissing face emoji}

GARRET

Me either.

I SLIP MY PHONE BACK INTO MY POCKET. ALL THE ANXIETY I felt a few minutes ago is gone. Whatever Charlotte had with that asshole in Chicago is over. I have no reason to worry.

She may not be mine to keep forever, but she's mine for now.

And that's good enough.

I CUT OUT OF WORK A LITTLE EARLIER THAN I USUALLY would. There was one more job I could've fit in, but I'm too eager to see Charlotte. It wasn't an emergency, so I called and told them I'd be there first thing in the morning. They were fine with that.

I rush home, let Bullet out, and shower faster than I think I ever have before.

She didn't say anything about dinner, but since she's been baking all day, I grabbed a pizza from Frank's in town after I finished installing the chair.

Now that I'm walking up the back steps to her parents' house, I wonder if I should have told her I took care of dinner. I don't even know what she likes on her pizza. I went with pepperoni and cheese, assuming that was a safe bet.

She opens the back door with a huge smile on her face, and I'm immediately put at ease. Without a word, I slide my arm around her waist, pull her body flush to mine, and kiss her. Her lips are soft, and she tastes like sugar and cinnamon.

“You’ve been sampling your cookies,” I say when I pull back. When I look down at her, she looks a little dazed. I smile, knowing I put that look on her face.

“Yeah,” she says, a little breathless. She shakes her head as if she’s just now realizing I’m here. Her eyes settle on mine. “Hi.”

“Hi.” My smile grows, and I kiss the tip of her nose. “I brought pizza. I hope you like pepperoni and cheese.”

Her hands clench around the edges of my coat. Seeing her eyes sparkle is a high I will never come down from. “It’s my favorite.”

“You’re not just saying that, are you?”

“No,” she playfully slaps at my chest. “I love pepperoni pizza. Frank’s pizza used to be my favorite. I haven’t had any since I moved home.”

“Good.” I press another kiss to her lips. “Glad I got it then. We’ll need to warm it first. Any chance there’s room in your oven?”

“We can put it in after I finish up with this batch of cookies.”

With her hands still clenched around my coat, she drags me into the house. I kick the door shut with my foot once I’m over the threshold.

My eyes fall closed, and a groan tumbles out of me when I get a whiff of the kitchen. “Princess, it smells so good in here. I’ve died, and this is heaven.”

Her laughter fills the air, and I realize I was wrong. The sound of her laughing is heaven.

I glance around the kitchen, looking for a place to set the pizza box, but every available surface is covered. There are more containers of cookies in this kitchen than I would find in a bakery.

“Damn, Princess. You’ve been busy.”

She shrugs. “Yeah, maybe I went overboard. Is this too much for the spring fundraiser?”

“Not even a little.”

Her smile broadens, but it’s the sparkle in her eyes that causes my heart to skip around in my chest. “I know you’re lying, but that’s okay. It’s been nice. I haven’t had this much to do since I left Chicago. I like being busy.”

“How many have you baked?”

She chuckles. “Not sure if I want to say it out loud. It’s a lot.”

“Just tell me you saved some for me.”

“Oh, don’t you worry, big guy.” She tosses me a wink and I growl. “I made an entire batch just for you.”

I set the pizza box on top of the first flat space I see, take my coat off, and then I stalk toward her. “Where are they?”

She spins around to face me, and it’s only now that I take in what she’s wearing. She always dresses nice, but today she’s in a pretty, light pink floral dress. It flutters around her legs as she comes to a stop. It’s got short sleeves, a fitted bodice, and a full skirt that stops at her knees. But it’s the apron she’s wearing over it that really catches my eye. It’s got a heart-shaped neckline and a wide band that wraps around her waist. The hem is trimmed in ruffles, giving it a 1950s housewife look that I absolutely love.

Paired with her high-heeled shoes, she looks good enough to eat.

“You look ... Wow.” I rest my hands on her hips and let my eyes fall over her body. “Does it make me a pig that I love this look on you?”

She swings her arms over my shoulders, clasping her hands around my neck, and smiles up at me. “Why would it make you a pig?”

“Because you look like a sexy 1950s housewife, and I really like it. That’s so ... I don’t know, sexist?”

Her head falls back in laughter, and I can't help but lean down and kiss her slender neck. Her laugh turns a little breathy as she speaks. "It's not sexist when that's the reaction I want. I wore this because I hoped you would like it."

I growl against her skin, licking her neck as I bring my lips back to hers. "As long as you don't think I expect you to be in the kitchen cooking for me for me all the time."

"I know you don't." Her voice drops as she runs her nails into my hair. "I cook for you because I like it. And I like that you appreciate my food."

"Princess, I appreciate so much more about you than your food." I lightly brush my lips over hers. Then I pepper kisses down her neck and along the collar of her dress. She's so sexy and pliable in my arms. Knowing she wants me as much as I want her is making me hard. "But the food is a perk I will never complain about."

"What else do you appreciate?" Her voice is low and husky.

"Your strength and determination." I reach around her neck and untie the top of the apron. It falls past her chest, revealing her perfectly plump cleavage pressed together above the neckline of her dress. I groan in appreciation.

"Your love for your family. The way you care about Rayne." I bury my face in her breasts and bite them. She gasps in pleasure.

Reaching around her back, I find the zipper on her dress and slowly drag it down.

"Your kindness." I continue. "That you like my dog. I even appreciate those damn high-heeled shoes you wear all the time."

She laughs. "I knew you loved my shoes."

"I do." I rub my nose along the edge of her jaw, breathing in her sweet scent. "They may not be appropriate for country living, but they're sexy as fuck."

"Anything else?"

I nod against her neck, breathing her in again before I nibble on her earlobe. “I also appreciate the way you smell. Always good enough to eat.”

Her grip on my hair tightens. “Garret, please.”

“Please what, Princess?” My voice is low and gravelly. My need and desire for her is evident in my erection pressed against her belly. “Tell me what you want, and I’ll give it to you.”

“Fuck me,” she breathes.

“With my mouth or my cock?”

“Both.”

“Princess,” I growl. “You say the sweetest things.”

I drop to my knees and slide my hands under her dress. Looping my fingers around her panties, I pull them down her long legs.

Lifting her feet one at a time, I slip her panties off her and bring them to my nose. They smell like her—sweet and spicy and so damn good.

“Mine.” I growl as I slip them into my pants pocket.

The whimper that exists her lips makes it hard to contain my carnal desire to devour her. But I don’t want to rush this. I want her to feel everything I’m feeling. I want to torture her with pleasure, drag it out so she knows exactly what she does to me.

I lift her foot and rest it on my shoulder, admiring the shimmery black fabric covering her shoe. It’s delicate and sophisticated and fit for a princess. The heel is at least three inches tall and spiked.

“You could kill someone with this thing.” I mumble against her leg as I kiss my way from her ankle to her knee. She trembles under my touch.

Just as I slide my hand up her thigh, a loud ringing fills the air.

“Cookies,” she huffs.

I glance up at her. Her dazed eyes are heavy with lust, and she's barely able to hold her hand up as she points toward the oven.

"I got it." I lightly slap her thigh before I set her foot down and stand. She stumbles slightly as if she's already too weak to hold herself up. I haven't even touched her yet. Knowing what I do to her makes me smile.

"Easy there, Princess." I grab her hips to steady her before I brush my lips across hers. "I'll be right back."

Turning toward the oven, I grab the potholder and take the cookie sheet out. The smell is so sweet with a hint of cinnamon. My mouth waters.

"Are these the reason you taste like cinnamon?" I ask as I walk back to my princess.

She nods. "You wanna try one?"

"Later." I cup her cheeks and kiss her hard, delving my tongue deep into her mouth. She wraps her hands around my wrists and kisses me back like she's starving for me. When I pull away, she whimpers. "First, I wanna taste you."

I drop back to my knees and reposition myself in front of her.

"Hang on and put your leg over my shoulder," I say as I lift the skirt of her dress.

She doesn't hesitate to comply, and I don't hesitate to put my mouth on her. I lick her from her entrance to her clit and then suck that little bundle of nerves between my teeth. She cries out my name and arches into me, grinding her clit against my tongue.

"That's it, Princess. Take what you want from me."

And she does. We work together with her rotating her hips to gain more friction against my tongue while I suck and nibble on her clit while I pump my fingers inside her. When she comes, it's fast and intense. Her leg buckles, and she falls forward, but I catch her.

I let myself fall to my back, so I'm spread out on the floor. I pull her down with me so she's sitting on my face and continue to suck and lick her until she's begging me to stop.

"My jeans. Take them off me." I bark out as I reach for my wallet in my back pocket.

She's breathing heavily, and she takes a moment to come down for her high, but when she does, she moves quickly.

I rip the condom wrapper open but before I can take the condom out, she grabs it from me at the same time she fists my cock.

"Fuck!" I cry out.

She squeezes me from the base to the tip and jerks her hand up in slow, even motions. "I want to feel you sink down on me. Ride me, Princess. Ride me until you come again."

She smirks down at me, shaking her head. "Not just yet, big boy. I want my own taste first."

I growl and slap her bare ass right before her pretty lips wrap around my cock. The yelp she lets out vibrates against my erection, causing me to thrust up. She takes me deep into her throat and sucks.

"Fuck, Charlotte." I barely manage to say those words as my voice cracks. She slides her mouth up and down my cock a few more times before I slap her ass again.

"Not like this." I growl. "I wanna come inside you."

Her tongue darts out and licks the length of me as she gives me one last long suck. She releases my tip with a pop, and the sound that comes out of me is guttural.

I'm panting while she rolls the condom onto me, and when she positions herself on my cock and slowly slides down until I've completely filled her, I don't even recognize the sounds I make.

My head is spinning as she takes complete control and rides me hard and fast. It's intense and I'm barely able to hang on until I feel her body tighten around me.

“Please tell me you’re close?” I ask through gritted teeth.

“Yes!” she cries out. Then her cry turns into a deep, pleasurable moan as she comes around my cock. Her body stiffens, and I take over, thrusting into her until my own release consumes me.

She collapses onto me, and I wrap my arms tight around her. With my cock still buried deep inside her, I’ve never felt so close to another person before.

Everything inside me is screaming *mine, mine, mine*.

We may have said we’d take this thing between us one day at a time and with no labels but fuck that.

Charlotte Weber is mine.

Letting her go at this point is not an option. Now I just have to figure out how to tell her my deepest secret without losing her forever.

Because that’s a reality I can’t even contemplate.

IT’S AFTER NINE BY THE TIME WE COLLAPSE ON THE COUCH. Shortly after I arrived, we took a break to eat dinner, and then got right back to baking cookies. She had two more batches to finish before she could call it quits.

I helped her however I could, but I suspect I was more of a hindrance than anything. She never complained and smiled at me every time our eyes met.

“Give me your feet.” I reach for her legs, shifting her so she’s leaning against the opposite end of the couch with her feet on my lap. “Your feet have to be killing you after wearing these shoes all night.”

“Not really.” She sighs as I slip her shoes off and start massaging one of her feet. “I’m used to them, but I will not turn down a foot rub.”

I press my thumb along the sole of her foot, and she lets out a low moan. I do it again and again just so I can hear those sounds come from her.

“That feels so good,” she whispers. Her head is leaning back on the armrest and one of her arms is slung over her eyes. She looks exhausted, and all I can think about is taking her upstairs and fucking her again.

I settle for rubbing her feet.

I lift one of her feet and kiss the top of it before I continue my massage. “I should put you to bed. You wore yourself out today.”

“Can’t. Still have more to do.” She moans as my thumbs dig into the ball of her foot.

I frown. “What do you mean, you have more to do? I helped you clean up.”

She points toward the coffee table at a box that has several stacks of small, shiny clear bags and stickers. “I need to put all the cookies in one of those.”

I lean forward and pick up the box. “There are hundreds of cookies. This is going to take us all night.”

She chuckles. “I know. But it will look so nice and help keep the cookies fresh.”

I lift a sheet of stickers so I can read what it says. *Made with Love*. There’s a heart beneath the words with a crown positioned over the top. I glance over at her to find her smiling.

“How fitting.” I pat her feet before I move them aside so I can stand. “Stay put.”

She doesn’t argue with me. Instead, she turns her head to the side like she’s ready to take a nap. I kiss her forehead, causing her to sigh, before I head into the kitchen. I wash my hands and then grab several containers of cookies.

When I return, she starts to sit up, but I raise my hand to stop her. “You stay. Rest for a bit. I’ll get this started. Just tell me what to do.”

She gives me an apprehensive look but lays back on the couch. “Fine. I’m too tired to argue with you.”

I lean down and press a light kiss to her lips. “Good girl.”

She smiles up at me and lets out a soft moan. She looks so damn pretty like this. All I want to do is wrap her up in my arms and hold her forever.

But there’s work to be done.

I take my seat on the opposite side of the couch, placing her feet back on my lap. “Okay. Tell me what to do.”

She points toward the bags. “Put one cookie in a bag. There’s a strip in the back that you need to pull off before you fold it over to seal it. Then put one sticker over the join. If you give me one, I’ll show you.”

I shake my head. “I’ve got it. I told you to rest.”

She chuckles. “Bossy much?”

I raise a brow and shift my eyes to her. “Don’t get mouthy with me, Princess. I’ll have to spank you again.”

She waggles her brows. “I like it when you spank me.”

I growl and narrow my eyes. “You’re not playing fair.”

“Not even a little bit.” She rubs her foot against my growing erection.

“Princess.” I warn. “Do you need these wrapped up or not?”

She sighs and moves her foot back to my thigh. “I do. I’ll be good. For now.”

I give her thigh a light smack and get to work. We’re silent for several minutes while I get the hang of bagging these cookies. Once I’ve got a routine set, it starts to move pretty quickly. I finish up one container faster than I expected and move onto the next.

“How are you going to manage all this by yourself this weekend? Do you want me to get one of my brothers to take Rayne so I can help?”

I'd agreed to take Rayne so she could play all the games since Lois and Jim decided it was best if they both stayed home. It'll be too much excitement for Jim, and they're not comfortable leaving him home alone that long. That leaves Charlotte alone at her booth.

"Amelia is going to help me."

I raise a brow and look at her out of the corner of my eye. "Amelia? I didn't know you two were friends."

"We used to be." When I glance over at her, she's twirling a strand of her hair between her fingers. She looks so relaxed and comfortable. I want to see her like this every day. That thought makes my chest ache. "We didn't stay in touch after I moved, but we reconnected. You saw us together at Posey's, so I assumed you knew."

"That night made me wonder, but I didn't know for sure."

"Is that okay? Me being friends with Amelia."

I nod.

"You sure? I know your families are rivals or mortal enemies or whatever you call it. I don't want to cause any trouble."

I set the cookie down that I just finished wrapping and turn to her. Taking her hands, I pull her onto my lap and lean back on the couch. Cupping her cheek, I give her a quick kiss. "It's fine. I promise. I don't have a problem with it as long as Amelia understands I hate her brothers. She's not so bad. I can't promise how my brothers will take it, but it's not an issue for me."

A look of concern flashes across her face. "Do your brothers know about me?"

I nod. "They've known for a while. Ash saw you leaving that first night you stayed with me."

"Oh." She worries her bottom lip between her teeth. "Why didn't you tell me?"

I shrug. "It wasn't a big deal." I rub my thumb over her lip until she releases it. Then I kiss her. "They won't say anything

unless we're ready for people to know about us. You don't have to worry about that."

"I'm not worried. Just surprised is all." She rests her head on my shoulder and sighs. "I guess I should tell you that my mom knows as well."

"Really?"

"Yeah." She chuckles. "She called me out the night I came over to your house for dinner. She said I wasn't as sneaky as I thought I was."

I rub my hand over her head and down her back. "Is she okay with it?"

"She is. In fact, she warned me not to hurt you. My family likes you very much. More than I think you realize."

I furrow my brows. "Why would you hurt me?"

"Well." She takes a deep breath. "I don't know how much of the gossip you've heard. I told you—"

"I've heard enough. That man is an idiot."

"He is." She chuckles. Then she lifts her eyes to mine. "I'm over him. Just so you know. I can't say my heart isn't still wounded though."

"We're all a little wounded, Princess." I kiss the top of her head and hug her closer.

The voice in my head is yelling at me that this is the time. That I should tell her the secret I've held close to my heart for over ten years.

But the damaged little boy inside me is too scared of the consequences, so I keep quiet.

Instead, I hold her until her breathing evens out, and she's asleep in my arms. This feels so right, like she belongs with me, and it's a feeling I don't want to lose.

If I had any doubt about the depths of my feelings for Charlotte before, they're gone now.

I am completely head over heels in love with her.

Chapter 21

*Because feuds and bake sales
always go hand in hand.*

Charlotte

All my worries and concerns about baking too many cookies fly out the window when I see how much everyone else baked for this event. I made a lot more than some and didn't even come close to baking as much as others.

My former elementary school has been converted to a community center, and the old gymnasium is packed with booths. My senses are overwhelmed with sugary sweet goodness.

I see a few parents of kids I went to school with, a few of my former teachers, and some younger faces I don't recognize. Of course, Grams and Mrs. Engle are both here. They never missed a bake sale when I was growing up, and it looks like they still don't.

"These are the last of them," Amelia says as she drops the last of the containers on the table behind me.

I'd mentioned to Amelia that I sponsored a table at this fundraiser when we'd gone out a few weeks ago. I couldn't pass up her offer to help when I told her I'd be working it alone.

Accepting help from a Koch was a risk, and one I decided to take. Thankfully, Garret didn't have a problem with it.

"Thanks, Lia." I wipe my brow with the back of my hand. All this running around, setting up, is making me hot. "Are you sure your mom doesn't need your help?"

“Nah.” She waves off my question. “She’s got Dad with her. They always work the booth together.”

I glance around the gymnasium and don’t see her parents. I haven’t seen them since I moved home, and I’d like to say hello. I spent a lot of time at their house when I was in high school.

“Where are your parents? I don’t see them.”

Lia points toward the opposite side of the gym. “They’re by the back entrance. The fundraiser committee learned a long time ago to put as much distance between my parents and Grams as possible. Otherwise, they’d argue all night.”

“Does your mom still insist Grams stills all her recipes?”

“Every single event.” Lia rolls her eyes. “It’s so dumb. I think she complains just to keep the feud alive. If the Kochs aren’t fighting with the Mutters, then they ain’t living.”

“That is so true.” I chuckle. “And it always felt so one sided when we were in school. Like your brothers and parents made a bigger deal out of it than the Mutters. Is that still the case?”

“Oh my gosh, yes!” She drags out the S on yes and groans. “I am so over it. It’s mostly Tanner and Linden keeping it alive. I don’t think those two will ever let it go. They’d rather die than be friendly with a Mutter.”

“That’s a bit extreme, don’t you think?”

“Yep, but sadly, it’s true.”

I grab a few more of the containers and start laying the individually wrapped cookies out on a platter. I thought baking the cookies was a lot of work. That was nothing compared to wrapping them up. At least I had Garret’s help. In fact, he did most of this while he insisted I rest. At one point, I fell asleep in his lap. When I woke up, he’d had two-thirds of them done.

Thinking about Garret causes a wave of guilt to wash over me. I doubt Lia cares about my connection to Garret, but I don’t want to inadvertently cause her problems with her brothers.

I should tell her, so she's not blindsided when he stops by later. I pull my bottom lip between my teeth while I debate on what to do. Garret and I didn't discuss telling anyone else outside our families. Would he be okay with me telling her too?

"Are you okay?" Lia places a hand on my arm. When I look up at her, I'm surprised by the worried look on her face.

"I'm fine. Why?"

"You have a pained look on your face. Like something terrible just happened or is about to happen."

My shoulders sag and I let out a deep breath. "Here's the thing. I feel like I need to tell you something. But it isn't something that anyone else knows about. Not yet, at least. So it needs to stay a secret."

A wide smile covers her face. She lowers her voice to a whisper as she steps closer to me. "Does this *something* have anything to do with Garret Mutter?"

I gasp and feel my eyes bug out of my head. "Why would you ask me that?"

Her head falls back in laughter. "Oh my God. It's true."

Grabbing her arm, I pull her around the back of the table as far away from others as we can get. "Tell me what you've heard."

"Relax." She's still laughing, and that only makes me more anxious.

"I can't relax until you tell me what you've heard."

"Okay, okay!" She holds her hands up in surrender. "Not much. It's just that we all saw you follow Garret out of Posey's a few weeks ago. It started some talk, but I think it's all speculation. Unless ..."

She waggles her brows with a hopeful gaze.

"Oh God." I pinch the bridge of my nose and take a few deep breaths, hoping it will make me feel better. It doesn't.

“So ... Does that mean there *is* something going on between you and Garret?”

“Lia, you can’t say anything. Please. It’s new, and I have no idea where it’s going. But I like him, and he likes me. He’ll be here later with Rayne, and I don’t want things to be awkward between you and me when he shows up. Can you just ... Not say anything and play it cool? Put the feud aside for one night.”

“Hey, you can trust me.” Her smile is gone, and her teasing voice is replaced by one that is kind and caring. “I don’t play into that stupid feud like my brothers. I think the whole thing is silly and dumb.”

“Really? You’re not mad at me?”

“Why on earth would I be mad? We can’t help who we fall for, Char. Mutter or not, Garret is a good man. And so freaking tall.” She steps closer to me and drops her voice even lower. “Is he ... *Big*?”

“What?” I furrow my brows.

Her teasing smile returns. “He’s so tall and broad. We’ve all wondered about the size of his ... You know.” She points toward her crotch. “Is it as big as the rest of him?”

I can’t help but laugh at her question. “I am not answering that.”

I turn to walk back toward the front table to finish setting up.

“But you *know* the answer,” she says in amazement.

Glancing over my shoulder, I toss her a wink. “Wouldn’t you like to know?”

WALKING THE HALLS OF MY OLD SCHOOL, I’M AMAZED AT HOW many activities are set up for the kids. This fundraiser isn’t just a bake sale. It’s more like a carnival night with the best home baked treats of all time.

Lia and I finished setting up all the displays with some time to spare, so I'm taking a walk through the halls to see what else is here before we open the doors.

I didn't expect all this. There's every game you'd typically find at a carnival, like ring toss, balloon darts, and whack-a-mole. I can't believe they actually have a whack-a-mole game in one of the old classrooms.

There are arts and crafts, face painting, quilts for sale, and the knitting ladies are set up in a circle knitting hats and scarfs. There are even a few women with spinning wheels. *Spinning wheels!* I didn't even know that was a thing. It looks so cool I have to get a closer look.

I recognize Lina Lange right away. Her beauty is unmistakable. I'd say she's more beautiful now than she was when we were kids. She was in my graduating class, though we weren't close. She was always a bit of a loner, but she seemed nice enough.

Her long dark hair is pulled back in a high ponytail. Her face is clean with minimal makeup. She doesn't need it. Her natural beauty always shines through. The biggest difference in her appearance is the tattoos. Even with her t-shirt on, I can tell her tattoos cover both arms and shoulders completely.

"Hi, Lina." I give her a friendly smile, hoping she sees it for what it is. *Friendly*. Lina's one of those girls that was born with a resting bitch face. Everyone always assumed she was angry at the world, but I suspect there's a lot more to her than that. "May I watch what you're doing?"

She lifts her gaze in surprise as if she didn't expect anyone to talk to her. For anyone who doesn't know Lina, her expression would surely cause them to retreat. Her light blue gaze is intense and if I didn't know her, I'd think she was about to shoot ice daggers through my heart.

Then she softens and nods. "Do you knit?" Her voice is raspy and a little hoarse as if this is the first time she's spoken all day.

“I do. It’s been a while but seeing all this beautiful yarn is making me want to start up again.” I pick up a hank from the basket on the table next to her. There’s a sign in front of it that says *\$30 each*. The colors are gorgeous shades of deep purple with hints of shimmer mixed in. It’s uneven, with thick and thin sections throughout. “Did you make these?”

She nods and keeps pumping the foot pedal on her spinning wheel and feeding clumps of fiber into it. It’s amazing to watch the loose fibers in her hands come together in a thin, single strand of yarn.

“Is one hank enough to make a project? Like a scarf or hat?”

She pauses what she’s doing and studies me with a narrow gaze. Then she shifts her eyes to the hank I’m holding. “Not that one. You’d need two.”

She digs around in the basket and pulls out a second hank with similar colors to the one I’m holding, only slightly lighter. “Those two together would make a beautiful scarf.”

I smile and take the second hank from her. “Yes, they would. Can I buy them?”

Surprise once again mars her expression. “Do you have a ball winder?”

I raise a brow. “What’s that?”

“You can’t knit from a hank. It needs to be wound into a ball. I can do that for you if you like.”

“That’d be wonderful. Thank you, Lina.”

She pushes her spinning wheel to the side, letting the fiber she’s spinning drop to the floor. The end starts to unravel but she doesn’t seem the least bit concerned. Taking the two hanks, she heads to a table in the back of the room where she stretches the hank out on an unfamiliar tool that holds it in a tight ring while she hooks a free end of the yarn to the ball winder.

She moves quickly and in a matter of minutes, both hanks have been wound into small balls ready to knit. She places

them in a small bag and then pulls her phone out of her back pocket. After pushing a few buttons, she looks up at me. “Sixty dollars.”

I hand her my credit card to complete the transaction.

“Thanks,” I say when she hands my card back to me. “I can’t wait to find a pattern to use.”

She stares at me again, like I confuse her. I think back to when we were kids and wonder if I was ever mean to her or did something to make her uncomfortable. I don’t recall anything involving me, but I remember other kids picking on her. Her family never had much, and her brother caused trouble at times but nothing specific rings a bell.

She clears her throat before she takes her seat again. “There are some patterns on the community center’s knitting group page. Might find something there that you like.”

“Thanks, I’ll check that out.” I check the time. It’s getting close to the opening. “Well, I better get back to my booth. Thanks again for this. I can’t wait to knit it up.”

I quickly make my way back to the gymnasium, and to my surprise, Grams is at my booth talking to Lia. Even more surprising, they both seem friendly with each other. Grams says something that makes Lia laugh.

“Hey,” I say when I reach the table. “Did I miss anything?”

“Nope.” Lia wipes her eyes. *Was she laughing to the point of tears?* “Grams was just telling me about a prank Ash pulled on Liam. Apparently, he covered Liam’s bedroom in aluminum foil. Like, the entire room.”

“What?” I huff out a laugh.

“Yep.” Grams shakes her head. “Damn boy even covered Liam’s clothes with it. I don’t even want to think about how much he spent on supplies. A complete waste, if you ask me, but those boys never know when to stop. But enough about them and their nonsense. Looks like I’ve got some actual competition this year.” Grams gives me a wink and a smile. “These cookies look delicious.”

“I’m sure they don’t compare to anything you baked, but they’re not bad.”

“Psh.” She waves a hand at me. “That’s not what I’ve heard. A little birdie might have whispered in my ear that my grandson is quite taken with your cookin’. I assume that includes your sweets.”

My eyes widen and my mouth falls open, causing Grams to laugh. I glance over at Lia and she’s doing her best to hide her smile.

“Oh now, dear. Don’t tell me you’ve forgotten how secrets never remain secrets for long in this town.” She leans close to me and drops her voice to a whisper. “If you didn’t want folks to know you were seein’ Garret, then you shouldn’t park your parents’ car in plain sight outside his house all night. Let’s just say that got people talkin’ and watchin.’ If the rumors are true, you’re seen comin’ and goin’ from his house almost every night.”

Grams quirks a brow at me as if to say she’s daring me to contradict her.

I drop my face into my hands and groan. “People are talking about us?”

Grams pats my arm. “Now, it ain’t so bad. Turns out people are happy about it. We all want to see Garret happy. Lord knows that boy needs a good woman in his life.”

“I’m not ready for this,” I mumble, making Grams laugh even harder.

“Well, ready or not, it’s out there.” Then her laughter dies, and she gives me the most serious look I’ve ever seen on the woman’s face. “Just don’t hurt that boy. He’s had enough pain in his life. He doesn’t need or deserve more.”

“It’s not that serious. And it’s really new.”

She snorts. “Everything about Garret is serious. He doesn’t do anything unless it means somethin’ to him. When he loves, he loves hard and completely. You’d do well to remember that.”

My heart nearly jumps out of my chest at her mention of love. I feel a tingling sensation rush through my body and it's suddenly hard to breathe. "Who ... Who said anything about love?"

"I'm not sayin' you two are in love, just that you need to be careful. We all know what you just went through, and I am truly sorry you had to go through that. Just don't use my grandson because you're bored or hurt or whatever you might be feelin'. Understand?"

I glance over at Lia, who looks really uncomfortable being caught listening to this conversation. Turning my gaze back to Grams, I say quietly, "Yes ma'am. I can assure you, hurting Garret is the last thing on my mind."

"Good," her smile returns, and she pats my arm again. "Glad we got that straight. Now you ladies have a great night. I suspect you're gonna sell a lot of cookies."

With that, Grams turns on her heels and walks back to her own booth. Lia steps up beside me and shivers. "Remind me to never get on her bad side. Something tells me Grams is a force to be reckoned with."

I huff. "Yeah, no shit. But the threat of her wrath is not what has me worried. I'm not ready for everyone to know about Garret and me. Not until I know where it's going."

Lia chuckles and wraps her arm around my shoulder. "Then I suggest you figure it out real quick, because everyone in this room was watching Grams talk to you. I'd say that means the rumor is confirmed."

I glance around the gym, and sure enough, all eyes are on me. I let out a low breath, feeling completely exposed.

All the excitement I felt over seeing Garret tonight deflates.

This night is not going to be fun.

Chapter 22

Well ... Fuck me.

Garret

Public events always make me uncomfortable, but being dragged from my truck to hang out at a community event by a ten-year-old girl is downright torturous.

I have no clue what I was thinking when I agreed to bring Rayne tonight.

I know why I agreed. Because Charlotte asked me if I could do it.

I didn't even have to think about it. It was an immediate yes. I think it's safe to say there isn't much I'll say no to where that woman is concerned.

It's official. I have fallen hard for Charlotte Weber, and I'm ready to put my heart on the line for her.

Whether or not she wants it, she owns my heart. I just hope she decides to keep it when I tell her the truth I've kept secret for far too long.

"Come on, Garret." Rayne tugs at my arm. "Stop dragging your feet and let's go."

I let out a low grumble at her insistence.

She stops and turns to me with her hands on her hips. "You promised my aunt you'd bring me tonight, so stop growling like a grumpy old bear."

I narrow my eyes. "Did you just call me old?"

She shrugs. "Well, you are old."

“Am not,” I mumble as I push past her, heading for the main entrance. I’m not getting out of this, so I might as well get it over with it.

She skips up next to, seemingly happy again. “Aren’t you like forty or something?”

I stop in my tracks. “No. I’m thirty-two.”

“Oh.” She shrugs. “That’s still old.”

I scoff. “Hardly. Now let’s go. Sooner you play some games, the sooner I can go back home.”

“And cookies. We have to get lots of cookies too. And cake if they have some. Will you buy me an entire chocolate cake if someone made one?”

“Sure.” I chuckle at how she skipped right over my comment about wanting to go home. This kid has a one-track mind, centered on fun, and I love it.

I never had fun like this as a kid. I’ve always been grumpy and miserable. Dad never made it easy on me with his constant looks of disgust. He made it clear at a very early age that he wished it were me that died, and not Mom.

Like I had any control over that.

My brothers had fun though, and they tried to pull me into it every chance they got. It worked sometimes, but I figured out at an early age that I liked being alone. It suits me.

“Can we play *all* the games?” Rayne asks as we near the main entrance.

“If you want.”

“Will you also help me win at all the games?”

I open the door and wave her in ahead of me. “Well, I’ll try. But I’m afraid you asked the wrong Mutter to bring you if winning is your objective. I’m not the best at carnival games. That would be Mac, Chase, or Ash.”

She looks up at me and frowns. “Are they here?”

I shrug. “Dunno. Maybe.”

She stops, puts her hands on her hips, and stares up at me like she's going to reprimand me for doing something wrong. "Will you text them and ask?"

I cross my arms over my chest and stare down at her. "You're being demanding today. Can't we just have fun?"

She copies my stance. "Not if we don't win."

"There's more to life than winning."

She snorts. "Only losers say things like that."

I raise a brow. "Are you calling me a loser?"

"No." She smirks. "You're calling yourself one. Now will you message your brothers or not? I want to play *and* win."

"I don't know." I tease. "I think I should make you suffer through all my poor playing skills first. That'll teach you."

"Garret! Come on, please." She clasps her hands together and holds them out in front of her. "I was just kidding."

"I don't know if I should believe you."

"No, seriously." She pleads. "I really was kidding. You know, just messing around."

I step to the side of the long hallway to let others pass us by. Crossing my arms over my chest, I stare down at her. She bounces nervously on her feet.

"Okay, fine, but no picking on me when I lose. You know I hate crowds."

She leaps forward and wraps her arms around my center. It catches me off guard and I stiffen. But as she hugs me tighter, I relax. I could get used to hugs like this. I just hope I still get them after I drop the bomb on her family.

I don't know when I'm going to tell them, but it has to be soon. Things are getting serious with Charlotte, and I can't keep a secret like this from her for long. It's just not right.

I pull my phone from my back pocket and group text my brothers. Ash responds right away.

“Alright. Let’s go.” I ruffle Rayne’s hair and start down the long hallway. “Ash says to meet him at the ring toss. He’ll win you all the prizes you want.”

“Yay!” Rayne claps her hands and runs past me. Even with my long legs, I have to walk double-time to keep up with her. As soon as Ash comes into sight, she squeals.

She leaps at him and hugs his waist, same as she did me. It makes me smile. I love that she’s so close to my family. I hope it stays that way for years to come, no matter what happens.

Blood or not, Rayne will always be mine.

AS SOON AS I SEE HER STANDING BEHIND THE TABLE, SMILING at a customer, I relax. All the noise fades into the background, and I only see her. What I wouldn’t do to walk up to her, pull her into my arms, and kiss her?

Maybe one day soon.

Rayne rushes past me with her arms full of all the prizes my brothers helped her win.

“Aunt Char! Look!” she cries out above the low rumble of the crowd.

Charlotte’s eyes snap up, and she smiles when she sees Rayne running toward her. Her eyes shift to mine and that gorgeous smile of hers grows. There’s a glint in her eyes that speaks volumes. It’s more than want and need and desire. Charlotte is genuinely happy to see me.

“I wondered when I was going to see you two. I was beginning to worry you were a no show.”

“Are you kidding?” Rayne says. “We had to play all the games. Ash had to help me win though.” She drops her voice to a whisper. “Garret isn’t that good.”

Charlotte chuckles as she brushes Rayne’s long dark hair out of her face. “You don’t say.”

“I don’t get out much,” I say in my defense.

Charlotte looks up at me, nothing but happiness in her gaze. “Sounds like we need to change that.”

“I like home.” I grumble. “I don’t need—”

“Char,” a deep baritone voice says from right behind me. I turn around to see a dark-haired stranger in a very expensive suit standing next to me. He’s got an air of sophistication about him that says he’s not from around here. I instantly dislike him.

“Brad!” Charlotte gasps. “What are you doing here?”

My hands ball into fists as I look him up and down. This is the asshole that cheated on her? I puff out my chest, ready to defend what is mine.

“I need to talk to you.” He takes a step closer to the table. The urge to shove him back is strong, but I resist. “Your parents told me I could find you here.”

Charlotte frowns. “You spoke to my parents?”

He steps even closer and rests his hand on her shoulder. My nostrils flare.

“I stopped by the house first,” he says.

Charlotte blinks a few times like she can’t believe what she’s seeing. Her eyes dart from mine to his. Her smile is gone and replaced with anxiety. My happiness to see her is gone. She’s letting him touch her and that pisses me off.

“This is Brad?” I point my thumb in his direction. My anger is evident in my tone. “The guy you were seeing for years?”

“Um, yeah.” She shifts nervously on her feet. She keeps looking between us as if she doesn’t know which one of us she should be focusing on.

“Char, honey.” With one hand still on her shoulder, Brad reaches out for Charlotte’s hand. She lets him take it. The primal beast inside me roars in protest.

Mine. Mine. Mine. Plays on repeat in my mind.

“Don’t call me that anymore,” Charlotte says, but she doesn’t pull away. I can’t stop staring at their joined hands. Why the fuck is she letting him touch her? It’s killing me to stand here and watch but I’m trying really hard not to make a scene.

“Please don’t be like that.” He pleads. “We need to talk. Can we go somewhere private?”

Charlotte is shaking her head before he finishes speaking. “Whatever you need to say to me, you can say right here.”

He glances around. Every eye in the gym is on us. “Okay, if you’re sure.”

“I’m sure.”

I’m still staring at their joined hands, and for the life of me, I don’t understand why she hasn’t pulled away from him. This is the asshole that cheated on her. He has some nerve touching her again after that.

“Charlotte,” his voice drops another octave into a deep, seductive tone. “I made a huge mistake. I’ve realized these past few months that I love you so much more than I ever thought possible. I miss you so very much. I want you back in my life. Permanently. Forever.”

Charlotte’s eyes widen as he drops to one knee and holds a small box out for her. Inside is a very large diamond ring.

She gasps. “Brad. You can’t be serious.”

“I’m very serious.” A sly smile spreads across his face and it makes me want to punch him. “I was a fool to let you go. I’m ready to spend the rest of my life making it up to you. All you have to say is yes.”

Brad takes her hand and holds out her ring finger. “Oh my God. This isn’t happening.”

Tears well up in her eyes, and Brad’s smile grows. “I love you so much, honey.” He slowly slips the ring onto her finger. She doesn’t say no or do anything to stop him. And my heart breaks into a million pieces. “I’ll never do anything to hurt you again.”

Tears stream down her cheeks as she stares at the ring he just put on her finger. The ring she isn't objecting to.

"You can't marry him," I blurt out. All my anger and fury boil up to the surface.

The room falls silent and all I can hear is the pounding of what's left of my shattered heart and my heavy breathing.

I stalk toward her. "You are *not* marrying that man."

Fear covers Charlotte's face. "Garret, not here."

"Yes, here." I bark out in anger. "He cheated on you, and you still let him put a ring on your finger. Have you lost your mind?"

"Garret, I didn't ..." Her gaze shifts to her hand—the hand that Brad is still holding—and stares at the ring. She shakes her head before she looks at me again. "I ... It's—"

Brad pushes to his feet and steps between us, cutting Charlotte off.

"Garret, is it?" He drops his voice in a low threatening tone. I puff my chest out, ready to fight for what's mine. "I don't know why you're making a scene, but this is between Char and me."

"To hell with you." I grab him by his fancy suit jacket and shove him back until his body knocks into the table. Cookies go flying in all directions. "You're *not* marrying her."

He clutches his hands around my wrist and tries to loosen my hold but fails. Hands grab me from behind, and before I can wrap my head around what's happening, Ash and Chase pull me off him and shove me back.

Brad quickly recovers, straightens his jacket and looks at me like I'm so far beneath him I'm not even worth the words he's about to speak. "Why the hell not?"

"If she's going to marry anyone, it's going to be me!" I yell.

Gasps fill the air, followed by a devilish laugh from Brad. "Sure, that's going to happen. You're not her type."

I scoff. “Shows you how little you really know Charlotte.”

He looks me up and down like he’s disgusted with what he sees. “I know her better than you.”

“Aunt Char?” Rayne’s voice cuts through the tension. She sounds confused and maybe even a little hurt. All her prizes are now on the floor around her feet. “Why did Garret say that?”

“What?” Charlotte wipes her face dry of the tears streaming down her cheeks. Then she looks at her niece, her expression filled with pain.

“Are you dating Garret?” The confusion and hurt in her voice are gone and are replaced with anger.

“I ... Um ... It’s complicated.” Guilt is written all over her face.

Rayne barges toward her aunt and shoves her back. “How could you do this? He’s my daddy.”

Charlotte sucks in a breath, and her eyes snap to mine. “What did you say?”

“I said you can’t!” Rayne cries out. Her face is red and streaked with tears. “I can’t believe you did this.”

Then she spins around and runs for the door. Ash takes off after her, but she’s fast and disappears before he even makes it halfway across the gymnasium.

I close my eyes, struggling to breathe. Everything is crashing down around me. The air feels thick and heavy, making it hard to breathe. I feel like I’m being crushed.

How does she know?

“Garret?” Charlotte’s voice is timid as she says my name. I open my eyes and meet her tear-filled gaze. “Is that true?”

“I don’t know,” I answer honestly.

“But it’s possible?” she asks.

I swallow. It feels like jagged rocks are caught in my throat. “Yes.”

With that one word, my entire world falls apart. Charlotte takes a step back, shaking her head. She might even be saying no over and over again, but I can't hear her from the ringing in my ears.

"Charlotte." I reach for her, but she pulls back. The pain in her eyes completely shatters me. "Don't. Let me explain."

"I can't." She pushes past me.

All I can do is stare at her as she walks away. Each step she takes feels like a gash to my heart.

The scars I carry are nothing compared to what this gaping wound will leave behind.

Chapter 23

*Rock-bottom is a bottomless pit,
and I just keep falling.*

Charlotte

All rational thoughts go out the window, and I run. I don't know where I'm going, or even why I'm heading in this direction. All I know is I have to get as far away from that mess as I can get.

My feet hurt because, of course, I'm wearing my favorite Jimmy Choos. My chest is heaving as I gasp for air. And every inch of my body is screaming at me to stop.

I'm not a runner, not even on a good day.

I hear voices calling out for me to stop, but I can't. I fight through the pain and discomfort and difficulty breathing, and I keep running and running and running.

When I finally collapse, I'm surrounded by darkness. I'm far enough past the edge of town that the soft glow from streetlights is too far away to light my path.

"Charlotte!" Garret's deep gravelly voice, the one that usually sends shivers through my body, surrounds me. But not this time. All I feel is anguish and hurt and a betrayal I'm not prepared to process.

I try to push to my feet, to run again, but I can't get my body to listen to me. I'm spent, both physically and mentally exhausted.

"Go away!" I cry out.

"Charlotte." His plea is softer, closer. I feel his body next to mine as he reaches for me. "I can't leave you out here. Please. Let me take you home."

“No.” I push at him, and he falls back. Scrambling to a seated position, I scoot back, putting some distance between us. “You don’t get to help me anymore.”

He holds his hands up in surrender. “That’s fine,” his voice cracks as he speaks. “Let Chase take you home. Please. I need to know you’re safe.”

I didn’t notice the figure behind Garret until he said his name. Chase steps closer and leans down next to me. “Hey, Char. Can you walk or do you want me to carry you? That was quite the run you went on.”

He reaches out his hand for me, and I take it. He stands first and helps me to my feet. My legs are weak and wobbly, and I fall backward before I’m even completely upright. Chase grabs a hold of me and swings me into his arms.

“Looks like I’m carrying you, sweetheart.” He hugs me close, not giving me much choice in the matter. Then again, I couldn’t fight him off even if I tried.

“Where’s Rayne?” I ask. My voice is raspy, and it hurts to speak. I thought I felt like shit after Brad publicly humiliated me, but that night has nothing on how I feel now.

“Ash has her. He’s taking her home.” Chase’s voice is calm and soothing. It puts me a little at ease knowing someone has made sure Rayne is safe.

I glance over Chase’s shoulder and can just see the outline of Garret’s body still sitting on the ground where I had fallen. His head is down, and his shoulders are shaking. I can’t be sure, but it looks like he’s crying.

My grumpy beast of a man is crying, and a little more of my heart breaks.

THE NEXT TWENTY MINUTES ARE A BLUR. ONCE CHASE GOT ME back to the community center, he took me straight to his truck, where Amelia was waiting with my belongings. She said

something about not worrying about my booth, and that she had it taken care of.

The drive to my parents' house was quiet. Chase never asked me questions, and I didn't offer any answers.

Not that I have answers. My life just imploded more than I thought possible. This ache in my chest hurts far worse than when I found out Brad was cheating on me, and I can't for the life of me figure out why.

You know why, dummy.

I squeeze my eyes close attempting to fight back the tears.

In the few short months I've been home, Garret's gruff demeanor and caring heart broke through all my defenses.

I didn't realize until his outburst over Brad's proposal just how deep my feelings for him have grown. The minute he said I couldn't marry Brad, I knew. I love him. Completely and with all my heart.

Then everything went to hell.

Chase pulls into my parents' driveway. I grab my purse and reach for the door handle before he even comes to a stop.

"Thanks for the ride," I say as I open the door.

"Are you okay?" he asks.

"Not even a little bit." I give him a weak smile before I slide out of his truck and shut the door behind me.

It feels like I'm walking through molasses as I make way up the driveway and to the front porch. Mom opens the front door before I reach it, a look of panic and concern all over her face.

"Char, what on earth is going on?"

"Where's Rayne?" I ask, ignoring her question as I push past her.

"In her room." The sigh that comes out of my mom is heavy with exhaustion. "She won't come out or talk about why

she's so upset. What happened tonight, and why did Ash bring her home? Where's Garret?"

"Not now, Mom. I need to talk to Rayne." I run up the stairs and head straight for Rayne's room. When I open her door, I find her curled up on her bed, hugging a book close to her chest.

She looks just as upset as me. Her face is red, and her eyes are puffy. Tears run down her cheeks, and her lower lip quivers.

I drop to the edge of her bed and reach for her. Thankfully, she comes to me and wraps her arms around my waist. She sobs into my chest, dragging even more tears from me.

"Why did you say that about Garret?" I ask as I rub my hand over her back.

It takes her a minute to calm herself down before she sits up on her own and looks at me. She hands me the book she had clutched to her chest. Only it's not just a book. It's a journal.

"What's this?"

She looks up at me, her eyes overflowing with tears. "Mom's journal."

Those two little words cause my heart to lurch and get caught in my throat. My ears are ringing, and my head is spinning. I close my eyes and clench my hands around the journal.

Carol always kept a journal, and she never left home without one. It was her thing. The one consistency in her life. For me it was lists, but for her it was writing. Ever since she was old enough to hold a pen, she wrote in a journal.

And it wasn't just writing. Sometimes she'd fill the pages with drawings. Another detail about her that I let slip into the recesses of my mind and didn't let myself think about. It was far too painful to recall these details about her.

I open my eyes and study the book in my hands. It's a beautiful leather-bound journal with Carol's name stenciled on

the front in gold letters. I open it to the first page and seeing her name written in her handwriting nearly breaks me. I struggle to hold back my own sobs. I squeeze my eyes closed and take in a few deep breaths until I've calmed down.

Glancing at Rayne, she's watching me with caution as if she doesn't know what my reaction will be. Hell, I don't know what my reaction is going to be either. There are so many emotions swirling around inside me that I can't process any of them.

I'm a wreck trapped beneath the weight of every sad and depressed emotion known to man with no way to pull myself out of it.

"You read this," I say. It's not a question because I already know the answer.

Rayne nods. "I found a whole bunch of them. Mom wrote a lot."

"Yeah." I trace my finger over the curved letters in Carol's name. "It was her thing. She kept a journal for as long as I can remember."

"There are letters in that one to you. Mom knew you had a crush on Garret in high school."

My vision fades as more tears fill my eyes and the sob I've been struggling to hold back escapes. "It was a silly crush. I don't think Garret even noticed me back then."

"I think he did. Or at least Mom thought he did." She shrugs and falls back into her pillows. "It's all in that journal. Said she was pretty sure Garret liked you too, but you were dating Tanner Koch instead. And we all know Mutters and Kochs don't get along."

I can't help but let a low snort out at that. "Yeah, that's true."

"I don't think Mom meant to have sex with Garret."

"Rayne!" Mom shouts from the doorway. I'd forgotten she followed me up here. "What do you know about sex?"

Rayne rolls her eyes. “I’m old enough to know what sex is, Grandma. I’m just not old enough to do it yet.”

“Oh for heaven’s sake. I’m way too old for this conversation.” Mom presses her hand to her chest and leans against the wall like she needs it for support or else she’d fall to the ground.

“You and me both, Mom.” I mumble and refocus on Rayne. “What else did your mom write?”

“That they were both lonely and one thing led to another. She didn’t stop it from happening because she was mad at you for moving away and leaving her all alone. Garret wasn’t the only person she was having sex with. There were others. But he’s the only person she named in her journal.”

Squeezing my eyes closed, I find myself fighting more tears. I hate hearing that Carol was mad at me. That she left this world in an unhappy place. And I really hate that her pain drove her into the bed of a man I’ve fallen for. A man I want to be with because he makes me feel special and desired and appreciated.

But how can we move past this? How can I be with a man that was also intimate with my sister?

Newsflash, Char. You both already fucked him. The thought makes me cringe.

I shove my fingers into my hair and push to my feet. Pacing around the room, my mind wanders in a million directions. It’s not like I’m the only person Garret has had sex with or vice versa. Past relationships are just that—past. This isn’t the first time siblings have fallen for the same man.

But did Carol fall for him? Or was it all just a way to get back at me for leaving?

I grab the journal from where I dropped it on the bed and start flipping through the pages. I never read her journals when we were kids. I always respected her privacy. But right now, I have to know how she felt.

“Did she love him?” I blurt out in a panic.

I meet Rayne's worried gaze. "No. They stopped seeing each other after she got pregnant."

"But she thinks Garret is your father."

Rayne shrugs. "It's possible. But they don't know for sure. They were going to do a test after I was born, but ..."

She sinks further back into her pillows, her eyes unfocused and full of tears.

"But she died." I finish for her.

"Are you suggesting that Garret could be Rayne's father?" Mom's confused voice cuts through the tension.

With a heavy sigh, I nod. "Looks like it."

"Dear Lord." She presses her hand to mouth and stifles a cry. "But, Char. You and Garret are—"

"I know, Mom. I know." I cut her off because I don't need her to remind me that I've been sleeping with Garret for the past couple of months. Or that I've fallen in love with the man.

"And he knows," Mom says. It's not a question. Mom is a smart woman. I'm sure she's picked up on the emotional turmoil currently tearing me apart.

"Why didn't he ever say anything?" Mom asks as she paces in the doorway. "All these years he's spent with her. Watching her any time we needed help. Always letting her hang out with him and never once complaining. It's because he knew he was Rayne's father."

"He said he doesn't know for sure."

"But ..." Mom leans against the wall and slides to the floor. "Why not tell us? Why not ask to at least find out for sure? I don't understand."

"I don't know." I mumble.

"I have brown eyes like his," Rayne says, barely above a whisper. "Mom had blue eyes like you. And I think our smiles look similar too." She lets out a deep breath. "So, I just thought ... Maybe it was true. Maybe Garret really is my dad. I like him. I think it would be really cool if it were true."

I reach for Rayne's hand and take it in mine. I study her eyes and then the shape of her mouth. She's not wrong. Her eyes are almost the exact shade of chocolate brown as Garret's eyes, and she has the same thin upper lip as well.

I run my thumb over her chin and force a smile. "Maybe."

"You wouldn't be upset if it's true?" Her voice is timid, almost shy-like as she speaks.

"Why would—"

I'm interrupted by a knock on the door. Mom lets out an aggravated groan and pushes to her feet. "Who on earth could that be at this hour?"

"Hard to say, Mom!" I call after her in a sarcastic tone. "We are in the middle of a very public crisis involving our next-door neighbors. Maybe it's one of them."

Her footsteps are heavy as she heads down the stairs. With all the drama filling our house, I'm surprised we haven't woken Dad up. Hopefully, he stays asleep. The last thing we need is to confuse him.

But when Mom opens the door and I hear whose voice it is, Dad is no longer a concern.

The reason my life got all turned upside down in the first place, and the reason my night imploded without warning. *Brad.*

With a heavy sigh, I push to my feet and head downstairs. With all the drama going on with Rayne and Garret, I had completely forgotten about Brad's random appearance. I don't know why he showed up here now. We've gone a few months without contact, and I don't have time for this. I have more important issues to deal with than him.

As soon as he sees me coming down the stairs, he rushes past my mom and meets me at the bottom.

"Char, honey." I cringe at the nickname I used to love to hear him say. Now it sounds cheap and makes me uneasy.

He pulls me into his arms before I can even register what he's doing. "Are you okay? You took off before I could wrap

my head around what was going on.”

I push against his chest, forcing him to release me. “First of all, don’t call me that. I am no longer your honey. And second, why are you here?”

“I told you, honey. I made a mistake. I want my girl back. I assume that’s what you wanted too since you’re wearing my ring.”

“Huh?” I shake my head, not sure I heard him correctly. “Ring?”

“My ring, Char.” He takes my hand and holds it close to his heart. “The one I put on your finger tonight when I asked you to marry me.”

I shake my head and focus on my fingers that are spread out over his chest. When my eyes zero in on my ring finger, my eyes widen in surprise. “I am not marrying you, Brad.”

I jerk my hand back, pull the ring off, and toss it at him. It hits him in the chest and then bounces to the floor. He scrambles to catch it before it disappears under the small table at the entrance.

“Char!” He yells out in anger. “This ring is worth more than this house.”

He picks up the ring and inspects it like I might have broken it or something. I roll my eyes and shake my head. Typical. Of course he’d be more worried about the ring than he is about the fact that I just rejected his proposal. How did I not see who he really was for seven years?

“Brad, you need to leave. Right now.”

His eyes snap to mine, his frustration and anger evident in this stony stare. “You don’t mean that.”

I huff out a laugh. “Yeah, I do.”

“No, you don’t.” He raises his voice and takes a step closer to me. “We shared seven years together. Seven. Years. That has to mean something to you. Surely you’re not willing to throw all that away for some backwoods redneck. You’re better than that, Char.”

“Oh, as opposed to how *you* threw it all away for one of *my* clients?”

“That’s not the same thing, and you know it.”

“It’s exactly the same thing, you asshole.” I yell so loud my chest vibrates.

“What’s going on down here?” The confused sound of my dad’s voice has me spinning around. I’d been so absorbed in my frustration with Brad that I forgot I had an audience.

Dad is standing right behind me, confused and angry. Seeing him like this causes me to deflate.

“It’s okay, Dad. Sorry we woke you.”

He looks down at me and frowns. His brows are furrowed and from the way he’s studying my face, I’d say he doesn’t know who I am. His eyes dart around my face, from my nose, mouth, and hair, as if he’s looking for any hint of recognition.

“Brad, I think it’s best if you leave like Charlotte asked.” Mom steps up between us and rests her hand on Brad’s arm. She slowly guides him toward the door. “It’s quite late for us, and I need to get Jim back to bed. You understand, I’m sure.”

Brad glances over his shoulder and meets my stunned stare. “This isn’t over.”

I let out a deep breath and reply in a calm, steady voice. “Yes, it is. Go back to Chicago. There’s nothing left between us.”

Maintaining her polite decorum, Mom shuffles Brad out the door. As soon as she closes the door behind him and flips the lock, I relax.

“Thanks, Mom.” I sag against the wall and drop my hands to my knees.

“Will someone please tell me what’s going on?” Dad’s frustrated voice has me standing up straight.

“Jim, let’s get you back to bed.” Mom reaches for his arm like she’s going to walk him upstairs, but he pulls away.

He takes a few steps back, his eyes darting between us before they land on Mom. He stares at her for a moment before his expression softens.

“Lois?” He says her name like a question, as if he’s not quite sure who she is.

“Yes, Jim. It’s me, Lois.” Mom’s voice is calm and full of love. She holds her hand out to him. He stares at it for a moment before he steps toward her and wraps his hand in hers. Then he looks at me and frowns.

“I should know you, shouldn’t I?”

My breath hitches, and my heart falls out of my chest. The doctor warned me of this, but I hoped I’d never have to witness the pain reflecting back at me in my dad’s eyes.

“Yeah.” My voice cracks and tears run down my cheeks. I’m too emotionally distraught to hold them back.

“I’m sorry.” Those two words from my dad nearly break me. I squeeze my eyes closed and nod quickly, hoping he can’t see just how much this hurts me. It’s not his lack of recognition that’s breaking me, but rather the pain it’s causing him.

“Good night, sweetheart.” Mom squeezes my arm as she leads dad past me. I can tell by the sound of her voice she feels the same pain as me.

We both knew this would happen at some point, but he’s been so good the past few weeks. It had given me hope that we’d have more time before moments like this stole my dad away from me.

As soon as Mom and Dad disappear up the stairs, I let myself fall to the floor and cry. I cry like I’ve never cried before.

I’ve lived through some truly awful days in my life, but something about tonight is worse than all the others combined.

I had to face the man who destroyed the life and career I loved.

I feel betrayed by a man that had quickly become one of the most important people in my life.

My dad doesn't know I am.

And I feel like I've lost my sister all over again. I'm questioning if I even really knew her at all.

Because I'm struggling to wrap my head around the secret that she took to her grave.

A secret that has completely crushed my world.

Chapter 24

I shut my heart down for a reason.

Garret

Two days of no communication.

Two days of sulking in the mess I've made of my life.

And two days of avoiding all contact with another living soul.

That ends today.

Grams summoned me to the house via a brief text message. All she said was seven o'clock in the kitchen. No fanfare. No fuss. Just one simple command.

A command that I will not disobey. Because it's Grams.

Even though I'd prefer to hide out in my house and never show my face again, I leave my house promptly at six fifty-five and make the walk across the property to the main house.

The house that has haunted me my entire life.

Unlike my brothers, who actually share good memories growing up in that house, my memories are sad and filled with anguish. All I see when I enter the main house is Dad's angry and hurt expression every time he looks at me. I see hatred and blame for something I had no control over, and yet I'm still the reason it happened.

If I didn't exist, Mom might still be alive today. She would have undergone treatment that could have saved her life. If she lived, then Dad never would've fallen into his own pit of despair. He would have been there for his family rather than turning into the shell of a man he is today.

His pain became my pain. I shouldered his loss and heartache. I've carried the blame and have never once complained that it was too much or too harsh of a punishment.

I'd argue the punishment for taking Mom's life hasn't been harsh enough.

And considering the current mess I find myself in, there isn't enough time remaining in this life of mine to make up for my transgressions.

The back door to the house opens before I reach it. Grams stands in the doorway with her hands on her hips, watching me as if I might vanish before I make it inside.

I stop in front of her with my hands stuffed in my pockets. She looks so tiny, at only five-foot-three, standing next to my tall frame. Where I'm broad and thick, she's narrow and petite. But that doesn't make her any less tough.

Grams is the toughest lady I know, and if she chooses, she could kick my ass without breaking a sweat.

I brace myself for her harsh German tongue but am surprised when she looks at me with nothing but love. Then she reaches for me and wraps her arms around me in a tight hug. I remain frozen for a moment—too surprised by her action—before I wrap my arms around her too. She holds me for a few moments, and it feels so fucking good to be hugged right now. I had no idea how much I needed this simple act of love and affection.

She pats my back and sighs. "Get in here. Dinner is about ready."

I let out a deep breath. "I've really made a mess of things, Grams."

"Maybe so, but it's nothing we can't handle. Not gonna sugar coat it. We've got our work cut out for us, but we'll fix this mess just like every other mess that comes our way. Don't you worry."

I close my eyes and the hurt look on Charlotte's face is all I see. "But I am worried."

“Just tell me one thing.” She pauses and waits for me to look her in the eyes. “Do you love her?”

She doesn't have to tell me who she's talking about. She heard what I said to Charlotte, just like everyone else at the bake sale. I all but demanded she marry me instead of that asshole from Chicago.

“Yes.” I admit, not just to Grams, but also to myself. I didn't mean for it to happen, but it did. I am in love with Charlotte Weber. Knowing that I caused her and her family pain is destroying me.

“Well, then.” Grams waves me inside. “Get in here so we can get to work. We're not going to get anywhere with you moping around outside.”

Reluctantly, I follow Grams inside, bracing myself for whatever response I'm going to get from my brothers. We're generally a very supportive bunch and will do just about anything to help when one of us is in need. But we're also relentless when it comes to teasing and goading each other when we make mistakes.

And I've made a really huge mistake.

I stomp my feet on the mat just outside the door before I step inside. Keeping my eyes down, I slip my coat off and hang it on an open hook in the washroom.

When I turn around, silence falls over the kitchen, and my brothers stare at me. A quick glance around the kitchen confirms they're all here. They even patched Warren in via a video call. I don't see Dad, and that gives me some comfort. I'm not ready to face him right now.

Liam is the first to move. He walks right up to me, pulls me in for a hug, and pats my back. Out of the corner of my eye, I see Mac stand and head to the refrigerator. He takes a beer out and pops the top.

Liam releases me just as Mac reaches us and hands me the beer. “I assume you need this.”

I nod and take a long pull before looking my older brother in the eye.

“You okay?” Liam asks.

“Nope.” I pop the P as I push past him and take a seat at the table. Resting my elbows on the edge, I lean forward and run my hands through my hair. “I really fucked up, and I don’t know what to do to fix it.”

Liam lets out a low breath before he takes the seat next to me. “That’s what we’re here for, but we need more information. We’re going to need you to start at the beginning. Like with you and Carol.”

My nostrils flare as I huff. “That’s not an easy story.”

“They never are.” This comes from Warren through the video call. I glance over at the laptop in the center of the table facing me.

“Hey,” I say with a quick nod.

“Hey,” he says back. He must see the hesitation on my face because he leans closer to the camera and adds, “Just spit out, man. Dragging it out only makes it more painful.”

I drop my head and close my eyes, so I don’t have to look at any of them as I say this. I’m not proud of how I handled it, and I don’t want to see their disappointment.

I take a deep breath and start. “I don’t know if Rayne is my child, but it’s possible. I started messing around with Carol right after I bought that RV and parked it on my lot. She’d come over and keep me company while I worked on my house. It was just friendly at first. We were both lonely, and a little pissed off at the world. It wasn’t anything specific for me. I’ve always been pissy.”

“No lie there,” Ash says as he leans his chair back on two legs.

Chase knocks him upside the head, causing him to crash forward on land on all four legs with a loud thunk. “Not the time, dude.”

“Sorry, man.” Ash gives me a serious nod that looks a little too forced. “Continue.”

I glance around again. Chase and Ash are watching me closely. Christian and Mac are both staring at the table, but Liam and Warren are holding each other's gazes. It's as if they're saying something to each other with an intense glare.

They look angry, which causes me to pause. I share a mom with them, and while they've never made me feel responsible for Mom's death the way Dad did, I can't help but wonder if I was wrong about that.

Clearing my throat, I take another drink of my beer before I continue. "Anyway, Charlotte had just moved to Chicago, and Carol was having a really hard time with it. We started messing around. I knew I wasn't the only man she was seeing, but I didn't care. We were young and stupid and found comfort in each other. She missed Charlotte and felt abandoned. And me, well ... I'm not sure what I felt. Angry that Dad blamed me for Mom's death. Guilty because she chose me over her own life. And I guess, responsible for why everyone else's life sucked."

"I didn't blame you," Dad's voice calls from the entrance to the kitchen. When I look up and meet his gaze, my breath hitches and it feels like his presence sucked all oxygen out of the room. There are tears in his eyes and regret written all over his face.

Seeing him like this doesn't make me feel better. It feeds my anger and pokes at my hidden scars, breaking them open again. Every bit of my restraint slips. I'm usually the reserved and quiet one, but not today. I push to my feet, no longer able to hold back my emotions.

"Yes. You. Did!" I yell so loud I swear the room shakes from the rumble of my deep voice. "You couldn't even look at me, Dad. And when you did, it was in disgust or apathy or anger. I am a constant reminder of what you lost. You would rather have saved her than me, and you made no effort to hide that fact. I grew up blaming myself for killing my mom. And then when Carol died in childbirth, I felt even worse. It was as if the universe was telling me it was my child, and I was responsible for another woman's death."

“Oh, Garret.” Grams sobs and reaches for me, but I pull away. I don’t want to be hugged and comforted anymore. I want to get all this anger out of me and finally be done with it.

I turn my angry gaze to Dad, ready to yell at him some more, but he speaks first. “You’re wrong, and I’m so sorry if my actions led you to believe otherwise.”

“But you were always so angry with me.” I shout, not ready to accept his words.

“I was angry,” he says calmly and in complete contrast to me. “But not at you. Never at you. You didn’t kill your mother. Cancer did that. Yes, I wanted to save her, but there was nothing to be done. And it had nothing to do with you. We would have lost her, regardless.”

Dad slumps against the door frame, and my anger deflates just enough that his pain registers in my brain. My dad is a broken man, and no matter what he does to try and fix it, nothing can heal the crack in his heart.

I know because I see that expression on my face every time I look in the mirror. I’m broken too. Our scars are invisible, but those wounds hurt far worse than anything physical.

Because of those scars, I lost someone I deeply cared for. I wouldn’t blame Charlotte if she never spoke to me again.

“Garret,” Liam says right before he rests his hand on my shoulder. His expression is laced with sadness. “If you think that about yourself, then I failed you. You are a very important part of this family, and none of us would be the same without you. Do you hear me?”

I nod but shift my gaze to the floor.

“Garret!” His voice is demanding and his grip on my shoulder tightens. “Don’t ever doubt your value to this family. Look around this room.” Liam waves his hand in the directions of my brothers. “Every one of us would lay our lives on the line for the other. Nothing we do, and I mean *nothing*, can break our brotherly bonds. We will fight by your side, no matter what. Is that clear?”

I squeeze my eyes closed, mostly to fight back the sting of tears. The last thing I want is to cry in front of my brothers.

“Yes,” I whisper. “I hear you.”

“Good.” He pulls me in for a hug, and this time I don’t retreat. “Now, tell us about Charlotte. Are you two an item?”

I huff. “Not anymore.”

“Why not?” He furrows his brow.

“The fact that Rayne might be my daughter because I slept with her sister kinda pushed her away.”

“What are the chances Rayne’s really yours?” Chase asks.

I glance over at him, and his expression is serious. It’s an unusual look for him. He and Ash would prefer to turn every situation into a joke before taking matters seriously.

“I don’t know. I wasn’t the only man Carol was with. She wouldn’t tell me who the other men were, only that there was a chance I wasn’t the father.”

“Okay, so we take a paternity test. Find out for sure,” Liam says.

“Only if that’s what Rayne wants,” I say. “What happens next is up to her.”

“But don’t you want to know?” Ash asks.

“Yeah. I’ve wanted to know since before she was born. But I fucked that up by remaining silent for all these years. Now it’s her call.”

My brothers look at me like they want to protest. Family always comes first in our house, and if there’s a chance Rayne is our blood, they want to know. I get it. I want to know too.

But I refuse to force it on her.

I’ve fucked up enough lives and I’m not going to be responsible for more damage.

I hope she chooses to find out. And hope even more that she’s truly mine.

WITH A HEAVY SIGH, I FALL INTO THE CHAIR IN MY SMALL living space. I'm both emotionally and physically drained after spending the evening with my family. I knew that conversation would be hard, but my expectations were very different.

I underestimated the loyalty and support I'd get from my brothers. I should have known they'd stand by my side and support whatever decision I made, even if they didn't agree with it.

Bullet walks over to me and nudges my hand with her nose. I rub her head and then scratch under her chin where she likes it. She lets out a low whine and wags her stubby tail.

I groan, knowing I don't get to relax just yet. "You need to go out, girl?"

She hops on her feet and spins in a circle. Then she hunches down at my feet and growls.

I chuckle. "That's a yes then."

Pushing to my feet, I grab my coat and head toward the back door. Bullet is nudging her way past me before I even get the door open. She earns her namesake the moment the door is open by taking off into the darkness like a bullet.

While she's running around in the open field behind my house, I take a seat on the edge of the patio and lean back on my hands. My mind wanders to thoughts of Charlotte. I can't help but imagine what kind of life we could have had if I hadn't royally fucked things up.

I can't say I'd go back in time and never sleep with Carol. If Rayne is my daughter, I'd never change that fact or wish her out of existence. She's too special to me. No matter what happens with her, I will always love Rayne and think of her as mine.

But I would tell Charlotte the truth before I let anything physical happen between us. She deserved to know the truth before taking that step with me. Maybe she would have

walked away forever, but at least it would have been before I fell in love with her. Then my heart would have been spared this never-ending ache.

Bullet lets out a high-pitched bark, then takes off around the corner of the house before I can react.

“Bullet! Where are you going?” She barks a few more times, sounding further away with each one. I push to my feet and follow her. “Bullet! Get back here.”

Then I hear it. A cry followed by what I think is my name, and it sounds like Rayne.

I take off toward the trail that leads to the Weber’s house. Rayne’s cries get louder. When I finally reach her, she collapses to the ground. I sweep her up in my arms and inspect her tear-streaked face.

“What happened?”

“Grandpa!” she cries. “He’s really angry.”

“Where’s Charlotte?”

She snuffles and takes a deep breath, trying to calm herself enough to speak. “She tried to stop him, but he hit her. He hit Grandma too.”

“Okay. I need to put you down. Can you run to Grams’ house?”

She nods. When I set her on her feet, I turn to my dog. “Bullet, go with her.”

Bullet lets out a single quick bark and takes off with Rayne as if she understood every word I said. As soon as they are out of sight, I take off for the house.

The back door is wide open, so I run in. “Charlotte?”

“We’re in here!” she replies.

I take off toward her voice. She’s in the living room, standing on one side of the coffee table with her hand held out while her dad is pacing on the opposite side. Lois is curled into a ball on the couch, crying.

“Jim,” I say his name with authority. He abruptly stops and looks at me.

“Who are you?” His tone is harsh.

“I live next door. I heard a disturbance and came to make sure everything was okay.”

“No, everything is not okay.” He sounds agitated and scared. “There are strangers in my house.”

“I’ll take care of them,” I say as calmly as possible. “Why don’t you come into the kitchen with me?”

Jim stares at me for a moment, his brows furrowed and a deep frown on his face. “But I don’t know you.”

“I’m your next-door neighbor. We’ve met before, but it’s been a while.”

He contemplates that for a minute before he finally takes a step toward me. As he gets closer, that’s when I see the blood on his hand. My eyes quickly dart to Charlotte. Her cheek is red, but I don’t see any blood.

Once Jim is out of earshot, I ask, “Are you two okay?”

Even though she doesn’t look okay, Charlotte nods. “He broke a picture frame and cut his hand on the glass. He won’t let me look at it.”

“I’ll see if he’ll let me. Call 9-1-1.”

I don’t wait to see if she does it. Instead, I head to the kitchen to check on Jim.

I find him sitting at the table, staring at the space in front of him. He looks sad and defeated.

“Jim. Can I look at your hand? It’s bleeding.”

His eyes snap closed before he looks down at his hand in surprise. It’s as if he hadn’t even noticed he’d hurt it. Then he looks up at me and frowns. “Paul. When did you get here?”

I cringe at the sound of my dad’s name. I look a lot like dad when he was my age—we all do—but considering our rocky relationship, it stings.

“A few minutes ago.” I decide not to correct him and point at his hand. “I’m going to look at that now, okay?”

I grab a few paper towels, and he rests his hand on the table. As soon as he opens up his fist, blood gushes out. I quickly dab it with the towel. I feel the broken glass stuck in it before I see it.

“I need to get a pair of tweezers. Can you hold this on here to control the bleeding?”

He nods and replaces his hand with mine. I head into the living room just as Charlotte hangs up the phone.

Her eyes meet mine. “They’re on their way.”

“Good.” I walk up to her and place a finger under her chin. Thankfully, she doesn’t pull away as I gently lift her face so I can study it. My gut wrenches at the sight of the bruise forming under her left eye. “You should put some ice on that. I need a pair of tweezers to get the glass out of your dad’s hand, then we’ll take care of that eye.”

She diverts her eyes from mine and nods. “I’ll get you the tweezers.”

She disappears upstairs while I check on her mom.

“Lois. You okay?”

She looks up at me. Her eyes filled with tears. “He didn’t know who we were. He just flipped out. He didn’t mean any of it.”

“I know.” I kneel next to her. “Rayne said he hit you too. Where?”

“Just my arm.” She waves me off as if it wasn’t a big deal. “I’m fine. I think the hit to Char’s face is worse.”

“When the EMT gets here, you’re going to let them look at it. No arguing.”

She nods. “Just make sure Jim’s okay first. I’m afraid he lost too much blood.”

“He’ll be fine. I’ll make sure of it.” I go to stand, and she grabs my arm.

“Is Rayne okay? The poor thing was so upset.”

“I told her to go to Grams’ house. Once I get Jim’s hand clean, I’ll call and check on her.”

“Thank you.” I turn to head back to the kitchen when Lois calls out for me. “Garret.” I glance over my shoulder. “You’re a good man. I just want you to know that. I’m sure you had your reasons for keeping your secret. I don’t hold that against you.”

I nod, and for what feels like the millionth time tonight, I choke back tears. “Thanks. That means a lot to me.”

Just then, Charlotte comes back into the room with a pair of tweezers held out. Our eyes meet for a split second before she looks away. I take the tweezers and head back to the kitchen with my head down.

Her mom may not hold it against me, but she clearly does.

That knowledge cracks open my wounded heart even more. All the pain and anguish I have over the decisions I made crash through me and sucks whatever hope I’d been hanging onto right out of me.

I closed up my heart a long time ago for a reason. If recent events have taught me anything, it’s that I should have kept my heart locked up tight.

Now my heart no longer belongs to me. Whether she wants it or not, it belongs to Charlotte. Unfortunately, I don’t think she wants it.

I push my shoulders back and harden my outer shell. Now is not the time to fall apart. I can do that later when I’m home and alone with the memories of my mistakes.

Right now, all that matters is taking care of Jim and making sure everyone is okay.

Chapter 25

When recovering seems impossible.

Charlotte

Three days have passed since the incident with my dad. And it's been three days since I saw Garret. He looked just as broken as I feel.

The pain and anguish in his eyes were almost enough to make me hug him. Despite the secret he held onto—a secret that ripped my heart to shreds—I wanted to comfort him. I wanted to tell him everything would be alright even though I don't know if it will be.

As much as I want to tell him that I forgive him, I don't know if I can.

How can I be with someone who was also with my sister? It makes me feel dirty like I've somehow disgraced her memory. I'm still struggling with moving past her death and now I have to add sleeping with the same man to the list of issues to work through.

I rub my hands over my face before I fall back onto my bed. Thinking about him is the last thing I need to do right now. I need to be focused on my parents and Rayne.

Rayne hasn't gone back to school yet. We decided to keep her home for a couple more days until we figure out what's going on with Dad.

Dad is still in the hospital, and Mom has stayed with him even though he doesn't recognize her. He lost a lot of blood and needed several stitches to close up the wound on his hand. Not even a hint of his memory has come back. His doctor is

monitoring him closely. The hard truth is if he doesn't know us, he can't come home.

I've never seen Mom such a mess before. My mom has always been the strength of this family. When Carol died, Dad and I retreated into our sorrow. Dad shut down for a while, unable to even look at Rayne without breaking down into tears. And I ran away and rarely came back. Being home was a constant reminder that I'd never hear my sister's laugh again or see her smiling face.

But Mom stood tall and pushed forward with life. She hurt just as much as we did, but she buried that pain and did what needed to be done for Rayne. I wish I could be half the woman my mom is. Maybe then I'd be able to face Garret and move past this.

I squeeze my eyes closed as more tears form and I wince at the pain. My face hurts far worse than I ever imagined.

Pushing to my feet, I step over to the mirror and inspect the damage. Dad got me good. My left eye is a little swollen and black and blue. My cheek is discolored too. Even my arms are bruised from where Dad grabbed me.

At least I stopped him from hurting Mom. I'd never be able to forgive myself if he did this to her. I'm young and will recover quickly, but injuries like this could have been much harder on someone Mom's age.

Just as I lean forward to take a closer look at the swelling, there's a knock on the door. Stepping up to the window that faces the front of the house, I see my car in the driveway.

Garret.

My belly immediately feels light, and a tingling sensation washes over me. My heart kicks into overdrive and my chest feels tight at the mere thought of seeing him.

He knocks again, causing me to jump. Maybe if I ignore him, he'll leave. I'm not sure I can handle it just yet. My mind is telling me to maintain distance, but my body is begging to feel his touch.

“Are you going to get that?” Rayne’s voice causes me to jump again. I turn to face her. Where I feel stressed and anxious about seeing Garret, she looks hopeful.

“I don’t know,” I say honestly. “I don’t know if I’m ready to see him.”

She rolls her eyes like I’m being silly. “Just talk to him.”

“I’m not sure I’m ready. His secret hurt you.”

“No, it didn’t. I already knew, remember? His secret hurt *you*. Don’t use me as an excuse.”

I stare at my ten-year-old niece in complete awe of her. Because she’s right. She’s asked me several times when she can go see Garret again. She’s even asked if they can find out for sure if he’s her father. Where I’m struggling to accept this knowledge, she’s excited the secret is finally out.

I take a deep breath and rub the bridge of my nose. “When did you get to be so smart?”

She shrugs, then gives me a wide smile. “Dunno. Just born that way, I guess.”

I chuckle and shake my head. “Alright. Go to your room and I’ll deal with him.”

Her smile instantly falls. “But I want to see him.”

“I know you do.” I pull her in for a hug. “But let’s figure out what we need to do next first, okay?”

“I already know what I want to do.” She pushes away from me with furrowed brows. “I want to know if he’s really my dad.”

“I know. Just ...” I take a few deep breaths to calm my pounding heart. “Let me see what he wants first, and ... Give me a bit more time to get used to this. Please.”

She nods but doesn’t look happy with me. “Fine. I’ll go to my room.”

“Thank you. We’ll figure out a plan soon. I promise.”

Once she's inside her bedroom, I head downstairs. I pause with my hand on the doorknob, digging deep for my strength before I open the door.

Garret is on the other side with his head down and his hands in his pockets. When he looks up at me, his eyes are dark and tormented. It makes me want to hug him.

When he pulls his hand out of his pocket, he's holding my car key.

"It's done," he says as he drops it in my hand.

"How much do I owe you?"

"Nothing." His eyes shift to my left hand, and something close to relief passes over him when he sees I'm not wearing a ring. I've hardly let myself think about his reaction to Brad proposing to me. It all happened so fast, the meaning of his words haven't fully set in.

If she's going to marry anyone, it's going to be me!

Did he mean that? Does that mean Garret loves me?

I stare at him for a moment, but he doesn't meet my gaze. His eyes are now firmly planted on the ground. Shaking my head, I refuse to think about that right now. "I can't let you fix my car for free."

"Already done." His eyes flicker to mine before they glance around like there's something interesting happening around us. "I'm not taking your money, and there's not much you can do about that."

We stand in silence for what feels like an eternity. I want to argue with him but decide against it. Instead, I grip the key close to my chest.

"Thanks."

He nods then shifts his gaze behind me. "Is your dad okay?"

My throat tightens at the memory of what he saw. "He's still in the hospital. His memory is still lost to him."

“I’m so sorry.” He lifts his hand like he’s going to brush my bruised face but stops himself. “You okay?”

“I’ll heal.”

He shifts nervously on his feet. “How about Rayne? She at school?”

“No. I’ve kept her home for a few days.”

“Is she okay? You know, with what happened with me the other night.”

“Yeah. She’s handling it all better than the rest of us.”

“Good. I’d like to schedule a paternity test. If she’s okay with that and wants to know. It’s her call, but I want to make it clear that I want to know.”

“Well, we haven’t—”

“Yes!” Rayne rushes past me and wraps her arms around Garret’s waist. His hands shoot out to his side as if he’s shocked by her action. “I want to know.”

“Rayne! I told you to stay in your room.”

“I know, but he wants to know and so do I.” She buries her face into him, and his hands slowly fall and wrap her in an embrace.

“Then we’ll get it scheduled,” he says.

My mouth falls open, and I want to protest. My protective instincts say he has no right to make that decision, but the rational part of my brain tells me I’m wrong. He has just as much right to the truth as she does.

“Okay, fine.” The words come out clipped. “Rayne, get back inside.”

“But—”

“No arguing. Go.” I step aside and wave her in the house.

She releases him and looks up at him with sad puppy dog eyes.

“Bye.” She waves and heads inside.

Before he can say anything else, I say, “Thanks for my car. Let us know when everything is set up and where we need to go.”

I don’t give him a chance to respond. I step inside, shut the door, and fall against it. My tears are immediate. I ache to hold him and be held by him. My heart is torn between what it wants and what it feels is right.

Not once did I think I wouldn’t recover from Brad’s betrayal. Getting over him was never something I struggled with.

But I’m not so sure about Garret. I didn’t even realize how attached to him I was until everything blew up in my face.

No matter what happens, I will never be the same again.

I CAN’T STOP STARING AT MY PHONE AND THE MESSAGE I JUST received from Garret.

GARRET

The appointment is set for Thursday at 3:30. This way Rayne won’t have to miss any more school. Address to follow.

I TAKE A FEW DEEP CALMING BREATHS AND GLANCE AROUND the hair salon.

Work has been challenging after what happened. The first few days weren’t that bad, but now that the gossip squad have all scheduled their appointments, I can’t avoid it. Especially since Mrs. Engle brings it up with every person who walks through the door.

Half the people that have come in today are only here to see me and hound me with questions. None of them really

need their hair done.

The only positive thing is it's keeping me busy. Thanks to Mrs. Engle putting in a second workstation, I'm able to work every day now. That's better than sitting at home alone with my thoughts.

Although with the way this town refuses to let me forget what happened, alone with my thoughts is probably safer.

"Charlotte, dear. Ruth is ready for you," Mrs. Engle says. She's taken to calling me dear ever since the incident. She says it in a way that sounds like she's afraid I'll break. But that doesn't stop her from gossiping and hounding me with questions.

I slide my phone into my back pocket, choosing not to respond to Garret just yet. Truth be told, I don't know what to say. Responding with a simple *okay* or *we'll be there* doesn't feel like enough. There are things we need to talk about, but my heart hurts too much to even start that conversation.

"Alright, Ruth." I turn to her and smile. "What are we doing today?"

"Just a wash and set." Her voice is overly sweet, and I know that means she's about to hit me with a ton of questions. I also know she was just in here on Friday and shouldn't be scheduled for another visit for a few more days.

She's one of those women who comes in once a week to get her hair done. We curl and tease it and spray it with so much hair spray that nothing will move it until her next visit.

"Sure thing." I drape the cape over her chest and snap it in place. "Let's get you to the sink."

As soon as she's situated, the questions start coming. "I heard about Jim. How is he doing?"

"Better, but he's had to stay in a facility for now." What I don't say is that it's permanent. I made the decision as his power of attorney. Dad will stay in the facility. He feels better about that, but Mom is still struggling with my decision.

But it's what's best for everyone, including Dad.

“That must be so hard on your mother. Please send her my regards.”

I give her a tight smile. “Will do. I know she’ll appreciate that.”

“And how is Rayne?” she asks with a little more caution than she did about my dad.

“She’s great.” I keep my response short.

“Oh.” She presses a hand to her chest like that shocks her. I start up the water and wet her hair, hoping that will stop this line of questioning, but no such luck. She doesn’t miss a beat and talks over the spray. “I’m surprised to hear that. I’d think that little girl would be devastated to find out who her father might be after all this time.”

“Not at all. Turns out she’s known for quite some time.”

“And you, dear?” She looks up at me with a raised brow. “How are *you* handling the news?”

Translation: How are you handling the news that you’ve been secretly—though not so secretly, apparently—sleeping with the man that may have impregnated your baby sister?

That’s the question everyone wants to ask me but keeps tiptoeing around it rather than getting to the point.

“I’m also great.” I lie. There’s no way in hell I’m going to be honest and open up to these ladies. It’s bad enough that my breakup with Brad was splashed all over the tabloids for the world to read. It sucks even more that he had to make an appearance at the first public event I attended since moving home.

My life sucks.

She continues babbling on about what happened as if I wasn’t there to live through it. It’s how they all talk to me.

I tune her out along with the next three women who come in and ask me the same questions. By the time my shift is over and I’m sitting in my car, I’m completely exhausted and ready to scream.

I also really want to see Garret. I miss him.

Fighting back the tears, I open up the message app on my phone and stare at his name. I really want to message him back and ask if I can come over.

I want to feel his strong arms around me and breathe in his earthy scent.

I want to feel his body flush against mine.

I want to hear him whisper dirty words in my ear as he slowly moves inside me.

I want him to make all this go away so we can return to how we were before.

But most importantly, I want to pretend he never slept with my sister and that Rayne isn't his daughter.

That's the truth I struggle with the most. I can almost handle the knowledge that he had a relationship with Carol before me. We're not the first siblings to fall for the same man. But can I handle it if Rayne is his? That's the question I can't answer.

I want to say yes, but there's a voice deep inside me that keeps screaming no. I'm not sure I know how I'll really feel until we have an answer.

So instead, I reply to his text with a single word answer.

CHARLOTTE

Okay.

WHILE I'VE BEEN DREADING THIS DAY ALL WEEK, RAYNE hasn't been able to stop bouncing on her feet. Even as I pull up outside the family services office, she can't sit still. It's not

until I toss the car in park that I see Garret leaning against the brick wall of the building, staring right at me.

It's warmer out now that spring is right around the corner. He's in tattered jeans and a snug black t-shirt, showing off his firm biceps and arm tattoos. His hair is neatly combed, and his beard is trimmed short. He looks so sexy and grumpy.

My heart immediately lurches in my chest. I ache to touch him, hug, hold him, and do whatever it takes to put a smile on his face.

But that honor goes to Rayne.

She jumps out of the car before I even cut off the engine and runs right up to Garret. They don't hesitate to embrace in a tight, familiar hug. Garret whispers something to her, and she nods emphatically.

The closeness they share sends a pang of jealousy through me. Regardless of the outcome of the paternity test, something tells me Garret and Rayne will be just fine. I can't say the same thing about him and me.

And that breaks my heart a little more.

I grab my purse and force myself out of the car. I'd tried to get Mom to bring Rayne to this appointment, but she insisted she needed to spend the entire day with Dad at the facility. I couldn't take that away from her. Not since I'm the reason he'll never come home.

"Hey," I say when I stop next to him.

Garret lifts his hand like he's going to touch me but jerks it back. His eyes flick over me nervously. All I see is longing in his gaze.

He clears his throat and stands up straight. "Shall we go in? This shouldn't take too long."

"Lead the way." I wave toward the door.

He opens the door and holds it so Rayne and I can enter first. The young woman at the counter smiles up at us. "How can I help you?"

“Mutter and Weber,” Garret says. “We’re here for a paternity test.”

The woman checks the schedule and nods. “I’ll let them know you’re here. Just take a seat anywhere in the waiting room. We’ll call you back in a few minutes.”

Rayne sits first, and I take a seat beside her next to an end table. I don’t think I can handle sitting right next to Garret right now. My feelings are too strong and too confusing.

He sits opposite us. That’s not much better because now I can’t help but stare at him. Our eyes meet a few times, but I can’t bring myself to hold his gaze. He looks too much like a wounded puppy, and it’s breaking my heart.

My big, strong, grumpy, dirty talking Garret is broken. And I think it’s because of me.

Feeling a sudden urge to make him feel a little better, I blurt out, “I never accepted Brad’s proposal.”

Garret’s eyes hold mine before he leans forward and rests his elbows on his knees. He clasps his hands together and hangs his head low. I feel Rayne shift next to me, but I don’t let that stop me from continuing.

“I was so stunned to see him. It didn’t even register to me that he’d put the ring on my finger until after I’d gotten home, and he showed up there. No matter what happens, I will never marry Brad. I just want you to know that.”

“Good.” His voice is rough and gravelly. “He doesn’t deserve you.”

I watch him for a moment. My gut is screaming at me that there’s more to be said, but I can’t seem to find the words. I want to tell him that it’s him I think about when I wake up in the morning and that he’s the last person I picture before I fall asleep at night.

Instead, I say, “No, he doesn’t. He proved that to me months ago.”

We fall silent again, the only noise coming from a small TV mounted to the wall. It’s playing cartoons I’ve never seen

before. There are a few other people waiting, but not nearly as many as I'd expected, considering this is the only office serving the entire county.

After a few more awkward moments of silence, a woman pops her head through a side door and calls us back. She leads us to a small exam room that only has two chairs and a bed. Garret leans against the wall, so I take one of the chairs. Rayne paces around, looking at everything.

“Okay, I just need to take a swab from each of your mouths. It's quick and painless.” She sets out two test kits on the counter and preps each one for the sample collection. Then she turns to Garret and Rayne. “Who wants to go first?”

“Me!” Rayne jumps forward, excited and smiling. It makes me inwardly chuckle. This girl loves Garret so much. I worry how she'll react if it turns out he's not her father.

And I worry about how I'll react if he is.

She collects the samples and packages them up to be sent to an external lab. “I just need both parties to sign here.”

She hands Garret a clipboard. He scribbles his name and hands it back to her. Then she hands it to me. I stare at it for a moment. My hand shakes as I take the pen to sign where she indicated.

Somehow, I sign my name and hand it back to her. I think I'm more nervous about this than Garret or Rayne. They just want to know the truth. I can't blame them, but that truth could be my ruin.

“These will go out this afternoon in the last pickup and be overnighted to the lab. Results will be back anywhere between two to seven days.”

“Two to seven days?” My eyes pop up to meet hers. “That fast?”

“Mmm hmm.” She gives me a gentle smile. “They're pretty quick with these nowadays.”

“How will we get the results? Will you call us?” Garret asks.

“No, since this is amicable, they will mail results directly to both parties. Here are some brochures on what to expect and about the validity and confidence of the results. More information will be included in the packet the lab sends to you.”

“Thanks.” Garret takes the information from her but doesn’t look at it.

“Any other questions?” She looks back and forth between us. We both shake our heads.

“Okay, then you’re all set. I can show you back out.”

She leads us back to the lobby. Garret and Rayne say a quick goodbye with a hug. When he kisses the top of her head, it sends another pang of jealousy through me.

As I head to my car, I feel his eyes on me, but I can’t bring myself to look at him. I’m afraid I’ll fall apart if I do.

Sliding into my car, I start it up. As soon as Rayne is buckled in, I take off. I need space and time to process everything that has happened. Not to mention, I still haven’t dealt with the loss of my sister.

Now those feelings of pain and anguish are all muddled up and complicated. Complicated with a reality I’m not sure I can handle.

My heart is wounded and I’m not sure how much more it can take.

Chapter 26

Blood doesn't make the father.

Garret

Walking into my old high school is weird.

Probably because it's not the same building I attended. Several years ago, the district won a huge grant to build a new school complex that would combine the two elementary schools, the middle school, and old high school.

It's been several years since the new complex was completed and the old building was torn down, but this is my first time inside these walls. I've avoided the numerous community events and open houses held since its opening. Going back to school—no matter the reason—never appealed to me.

But today I was called in for a job.

The school employs their own handy man but apparently, he's out sick today and a broken step leading to the stage needs to be fixed before the rehearsal tonight.

Surprisingly, they called me. I never get calls for work at the school. Mainly because Linden Koch is the vice principal. He'll call everyone and their brother before calling a Mutter to get the job done.

I'm quickly shown to the auditorium where the theater teacher is waiting for me. I've met Tide Waters a few times at Posey's Lounge. Since moving to Beaver to take over the theater and music classes, she and Clara have become good friends. I mostly remember her for her amazing singing voice. Although, seeing her now, she reminds me of Charlotte. Tide

is a Southern Belle, and there isn't anything she can do to hide her former beauty queen habits. Same as Charlotte.

“Garret.” She rushes toward me with her hand held out. “Thank you so much for coming on such short notice. You’re our savior.”

Taking her hand, I give it a shake. It’s not a firm shake, but rather soft and delicate. As if she might break if she squeezes my hand too tight.

She’s exactly how I expected Charlotte to be. But Charlotte quickly proved to me that she’s much stronger than she looks. Especially after she eagerly and willingly dropped to her knees the first night we were together. I hadn’t expected her to do that. I think she won my heart that night.

“It’s not a problem. Just point me in the right direction and I’ll get started.”

“Of course.” She draws. Her smile is wide and perfected exactly like I’d expect from someone raised on politeness and kindness.

She leads the way behind a side door to the left of the stage. It’s dark, so she flips the lights on.

“It’s right here.” She stops next to the stairs that lead to the stage. It looks like someone took a hammer to the third step. After a quick inspection, it looks easy enough to fix.

“This should be easy. I’ve got all the supplies I need in my truck. Is it okay to run power tools back here?”

“Of course. Whatever you need.”

I nod and head back out to my truck to gather the things I need while she heads off to teach a class. It doesn’t take me long to get set up and cut the new plank for the step. I always keep a few boards of various sizes in the bed of my truck. I never know what a client might need, and sometimes one board will do the job.

Within thirty minutes, I’ve got the new piece cut and ready to nail into place. Just as I fit it on the step, a voice I’m not too fond of speaks from the dark corner of the room.

“I guess they let any piece of shit in here, huh?” Linden says.

I turn just as he steps out of the shadows. “I’m guessing since they let you work here, that’s a yes.”

“Always a dick, aren’t you?”

I narrow my eyes on him. “Um, I was minding my own business, getting this job done. You’re the one who interrupted me with an insult.”

He stalks closer, his eyes focused on the steps. The look on his face suggests he’s not happy with my work, but I know that’s bullshit. I do good work. He’s just pissed I’m the one doing it.

“I heard Charlotte left town.” I tense at the mention of her name.

I’d heard she left for Chicago the day after we submitted the paternity test. I don’t know if it’s temporary or permanent. I certainly hope it’s temporary.

“Yeah. What’s it to you?” I ball my hands into fists, fighting the urge to tell him to fuck off. That’s what he wants. He’s goading me into fighting him.

He shrugs. “Oh, I don’t know. How about the fact that you had no right to touch Char? She belongs to Tanner.”

I snort. “Charlotte is her own woman. She doesn’t belong to anyone.”

“I noticed.” He gives me a sinister grin that makes it really hard not to punch it off his face. “You managed to chase her away in what, a few months? At least Tanner kept her happy for a couple of years. Now that she’s dumped your ass, maybe he can have another go.”

Taking a step closer, I growl. “Watch it.”

He matches my step. “Or what?”

“Keep pushing me and find out.”

The laugh that escapes him is villainous. He shoves his hands in the pockets of his dress pants and strolls around the

room like he's taking it in for the first time. I cross my arms over my chest and watch him closely. He's up to something, and I don't like it.

I can't say I've ever seen Linden dressed up for work before either. Seeing him in dress pants and a nice button-down shirt is in complete contrast to the jeans, flannels, and t-shirts I'm used to seeing him wear.

"What do you want, Linden?" I ask, hoping he'll get to the point.

"Who says I want anything?"

"You never willingly talk to a Mutter. So get on with it."

"True." His voice is low and drawn out. He circles back around from the edge of the stage where he's pretending to inspect something. There's nothing there to see. He stops close to me and leans against the edge. "Maybe you should get out more."

I furrow my brows. "I get out plenty."

He chuckles. "Clearly you don't. From what I hear, you like to keep it in the family. I mean, who fucks one sister, waits ten years, and then fucks the other? What's that like?"

My temper snaps and I grab Linden's shirt, lifting him off the ground. He may act like he's tough, but he's short as fuck compared to me. Where we're all over six feet tall, not one of the Koch brothers is over five feet ten. I could crush him with one hand.

"Don't." I warn.

He laughs harder. "Or what? You gonna kick my ass while I'm at work? That should make for an interesting assault charge. I can see the headlines now. Grumpy beastly man attacks school official during school hours. What would Char think of you then?"

"Leave her out of this." I shove him back, causing him to stumble and trip over his own feet. He quickly recovers, bounces back up, and brushes off his pants.

“Is that the best you can do? Such a disappointment. And here I thought you were meaner than me.”

“I’m not mean, and I’m certainly nothing like you.”

“You got that right.” He winks with a shitty smirk on his face that riles me up even more. “Because if I got a woman like Charlotte Weber in my bed, I’d make sure she never wanted to leave.”

I lunge forward, but before I reach him, a woman’s voice calls out. “Mr. Koch! What on earth are you doin’?”

This time I stumble, but I catch myself before I fall. Linden and I both pivot toward Tide Waters, who just returned from the class she informed me she had to teach.

Linden clears his throat. “Miss Waters. How was class?”

“Fine.” Her voice is clipped. Her typical sweet southern charm is gone and replaced with fury. She looks like she’s about to rip Linden’s head off. “Why are you botherin’ Mr. Mutter? It’s important that he gets this job completed before three. He has ten minutes.”

Linden’s smile returns. “We’re just catching up on old times. Weren’t we Garret?”

“No.” I bark out in response.

Tide lets out a long sigh before she looks at me. “Are you almost done? I hate to rush you, but practice starts soon.”

“Yes.” I turn my glare to Linden. “Would’ve been done by now had this asshole not bothered me.”

“Well, I’ll make sure he leaves you alone so you can finish up.” She turns to Linden with a stern expression on her face. “I need to speak with you about one of my students. Care to walk me to my classroom?”

His expression softens and if I didn’t know any better, I’d say his smile for her is genuine. “Of course, Miss Waters. Whatever you need.”

They leave out the same door I came in early. Once their voices have completely faded, I get back to work.

The sooner I get this done and leave, the better. The last thing I need is to lose my cool and beat the shit out of Linden Koch in front of a bunch of high school kids.

BY THE TIME I MAKE IT HOME, I'M BOTH PHYSICALLY AND mentally exhausted. I did not need that run in with Linden today.

I toss my mail on the table, grab a beer from the fridge, and get ready to take Bullet out back so she can run around for a few minutes before I find something to eat.

On the days I'm gone all day, Bullet usually meets me at the door, bouncing on her feet in excitement. But not today. She doesn't even lift her head up off her bed. She just looks up at me with sad puppy eyes.

I lean down and rub the back of her head. "Come on, girl. Let's go out."

She whines, stretches her front legs out in front of her, and takes her sweet time meeting me at the back door.

"I know," I grumble. "I miss them too."

She walks past me when I open the door and moves at a snail's pace as she exits the back patio and onto the ground.

Taking a long pull from my beer, I stand there wondering how I let things get this bad. My life wasn't all that great before Charlotte moved home. In fact, I'd say it was pretty shitty. I was grouchy all the time and lonely as fuck.

For a short while, she changed all that.

She brought the sun into my otherwise gloomy life.

She made me smile when I didn't think I had anything worth smiling about.

She made me feel like a man worth knowing.

And she accepted me for exactly who I am. There was no trying to change me into something I'm not or telling me there

was something wrong with me because I'm such a grumpy shit all the time.

Sometimes I got the impression she liked my grumpy attitude. Or at least she didn't mind it.

When I'd heard she left town, it felt like I'd swallowed jagged rocks and they were stuck in my gut.

She's running from me, and I hate it.

A part of me wants to tear this town apart until someone tells me where she's staying so I can chase after her. I'd get down on my hands and knees and beg her for forgiveness.

Not that I deserve her forgiveness. I wouldn't blame her if she never spoke to me again after the secret I kept from her.

Bullet nudges my leg, dragging me out of my thoughts. "You done?"

She lets out a single bark in response.

"Come on, let's go find some dinner."

Heading back inside, I give her some fresh water and food. Once she's situated, I grab the mail I'd tossed on the table and flipped through it. My hands freeze on a plain white envelope from ChoiceDNA, the lab we sent our samples to.

I don't know how long I stand there staring at it, unable to move. It feels like the world around me stopped moving and all sounds ceased to exist. All I can hear is the pounding of my heart.

A part of me wants to rip it open and find out the truth, and another part is terrified of the answer. I want Rayne to be mine. I've lived the past ten years of my life under the assumption that she belongs to me. I'm not sure I'll recover if she's not.

Deciding I can't do this by myself, I stuff the envelope into my back pocket and head out the front door. I need my family for this. I can't face it alone.

GRAMS AND LIAM ARE THE ONLY ONES HOME WHEN I ENTER the main house. Grams is making dinner and Liam is rewiring one of Grams' old lamps. The woman has more lamps than anyone I know, half of which don't work.

"Hey." Liam furrows his brows. "You okay?"

I shake my head. "I got the results today."

Grams drops the spoon she was holding onto the counter and Liam carefully places the light fixture on the table.

"And?" he asks.

"I don't know." The words rush out of me. "I'm afraid to look at them."

He wipes his hands on the towel he has flung over his shoulder and nods. "I can understand that, but I thought you wanted to know the truth."

"I do," I say a little too loudly. "But what if this piece of paper says she's not mine?" I hold the envelope out in front of me and shake it. "I've lived the past ten years functioning as if I'm her father. I don't think I can't handle it if I'm not."

Liam steps up to me and takes me by the shoulders. "I get it. I really do. I'd be stressed out too if I was in your shoes. I can't imagine the hell of living my life assuming someone was mine, only to find out he or she wasn't. But that piece of paper could just as easily confirm that she is yours."

I nod. I know he's right, but it's not enough to ease my frazzled nerves.

"Hey," he continues. "No matter what that says, nothing has to change. You know as well as I do that blood doesn't make the father. This does." Liam places his hand over my heart. "All you need is this. You may be a grumpy bastard, but you have more heart than any of us. Nothing can stop you from loving that girl. You hear me?"

I clear my throat and squeeze my eyes closed. “Yeah. I hear you.”

“Whatever the results, we’re here for you. We’ll handle this together like we always do.”

I pull him in for a tight hug. It’s not something I do often, but knowing I have his support—all my brothers’ support—means the world to me.

“Where’s everyone else?” I ask when I release him.

“In the shop. Want me to call them over before we read it?”

I nod. “If you don’t mind. I’d rather only have to do this once.”

“Of course. Give me five minutes and they’ll be here.”

Liam heads out the front door while I continue to pace in the kitchen. Grams grabs a beer from the fridge, pops the top, and hands it to me. “Here. Maybe this will help calm you down. You’re gonna wear a hole in the floor.”

I take the beer and down half of it in one swallow. “Thanks, Grams.”

“Anything for one of my boys. Now get over here.” She steps into my space and wraps her arms around my waist. She’s so small against my large frame. Hugging her is a lot like hugging Rayne.

I squeeze my eyes tight, fighting back the tears. If I got the results, that means she did too. Have they already read them? She didn’t come rushing over to my house to tell me one way or the other. Does that mean I got them first, and they don’t know?

She could be sad because the test confirms I’m not her father. She wants me to be her dad just as much as I want it. If this says I’m not, she could be too upset to face me.

“Fuck,” I mumble. I step back from Grams and start pacing again. “I don’t know if I can do this.”

“Yes, you can.” Grams’ voice is calm and soothing. “You’re one of the strongest people I know. You’ve weathered every storm that’s come your way and you’ll weather this one too.”

Before I can argue otherwise, Liam returns with all my brothers behind him. Chase and Christian are wiping their hands clean from grease. Ash is still in his coveralls, with grease smeared on one side of his face. Mac is on the phone, and it only takes me a moment to figure out he’s talking to Warren.

“I’ll put you on speaker.” Mac moves his phone from his ear and hits a button on the screen. “Can you hear me?”

“Yeah, I hear you,” Warren says through the phone.

Mac’s girlfriend Sophia steps up behind him and wraps her arm around his waist.

Glancing around, all I see is support and love. Something close to shame washes over me. Shame for all the years I isolated myself from those who loved me most. I didn’t think I deserved their love, so I hid from it. I realize now how stupid that really was.

“Here.” I hand the envelope to Liam. “I can’t do it. Will you?”

Liam studies me for a moment and then nods. “Yeah, of course.”

He takes the envelope and rips open one end. Then he pulls out the folded papers within. I study his expression as he reads over the results.

When he looks up at me, his eyes are unreadable, and I have no clue how to interpret what they convey.

“Well?” I ask.

Without a word, he pulls me into his arms and holds me close. Then he whispers the result in my ear.

I crumble to the floor in a heap of tears.

Chapter 27

It's all or nothing.

Charlotte

The text message from my mom came through a little after six o'clock this evening. All I saw was *we got the results* scrolling across my screen before I darkened my phone and shoved it under the cushion. I haven't been able to click on the message to read the rest of it since.

Instead, I'm curled into a ball on Sierra's couch, trying to make myself as small as possible.

After we submitted the samples at the family services office, I needed to get away. Mrs. Engle understood and gave me a week off. Since Dad is in a facility, Mom doesn't need much help from me. She said she could handle Rayne on her own for a week.

So I called Sierra, arranged to stay with her for a few days, and got in my car and drove the six and half hours to Chicago.

That was three days ago. I've hardly eaten or showered or left this spot on her couch in all that time.

I'm a mess.

"Alright, babe. Enough." Sierra shuts her door behind her with a little too much force. "You don't look like you've moved since I left for work."

"That's because I haven't," I mumble.

"Get up." She kicks the side of the couch. I look over my shoulder and glare at her. She's standing over me with her hands on hips, giving me her best mom scowl.

"I don't want to."

“Tough shit. You’re stinking up this place. Go take a shower while I make you something to eat. When’s the last time you ate?”

I shrug.

She lets out a heavy sigh.

“Let’s go, babe. Now!” She yanks the cover off me and tugs at my hand. She’s relentless in her efforts to pull me to my feet and push me toward the bathroom. I fall against the bathroom wall and slide to a seated position. She turns on the hot water.

“This will be warm in a minute. I’ll go grab you some clean clothes.”

I nod. I want to fight her, but there’s no use. Sierra can be relentless when she wants something, and in this case, she’s not wrong to want me to shower. Even I can smell my own filth.

Twenty minutes later, I’m freshly showered and in a pair of my favorite comfy pajamas. Mentally, I’m still a mess, but I do feel better now that I’ve cleaned up.

Sierra is in the kitchen making me a grilled cheese sandwich. I glance around at the array of cheeses she has out, and my eyes widen. “Is that brie?”

She nods. “And prosciutto.”

A deep moan escapes me. “Please tell me you also have some of the peach preserves I love so much?”

She chuckles. “You know I do. It’ll be ready in a minute. In the meantime, talk to me. What are you thinking right now?”

I drop my head into my hands and run my fingers through my wet hair. “That I was banging the same man that may have knocked up my sister before she died giving birth to that child. How messed up is that?”

“I’ll admit that’s a little weird, but there’s nothing *wrong* with it. Stuff like that happens all the time.”

“Not to me!” I raise my voice.

“This isn’t the end of the world, Char. A few months ago, you experienced a very public rejection and breakup that changed your entire life. That’s far worse than falling in love with a hot lumberjack of a man who loves you back.”

“I don’t love him.” I mumble, and the lie tastes sour coming from my lips.

“Yes, you do.”

Choosing to ignore her, I change the subject to what really upset me just before she got him. “I got a text from Mom.”

Her hand freezes just as she was about to flip the grilled cheese sandwich in the skillet. “What does it say?”

“That the results arrived. That’s all I saw before I hid my phone. I can’t bring myself to read the rest of it.

“Char. This is what you’ve been waiting for. Read it.”

“I know. But what if she’s his? How will that work? Am I supposed to just be with him, marry him, have kids with him, all the while raising my niece as what ... Her aunt? Her stepmom? What would our kids be to her? Siblings *and* cousins? That’s so fucked up.”

She narrows her eyes and points the spatula at me. “Tell me again that you don’t love him.”

“Sierra! You’re not helping.”

She takes the skillet off the stovetop and slides the sandwich on a plate, then she walks around the counter and pulls me into a hug. “Listen to yourself. If you’re thinking about all those things, then you definitely love him.”

I quickly shake my head, refusing to hear her words. “No. It was just really great sex.”

“Oh, really?” She leans back and holds me at arm’s length. “So you won’t mind if I take him for a ride, then?”

I glare at my friend.

She laughs. “That’s what I thought.”

“Stop it. I know what you’re trying to do. I can’t think about my feelings for him. It’s too complicated.”

“Babe, life is complicated. Nothing is ever going to change that. Tell me something. Why exactly are you so upset with him?”

My eyes widen and my jaw drops. “Are you serious? He lied to me.”

She wrinkles her nose. “But did he? It’s not like you asked him about Carol. *Hey, Mr. Sexy Pants, before we bang, did you by chance bang my sister and knock her up?*”

“I didn’t know I needed to ask that question.”

“Now put yourself in his shoes. This is a secret he’s kept for over ten years. He’s lived with the knowledge that he may or may not be Rayne’s father. I don’t know why he kept it a secret for so long—that part is kind of shitty—but the more time that passes, the harder it becomes to talk about the decisions we make. Especially when they’re wrong.”

“Are you defending him?”

“No, not at all. Just trying to get you to see the other side of this. If you can at least see where he’s coming from, maybe you two can move past this. But ...” she puts emphasis on the T, “that will require you to actually talk to him.”

“Talking to him means seeing him. I don’t know if I can see him just yet without completely falling apart.”

She raises a brow as she walks around the counter to finish preparing our grilled sandwiches. “Because you really care about him.”

“Of course I care. I don’t have sex with men I don’t care about.”

“Okay, new tactic.” She rests her elbows on the table and leans forward. “Let’s go back to December. Do you remember what you said to me the day after Brad humiliated you?”

I groan and cover my face with my hands. “Oh God. I was such an idiot.”

“Yeah,” she says in a tone that confirms she agrees with my assessment. “Brad, a total douche of a human being, refused your proposal by publicly announcing he was having an affair with one of your clients. He admitted to cheating on you for over two years.”

She pauses to take a drink of wine. “The next day, you were frantically trying to figure out how to win him back, how to fix this mess so you two could get back to the life you were planning. It took me three hours—*three hours*—to talk you off that ledge. You were ready to forgive that asshole for what he did to you, and yet you can’t have one conversation with Garret? A man who publicly *claimed* you as his when the douche showed up and tried to wiggle his way back into your life. And all because of an omission to something that happened over ten years ago before you and he were even a thing.”

I snatch her wine glass from her and down the rest of it. “When you say it like that, you make *me* sound like an awful person.”

“I didn’t say that.” She grabs the bottle of wine and refills her glass and pours me one of my own. “You’re a great person, Char. One of the best people I know.”

I take the wine glass from her and take a more reasonable sip. “What do I do? I’m so confused.”

“Let me ask you this. How would you feel if Garret started dating someone else?”

“He wouldn’t do that.”

“But what if he did?”

“He wouldn’t,” I say with more force. “He ... Fuck.” I drop my forehead to the counter and bang it a few times.

“And why wouldn’t he?” Sierra nudges me.

“Because I’m pretty sure he loves me,” I whisper.

“Bingo.” She cuts my grilled cheese sandwich in half and hands me the plate. “Now, admit it.”

“Admit what?” I frown.

She stares at me like I just asked her the dumbest question ever. My shoulders sag and I take a deep breath before I look down at where my hands are clenched together on my lap.

“I love him too.”

“Finally.” She points half of her grilled cheese sandwich toward the couch. “Now go get your phone so we can find out if he’s Rayne’s baby daddy.”

“Fine.” I push to my feet. “Why are you being so mean to me?”

“I’m not being mean. It’s called tough love. I’ve left you alone for three days. You’ve sulked long enough. Now it’s time for action.”

I dig my phone out from under the couch cushion. Once it’s unlocked, I open the messaging app. Squeezing my eyes closed, I take another deep breath before I open the message from my mom and read it out loud.

MOM

We got the results. Garret is Rayne’s biological father. As you can imagine, Rayne is ecstatic. She loves him so much. I know this has to be hard on you, but please call us when you get this.

I STARE AT IT FOR SEVERAL MOMENTS, READING THE WORDS over and over again. I wait for the pain and heartache to hit me. But it doesn’t come. I’m happy for them both.

“Well?” Sierra nudges my arm. I look over at her, surprised to see she’s standing next to me. I didn’t even hear her move.

“I expected to be upset by this result. But I’m not. I thought it would mean the end for Garret and me. I’m not sure what to do with this feeling of happiness. It’s so unexpected.”

“You know what I think?”

I snort. “Why are you asking? You’re going to tell me even if I say no.”

“True enough.” Her smile grows as she wraps her arm around my shoulder and gives me a side hug. “I think you need to read your sister’s side of things. You brought the journals she wrote about Garret in. Read them. Listen to her side. Maybe then, your heart will lead you home.”

I drop my head on her shoulder and sigh.

Home.

A few months ago, I thought Chicago would be my forever home. Now that I’ve moved back to Beaver, I know that’s where I belong.

Now I just need to come to terms with what my mind is telling me and what my heart wants. Only then will I truly find my place in this world.

TWO DAYS LATER, I LEAVE CHICAGO BEFORE THE SUN IS UP and make the long drive back to Beaver. I only stopped once to get gas and use the restroom, so I made good time.

I’m tired and hungry and would love nothing more than to eat some junk food and sleep the rest of the day away.

But there’s something I have to do first.

I pull into Beaver’s cemetery a little after noon. Even though I haven’t been back here since the day we buried Carol, I know exactly where to go. The image of driving up to her headstone for the first time will be forever etched in my brain.

I park my car next to the black wrought-iron fence that separates each section and stare at her headstone. I would’ve thought that after all this time, being here would be easier. But it’s not. A part of me wonders if the pain of losing my sister will ever lessen.

It’s gotten easier to deal with it as the years have passed, but the pain is as strong as ever.

I grab the flowers I purchased when I stopped to get gas earlier and step out of the car. Mom visits her every few months and always adds fresh flowers to the vase in front of the headstone. Today, I'll be the one replacing them, and that gives me a small amount of joy.

"Hey, sis," I say as I kneel next to her grave. "I brought you some flowers."

I remove the dead ones from Mom's last visit and slide the ones I brought to replace them.

"They're not your favorite, but they're pretty. They didn't have lilies. These are a mix of colorful daisies and baby's breath. I figured you'd still appreciate the gesture."

I clear my throat and glance around me. Confirming I'm still alone, I face Carol again.

"Then again, you'd probably rather I just come see you, huh? Sorry I've stayed away for so long. Losing you was hard on me, and I've struggled to even be back in this town, let alone come here to see you. Piss poor excuse, I know. But it is what it is."

I pick at the dead grass next to my feet before I finally sit on the ground and cross my legs.

"Rayne is great. I've really enjoyed getting to know her better these past few months. She's a lot like you—and just as sneaky—but she's a great kid. I hate that you didn't get the chance to know her."

I take a breath and prepare myself for the real reason I came here.

"I read your journal. At first, I didn't want to. It felt like an invasion of your privacy. Even though you're gone, it still felt wrong. But I had to know how you felt about Garret. You see ..."

My voice cracks and my eyes sting with tears.

"Shit." I wipe my cheeks. "I told myself not to cry today. Something else I've failed at that I can add to my growing list."

I take a moment to regain my composure and then continue. “See, here’s the thing. I’m in love with Garret. This happened before I found out he’s Rayne’s father—and he is, by the way. The paternity test confirmed it. Way to go keeping that a secret from an entire town of busybodies.

“I’ve been a mess ever since I found out. I’m having a really hard time with the fact that I’ve fallen in love with a man you created a child with. It helps to know you weren’t in love with him. Thanks for writing that down, by the way. It doesn’t make it much easier. But it is what it is, and I either have to learn to deal with it or leave. I don’t want to leave.”

My voice cracks, and my tears flow freely down my cheeks. I take a couple of minutes to regain my composure before I can continue.

“I’d been gone so long I’d forgotten how much I love it here. The quiet this small part of the world provides is peaceful. Being back here after all this time wasn’t part of the plan, but it’s a detour I’m glad I took. I just wish you were still here to live this life with me. Even if it meant having to look at you every day knowing you had a relationship with the man I love.

“Just so you know, I plan to tell him that right after I leave here. I also plan on sticking around and being more to Rayne than just her cool older aunt. If Garret decides he wants me too, I’m hoping we can raise her together. Give her the life I know you would’ve wanted for her.

“I’m just sorry I didn’t do it sooner. And I’m really sorry I left you after high school. That wasn’t my intention. I hope you know that. I always had such big dreams and high hopes for myself. Back then, I felt way too big for this tiny village. I wanted more. Needed more. I craved it. Little did I know, I’d find true happiness right back here, and with the hot boy next door that I crushed on all through high school.”

A cool breeze brushes across my cheeks, and I smile. Carol always loved windy days. “You would have loved Chicago. It’s a shame you refused to visit me. Windiest place

I've ever been. Then again, if you had, maybe we wouldn't have Rayne."

Another gust flows over me, and for the first time in a really long time, I feel peace.

AFTER LEAVING THE CEMETERY, I HEAD HOME TO CLEAN UP. The house is empty. Rayne is still at school, and Mom is probably visiting with Dad.

My decision to leave Chicago this morning was quick and unplanned. I was going to stay through the weekend, but when I woke this morning, my heart ached to be back. It ached to see Garret.

I didn't tell anyone I was coming home early. So no one is expecting me.

I grab a bite to eat and take a quick shower. I didn't bother washing my hair. My loose curls from yesterday still look good. All I need is a few touch-ups here and there and I'm good to go. I freshen up my makeup and then stare at the clothes in my closet for way too long.

I want to look my best when I see him, but I also don't want to look like I'm trying too hard.

I opt for a pair of dark jeans with a thin dark blue sweater that brings out the blue in my eyes. The temperatures are warmer and with this I won't need a jacket.

I give myself one last look in the full-length mirror and then head out the door.

I'm anxious to get this conversation over with and see if Garret and I can find a way to move forward. Together. As a couple.

My chest tightens and my belly feels all light and fluttery when I see his truck parked in his driveway. I wasn't sure if he'd be home this early in the day.

Taking a deep breath, I step up onto his front porch and knock on his door. I hear Bullet first. She lets out a loud bark, and then rushes to the door, scratching at it. When she starts whining, I can't help but smile.

“Down girl,” Garret’s deep gravelly voice sounds through the closed door. It sends a shiver through my body.

When he opens the door, Bullet comes barreling out and runs circles around me as if she knew it was me on the other side. I chuckle and pet her behind her ear when she finally takes a seat next to me.

Garret’s dark brown eyes meet mine, and he sucks in a ragged breath. His hands twitch and he stuffs them in his pockets as if that’s the only way he’ll keep from touching me. He looks just as nervous as I feel.

“You’re home,” he whispers.

I nod. “Just got back a couple of hours ago. I really need to talk to you.”

He swallows, dragging my eyes to his throat. The way it bobs up and down with the action sends a tingling sensation straight to my core. He looks sad, yet sexy. Then again, Garret looks sexy without even trying.

Today he’s wearing a pair of faded jeans and a dark gray Metallica t-shirt. His tattooed arms are flexed. I’m sure more from nerves than from showing off. His hair is messy and sticking up on the ends like he was just pulling on it. His beard is a little longer than the last time I saw him.

“Of course. Come in.” He steps aside and waits for me to enter. I hesitate for a moment, but only because I’m nervous, not because I don’t want to come on.

“Thanks.” I step past him, my shoulder brushing across his chest. This slight touch has my body begging for more. I’ve missed him so much and it almost hurts to be this close to him without touching him.

He shuts the door and leans against it while I lean against the edge of his table. We stare at each other for a moment as if neither of us knows where to begin.

He takes a step toward me and breaks the silence first. “Charlotte, I didn’t me—”

“Not yet.” I cut him off. I spin around and shove my hands into my hair, attempting to calm my pounding heart.

I went over the things I want to ask him again and again on the drive home. I rehearsed this shit, and now I can’t remember a single thing I wanted to say.

When I turn back to him, his hands are stuffed in his pockets again and his head is down. He looks so heartbroken that it makes me want to rush to him and hold him. Tell him everything will be okay.

“I need to ask you a few things,” I say quickly before I lose my nerve.

He looks up and nods.

Straightening my back and squaring my shoulders, I start. “Carol kept a journal. Not sure if you know that.”

“Rayne told me that’s how she found out about me.”

“Did she tell you anything else my sister wrote about?”

He shakes his head.

“Well, she was pretty detailed about her relationship with you. And honest about her feelings. I know what she was thinking back then. Now I need your side of it.”

He places his hand over his mouth and rubs his fingers around it and down his jaw. Then he takes a seat in the chair in the corner and rests his elbows on his knees. With his head down, he says, “I didn’t love her. She didn’t love me either. It wasn’t like that. Honestly, I think we were both bored. I know that sounds awful, but it’s the truth. There were other men. She was honest with me about that, but I don’t know who. We discussed having a paternity test done after the baby was born. That didn’t happen for obvious reasons.”

“Why didn’t you push for it? Say something?”

His tormented gaze lifts to mine. “You have to understand something about me. I’ve lived most of my life blaming

myself for my mother's death. My dad fell apart when she died. The lives of every member of my family were forever altered after that. All my brothers suffered because of the impact Mom dying had on our dad. Dad could never look at me when I was growing up. He treated me differently. I thought he blamed me for her death. I've lived with that guilt hanging over me for far longer than I should have."

"Garret," I whisper. My heart breaks a little more for him. "You weren't responsible for that. You were just an innocent baby."

"I know that now. But as a little boy, it was hard to process that. My mom chose to die so I could live. My dad became a shell of a man without her. I felt responsible."

"So when Carol died ..."

He nods. "I blamed myself. I was a stupid, broken twenty-two-year-old kid. When I heard Carol died in childbirth, I went off the deep end. Retreated further into myself than I'd ever done before. I stopped going to family dinners. I ignored my brothers' requests to hang out. Right or wrong, I carried her death on my shoulders. It was all the confirmation I needed that Rayne *was* mine. I'd already killed my mom, and now I killed Carol too."

"Garret." His name comes out on a strangled sob.

I can no longer maintain this distance between us, and slowly make my way across the small space to him. When I reach him, I slide my hands around his neck. He wraps his arms around my waist and tugs me between his legs. The tremor that passes through him as soon as our bodies connect sends a bolt of electricity through me.

He lets out a ragged breath and drops his head, resting it on my stomach.

"Fuck, I needed this," he whispers. His fingers dig into my hips as he tightens his hold. When he looks up at me, I gasp at the tears welling up in his eyes. "I've been desperate for you, Princess. Desperate and terrified and needy. I've never been so terrified in all my life."

I run my fingers through his hair, flattening out some of the strands. "I'm sorry. I hate that you've felt that way."

"You have nothing to be sorry about. It's me that's sorry. I'm the idiot that held onto this secret for far too long. What I did wasn't fair to you."

"Maybe not, but I understand why you didn't say anything. There was a lot more at stake than just you and me."

"Please tell me you forgive me." His voice cracks. "I don't think I'll survive if you don't."

Rather than answer him with words, I lift my legs and straddle his lap. He falls into the chair and looks up at me. I cup his cheeks and drop my lips close to his. But I don't kiss him. Not yet. Hovering mere millimeters away, I whisper, "I forgive you."

Then I press my mouth to his. The kiss is tentative at first. Almost as if we're exploring each other for the first time. But then I lightly brush my tongue across his bottom lip, dragging a low growl from his chest.

He lunges forward, digging one hand into my ass while his other fists my hair at the nape of my neck. His tongue dives into my mouth, sending a fluttering of sparks throughout my body. That feeling quickly intensifies into a raging fire so scorching hot when he presses my center against his growing erection.

My desire to feel him inside me is excruciatingly painful. My entire body aches to feel him, touch him, make him mine.

Breaking our connection, I drop my head back and gasp for air. My chest rises and falls and no matter how many deep breaths I take, I don't feel like I'm getting any oxygen. My head is spinning, and my eyes can't focus.

"Charlotte." His raspy voice causes me to bring my eyes back to him. I blink a few times until he comes back into focus. "You okay?"

"Yes," I smile. "Better than okay."

“Good, then I need to tell you something.” A hint of nervousness passes across his face.

I run my fingers into his hair and drop my forehead to his. “What is it?”

He presses a featherlight kiss to my lips and whispers. “I love you.” I suck in a breath just as he kisses me again. “And I meant what I said that night. If you’re going to marry anyone, it’s me.”

My eyes meet his. There’s still a hint of nervousness in his gaze, but his determination is stronger. I run my hand down his cheek, smoothing it over his beard. Then I rest it on his chest, reveling in the feel of his pounding heart.

“Okay,” I say.

His eyes twitch, and he pulls his head back so he can get a better look at me. “Okay?”

I pull my bottom lip between my teeth and nod. “Yes. I agree with you. If I’m going to marry anyone, it should be you.”

Then I wrap my arms around his neck, press my chest to his, and lean in close before I whisper. “Because I love you too. So, so much.”

He lets out a low grumble that I feel reverberating throughout my entire body just before his mouth claims mine in a deep searing kiss.

I had no idea what to expect when I moved back to Ohio. I arrived feeling like a failure, a disgrace to my family, and completely lost without direction or goals.

Garret was never part of the plan. He never should have been on one of my lists. But life has a funny way of changing things up when we least expect it.

Without even trying, he disrupted my world and sent me down a new path. Thanks to him, I have a new list of life goals.

And he’s at the top of the list.

Chapter 28

Bigger is always better.

Garret

T *ap. Tap. Tap.*

A foreign sound rouses me from my sleep. My eyes slowly open to a dark room. The sun isn't up yet, but there's a soft glow coming from the side table lamp downstairs.

I reach out beside me, to find Charlotte's side of the bed empty.

I groan as disappointment washes over me. I hate it when she gets up before me. I want to hold her close—skin-to-skin—before we start our day together. Or as she likes to call it, my morning snuggle time. I don't care what she calls it, as long as I get it.

Tap. Tap. Tap.

The same tapping noise echoes off the rafters. It sounds like wood knocking against metal.

Kicking the covers back, I reach for my phone on the side table. It's not even six in the morning. Growling, I grab one of the pillows and cover my face with it.

"I can hear you," Charlotte calls out in a cheerful, singsong voice that makes me growl even louder. She chuckles. "Morning, grumpy bear."

"Why aren't you still in bed?" I call out, my voice still rough from sleep.

"Couldn't sleep. Decided to get up and work on my list."

“Is that what the incessant tapping noise is? Your pen on the table?”

“Yeah, sorry.” I may not be able to see her, but I can hear the wince in her voice.

“Come back to bed, and I’ll consider forgiving you.”

She chuckles. “But I’m making a list.”

“And what list would that be?”

That woman has a list for everything. She couldn’t even move in with me without making a list of all the things she needed to pack and how they needed to be packed. It made no sense to me. Pack up your shit and bring it over.

But no. It was apparently much more complicated than that.

Most of her stuff is still in boxes stacked in a corner of my garage. The house doesn’t exactly have a lot of storage room. Despite that, the closet and bathroom had plenty of space for her clothes and personal items. I didn’t have much in either, so I didn’t even have to make room for her stuff.

The kitchen, however, is a different story. It’s only been a couple of weeks since she moved in, and she complains about the lack of counter space in the kitchen almost daily.

“Just some things I want to get for the bedroom.”

I smile. I may bitch about it, but secretly I love that she’s investing her time into our home and making lists to improve it. It tells me she plans on staying. “Like what?”

“Are we going to have this entire conversation with you yelling at me from up there?”

“Does that bother you?”

“Yes.” She chuckles. “Just get up and join me. I made coffee.”

“Or,” I pause for effect, “you could come back to bed and snuggle with me.”

For a moment, the house is filled with silence as I wait for her response. Then I hear her bare feet pad across the hardwood floor. Seconds later, she appears at the top of the stairs wearing one of my t-shirts. I love seeing her in my clothes. Especially my flannel shirts. They're so big on her, they hit her mid-thigh and hang off her shoulders.

I pat the side of the bed and she crawls in next to me, resting her head on my shoulder. Wrapping my arms around her, I hold her tight against me.

"That's better." I sigh. "Why did you wake so early?"

"Not sure." She runs her hand up my chest and tangles her fingers in my chest hairs. Something she does often when she's thinking.

"Something's on your mind. Talk to me."

She shrugs and nuzzles closer to me. "I don't know. I guess I worry that we're moving too fast. Either that, or the gossip in town is getting to me."

I feel her tense against me. We've talked a lot about how to handle the gossip that was sure to come. Word spread fast that I'm Rayne's biological father. That kid wasted no time telling everyone who'd listen that I'm her dad. It made me both proud and nervous at the same time.

I love that she's happy I'm her dad. Lord knows it's some of the best news I've received in my life. But it's put a strain on my relationship with Charlotte.

Everyone already figured out we'd been secretly seeing each other. Considering Charlotte and Rayne's familial relationship, we've been the talk of the town.

"Hey." I roll us over so I'm settled over her. I rest my elbows above her shoulders and cup my arms around her head. "We promised each other we wouldn't let the gossip get to us. And if someone said something to upset the other, we'd talk about it. No matter what anyone says, we're not doing anything wrong."

"I know." She threads her arms underneath mine and wraps them around my shoulders. "And I believe that with all

my heart. It's just hard hearing the old ladies chatter when they come into the salon. Mrs. Engle stops them every time, but a few still manage to give me a piece of their mind."

I frown. "You didn't tell me this."

"I didn't want you to worry. You worry too much as it is. I can handle it, but that doesn't mean it doesn't bother me."

I press a light kiss to her lips. "I need you to tell me these things. I can't help you work through them if you don't talk to me about them. We promised no more secrets. Ever. No matter how big or small."

She nods. "I'm sorry. I won't keep it from you again. But you should know, it happens almost every day. The ladies from the Methodist church are relentless."

I groan because Grams has already told me a few stories about them bombarding her with questions when she's at the community center. From what Grams tells me, Charlotte and I have a lot of people praying for us.

"Well, fuck them. And fuck their judgment. I only care what you and our families think. They support us. That's all that matters."

"That's easier said than done. You try working at gossip central and see how much it gets under your skin."

"You know," I say as I pepper a trail of kisses down her neck. "If you would just marry me, that'd shut at least half of them up."

"Garret!" She runs her hands into my hair and gives it a sharp tug.

"Yes, Princess." I tease, choosing to ignore her frustration. I've asked her to marry me almost every day since we officially got together, and I don't plan on stopping until she says yes.

She huffs and tugs at my hair until she forces me to look at her. "It's only been a few weeks."

"But we've known each other our entire lives. And it's been longer if you count the time since we first reconnected."

“You could decide you hate me in a month.”

I’m shaking my head before she even finishes talking.
“Never going to happen.”

“It will when I finally take over your tiny house. I have a lot of shit in your garage to unpack. And all my plants are still at my parents’ house.”

I shrug. “I’ll build us a bigger house.”

“But you love your house.”

“I do, but I love you more. Plus, there’s nowhere for Rayne to stay. I want her to have her own room in *our* house.”

She raises a brow. “*Our* house.”

“Yes.” I position my legs between hers and spread them wide until my growing erection presses into her center. “Our house. This is your home too.”

“I like the sound of that.” She smiles as I press my lips to hers.

“Then say you’ll marry me, Princess. You already said you agreed with me. That I’m the only man you should marry. I don’t understand why you want to wait. Make my life complete and be my wife.”

“You’re not going to stop asking until I say yes, are you?”

“Nope.”

“Would you be willing to wait, like, a year before we get married?”

“No!” I frown. “I want to get married now.”

Her head falls back in laughter, and I take advantage of her exposed neck by kissing her and sucking on her delicate skin. She sucks in a breath and melts into me.

“You’re impossible to negotiate with,” she breathes.

“I know what I want, and that’s you.” I continue to kiss my way down her chest, pulling my t-shirt down to expose her breasts. I suck one of her pert nipples into my mouth and give it a light bite. “Just say yes, Princess.”

I do it again, this time biting down harder until her back arches beneath me.

“Yes!” she says followed by a sexy moan. I release her nipple on a pop and stare at her.

“Yes what?” The question rushes out of me. “Yes, keep doing this to you or yes, you’ll marry me?”

She cups her hands on my cheeks and pulls my mouth to hers, but she stops just shy of kissing me. “Both,” she whispers.

Then our mouths come together in a deep, claiming kiss that leaves no question about what we want from each other.

“Fuck woman. It’s about time you said yes,” I say once we both come up for air.

She chuckles. “You say that like I’ve put you off for years.”

“It felt like it,” I say before I kiss her again.

Nothing I’ve said has ever felt more true. I didn’t know it until recently, but I’ve been waiting my entire life for Charlotte. Now that I have her, I’m never letting her go.

CHARLOTTE LOOKS OVER AT ME IN CONFUSION AS I PARALLEL park in a space about a block down the street from the courthouse. “Why are we stopping here?”

Instead of answering her, I get out of my truck and walk around to her side. When I open the door, I hold my hand out. She stares at me for several beats before she finally takes it.

Once she’s out of the truck, she glances around like she’s looking for clues to why we’re here. She hasn’t yet noticed that the courthouse is just down the street.

It’s been a week since she finally agreed to marrying me, and I don’t want to wait another minute to make her my wife. If she agrees, today will be the day I make that happen.

“Garret. I thought we were going to visit my dad.”

“We are.” I lean down and give her a quick kiss. “But we need to make a stop first.”

“A stop for what?” Her expression turns from confusion to concern. I tighten my grip on her hand and pull her closer.

“Nothing to worry about.” I tug her down the sidewalk. My nerves are heightened and I’m starting to think this might have been a bad idea. but I’m here now. “This shouldn’t take us too long.”

She doesn’t resist me as I guide her toward the large brick building that’s impossible to miss, but she’s too confused to even notice where I’m leading her.

When we reach the steps, I pause and pull her close to me so we’re chest-to-chest. “Tell me you were serious last week when you said yes.”

She furrows her brows and studies me before realization finally dawns. She glances around us and her jaw drops when her eyes land on the sign for the courthouse.

“Garret?” she whispers my name like a question.

“Princess. You said yes, and I don’t want to wait any longer than necessary to make you my wife.” I drop to my knees and take her hand in mine. With my free hand, I hold up the ring I bought the week after she came back to me. “We have an appointment to get our marriage license. And if you’re ready, the judge will marry us today.”

“What?” she gasps. Her hand trembles in mine as I hold the engagement ring just at the tip of her finger.

“Will you wear my ring?” I ask, feeling nervous and a little exposed.

“Yes, but ...” She glances around and gasps again when she sees the crowd now gathered at the entrance to the courthouse. “I’m so confused.” She turns her tear-filled gaze back to me. “Are you suggesting we get married today?”

“Yes.” I don’t hesitate with my answer. “Our families are here. As is your friend Sierra. All we have to do is walk

through those doors. The judge is waiting for us.”

“Garret. This is crazy.”

“No, it’s not. It’s love. Maybe it looks crazy to others, but you’re all I want. Please say yes, Princess. Marry me. Today.”

“But.” She looks down at her clothes. Her tears spill down her cheeks and I worry I made a huge mistake. “I’m in jeans. I can’t get married in jeans.”

I point behind us to where Sierra is standing. She’s holding a garment bag and a pair of Charlotte’s favorite high-heeled shoes. “Got you covered. We can change inside.”

After sliding the ring on her finger, I push to my feet. “Everyone we care about is here. Even your father. He’s having a great day and is wearing his best suit. Rayne has the flowers, and she looks so beautiful in her dress. Everyone is ready. They just need us. What do you say?”

A slow smile lifts her lips as more tears fall down her cheeks. She glances around, her eyes landing on our happy families. “I say you’re crazy, but okay.” She turns back to me, her smile bright and wide. Then she throws her arms around my neck and hugs me close. “Let’s get married.”

My body sags in relief and I take what feels like the first breath in days. “Thank fuck. You just made me the happiest man alive.”

I don’t know how, but her smile grows wider. “And you’re about to make me the luckiest woman alive. Now kiss me.”

“Isn’t that supposed to come after we’re married?” I ask through a teasing grin.

She chuckles. “Since when do you care about following social norms?”

“I don’t.” Then I press my lips to hers. I don’t care who’s watching or how indecent this kiss is. Charlotte Weber is mine and I’ll kiss her however and whenever I want.

Epilogue

When lists come true.

Charlotte

This year started out as one of the worst years of my life. In the blink of an eye, I lost everything I'd dreamed of having. One minute I was proposing to a man I thought was the love of my life, and I was ready to put in an offer on a building space to open my own business.

Things didn't quite go down that way. Turns out he wasn't the man of my dreams, and I wasn't meant to open my own salon in Chicago.

Because my man was waiting for me to return home so we could fall in love.

In January, I didn't think there was any hope for this year. I mean, who would have thought I'd still get married and open my own business after a scandal that lost me my job? I sure as hell didn't.

But here I am. It's the middle of September and only one week away from my thirty-first birthday. All my goals to achieve by age thirty just came true.

It's been about five months since Garret shocked me with a courthouse wedding, and two months since Mrs. Engle decided it was time to retire.

She accepted my offer a few weeks ago, and I closed on the building this morning. The hair salon in Beaver is officially mine.

Spinning around in the main room, I can't decide where to begin. I can't move the couch until Garret gets here to help, so I decide on removing all the pictures from the walls.

Garret should be here any minute with the new sign for outside and the supplies we need to start on the remodel. There's not a lot to change. Mostly painting and replacing all the furniture and decor. The floors are in great shape, and I like the existing layout. I want to add another station. If business continues to pick up, I should be able to support two other stylists.

The gossip surrounding my relationship with Garret spread fast and far. Turns out in this small town, gossip is good for business. Unlike the rich and famous, small-town folks wanted to be a part of our story. People came from as far as Chillicothe just to get their hair done by the disgraced former Miss Ohio who once did Oprah's hair.

Once I embraced the gossip, and took the time to set the rumors straight, business boomed. I'm now booked out two months in advance and I feel like I have my old life back.

Granted, life in Beaver looks a lot different than my life in Chicago.

Honestly, it's better.

That's something I never thought I'd say. The only thing I miss about my old life is Sierra. She's visited me a few times since the wedding, and Garret and I spent a long weekend with her just before school started back up for Rayne.

Rayne still lives with Mom, but she spends a lot of time at the house with Garret and me. Once he's done with the room additions, she'll have her own bedroom. We're hoping she'll choose to split her time between Mom and us. We don't want to take her away from Mom, but it'd be nice to have her at the house more often.

Dad's good days are getting less and less and turning more into good moments. That's been particularly hard on Mom. Our visits with him are hit or miss. Sometimes we arrive and

he's great, and then ten minutes later, he has no clue who we are. Dementia is the worst.

Losing Dad while he's still alive and otherwise healthy hurts worse than when we lost Carol. With Carol it was sudden. One minute she was there, and the next she was gone. It still hurt like hell, but seeing Dad regularly when he has no clue who I am, is somehow far more devastating.

My thoughts are brought back to the present when the front door opens. Glancing over my shoulder, I smile when I see it's my husband.

"Hey. Did you get the sign?" I ask as he comes up behind me and wraps me up in a hug. The man never tires of touching me.

He kisses the nape of my neck, sending a shiver down my spine. "I did. It's outside. You want to see it?"

"Yes!" I clap my hands before he takes one and leads me out. The large sign I'd ordered is leaning against his truck. Since I didn't want anything too fancy, they were able to make it quickly. "Oh, wow! It's bigger than I expected."

In large bold letters are the words A Cut Above with a small pair of scissors resting just above the word Cut like they're about to snip off the top of the T.

"Yeah, there's no way I can hang this by myself. Christian is on his way to help. He should be here soon."

"Thank you. I appreciate you helping me make this happen."

He cups my cheek and lifts my lips to his. "Anything for you. Ask, and I will make it happen."

I smile. "Well, you can start by helping me get that couch out. The new one should be delivered tomorrow."

"You got it, Princess." He takes my hand and leads me back inside. Once the door closes behind us, I start pointing out all the things I want to change.

"I also think it would look better if we moved the desk over to that wall. Open this area up more. Then we can—"

Garret spins me around and pulls me close to his chest. I look up and see a hint of mischief in his deep brown gaze. “Why are you looking at me like that?”

“Because I need something from you.” He plants another kiss on my lips before he releases me. Then he pulls his phone out of his pocket.

“What is it?” I furrow my brows, confused by his actions.

He taps on his phone screen a few times. A moment later, George Strait’s *I Cross My Heart* surrounds us.

He holds his hand out for me. “May I have this dance?”

My heart flutters and a swarm of butterflies takes flight in my belly. “I thought you’d never ask.”

I take his hand, and he pulls me close. We sway around the empty salon for a few beats before he speaks. “This is my first dance, Princess.”

I look up at him, not sure I understand what he means. “You mean us? This is *our* first dance?”

Since we didn’t have a traditional wedding or a reception afterward, we didn’t share a wedding dance. A couple of months ago, I admitted that was my only regret about how we got married. I didn’t get to share a first dance with my husband.

He shakes his head. “No, this is *my* first dance. With anyone. I never went to school dances or prom. Can’t say I’ve ever had a reason to dance with a woman before now. You’re my first, Princess. And other than Rayne or any other daughters you might happen to give me, I will only ever dance with you.”

Tears well up in my eyes as the significance of the moment sinks in. He’s sharing something with me that no one else has ever gotten to experience with him. Just me.

“Why do you have to go and make me cry like this?” I say as my tears break free.

He smiles as he wipes the tears from my cheek. “That wasn’t my plan. As long as you tell me these are happy tears, I

don't think I feel the least bit bad about it.”

“Definitely happy tears.”

“Good.” He drops his forehead to mine. “Now let me dance with my wife for the first time.”

We sway around the room, completely lost in each other's embrace. The song ends and another begins but it barely registers.

My life is far from perfect, and we still have a lot of issues to work through, but I'm happy.

We're happy.

And I can't wait for the rest of this journey with Garret by my side.

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Steamy Emotional Contemporary Romance

Aria Bliss writes steamy, emotionally charged contemporary romance with humor, drama, and big feels. She has a soft spot for single dads, second chances, forbidden romance, and grumpy bad boys with sweet centers that are impossible not to love.