

a steamy  
*unexpected baby*  
romance collection

WINTER  
*Baby*

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

TARYN  
QUINN

# WINTER BABY

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A STEAMY UNEXPECTED BABY ROMANCE  
COLLECTION

TARYN QUINN



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Winter Baby

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## WINTER BABY

*This winter, get super cozy in the lakeside small town Crescent Cove—and surrounding area—where babies aren't just a bonus, they're almost a certainty!*

Along with lots of cute babies and single dads or new dads-to-be, you'll find small town shenanigans, lots of steam, and laughs to spare!

Books included in this exclusive limited time bundle:

- Have My Baby - series starter for the Crescent Cove series
- CEO Daddy - standalone in the Crescent Cove series
- Mistletoe Baby - standalone in the Crescent Cove series
- Fireman Daddy - standalone in the Crescent Cove series, currently unavailable outside this bundle!
- Rockstar Daddy - series starter for Wilder Mind series

*Author's note: all of the included books are complete stories—some longer, some shorter—but all have a romantic happily-ever-after and no cliffhanger!*

# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Sometimes we make up fictional places that end up having the same names as actual places. These are our fictional interpretations only. Please grant us leeway if our creative vision isn't true to reality.

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HAVE MY BABY

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# CRESCENT COVE BOOK 1

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Have My Baby

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# HAVE MY BABY

*Have my baby.*

That was what my single dad best friend Seth said to me while I was waitressing at the diner.

His little girl wants a sibling. But Seth is a workaholic millionaire and doesn't have time to meet someone.

Someone who won't screw him over, like his kid's mother.

Only problem is *this* someone has secretly been in love with him since high school. I've been hiding it forever, not wanting to risk our friendship.

Sleeping with him is my biggest fantasy. And I've fantasized plenty, being a virgin. Another thing he doesn't know.

Now I have to make the biggest decision of my life.

Is having a no strings attached affair just to make a baby better than never having him at all?

***Author's note:*** *this case of insta-love and insta-naked-time has been brewing for over a decade. Babymaking has never been so hot...or so funny...or so complicated.*

***Author's note part deux:*** *Have My Baby is a standalone rom com with a romantic HEA ending and no cliffhanger.*

# PROLOGUE

SETH

*Almost five years ago*

THE GUY IN THE SUIT IN THE MIRROR WASN'T ME. HE couldn't be. I wasn't ready to pack it all in yet.

I'd only graduated college a couple of years ago. Marriage? A baby on the way? Fuck, middle-aged guys did that stuff. Me? I was still young and fancy free.

But I wasn't. Not anymore. Not since the morning Marjorie Maplewood had walked into my office at Hamilton Realty, waving around a white stick that didn't belong to a popsicle.

*This kid is yours, Hamilton. Don't try to pretend it isn't. What are you going to do about it?*

It had never occurred to me that the child wasn't mine, but I'd probably stared at her for two full minutes before finding my voice. Marj hadn't appreciated that, and she'd burst into such loud sobs that my loyal assistant, Shelly, ran in from the reception area with a handkerchief, a mint, and plenty of judgment.

An hour later, we'd been engaged and planning a wedding. Okay, maybe two hours.

Now I was facing my reflection in a spotted mirror in a back room at Our Lady of Peace Church, and the ticking minutes might as well have been a time bomb that wouldn't be kind enough to kill me.

*Jesus, you're an asshole. She's the mother of your child.*



And I was marrying her. I knew my duty. It wasn't our child's fault. Truth was, I already wanted that baby. I had as soon as I'd stopped panicking.

Hell, I was still panicking, but I was moving forward anyway.

A soft knock came at the door and I turned, expecting my father. He was one of the few pleased as could be about this union. Marjorie's family wasn't as well-to-do as ours, but they had good social positioning. My father sold property for a living—as did I now—and was always negotiating deals and searching for angles. My mom leaving the family when I was a kid, certainly hadn't softened him. If anything, he'd become harder and more inflexible.

*Everything has a price, Seth. Even people. Especially people.*

But it wasn't my father. The woman standing in the doorway, her dark hair wreathed in a crown of tiny wildflowers, would never worry about social standings or brokering deals. She called me on my shit and made me laugh while doing it.

"Hey, you," Ally said, and I smiled for the first time since I'd walked into this narrow, stuffy room.

What that said, I didn't want to analyze.

She took a step forward and for a moment, light surrounded her, making her pale blue dress seem even paler. Almost...white. And if I tilted my head, that crown of flowers on her head could be attached to a veil.

Almost immediately, the tightness in my chest eased and I could breathe again. I wasn't going to run out of oxygen before I even walked down the goddamn aisle.

"Ally Cat," I said, my voice sounding scratchy even to my own ears. I moved forward and gripped her shoulders, drawing her back enough that I could search her eyes. Then she slugged me in the gut and the spell was broken.

I wasn't marrying Ally. That wasn't what we were about. We were buddies.

We'd met in Mrs. Danforth's third period English class in tenth grade on the second day of school. Ally had been absent the first day, and I was a transfer from the godawful prep school my father had sent me to in Connecticut. I'd lasted a year there, which was three years fewer than my twin, Oliver. Then I'd landed in public school in our small town, still unsure if I was making a colossal mistake—sure, prep school had sucked, but school was never fun—and I'd been half as interested in starting *Of Mice and Men* as I was at looking down Marcie Culpepper's V-neck top.

Then Ally had hurried into the classroom, her hair done up with crazy sticks, her arms full of books, and dropped into the empty seat beside me. She'd taken one glance at the way I was hunched over my desk to ogle Marcie's boobs and smirked.

Between that and the fact that I'd assumed she'd ditched the first day of class, I'd figured she was totally badass. I found out later her mom was sick and she'd stayed home with her to keep her company. But my badass opinion of Ally had remained all these years.

This badass chick was my best male friend...who just happened to have a pair of tits.

Sure, occasionally, I noticed more about her than a friend should. Like how her hair always smelled like fucking sunshine, or that her legs seemed six miles long. I always shut that crap down immediately. She'd been dealing with her mother's illness all along, and with every passing year, her mom grew frailer. I was Ally's support system. The only certainty she had in her life.

Just as she was mine.

“Seth? Hey, wise ass, you okay?”

I flexed my hands on her shoulders, not quite ready to let go. Normally, I didn't grab hold of her as if she was my only lifeline, but it sure as hell felt as if I was facing an abyss.

One of my own making.

“What's going on?” She reached up to lay her hands over mine, and the softness of her skin made me swallow hard.

I had to haul myself back. To remember who I was marrying.

“Nothing. Last minute jitters, I guess.” I smiled and let her go, tucking my itchy hands into my pockets.

Ally smiled, relaxing finally. “Understandable. It’s not every day that Scorer Seth gets put on lockdown.”

See, she was glad I wasn’t going there too. She’d even mentioned my old stupid high school nickname. Scorer Seth, the guy who never missed when he set his mind on a woman. Now I was engaged, and of course, Ally wouldn’t want me going there. But she never had.

Our entire friendship, we’d kept each other firmly in the friend zone. It was safer. Didn’t make sense to risk screwing up a good thing, not when we had so few others we could count on.

We were it for each other. And we always would be.

“Scorer Seth never learned.” Giving in to the urge to touch her one more time, I reached up to adjust her flower crown, and she immediately followed my hand to adjust it herself. That was my girl, always double-checking my work.

I grinned and moved back to the mirror to work some more on my tie. My eternal downfall. Knowing that, she let out a sigh and walked over to fix it for me, accomplishing the task in two seconds flat. When she started to move back, I grasped her wrist and her gaze flew up to mine.

“Promise me this won’t change,” I said urgently.

“What?” She let out a nervous little laugh, the kind I rarely heard from her. No matter what, Ally had her shit together. “You want me to promise to always fix your ties? Okay, I can do that—”

“No. I want you to promise we’ll still be this way together. That just because I have a wife now, we’ll still be like...this.” I gestured between us with my free hand. “That you won’t pull away.”

She laughed again, averting her gaze. Telling me without words she'd intended to do exactly that.

“We'll always be friends. But your wife will be your best friend now. As she should be. If you're worrying about me, don't. I'm good.” She tried to shake off my hold, but when that didn't happen, she shook back her hair instead. “I've got it all handled.”

“What if I don't? I don't want this to change. Fuck, Al, you're my best friend.”

Gently, she pulled away. “We'll always be friends,” she repeated. “I better get to my seat. It's almost time. Break a leg, Hamilton.” She flashed a weak smile. “Or whatever you say in times like this.” She leaned up on tiptoe and kissed my cheek. “I'm so happy for you.”

She was gone before I could reply.

I reached up to cup my cheek. My skin was still tingling from her lips.

She hadn't promised me. The only promises I could count on now were my own. The ones I'd already made to my unborn child, and soon, to my wife.

I would do what was right.

# ONE



I HOPPED BACK A GOOD THREE FEET, BUT IT WAS WAY TOO late. “Aww, come on.”

I stared down at the puddle of coffee dripping from the worn Formica tabletop to the red vinyl booth. The cracked pot in my hand held a jagged edge that could be a prop in a Quentin Tarantino movie. Right down to the coffee-stained orange lip.

If I had to sacrifice my last pair of white Converse sneakers to the coffee gods, at least it should’ve been goddamn full octane coffee, not decaf.

“I’m sorry, Mrs. Diggs. Don’t move, okay?”

Mrs. Diggs, one of the diner’s regulars, shuffled to the end of her booth and cupped her mug in her manicured hands. She picked up her feet—clad in bright orange and white sneakers—as the coffee raced toward the wall of windows.

I winced. Dammit, the baseboards needed a scrub again. Maybe I could convince Mitch to let me stay late or come in early one day. I’d been picking up as many shifts as he’d allow me to, but at least if I did this it wouldn’t require talking to people.

I was pretty much talked out.

“Are you all right, dear?”

“Fine. I just don’t want you to get cut, okay? Give me a quick second and I’ll brew you a fresh pot.” Disgusted, I dropped my threadbare towel over the glass and scraped the

shards into a pile as I shimmied my way out from under the table. “Sage, can you grab me another towel?” I hollered over my shoulder.

My best friend’s head popped out from around the corner. I gave her a rueful smile as I lost the battle against the river of coffee.

Sage rushed over with a pile of towels and crouched beside me. She blew a honey blond curl out of her face. No matter how many pins Sage Evans jammed into her twisting pile of curls, one invariably escaped. Luckily it only enhanced her heart-shaped face and huge green eyes.

“What happened?” She started mopping up the escaping coffee.

“Careful.” I grabbed her hand just before a hook-shaped shard of glass took a chunk out of her palm.

“Jeez, what did you do?”

I set what was left of the pot on the table. “One too many times left on the burner while empty is my guess. I barely tapped the side of the table and pop-crash.”

“Coffee.” She wrinkled her nose.

“Full pot no less.” I managed not to let the growl or the string of swear words free as I reached back under the booth and mopped up the coffee under Mrs. Diggs’ feet. “Okay, you’re set.”

The woman put her feet down as I crawled back out from under the booth. A pair of dark jeans and black boots stopped two inches from my coffee-splattered khakis.

I knew those boots.

My gaze skipped up to the way his jeans molded to strong thighs and a bulge behind his zipper that had caused me way too many sleepless nights.

My best friend since high school tucked his thumb into his pocket and drummed his fingers lightly against his leg. “Is this a new customer service thing?”

My mouth tipped up at one corner. If he only knew what kind of service I wanted to offer. “Jerk.”

Even with the slightly burnt decaf wafting up from the floor—and covering me from knee to toes, couldn’t forget that part—there was no denying Seth Hamilton’s delicious toasted sugar and sex scent.

It was some ungodly expensive cologne. I wasn’t exactly proud of the fact that I’d gone to a department store’s counter to take an extra whiff of it. I’d hunted it down so I didn’t seem like some perv by burying my face in his chest to get a better inhale.

However, the bottled version wasn’t nearly as divine as it was on Seth. Probably had something to do with his stupid pheromones.

Or the fact that his alarmingly perfect body chemistry made everything smell good—even during that one night we spent together with his daughter up all night with a fever.

I’ve relived that night more than I care to admit. Not the awful part. I’m not a freak. But I can’t help remembering the aftermath when we melted into a heap on the couch in half-hysterical laughter from exhaustion and relief. Yeah, so I shouldn’t have noticed, but I’m human.

It wasn’t like I jumped him.

I thought about it for a hot second. To be honest, I think about it all the damn time. When you didn’t get any attention of a sexual nature, it tended to take over the whole frontal lobe. The fact that he was so delectable didn’t help. However, the idea of tilting our perfect friendship into naked time was too much to deal with. Much of my life was the same refrain.

Me lusting after my best friend. Him completely clueless. Me more than willing to let him stay in the dark. It was a pathetic song that I couldn’t stop playing.

I scrubbed my tingling palms on my thighs and noticed his untucked white dress shirt. He was still wearing a navy sport jacket so he wasn’t completely off the clock, but definitely not in sales-mode. His dark hair was tousled from the breeze off

the water, a pair of mirrored aviators hid his equally dark eyes, and his perpetual scruff made my insides buzzy. Who the hell needed caffeine when Seth came into The Rusty Spoon?

Or the thoughts of me on my knees in front of said man.

*Good God, pull it together, girl.* I slapped my thighs to kill the last of the buzzing. “Hi.”

“Hi yourself.” He bent at the waist and I got a blast of that sugar sex. He took off his sunglasses and his eyes crinkled at the sides as he smiled. His gaze slid from me to Sage. “Two-woman job? Must be serious.”

“Hey, Pita.” Sage rolled her eyes before bunching all the towels together. “I’ll put on that pot for you.” She stood up and dropped the pile on the lunch counter so it wouldn’t drip all over the floor.

“Thanks,” I murmured.

“Wow, ten points for the full-on shatter, Ally Cat.” He helped me to a standing position, then hustled around the counter for the garbage and dragged it over to me. He must have heard the crunch and click of glass because he cupped his hands around mine and pulled them over the bin. I didn’t bother trying to save the towel, just shot the whole thing in the trash. “No cuts?”

“I’m fine, Dad.” Or I would be if he’d let me go. Because seriously, I couldn’t deal with tingles on top of mortifying coffee splatters. Not that I wasn’t used to the eternal stains that were part of being a waitress at the diner. It just seemed extra embarrassing in front of Seth.

He flipped my hands palms up then coasted the pads of his fingers over the tops. “All good.”

I curled my fingers into my palms. “Told you. The only casualty is my Chucks.”

He glanced around the garbage to my shoes. “Yeah, they’re toast.”

“No, I’ll just use them as my new mopping shoes.”

He frowned.



“What?”

“Nothing.” The little wrinkle between his brows cleared as he noticed Mrs. Diggs in the booth. “Aren’t you looking lovely, Mrs. Diggs? New workout gear?”

“Charmer.” But she preened and smoothed her bejeweled hand over the expensive designer Adidas jacket in the same orange and white of her shoes. “Nice to see someone watching after our Alison though.”

“Always.”

“Oh, brother.” I turned to the counter lined with red vinyl stools and collapsed onto one to take stock of my situation.

Most of the coffee had hit the floor and my shoes, so I guess that was something at least. I stalked down the aisle and inwardly groaned at the squeak of my rubber soles. I hustled to the carpet in front of the door and scuffed my feet. I could actually feel the coffee squishing inside my shoes.

Ugh.

My life—up to my ankles in crap coffee. Of course.

I went around behind the counter to take care of the pile of towels Sage had left. “What’s up, Seth? You don’t usually come in this late.”

“I actually have some papers for you.”

My gaze swung back to him. He nodded to the back of the diner where he always sat. “Can you take a few minutes?”

It was only then that I noticed the folder in his hand. The white Hamilton Realty logo scrawled across the dense green glossy folder. My stomach twisted for a whole different reason this time.

Mom’s house.

My house.

What could have been my house if it wasn’t full of shitty memories and the stench of too much antiseptic. I closed my eyes as a wave of exhaustion chased the sad. It had been three months since my mom had finally passed away after a soul-

crushing bout with cancer. She'd always been fragile, but the last five years had about killed me too.

By the end, all I wanted was peace for her.

And maybe a little for myself. I only let that part out in the deepest, darkest parts of the night where sleep and waking overlapped. When the quiet was finally comforting and the hiss of the oxygen compressor wasn't my constant companion for the first time in too many years to remember.

But then the alarm pushed me out of the quiet and into my current reality. Bills, life, the diner, plans...all jumbled together in my little planner. And the little secret pocket where I'd stashed the page of classes I wanted to take. I had sent off for a few brochures from schools in New York City, and I looked at them now and then.

It had been so long since I could think about what I wanted that I honestly wasn't quite sure what to do. But it didn't stop me from poring over my brochures and the college catalog online.

Too bad dreams didn't pay the bills.

I pressed a shaking hand over my belly. "Yeah. Let me make sure I can take my fifteen."

I hurried over to the sink. My rings clicked together as I soaped up my hands to get the coffee smell off them. "Mitch, I'm going to take my break."

He only grunted. Typical.

"Sage, you okay?"

She waved me off. "Sure. Take it now before the biddies come in for the early bird special."

"Truth." I smoothed my hand over my apron and stuck my order pad in the front pocket. I double checked that I had three pens like I always did. Patrons were notorious thieves. Not sure why they wanted my cheapie Bic pens, but they were forever walking off with them.

*Stop stalling.*

I was tempted to roll my eyes at myself, but that took too much energy and I didn't have much to spare. I grabbed a fruit plate and a scoop of cottage cheese to get me through the rest of the evening. Sage and I might have time for a bite after the dinner rush, but more often than not, it just rolled into dessert business and the endless coffee mug crowd.

I snagged a menu on my way down the aisle to him. Seth was sprawled in his favorite booth, his long legs encroaching on my side. I kicked his boot as I sat down and dropped the menu in front of him. "How you don't have that memorized is beyond me."

He straightened and placed his phone face down on the table, then propped the menu against the wall. "Just coffee this time."

"Oh. Have an appointment?" I ate a forkful of my cottage cheese.

He sneered at my plate. "So gross."

I forked up some more and held it in front of him. "So good."

"Disgusting."

I snagged a piece of pineapple to go with my forkful and chewed with a smile. "How would you know? You still won't try the wonders of my fruit plate."

"It's a texture thing."

"And yet you'll eat grits."

"Only Angelo's grits. Which reminds me." He flipped over his menu. "I have been dreaming about his kitchen sink omelet."

"Kinda lame dreams."

He glanced over the menu. "I can't have dreams about you naked all the time."

"Har-har."

He winked at me and I tamped down the hormones prepared to leap across the table.

Sage came over with a grilled cheese sandwich and slid it in front of me. In her other hand was a pot of coffee. “What are you having, Seth?”

I frowned. “I didn’t order this.”

Sage put her hand on her hip. “That fruit thing isn’t going to hold you over for the rest of the day.”

“Thanks. My ass won’t thank you, but I do.”

“Your ass is just fine.”

“Sure is,” Seth agreed.

What the hell was up with the comments? He didn’t notice my ass.

Did he?

I shook my head and peeled the triangles apart as the lava-like mixture of cheddar and muenster that spilled onto the plate made me moan. Cheese was my downfall. I could pretty much give up anything except that.

Noticing Seth’s smirk, I dragged my fingertip through the cheese and brought it to my mouth. “What?”

“Should we leave you alone?”

“Fine by me. We’ll live happily ever after, won’t we, you gooey piece of perfection?”

Seth shook his head. He flipped his mug right side up on the saucer. “I’ll just have coffee.”

“You sure?” Sage asked as she poured.

“Yeah. I really want that omelet, but it’ll have to wait until next time.”

Sage nodded. “You got it.” She glanced at me. “I got Mrs. Diggs.”

“Oh, crap. I forgot.” I swiveled to give the older woman a smile.

“No worries.”

“She wasn’t mad?”

Sage shook her head. “Too busy staring at this one’s ass.” She nodded at Seth.

He waggled his eyebrows.

Sage rolled her eyes. “I’ll leave you guys to it.”

As soon as she walked away, Seth folded his hands on the folder. “So about the house.”

I looked down at my sandwich and picked up half. “Want?”

He smiled. “I wouldn’t want to come between you two.”

I shrugged. Fine by me. I sucked at sharing anyway. If he wanted to keep it about business, I could do that. “How’d we do?”

He blew out a breath. “I’d prefer to leave it on the market so we—”

“Nope. Can’t. John Chandler gave me three months to sell and here we are a week past that.”

His eyebrows snapped down and his jaw muscle flexed. I’d bet twenty bucks he was grinding his molars. But it was my decision, not his.

“I told you I could—”

“Nope.” I yanked a napkin out of the dispenser to degrease my fingertips before I covered his clenched hands. “You know I can’t.” He’d been trying to throw money at all my problems for years, but my answer was always the same. Even if he had more money than most of the Crescent Cove population combined, I couldn’t take money from a friend.

Especially not Seth.

God, not him.

“Let me talk to John. We throw him a hell of a lot of business. I can pull a favor.”

“No.”

I had a feeling the three months I’d been granted was already one of those favors. No matter how much history I had

in this town, a banker wasn't going to let me slide when it came to prime land, even if it was on the fringes of lakefront property. Add in the mortgage I could barely scrape together now that my mother's social security was gone and the only math that made sense was selling the house.

John Chandler over at Crescent Cove Credit Union might be a sweet man who coached Little League on the weekends, but he was still a businessman. And there were rules.

Rules I was intimately aware of. My mother's modest life insurance policy did little more than cover her burial and a small memorial service.

"I've got a guy who's buying up some of the older..." He trailed off.

I squeezed him one last time before sliding my hands back across the table and picking up my sandwich again. "Shacks? You can say it. I know my house wasn't much."

He swiped his hand along the back of his neck. "Dammit, Al."

"It is what it is. She wanted a house on the lake, and it was all I could afford on my meager salary and what she had in the bank. It was enough for us." My bedroom had been little more than a closet, but my mom had been happy her last few years and that had been all that mattered.

"A new company is looking to build family houses on the lake to beef up the rentals for the season."

"The Kennedys kind or...?"

He nodded. "The middle-income kind of families. I'm not completely against what they're doing."

I broke off a corner of my toasted cheese and popped it in my mouth. "That's great. You know this town relies on seasonal visitors. Though I'm glad they're not just making mansions."

His eyes glittered. "No."

I knew Seth and his brother had been working hard to keep Crescent Cove from turning into the Hamptons part two. They

were probably the only reason half the coast hadn't been razed and turned into huge houses and overpriced hotels.

But the Cove was a mix of wealthy and working class. Just the way I loved it. Though I wouldn't mind being one of the wealthy someday.

And maybe if I could get the house sold and get back to even, I'd have at least a chance at some kind of future besides drowning in debt.

"What's the offer?"

I listened to him drone on about the sale and the banks. I swallowed when he opened the folder and slid a printed page my way. The sale price wasn't as good as I'd hoped, but it would cover what I needed it to.

It would leave me with a big fat zero in my bank, but at least it wasn't a minus sign.

Right now, that was glorious and I was calling it a win. I folded the paper in half. "Thank you, Seth."

"Don't thank me. I'd rather you walked away or haggled for more."

I lifted my chin and pushed my plate away. "Do you think I'd actually get it?" He opened his mouth. "Without doing upgrades and all the things you wanted me to do to the house?" He shut it. "I thought so."

"Fuck." He slumped in seat a little. "I don't like any of this."

"You don't have to like it. Just make sure I don't get too screwed and be my friend. Simple things. It's all I really need." I put my leg out and twisted my ankle to show off my splattered shoes. "And a new pair of sneakers. Which I need to work to pay for. Just let me know when and where to be to sign the papers." I started to slide out of the booth.

"Your fifteen isn't over yet."

I paused.

"Almost. Fifteen minutes goes quick. You know that."

He pressed his lips together and his eyes flared with something. I didn't even want to think about what they flared with. It didn't happen often, but there were moments when I wondered if he thought about other, less platonic things when it came to me.

But it was much easier to file those moments away as aberrations and fantasies.

“Just one more thing.”

“It's never just one more thing with you.”

“You're killing me, Al.”

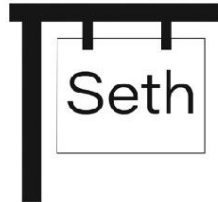
“Right back atcha, buddy.” Exasperation was the word of the day. When he leaned forward, his dark eyes were a little too serious. I straightened and pulled my hands away from my plate to land in my lap. I twirled my thumb ring as a sudden chill climbed up my hairline.

He leaned forward, suddenly earnest. Too earnest. When Seth Hamilton acted solemn, he was up to something, and chances were high I wouldn't like it.

“Will you have my baby?”



## TWO



SILENCE WAS NOT THE RESPONSE I EXPECTED.

I wasn't sure what I did expect. The request wasn't a usual one, not even between longtime friends. Tenth grade was more than a decade in the rearview mirror, and here we were.

Still friends. Best friends, even. Our friendship had survived my marriage and divorce, among other things. If this crazy request of mine didn't kill her affection for me.

Anyone's bet at this point.

"Have your baby...what? What does that mean, exactly?" When I didn't immediately reply, she fanned herself with the laminated menu she'd given me. "Okay, wait, baby means Laurie. Of course it does. She's your only baby. Right? Right. So you must want me to babysit her or something? I can do that. Sure. Let me consult my planner for dates."

I stopped her from flying out of the booth. "Laurie isn't a baby. She's almost four. As she likes to tell me, that's almost halfway to ten, and ten is more than halfway to a big person."

As always, when talk of my daughter entered the conversation, Ally softened. I might have known that and used it to my advantage, if I hadn't been so addicted to how her cheeks turned pink and her smile warmed at my little girl's name. God knows Laurie's own mother hadn't been similarly affected.

Ally's love of children, and my child in particular, had weighed in heavily to my choice to ask her this very important question. And if I'd watched her with my daughter a bit too

much lately, studying the exact curl of Ally's hair against her neck, or the way her dangling earrings made shadows, or how her mouth curved and teased out a dimple—well, I was a red-blooded man.

One who could only ignore the beauty in front of him so long without it slamming him in the forehead, apparently.

“She is a big girl. Growing bigger every day.” The wistfulness in Ally's voice made me lean forward.

“So now that we've ascertained I wasn't talking about you babysitting my child, something you do on occasion anyway, let's go back to the point of this conversation. You. Having my baby.”

Golden brown eyes settled on mine as a smile toyed with her mouth. “You missed April Fool's day by a mile, dude.”

“This isn't a joke. There's no hidden camera. This is just me, your best friend coming to you with a simple request.”

Her dark brows knitted. “A simple request to borrow my eggs? And what would you need with another baby anyway? You already have one. You work all the time, and if you had two kids, you'd have twice the work.”

“I'd have another child to love and my little girl would have a sibling, something she wants more than anything else in this world.” I toyed with the handle of my coffee cup. “Even more than she wants a mother, and that's the one thing I can never give her. Fucked that one up royally.”

Ally sighed and tweaked my pinky, curled around the cooling mug. I'd barely touched my coffee. My throat was too tight.

“That wasn't your fault. You didn't know Marj was only in it for the dough. How could you?”

“Oh, I don't know, that she was always more concerned about fur coats and jewels than baby formula and lullabies? If I'd been paying attention, that is. But as you said, I'm always working.” I heard the bitterness in my tone and couldn't do a damn thing to stop it, though I knew I was screwing this up more with every passing moment.

I didn't want Ally feeling sorry for me or guilty into this situation. I wanted her to make the choice because it would be good for her and good for me and Laurie. A positive thing all around.

"She didn't breastfeed?"

"Is that relevant?"

"No, not really, just that it's such a healthy, nurturing experience. It's not an imperative, of course. A baby can be perfectly happy and cared for without it."

"I'd be fine with you breastfeeding our child." Just saying those words had my stomach tightening in weird and unexpected ways.

"Stop it." She hissed out a breath. "We don't have a child. Nor will we. I don't know why you're pursuing this, really, but it's not very funny. Now I should get back to—"

I reached out and snagged her wrist. "Let me spell this out for you before you run from me and concoct all kinds of crazy scenarios in your head. I want another child. I do not want another relationship, potentially with a woman who would harm our baby and not be viable long-term. I just want a healthy child. To that end, I am prepared to compensate you for your significant time investment. Four years at the college of your choosing, tuition free. If you desire to go to grad school, that will be covered as well."

She yanked back her hand and let it drop limply into her lap. "You've gone stark raving mad."

"Actually, I feel saner than I ever have. Instead of lamenting I can't have what I want, what my daughter wants, I can make it happen with a woman I trust. The *only* woman I trust." Swallowing hard, I gripped the handle of my mug and fought not to reach for Ally again. "I'm not exaggerating. It's you or no one. I can't risk it with anyone else."

Her lower lip wobbled and I clutched the handle until my damn knuckles went white. If she cried, I'd be done for.

"Not fair," she whispered. "So not fair."

“No, what’s not fair is that you work your fingers to the bone in this place and you have dreams you can’t see your way to because of all the bills.”

She clenched her jaw. “As soon as I sell Mama’s house—”

“What, you’ll barely be out of the hole? I have more money than I know what to do with. I can make a good life for my kids. Both of them, including the one I’d have with you. And you’d be free, Ally. You could go to school like you want. I know you probably wouldn’t want to quit here, and that’s fine. But school would be taken care of, and then your dreams could be yours. Anything you want.”

She turned her head away and stared hard out the window at some place I couldn’t see. But she damn well wasn’t seeing the tidy, well-kept Main Street of our small town, I was certain. Her gaze was farther off, on a future I couldn’t imagine.

For all I knew, she’d leave Crescent Cove. With the money she’d receive, she could go somewhere else and start over for real. I knew she loved the diner, but more than anything, she spoke of fresh starts. Hard to have one in a town synonymous with so many bad memories for her. So much loss.

Sure, Laurie was here. I was here, plus Sage and her other friends at the diner. But there was a huge world out there, just waiting for Ally to make her mark. This way, she could. Without being tied down by anyone or anything.

As much as I might hate the idea of going even one day without seeing her smile or having her roll her eyes at me or hearing her laughter, it wasn’t about me now. She deserved a chance to live the way she wanted to.

So did I.

“You’re paying me for my eggs,” she said quietly. “Like I’m a freaking chicken. Except my eggs are like fucking gold lined in platinum, if they’re worth a college education.”

A laugh tickled the back of my throat, but it was too constricted for me to let it free. “Anywhere you want,” I

gritted out instead. “A free ride all the way. Ivy League if that’s what floats your boat.”

Her chest quickly rose and fell, drawing my attention to her full breasts heaving under the starched cotton of her uniform. I tried not to notice. I respected the fuck out of her, but I also wanted to fuck her senseless.

Something I don’t think I’d fully realized until that exact moment. Even knowing what I was asking of her, what it would entail...I’d been focused on the end result, not the process.

Now that process was playing out in my head in lurid Technicolor, and my stiff dick was lurching against the zipper of my jeans. And she was still breathing hard and worrying the silver rings she wore on each finger, her mind whirling faster than she could give voice to her thoughts. Or else she didn’t want to share.

I wanted to fuck her until every one of those thoughts tumbled out of her pretty mouth. To strip her bare until she could hide nothing from me. Her innermost secrets, her hot tits, her sweet pussy.

All of her, mine for the taking.

But I didn’t say any of that. Not yet. There was one point I needed to clarify, however.

“You keep talking about your eggs. You think that’s what I mean?”

“I don’t know what you’re getting at, because this is all crazy talk. You never gave me one inkling you were thinking like this before and now you’re all in on baby central.”

“Okay, yes, I know my technique could use some work. But I figured you’d say no, so if we can get to that part, then we can get to the part where I considerately give you time to think about it while I do my level best to convince you. Without acting as if I’m convincing you, of course.”

“I can’t decide if you’re the dumbest dude on the planet for admitting that or the smartest.”

“I’m an excellent closer. You know that yourself.” I shrugged, hoping the gesture didn’t look as jerky as it felt. Truth be told, acting overly confident about this situation was the only way I’d been able to gear myself up to ask her in the first place.

I was okay with her thinking I was nuts. I was even okay with her saying no. What I wasn’t okay with?

Her pulling away from me because I’d officially moved out of the stress-free friend zone into the realm of one more man who wanted something from her. I did, but I wanted to give as much back.

As much as she would let me.

“Closing is one thing. Your openers, however, suck.” Ally leaned across the table and gripped my wrist, twisting my arm toward her so she could see the time as she’d done a million and one times before.

Normally, I barely paid attention. But apparently asking her to have my baby had subtly changed the ions and molecules in the air between us, because the brush of her fingers on the back of my hand made my balls clench. My spine locked as I fought not to draw back my hand.

But she noticed that I tensed. Of course she did. She was as perceptive as the damn cat I’d nicknamed her for years ago. “So what, you want to knock me up but I can’t touch you now? You’re all about that petri dish action, aren’t you? You don’t want to come right out and admit it, but that’s what your goal is.” She let out a whooshing breath as if I’d just handed her the winning lotto numbers. “You just want to inseminate me. Okay. Better. I’m not saying yes, of course. Still, even considering that you actually thought that we...that we could...is ridiculous.”

Leaning forward, I snagged her fingers where they lay on the tabletop, holding firm when she tried to snatch them back. “That we could what?”

Her gaze darted everywhere but never landed on me. “You know quite well. Can you let go of me now, please? I need to

get back to work.”

I only tightened my hold as I leaned across the table. She didn't shrink back. Far from it. Her maple syrup eyes—all those rich hues of gold and brown—flashed and locked onto mine. “That we could what, Ally?” I asked again, voice low.

Suddenly it was vitally important she answer me. That I hear her say the words, to solidify the reality of it happening in my head. Because it was sure as fuck real according to what was going on in my jeans.

“So we could have, you know, sex.” She spoke so fast that I lessened my grip a fraction and she yanked free, popped to her feet, and grabbed hold of the folder containing the contract.

*Both* of them.

Though she didn't know about the second one yet. I hadn't gotten that far.

I started to lean toward her to snatch it back, then paused.  
*Hmm.*

Maybe it was better she read the contract on her own. Seeing it all in print might work to allay her fears. It wasn't as if I was asking her to let me breed her and marry her and lock her away forever in my tower. It was just a simple exchange between friends. No romantic relationship, but a pleasant, mutually satisfying one. She would give me something I wanted, and I would give her something she would never ask for but deserved.

Hell, I'd be happy to offer her the money right now on the spot, no strings attached, but she would never take it. So instead I'd made it a condition of our bargain. All neat and tidy and written down.

A wise businessman pivoted with changing conditions. And I was nothing if not my father's son.

“Too slow,” Ally said, her confidence returning as she clutched the folder to her chest. “Better work on those reflexes of yours, Hamilton. Think you're getting old.”

“Thanks for bringing that point up. Sit again for another moment.” I inclined my chin toward the opposite side of the booth.

She sighed and sat sideways on the seat, balancing the folder on her knees far from my reach. “Finally reconsidering this insanity? I knew if you took a moment to just think, you’d realize this is insane. Just because Laurie wants a sibling it isn’t a reason to be rash.”

“Rash. Right.” I stirred my now ice-cold coffee and dropped the spoon into the saucer. “She’s told you too?”

“She’s told everyone. When I picked her up at school last week, Mrs. O’Connor mentioned it to me. She had this idea that I was your girlfriend.” Shaking her head, Ally smoothed a hand over that green Hamilton Realty folder that held the power to change both of our lives. “Ridiculous.”

“So you keep saying. Ridiculous you’d be my girlfriend, ridiculous I’d want to fuck you to make a baby.”

Her eyes flared wide before she slapped the folder on the table. “Keep your damn voice down. You know how this place is with gossip. If the wrong person hears that, they’ll think you actually want to...do that.”

My frustration level spiked, and laughing was the only thing I could do to alleviate it. Along with grabbing hold of the back of my neck to rub out a particularly pesky set of knots.

Not the only thing I wanted to rub out, but that wasn’t going to be occurring at the diner. Probably. Unless she pushed me to untold lengths.

“Newsflash. I do want to do that. I want to spread you out on my bed and fuck you until you’re so full of me it’s spilling out of you. And then, just for good measure, I want to roll you over and do it again.” Her lips trembled apart and I placed a finger over them. “But no, I don’t want a girlfriend. I want you to have my baby, and I want it to be a good, positive thing for both of us. Unconventional, yes, but then we’ve always been that, haven’t we?” I rose, unable to deny that I enjoyed



looming over her while her big brown eyes tracked my movements.

“Seth,” she whispered.

Her usage of my actual name instead of some insult said volumes.

“The second contract,” I said lightly, pulling out my wallet to leave a wad of bills on the table. Far more than my coffee and tip should cost, but I always tipped excessively, especially at the diner. “Call me when you’ve had a chance to read it.”

Slipping on my sunglasses, I headed toward the door. I could feel her heavy stare on my back. And knew she would probably flip open the folder to scan the contents before the door shut behind me with a cheerful tinkle of bells.

I’d made it up the street to my Mustang and was just about to open the driver’s door when my cell vibrated in the pocket of my jeans. I pulled it out and answered her call without reading her name.

It could only be one person. The one who held a good chunk of my dreams and my future in her strong, capable, ringed hands.

“Hi there,” I said, keeping my voice pleasant. Even with my aviator sunglasses, I still had to shield my eyes from the angle of the sun glinting off the lake directly in front of me. “That didn’t take you long.”

I heard a hiss that I guessed might be running water then the sound disappeared. “You told another human being about this crazy plan?”

“I told my lawyer. Whether or not he’s actually human is up for debate, but most people seem to think he qualifies.”

“The last hope I had was that this was another one of Seth’s wild schemes. You know, like when we put the top down on your convertible and drove up to the Canadian side of Niagara Falls on senior skip day without any ID. All because you woke up that day and wanted to do something fun.”

“And you thought I’d ask you to make a baby the same way.” I nodded, inhaling a deep breath of water-tinged air. “Sure. I can see now why you’re hesitating. If you think I’d view those two events the same way, no wonder you aren’t inclined to say yes.”

“But you laid all of it out in these papers.” She lowered her voice until I had to strain to hear her over the gentle lap of the water against the sea wall. “You want me to get pregnant, and you want to pay me for my baby. Like I was some broodmare.”

“A chicken and a broodmare. Nice to know how you see yourself.”

“How I see myself? Um, no. That’s all you, bucko.”

I nearly smiled. I would have if this wasn’t so important. “I want to pay you for your time. The gestation period is lengthy, and the change in your lifestyle for that period is worth compensation.”

“So you keep saying,” she said, sounding shriller by the minute.

“Which brings me back to the reason I asked you to sit down again in the diner. I was knocked off-course, but you’ve reminded me once again. Age. You’re twenty-eight. Egg validity is an important concern.”

“Egg what?”

“Validity. Once a woman nears thirty, her eggs start becoming—”

“Dude, you did not just call my eggs old. You’re fucking lucky you walked out when you did because if you were still here, I’d slap you until you came to your senses.”

“You’d be slapping me for a while then, because I’ve thought a lot about this. It’s a sensible idea, and once you take some time to calm down and think, I have a feeling you’ll agree. College is expensive, and this way you’ll be covered. Any school you like,” I reminded her. “And Laurie will have that sibling we both know she desperately wants.”

“Cheap shot,” she said in an undertone. “Using that little girl to get your way is the lowest of lows. But I should expect nothing else from a fabled Hamilton, now should I?”

Wincing, I gripped the phone tighter. “Wait. That didn’t come out right. I meant—”

She’d already ended the call.

Immediately, I called her back, but it went straight to voicemail. I braced my elbow on the roof of my car and shut my eyes, hearing her pained voice on repeat in my head.

Hating every second.

“Fuck,” I muttered, stepping back and yanking open my door.

Maybe I wouldn’t have to worry about her saying no. God knows I’d bungled this situation in every possible way. And I might have screwed up more than just my slim chances of her agreeing to my plan.

I might have just lost my best friend too.

## THREE



I STARED AT THE CEILING AND FROWNEED AT THE WATERMARK IN the corner. Had that been there before? I covered my face with my arms and pulled my knees up to my chest as I stretched out my back.

I'd been on the floor for the last ten minutes. Mostly because my furniture was either packed or sold off. If the ten-dollar college student special counted as sold anyway.

My day had started at five in the morning to open the diner, then I'd gone right to my—no, not mine anymore. *The* house. Now the only thing familiar were the ghostly shapes from my mother's old medical equipment on the battered hardwood.

Hospice had come to collect them last month and I hadn't had the heart to come back into her space since then.

I held my hand up to catch the speckled bits of sunlight that peeked from the trees surrounding this corner of the house. Dust motes danced through the fading rays as I dropped my arms over my knees to pull them closer.

My body ached almost as much as my head. Between the long hours at the Rusty Spoon and packing up the house, I hadn't had time to do anything more than fall on my face in sheer exhaustion. Lather-rinse-and-repeat.

Okay, so maybe some of it was to avoid thinking about Seth's question.

Because if I was so tired I was blind, I didn't have to re-read the two-page contract that he had tucked behind my

tentative house sale contract.

I released my knees and sprawled out on the floor spread eagle. What the hell had he been thinking?

I was obviously going to say no. There was no way I could contemplate having his baby for a college education. First of all, paying me to be his broodmare was archaic. Second, I couldn't survive it.

Simple as that.

My nipples hardened and I crossed my arms over my chest. See? I couldn't even think the words sex and Seth and not react. The fact that my body wasn't cooperating with my firm *no* was getting really annoying.

I shut my eyes as the word firm teased out a memory of Seth shifting in the booth as he explained his plans for me. When he'd stood over me, there had been little doubt he meant what he said. Oh, the dark denim masked most of his... situation, but there was a bulge behind his zipper that I had to stop thinking about.

"Where are you?" Sage's voice rang out from the front of the tiny house. She really just had to walk in a small circle and she'd find me.

"Here," I called out.

"Should I worry that you're on the floor?"

I peered at the doorway, but instead of Sage's face, there was a huge arrangement of lilacs and daisies tucked into a copper watering can.

I didn't need to look at the card to know it was from Seth. My head thunked back onto the hardwood. "Dammit." I slung my arm back over my face. Why the hell did he have to remember both me and my mama's favorite flowers?

Couldn't he be like the guys I heard my friends complain about? The clueless boyfriends or husbands who bought them a vacuum instead of a bracelet for an anniversary?

That guy was easy to ignore.

This one?

Not so much.

Add in thirteen years of being my best friend and I was friggin' toast.

"Where do you want me to put this? And why don't you have any furniture?"

I hauled myself off the floor. "By the door is fine. In fact, put it in your car and take it home."

Sage put down the jumbo watering can. "I will take it home, but only because it's your home now too. Or did you forget that little fact?"

"Of course not." I tucked a stray curl out of my face and back into my fraying French braid. Like a damn homing beacon, I couldn't stop myself from crossing to the flowers. I brushed the back of my knuckles along the delicate lilac petals before curling my fingers back into my dirty palms. A fine layer of dust caked my hands, arms, and knees from packing and hauling boxes. "And that's why I didn't need all this stuff."

"We could have put it in storage," Sage said with a flutter of hands.

I dabbed at the sweat on my forehead. I needed a shower something fierce. "None of it was worthy of storage."

Her huge green eyes were about a blink away from tears. "There has to be something you want to keep."

"Would that be the cracked Walmart lamp, or the sagging wicker round chair circa 1994?"

"Stop. You can't throw everything away, dammit."

Sage actually stomped her foot. It was sort of cute in a fluffy half unicorn, half pixie kind of way. The unicorn half was the one that had a little mettle behind her words. She wasn't a pushover, even if she was the sweetest, most fanciful woman I knew.

“Some kids from the university came and took me up on my bargain basement deals.”

“You didn’t use Craigslist.”

When I didn’t disabuse her of that little statement, her eyebrows shot up.

“Are you insane? And why didn’t you wait until I got here?”

I shrugged. “Not like I couldn’t handle myself.”

“You are on a semi-secluded road a quarter mile away from the main road and the lake. Anything could have happened.”

“Okay, Ann Rule.”

“Don’t joke. We watch those shows together, woman. Anything could have happened. They could have kidnapped you and put you in the back of their van—”

“Before you get all bent, there was no van, Scooby Doo Magical Mystery van or otherwise. They had an old rusted truck with a flatbed that wouldn’t even close properly. The most exciting part of the whole endeavor was us wrestling with bungee cords to get them safely back onto the highway.”

Sage tipped back her head. “You’re incredible.”

“Thank you.”

She shoved me. “Not funny.”

“A little funny.”

Her lips twitched, but she managed to keep a straight face.

“Aww, come on, Sage.” I hooked an arm around her hips before wrinkling my nose and pulling away. “Sorry, I’m too dirty to be touching you.”

She hauled me in for a hug. “Dusty is part of moving. At least you smell like sunshine. How you doin’, girl?”

“God, I doubt it.” But I hooked an arm around her and hugged her back. When the lump I’d been jamming down my throat and belly started to rise up, I eased away from her. “I’m

okay.” At least I would be as long as she didn’t look at me with those big leafy green eyes puddled with tears.

“My mom sent over some food for us.”

“Not diner food?”

She laughed. “Not diner food.”

“God bless her. Though it’s Mother’s Day, she shouldn’t be cooking. And God, I’m sorry. You shouldn’t be here helping me on her day.”

Sage waved me off. “We all made her a big French Toast breakfast.”

As Sage spoke, I wandered over to the box half-full of the crocheted blankets my mom used to wear when she sat out here. No matter how warm or cold it was, she was forever bundled under the rainbow patchwork blanket.

That I would keep.

And a few others.

Okay, all of them. I could get rid of most of the junk we’d collected over the last six years, but not those.

Sage pulled the blanket out and buried her nose in the ancient yarn. I had to turn away again and suck in a long, slow breath.

I was not going to cry.

I’d already done that when I’d folded them up the first time. The lavender essential oils she’d been using at the very end had become her scent. As soothing and soft as her tissue paper skin.

My phone buzzed again, distracting me from thoughts better left in the past.

I’d been in denial mode for days. Three of his messages were still on my notifications. Every time I caught a glimpse of them, I flipped my phone over and ignored.

Even swiping them away, I’d have to read something.

Nope and nope.



“Still ignoring him?”

“Hmm?”

“Well, if you don’t want to talk about the house or your mom, then jackass is the next best thing.”

I rolled my eyes as I lifted onto my toes to reach the clock on the wall. Though Sage was all about finding Mr. Right, she thought Seth was an entitled pain in the ass with a cocky attitude. Some of that probably had to do with her even worse opinion of Seth’s brother.

And, yes, Seth was most of those things, but even when he was being a complete jackass, he was still better than most men I knew. There were some rose-colored glasses involved. I could admit that much, but then he went and did things like the flowers.

I fought the urge to touch them again. *No*. I wasn’t going to dwell.

Instead I brought the clock with me as I crossed the room. Carefully, I tucked the old starburst cabinet between two of the blankets. It might be hideous, but she’d loved the rose-gold clock. We’d moved a few times over the years and it always went with us.

In fact, she’d stolen it from a tacky hotel when I was seven. Back when my dad had still been around. We’d stayed in places like that most of my life until he finally disappeared for good. She’d taken that clock and the fifty bucks he’d left us and we’d driven east until we landed in the middle of New York.

And that was where we stayed.

Our life had been penny pinching and extra shifts and crappy little apartments until I’d scraped together enough to get us this house. When the doctor had told me—told us—that she didn’t have much time.

She’d survived for five more years just because of Crescent Lake. Looking out of the sagging screen windows of the four seasons room had been her little piece of perfection.

I crossed to the La-Z-Boy chair she'd lived in for the last six months. Getting in and out of a bed had been too difficult for her, but she'd always wanted to be by her window. So I had made sure she had all her blankets and her window and her lake view.

It had been worth all her savings and mine too.

Every damn penny.

I jumped when Sage tipped her head against my shoulder. I rested mine against the crown of her head. "Today sucks."

"Yeah, I know," she said softly.

We stayed like that for I don't even know how long. Until my belly started howling its distress. Food didn't sound good at all these days, but man, the idea of something that wasn't on the Rusty Spoon's menu sounded glorious.

"What did your mom pack for us?"

Sage grinned. "Chicken and dumplings."

"Oh, man."

"Comfort food at its best. Still have plates?"

"I can scrounge some up if you go get the food."

Sage waggled her eyebrows. "Deal." She crossed the room and paused at the threshold to the living room. "I didn't forget my question, even if you're ignoring it."

"Hmm?"

"Don't give me that innocent face, Alison Marie Lawrence. I'm not done."

"Plates!" I said in a singsong voice.

She blew raspberries before she banged out the front door.

I sagged against the ledge of the half wall beneath the screen window. The problem with having a friend like Sage was that she liked to talk about feelings. Especially of a romantic nature.

The girl was in love with love.

So much so that she'd had a parade of boys, then eventually men, in her life. They never stuck around long because they invariably couldn't live up to Sage's high standards of romance. You just weren't going to find a Prince Charming in Crescent Cove.

I certainly hadn't. Though my issues might have had something to do with my caretaker status since high school. And meeting Seth.

He didn't even know he'd ruined me for other men. Without a touch other than a platonic hug or a game of touch football, I'd been his.

Pathetic.

So yeah, his current mission to steer me into Babytopia by way of his very impressive master bedroom had me ready for first place in track and field at the other end of the county.

Which was impressive since my idea of running generally consisted of dodging Sage, Amber, and Jean on National Pancake Day at the diner. Pretty much the only day every waitress was working.

“Okay, where are those plates? I'm starving.”

I blinked out of my rambling musings. Honestly, there had to be something in the air.

I met Sage in the kitchen and pulled down two large bowls from the cabinet I hadn't quite emptied out. I had to dig through two boxes to find something to eat with.

A serving fork and slotted spoon for vegetables would have to do.

Sage laughed when I handed her the spoon. “Remember when I moved into my place and couldn't find the silverware?”

I flipped over a bucket and pulled over a box to serve as a makeshift table. “God, yes. We scoured your apartment. We even left the house to go to Target and buy another set.”

“Mom called to let me know the box was still sitting under the kitchen table.”

“Heaviest freaking box too.” I stopped at the kitchen sink and washed my hands and arms with soap.

“Of course, it had to have all my silverware and pots.”

I turned around and leaned against the counter as I dried my hands. “It took two of us to get it up those stairs.”

“And then it busted twenty feet from the door.” Sage transferred a healthy portion of the gravy-slathered chicken into my bowl. My stomach roared in reaction. She laughed and put on another spoonful. “Might need to zap it.”

I took the bowl and shoveled a dumpling into my mouth.

“Guess not.”

I grinned around a bite. “So good.”

“So are you going to tell me what’s up with Seth?”

I choked on a bite and stood to grab my Coke Zero out of the fridge. “Nothing’s going on.”

“Yeah, I believe that as much as Mitch’s promise of a Friday night off.”

“You get one?”

“Yeah, first Friday of never followed by when hell freezes over.”

I laughed and took a longer sip of my soda before sitting back behind the cardboard palace. I forked in a regular-sized bite and chewed slowly.

“While I appreciate you not talking with your mouth full, I’m not reframing the question.”

“He’s my best friend, Sage. It ain’t happening.”

“What isn’t?”

“Us. We aren’t happening.” That wasn’t what I’d meant to say at all, but Sage took the ball and ran with it as if I wasn’t talking crazy talk.

“Yeah, but you’re simply biding your time on the sidelines. From what I’ve seen lately, he’s finally gotten his hormones engaged.”

That was the problem. He was only acting on an unexpected case of hormones and some misplaced sense of duty. Laurie wanted a sibling and Seth never knew how to tell his daughter no. At least not about this kind of thing.

And he knew I loved that little girl as much as he did. Dirty pool with a side of emotional blackmail.

Oh, and couldn't forget the left turn into naked time.

Nope.

But then he'd ruined it with a contract attached to my damn uterus.

My soda frothed over the top of the lip. I hadn't realized I was squeezing the bottle so hard.

Sage instantly crossed the room for a paper towel. "Oh, yeah. Nothing going on." She handed me a wad of them.

I crouched with a disgusted sound and mopped up the sticky mess before washing up and returning to our table.

Sage spooned up a dainty portion as I hacked at mine with the three oversized tines of my fork. I'd sold off my silverware since I wasn't going to need it at Sage's place.

"Things are weird, okay?"

She widened her green eyes comically. "Obviously, they're weird. I want to know *why* they're weird."

"It's stupid."

"Did you trip over his big feet and fall on his dick?"

"Oh, my God."

Sage dabbed at the corner of her mouth with her napkin. "It's the only thing that makes sense. Did you guys finally do the deed? You've been holding onto that V-card forever."

"You should talk. Yours is as intact as mine, pal."

Sage scooped up a roasted carrot. "Yes, but I've been trying to give mine away. You've been holding yours hostage."

"I have not."

Sage gave me a bland look.

“Not on purpose.”

“Hey, it makes sense. You’ve had your focus split in a few different directions.”

“Why are we talking about this?” I asked and stabbed a potato.

“Because that’s my only guess for this weird behavior.”

“Oh, honey. You don’t even know how weird shit has gotten.”

“Then enlighten me. Because I need to know why you aren’t over with Seth and Laurie like you usually are on Mother’s Day.”

I bowed my head. If I thought about things too closely, then the guilt was going to choke me. I might be having trouble with Laurie’s father, but that didn’t mean it was fair to stay away from his daughter in retribution.

I yanked the tie out of my braid and sifted my fingers through the tangle of waves before I knotted my hair on top of my head. “It’s complicated.”

“Complicated came and went about ten years ago, hon.”

I didn’t know if I should tell her. The fact that I was going to say no made the point fairly moot.

I was saying no. I had to.

Didn’t I?

Grumbling, I pushed my dish away and banged my forehead on the box.

“Okay, you have to tell me.”

“Seth wants a kid.”

“He has a kid. A cute one, if a little bit of a handful.”

“She’s bright and funny and really wants a little sister or brother.”

Sage’s eyebrows shot up. “Oh.”

“He wants me to have it.”

“I’m sorry? Come again?”

“He wants me to give him a kid.”

“What? Like a piece of chocolate?”

I laughed. It was either that or cry. “So you see my dilemma.”

“Not really. You already want to play Boom-Boom Room with him. This sounds perfect. You guys would make a cute couple. I mean, he can be annoying, and the idea is a bit weird, but—”

“He doesn’t want us to be a couple. He just wants me to carry a baby for him and then hand it off to him like a fruitcake at Christmas.”

“Huh.”

“Yep.”

“I think we might need wine.” She rose and went to the fridge where a box of wine was stuffed down on the bottom shelf. She hauled it onto the counter and pulled out jelly glasses from the skinny cabinet.

When she set a glass in front of me, I took a swig of the sweet white wine. The shock on her face helped with my own insanity. It wasn’t just me who had a problem with the whole scenario. It was straight-up crazy.

So why couldn’t I just say no?

## FOUR



“NO MO PEAS.”

Staring at my daughter’s stubborn chin as she shook her head in refusal of the healthy vegetable I’d added to our meals, I briefly reconsidered what I’d asked of Ally.

Did I really want another child?

Hell, could I *handle* another child? Basically on my own—along with the nanny I employed on workdays—since I didn’t expect Ally to be tied down. She could be as involved as she wanted in whatever capacity she chose, but I’d proceeded as if she would choose minimal involvement. Thinking otherwise made things sticky.

Made me itchy in ways I couldn’t define.

Now I had an almost four-year-old staring me down and a bowl of peas I didn’t even want myself. But good example and all that. And if I wanted another kid, good examples were the rule of the day.

God, was I crazy?

Dutifully, I spooned up my vegetable. “Okay, if you don’t want the rest of your dinner, as soon as I finish, we’ll get you upstairs for your bath. School tomorrow. Mrs. O’Connor said you’re drawing mermaids this week. That will be fun.”

“No bath.” Laurie pushed at her plate and inched back in her chair, step one in lurching to the floor.

She still wasn’t the best at climbing, but she liked sitting at the big table without a highchair. As small as she was, she’d



used one longer than some kids, but now she was done with it.

Done with everything judging from how many times she'd said no tonight.

"You need a bath. You were playing outside with Fritz for an hour this afternoon. Digging up Mrs. Polenti's flowerbeds no less."

It wasn't much of an admonition. Laurie and the neighbor's cocker spaniel were so cute together. Mrs. Polenti was soft on them too, so I knew she wouldn't mind a few trampled leaves.

Though as soon as I mentioned the neighbor's pup, I knew what I'd be in for.

"Daddy, I want a dog. Like Fritz." Laurie's big blue eyes zeroed in on mine. "I'd take care of it. Feed and walk it."

"What about clean up after it goes on the sidewalk? You have to scoop the poop into a bag and take it home to throw it out."

Her little nose wrinkled. "Eww."

"Part of being a pet owner, kiddo."

"Okay. Then I'd do that too." She sounded decidedly less enthusiastic.

"Maybe next year," I said as I always did.

Someday I intended to get her a puppy, but not until she was older and more responsible. And I'd figured out juggling the whole two little kids deal.

Yeah, I'd been plotting this scenario for a few months. Shifting things around in my head until I could figure out how to make it all work.

Ally was at the center of the plan. Without her, the rest fell apart. Considering she hadn't contacted me since our conversation at the diner, that wasn't a good sign.

She'd made it clear by not answering any of my calls that she needed space to think. But today was her first Mother's Day without her mom, and I couldn't just let the day pass

without her knowing I was thinking about her. So I'd sent a simple bouquet of flowers with a brief card and hoped that sufficed. Even if she hated me, at least she knew I cared.

As far as the reverse, she hadn't come by to see Laurie today, and she always did on this day for obvious reasons. I couldn't blame her. Much. My offer had upset the balance, but it bugged me that Laurie was paying the price.

Not that my baby girl had mentioned Ally. Not once. She barely seemed aware of the day, though it was always a big deal in her preschool class. She'd brought me home a card she'd drawn, as was standard on a parent celebration day when the parent in question wasn't a part of the child's life. So she knew what today was. Knew what it meant.

Maybe that had something to do with her cranky mood since waking up from her nap. She had to miss her mom, right? Even if they'd only spent a few months together while Laurie was too little to remember much, Marj had carried Laurie for nine months. That created a special bond. It had to. Not that Marj had seemed overly affected.

*Yet you're asking your best friend to bear your child then to walk away?*

"Daddy, ice cream?" Laurie picked up a couple peas between her fingers, squashing them together before popping them in her mouth. Her idea of a concession in the hopes of getting dessert.

"A scoop of ice cream after your bath, then you brush your teeth." I wasn't above bribery.

Laurie tilted her head, her blond pigtails falling over her shoulders. Every day she looked older. The chubbiness in her cheeks was fading, and her eyes were taking on a more knowing quality I was both proud of and worried about. I didn't want her to have to face the world. She'd never be alone—not while I had breath in my body—but there were far too many things out there that I couldn't shield her from.

And I would be taking on a whole new set of worries with a new one. Voluntarily.

Maybe Ally was right. I had gone mad.

“Okay,” Laurie said after a moment’s thought. “Strawberry?”

“It’s Neapolitan,” I told her. “Vanilla, strawberry and chocolate.”

Again with the stubborn chin. “Just strawberry and brush my teeth for three seconds.”

“Thirty,” I corrected, grinning in spite of myself. My daughter was a negotiator to the core. Just like her daddy and Uncle Oliver and our father before us. Always wheeling and dealing.

“Thirty what?”

“Seconds.” I reached over to ruffle her cornsilk hair. She was also a con artist. “You can have a scoop of mostly strawberry and then brush your teeth for thirty seconds.” I looked at her plate. “If you eat a few more peas.”

With a loud sigh, she grabbed a couple and smashed them into her mouth, chewing and swallowing so fast I feared she would choke. Then she made a face. “I hate peas.”

“You liked them last week.”

“Elizabeth doesn’t like peas.”

“Oh, so if your best friend doesn’t like them, you can’t like them?”

She nodded as if that made total sense. “Ally doesn’t like them either.”

Halfway to my feet to clear the dishes from the table, I paused. And sank back down as heavily as a stone in a lake.

Just her name slayed me.

“Is she coming over today?”

Like an idiot, I stared wordlessly at my daughter. I honestly didn’t know, and that was my fault. On another Mother’s Day, she would. It was almost guaranteed. But

because of my crazy scheme, I'd put distance between us. And distance between her and my little girl.

"I'll find out," I replied, unsure exactly how.

I was trying to give Ally space. Trying to not push or cause her any more discomfort on a day that already had to be tough. Not being there for her on this first holiday without her mom was like a physical ache in my gut. She wasn't just the woman I'd asked to have my child. She was my best friend, in many ways my other half. The person I wanted with me when I was going out for a good time or just kicking back with a beer and a movie.

And Jesus Christ, I'd told her I wanted to fuck her. In lurid detail.

The kind of detail that had kept me up late every night since, fisting my cock and imagining the shock on her face. The way her pale pink lips had trembled open, as if she was stunned I would ever say such a thing.

But I had. Now there was no coming back from it. We could only go forward. The one thing I wasn't going to do was apologize, because I wasn't sorry for being honest. I was just mad at myself for not realizing sooner that the occasional flickers of interest I'd dismissed as being due to a lengthy dry spell were so much more.

It wasn't like I wanted a relationship. Experience had taught me I sucked at those. Enjoying the process of getting Ally pregnant, however, was a completely different ballgame.

If she ever talked to me again. Which I wouldn't know unless I tried.

"I'll call her," I decided, standing up and grabbing Laurie's plate as she reached for another couple of peas. I waited while she grabbed them and pushed them into her mouth, shaking my head with a smile. "Fork next time, young lady."

She gave me a toothy green-smearred smile. "Call Ally now?"

I could do that. Sure, why not? It wasn't a big deal, calling my best friend on an important holiday.

That I'd told her I wanted to fuck her until my cum spilled out of her was incidental. Besides, I didn't want it to spill out. I wanted it to stay inside until her belly grew rounded with my baby.

*Our* baby.

Swallowing hard, I carried our dishes to the sink and rinsed them off before loading them in the dishwasher. "Why don't you go up to your room and pick out what you want to wear tomorrow then start getting ready for your bath?"

Sending Laurie off to dig through her drawers was always a dangerous proposition, but she preferred to dress herself these days, even if that meant she ended up more often than not in mismatched—and sometimes strange—outfits. Not like I was the fashion police. She was reaching for her independence, and so far, we hadn't yet hit an impasse. It was coming, I was sure, but it wouldn't be over rainbow leggings and light-up sneakers.

"Okay." She heaved herself off the chair, her feet landing on the tiled floor with a thud. She circled the table and grabbed me around the legs, hugging me hard. "Love you, Daddy." Then she ran down the hall, ponytails streaming, and I grinned.

Moments like that were why I wanted another one. Also possibly a healthy streak of masochism.

After I heard Laurie's footsteps climbing the stairs, I dried off my hands and tugged out my cell from my pocket. No missed calls or texts, which meant Ally hadn't responded to the texts I'd sent. I'd only checked twenty times today, so not sure when I thought they might've come in.

Nada.

Nyet.

Eh, fuck it. I was calling her anyway. She couldn't hide from me forever. If her answer was no, well, I'd just have to change her mind.

Steeling my shoulders, I hit the number one saved number. She didn't answer for so long that I figured I'd get voicemail.

“Hi.” She sounded tired.

My hackles rose. Everything rose, truthfully, including my dick. Since when did her silky voice have the power to wake up my cock?

For that matter, since when did I hear her voice as *silky*? I was on the verge of turning in my man card and signing up for eternal blue balls all in one week.

“Hi. How are you?”

“I’m okay. How are you?”

So she thought we were going to keep it cordial as if we were strangers. No dice.

“Why do you sound exhausted?” I asked.

“I stayed up late fucking my neighbors. Is that all right with you?”

That I actually gripped the edge of the sink instead of realizing right away that she was screwing with me, proved how messed up I was. She’d said things like that a million times, and I’d tossed back my share of those kinds of replies as well. We didn’t get overly personal when it came to sex, but we’d never shied away from most topics either. I didn’t know much about her sex life, and I was okay with that.

Or I had been, until I had decided I should become part of it. For baby-making purposes only, of course.

Mutual orgasms would just be a bonus.

“I know today is a rough day for you.” I relaxed my grip on the edge of the sink. “I wanted to make sure you were okay.”

“Yeah, it’s been rough. A lot of days have been lately.” She let out a breath and I wished like hell that there wasn’t a phone between us so I could hold her.

Not to make a baby. Not to soften her up for my wild plan. Simply because she was my closest friend, and her pain was palpable.

“Wanna come over?” I asked softly.

Any other time, I wouldn't have had to voice the question. She would've just shown up, and we wouldn't have talked about the meaning of the day other than to maybe hipcheck each other or sling an arm around each other's shoulders before she left for the night.

We weren't touchy-feely. She was basically like my best guy friend, except she was even better—and she also had one hell of a body, which thankfully was only a recent obsession of mine. *Very* recent.

If I'd allowed myself to notice her curves before, we couldn't have remained platonic friends for so long. I'd have banged her and probably driven her out of my life years ago.

There was a reason I didn't try to have relationships anymore, and it wasn't just because I didn't trust easily. I wasn't built to be a married guy.

Or maybe that was just what I told myself.

“Do you think that's a good idea?” she replied, just as softly.

“Why the hell not? You've spent part of every Mother's Day here since Laurie's birth. Hell, even when Marj was pregnant, you were the one here on Mother's Day making a fuss over her. More of a fuss than I made.”

By then, things had been so strained between Marj and me that I'd had trouble tamping down on my feelings long enough to do my husbandly and fatherly duty. But I'd made breakfast and gotten her flowers and tried to pretend we were a real family.

And I'd ignored my bitchy wife when she crabbed about Ally “always hanging around” instead of appreciating her kindness.

“Being a mom is special,” Ally said, and I felt like an asshole all over again. “So is being a dad.”

“Yeah, it is.” I grabbed a sponge and wiped halfheartedly at the sink. “Look, I'm not asking you to come over here so we can discuss things. I mean, unless you want to.”

“Why would I want to? I’ve spent the last few days hoping you had developed amnesia and had forgotten the whole asinine idea.”

I tried to rein in my temper. I’d told her we didn’t have to discuss this right now, and today was a difficult day for her. Of course she wouldn’t be in the best frame of mind.

“Judging from your silence, you haven’t. So I’m not really sure what else we have to say to each other, since you’ve lost your goddamn mind. Telling me you wanted to—” She broke off and hissed out a breath. “Lunatic.”

“Is telling you I want to have sex with you that startling that you think I must’ve developed a mental condition?”

“When you say it like that... Yeah, maybe. It certainly came out of left field. Though I get that it’s just the means to an end to you.”

“No, it isn’t.”

“Yes, it is.”

“No, it fucking isn’t. Okay, maybe it started that way, and maybe I never noticed you had tits before, but—”

She huffed out a laugh. “See? And they’ve been here all along.”

“I just never saw you that way. Intentionally. Not because you aren’t hot. You’re just—”

“Not your type. Yeah, yeah, Hamilton, I know it and I’m cool with it. We stay in our lanes. You’re the one who’s suddenly swerving all over the place. Maybe this is just the male version of a ticking hormonal clock. I didn’t know it happened to dudes, but possibly something went off inside you and you panicked. It’s no big deal. We can just move on from here and forget we ever brought up the subject.”

“Wrong answer. It is big, and if you ever stopped freaking out at the mere idea I could want to fuck you, you’d find that out for yourself.”

“You want to fuck me to make a baby with me. A baby you can then raise as a storied Hamilton child without my



involvement to taint him or her.”

Her words stole the breath from my chest. “You honestly believe I’d view your involvement that way?”

“I don’t know. You’re the one who told me I could run off and be a free bird as soon as I gave birth. Didn’t really seem like you wanted my input. And for that matter, I wouldn’t do it anyway, so why are we still talking about it?”

“Because you can’t seem to talk about anything else. Which is pretty damn funny considering you supposedly find the idea so off-putting. Me thinks the lady doth protest too much.”

“Oh, fuck right off.”

“I’d love to. When can I expect you?”

She growled at me and the tight band around my chest loosened for the first time since I’d walked into the diner during her shift on Thursday. That sound was pure Ally. She might be annoyed and questioning my mental balance, but she didn’t hate me. And I wasn’t entirely convinced she hated the idea of us making a baby either.

I could work with both of those things.

“Look, we’ll just hang out. Laurie’s been asking for you.”

“She has?” Ally cleared her throat. “Again, using your child is a dick move, Hamilton.”

“I’m not using her. Just saying I’m not the only one who misses you.” All right, so I hadn’t intended to phrase things quite like that.

I didn’t miss her. Did I? That would be nuts. It had only been a few days since we’d seen each other. You couldn’t miss someone in that time.

Even if the tightness was back in my chest at the possibility she wouldn’t come.

“Now you’re sweet talking. Pulling out the big guns, huh?”

“Nah. I haven’t pulled out the biggest gun yet. But if you’d like me to...”

“Hear that sound? It’s me not being amused by your sexual innuendoes.”

“Who mentioned sex?” I used my most innocent voice as she audibly swallowed a laugh. “You filthy-minded pervert.”

“Yeah, it’s all—”

“Daddy!” Laurie screamed from upstairs.

I didn’t think. I barely held on to the phone as I rushed down the hall and up the stairs, my only thought my little girl.

“Seth? Seth, what was that? Did I hear a scream? Oh my God, was that Laurie? Is she okay?”

Turning the phone against my shoulder, I hit the top of the stairs and booked toward Laurie’s room. She wasn’t in there, but the door to her en suite bathroom was open. And water was running.

“Oh fuck,” I muttered, my heart slamming in my ears.

“Seth? Goddammit, Seth.” Even Ally shouting into the phone couldn’t distract me from crossing the room to the bathroom.

I stepped over the threshold, my eyes bugging out at the sheer number of bubbles flowing everywhere. The tub was full and the bubbling water was still rising, and in the middle of it sat my little girl, her hair wet, and her eyes wild.

“I can’t turn it off, Daddy,” she shrieked as I moved forward and did the honors, barely managing not to curse a blue streak. I pulled the stopper up, rather amazed that Laurie had thought to put it in, and waited while several inches of water flowed down the drain. Her assorted Care Bears and other toys floated in what was left.

Laurie squealed in dismay. “My bubbles!”

“Yeah, well, my bathroom floor. Why are you in here? You were supposed to pick out clothes and get ready for a bath, not start it yourself.”

“Seth! You better answer me, you jackass! Is she okay?”

Somehow, I smiled in the middle of chaos. That was the gift Ally had given me since the first day we'd met.

Once the water was at a much more reasonable level, I put the stopper back in and brought my phone to my ear. "Your god-daughter chose to nearly flood the bathroom instead of waiting for me to start her bath."

Laurie popped halfway out of the water, her little face screwed up in annoyance. "I do it myself."

"Oh really? And you did a fine job." I braced my fist on my hip. "I'm going to let out some more of this water and—"

"No. Bubbles. I like it." Laurie crossed her arms and glared. "Is Ally coming over?"

"See?" I said into the phone. "Did you hear that? The princess herself just requested you."

"Don't be mean to her. She just likes her bubble baths."

"Fine. She couldn't have waited five minutes for me to get up here and start her bath for her?" Spying the almost empty bottle of Cookie Monster bubble bath on the side of the tub, I sighed. "And maybe not finish off the bottle of bubbles in one go?"

"There's some left. It needed more," Laurie said stubbornly, plopping back down in the water and sloshing a small tidal wave over the side.

"Women," I muttered.

"Sorry we're such a trial to you manly sorts," Ally said, but the dry humor in her tone made the year Laurie had just chopped off my life worth it.

"Daddy, out." Laurie stuck out her chin. "Private now."

"Say what?"

"Daddy, private now!" She flung a handful of soapy water at me and I backed into the other room, casting a glance at the ceiling.

"She won't let me stay in the room for her bath."

“Since when?”

“Ask her. So you gonna come over or what? My bathroom tiles will thank you later.”

“Daddy,” Laurie called. “Shut the door, pweese.”

“Did she just ask you to close the door?”

“She sure did.” And I was doing it—partially, though it was damn sure staying cracked so I could keep an eye and both ears on the situation—because hell if I knew what was protocol at Laurie’s age.

I’d been unsure about continuing to help with her bath as she grew older, but sometimes Ruth, the nanny, wasn’t there to help. I was her father, for fuck’s sake. It was my job. But if Laurie felt ready to do it on her own, I supposed I could give her that space.

Especially if Ally could help make sure my daughter—and my bathroom—survived intact.

“Fine, I’m coming over. But to see Laurie, not you.”

“Whatever. I’m grateful regardless. Bring alcohol.”

“Moscato?” Ally asked, mentioning what we’d turned to more often than not lately.

“Nah. A six-pack of whatever you find at the corner store will do.” A thud came from within the bathroom and I tipped back my head. “Make it a twelve-pack. And hurry.”

## FIVE



I HUNG UP THE PHONE AND FROWNED AT SAGE WHEN SHE TOOK my glass and poured it into hers. “Hey.”

“You’re going off to play Mommy to jackass.” She snorted. “Now that I know he really wants you to play Mommy, it makes it a little more amusing instead of just annoying.”

“You think it’s annoying?”

She shrugged as she swirled the wine. “I think it’s very suspect that he calls you with a SOS a lot.”

“He’s just a little overwhelmed.”

“Uh-huh. And he wants another one?”

I crossed my arms. I could feel the sweat and grit on me, but I didn’t have time to get changed and I definitely didn’t have time to take a shower. Maybe if he saw the real me he’d get that ridiculous idea out of his head.

I wasn’t mommy material. I knew a few tricks when it came to Laurie, but it was because we were buddies. Not due to a maternal instinct—mostly.

It still didn’t make sense that he wanted me to be a gestational host to his spawn. A spawn he planted himself.

Thank God for padded bras. Otherwise my damn nipples would be on display. Just thinking about him planting anything inside me stirred me up in ways I didn’t want to examine. And if my hand strayed a little farther down my body to cup my

middle, then I was entitled. It was still a shock to think Seth might want me that way in any capacity.

At least if we did a fertility clinic then it wouldn't be so... messy. Getting skin to skin would only screw things up. I wasn't exactly the type of girl who could remove myself from the sexual component.

And it was only partially because I hadn't gotten truly naked with anyone in my life. I'd had a few opportunities, but it never seemed to work out.

I wasn't as picky as Sage, but I was definitely a special head case thanks to my home situation. Since my mom had only been gone for a handful of months, it didn't make sense that I'd jump right into the dating scene. Especially when I didn't have time to sleep let alone try to form coherent sentences during a date.

Did I mention that this situation was fucked up? Because it so was.

I grabbed my purse off one of the two chairs left in the kitchen. "You good to get home?"

"No problem." She gulped down the remaining butter-colored liquid and set the glasses in the sink.

I frowned at her.

Sage rolled her eyes. "That wine was like drinking a diet, watered down beer."

"Better safe than sorry."

"Okay, big sis, relax yourself. Just because Scorer Seth wants to get jiggy with it doesn't mean you have to analyze every move I'm making."

"I know." I blew out a breath and wondered why I'd ever told her about Seth's old high school nickname. "I know."

"Good. Now do I need to give you the talk?"

Horried, I unrolled the sleeves of my T-shirt. "What talk?"

“I think you know about the birds and the bees. At least I hope you’ve at least watched those romantic cable movies after midnight that are almost porn.”

“Um, that’s a little TMI, don’t you think?” It wasn’t, but I was great at stalling.

“Is there anything off the table with us at this point? I now know you have been propositioned to be a gestational incubator.”

“I suppose not. And no, I’m good, thanks. Think I know how Tab A fits into Slot B.”

Big Tab A, from all the talk Seth was throwing around. Probably trying to sweeten the pot.

Sage glanced at my shirt. “At least that part’s fitting.”

I glanced down at my “I Can’t Adult Today” shirt and my cutoff shorts. I really wished I had time to change. Then again, the quicker I got Laurie settled, the quicker I could go home and soak in a tub before work in the morning.

Or maybe I would just climb in with the kid.

I shook my head. No, that wasn’t happening. Extra time at Seth’s was a no-go tonight and for the foreseeable future.

I grabbed my iPad and my iPencil and dumped them into my purse. My Christmas present from Seth last year kept his daughter endlessly entertained. Could’ve been the eight coloring apps I had on it too.

Hurrying outside, I waved to Sage as I climbed into my trusty Subaru Outback. Then I headed to Seth’s place on the opposite side of the lake. My old house was on the fringes of town, but I’d made this trip plenty of times. And most of them actually didn’t involve a cry for help from Seth.

He was a really good dad, but Laurie was asserting her independence. She was very much like her father, and I’d known they would butt heads eventually.

I toyed with my arrow necklace as the lakeside road curved around the bend. The gazebo and the pier came into view. It was late enough that most of the pedestrian traffic was

light as people finished up dinners and the shops started closing up for the night.

It was late for Laurie to be up. If she was already down for the night by the time I got there, I was going to string Seth up by his short and curlies.

My car made the steep climb up to the mansions on the far side of the lake. They were surrounded by gates of all kinds to keep the riffraff out, and the moneyed in. The house Seth had chosen for his home with Laurie after his divorce definitely wasn't at the top of the scale, but they definitely weren't slumming it.

Hamilton's never did.

According to my mother, a Hamilton had been in residence since the town had been established. In fact, the town had nearly been named Hamilton Cove, but some of the residents had fought for the name to be a bit more welcoming. Hamilton sounded so stern.

Much like the men, and the women, of the line. Seth even had his moments of stoic behavior, but Laurie had definitely changed him for the better.

I parked in the long, winding driveway and sat with my fingers wrapped around the steering wheel. There were wear marks from a hundred thousand miles of me gripping them. From the various levels of news about my mom's sickness, to money issues, to frustration—all of the handprints were carved into this wheel.

Tonight, it was nerves and frustration adding another layer to the already worn gray leather. I wasn't ready to face Seth, but his little girl trumped all. In fact, she was the reason for much of the drama in my life right now.

Seth wouldn't have looked twice at me if Laurie hadn't vocalized her very passionate view on having a sister. A brother wasn't really in her purview, though Seth tried to indicate she was open to either. We both knew it was female or bust in this princess's life.



I leaned over and dug my sandals out of my canvas bag, swapping my dusty ancient sneakers for more comfortable shoes. Especially if bath time troubles were in my future.

I was pretty sure my poor feet swelled to double their size the minute I took my sneakers off. I needed to be horizontal for a week.

My heart raced at the thought. No.

No.

No.

Not that kind of horizontal.

I peered into my bag for any other goodies. I was good at packing extras of most things, including clothing, but nope. Dusty T-shirt and cutoffs it was. My backup shirt had been used when a toddler sprayed me with ketchup yesterday.

I slammed the door and tromped through the river rock edging the wide driveway, then up the grand staircase. Solar lights flared from large lamps flanking the double entry door. The aged walnut wood screamed of money and affluence.

I didn't even get the pretense of knocking. A blood-curdling scream had me pulling the large door open.

"Laurie Elizabeth Hamilton, that is enough." A rare bellow from Seth kicked my heart rate into high gear as I hit the stairs at two at a time.

"No boys allowed!"

"I washed your hair two days ago and you didn't say a thing then, young lady."

Uh-oh. He'd dragged out *young lady*. This wasn't going to be good.

I came around the corner to find a frazzled Seth crouched next to the door with his fingers fisted in his hair. The dark wavy strands were sticking up in damp tufts. Wet splotches arced across his chest and his arms were beaded with water.

"Didn't even let you get a towel, huh?"

He spun on the balls of his feet and stood. “Thank God.”

He was wearing his oldest jeans—you know, the kind that were worn at all the good stress points—with bare feet and a waterlogged blue Oxford dress shirt open a few extra buttons to show off way too much of his chest. There was obviously no justice in this world.

“I just tried to go in again. I’m her father, for God’s sake. We just had a bath the other day without incident.”

“That was the other day.” I swallowed down my nerves. If he could act normal, I could act normal. I strode down the hall and knocked on the door briskly. “Hey, can I come in, munchkin?”

“Ally! Do you have my Care Bear bubbles?”

“Honey, you dumped your tubby bubbles, remember?” Seth called through the door.

“No! My bubbles. I want bubbles.”

I looked over my shoulder. “Does she mean like blowing bubbles?”

Seth tipped his head back. So much throat and chest on display. His chest was mostly smooth save for a sprinkle of dark hair between his pecs. I’d seen him without a shirt a million times, but now just seemed so much worse. *God, stop looking.*

“Honey, we play with those outside.”

“No!” Laurie screeched.

My eyebrows shot up. “Tell me you have bubbles.”

His dark brows knitted, then cleared. “Yes. I have to go get them.” He started to stride down the hall then stopped. “Are you okay?”

I rolled my eyes. “You’re asking this now?”

His gaze dropped to my chest and his eyes heated briefly. “Your shirt says maybe not.”

I glanced down at the words on my chest and cursed my headlights coming out to play. Timing was wrong as always, but this time there was a weight to it I didn't want to examine. At all. "Yeah, well, adulting comes around whether you want it to or not." I opened the door and slid inside before he could say another word.

The little girl in the tub obliterated any other issue I had with daddy dearest. I put my hands on my hips. "I hear you're giving your dad some trouble."

Laurie grinned up at me, her freakishly long eyelashes starred from the water. She was sitting in about six inches of water that was mostly foam. She also had an array of plastic ducks, fish, whales, dolphins, and yes, Care Bears in the tub with her. She held a bright pink netted puff in her hand as she painstakingly washed her blue Care Bear.

Fittingly, it was a plastic version of Grumpy Bear.

Just like me.

Well, until this little girl was in my space. I couldn't be grumpy around her, even if I wanted to strangle her sometimes. Cuteness always won out.

She smiled up at me with a dimple winking. "This is a girls' party."

I kneeled beside her and brushed her damp bangs out of her face. "Is that so?"

She nodded and bit her lower lip in concentration as she washed under Grumpy's armpit.

"Grumpy is a boy."

She looked up at me with a knitted brow so much like her father's. A blond version, but all the rest was the same. "Grumpy is a bear," she said as if that made all the difference.

I supposed for an almost four-year-old, it really did. I shrugged. "All righty then."

I turned on the taps to add to the water to bubbles ratio. From the looks of the bottle on the side of the tub, Laurie had been using a heavy hand.

When she lifted the bottle and started to pour more on the puff, I made a grab for it.

She stuck out her lower lip. "I need that."

I swooped up a froth of bubbles and settled it on top of her puff. "There you go." When she still frowned, I took another dollop and settled it on her nose.

She giggled.

Now we were in business. By the time Seth came back, I had her hair washed and was chaperoning her hygiene rituals. I'd already made the mistake of trying to help there.

I'd been an independent kid too, but I didn't remember a lot about my childhood. Just moving a lot. And I'd learned to shower far earlier than a lot of my friends. Sitting in bathtubs in some of the places we'd lived wasn't the best idea.

Seth knocked on the door.

"No! No boys."

A clunking sound made me frown and then Seth's lacrosse stick came through the door with a bottle of bubbles in the netting. I laughed and stood.

Laurie giggled. "Thank you, Daddy!"

I took the bubbles. "You're a dork."

"Daddy's a dork."

"Great. Thanks. She'll be saying that for days."

"Fitting."

"Har-har. Everything okay in there, girls? It's way past bedtime."

"Almost done." Laurie slapped her hand on the water. "Go away."

"I'm going."

I snaked a finger through the crack in the door and flicked a nail over the back of his hand. "We're fine."

He let out a slow breath. "Thanks."

“Of course.” I rubbed my hand over my breastbone and went back to his daughter with the bubbles. I unscrewed the cap. “Okay, you get one blast of bubbles for each friend you finish washing.”

“Deal.” She dunked her dolphin into the water and it came out gleaming. She set it on the shelf along the back of the tub. “Go.”

I pulled the double wand out and blew out a stream of rainbow bubbles.

“Me. I want to do it.”

“Two more of your buddies and you got it.”

The big whale and baby whale got dunked and deposited on the shelf. I dunked the wand and handed it to her.

“No, I want to do it.”

“You are wet and soapy, kiddo. We don’t want these to fall in, do we?”

She scrunched up her nose and lips. “No. I guess not.” She shrugged and took the wand. She blew too hard and only got three bubbles. “Hey.”

I took it back and dunked. “Easy. Soft. Yes, just like that.”

When the stream of bubbles floated up, she clapped. Five minutes later, there were many squeaky clean fish guarding her tub and a pruny almost four-year-old standing with a purple towel on her head and fluffy pink Care Bears towel wrapped around her.

Before she could find another reason to extend her bath time, I swooped her out and deposited her on the bath mat. I wrapped another towel around her and started a rubdown. By the time she was mostly dry, she was still giggling and I was laughing with her.

I hadn’t even known this was exactly what I needed to even me out.

“Okay, Daddy, we’re ready.”

He opened the door so fast, I knew he'd stood out there the entire time. I wasn't sure how I felt about that. Didn't he trust me?

Then I looked down at the crazy monkey in my arms and her adoring eyes only for him. There was no way I could get upset about that. Laurie reached for him and suddenly I was forty pounds lighter.

He looked down at me, his eyes flashing for a moment as he dropped his gaze over my wet shirt. Yeah, good thing I had that padded bra on. I turned away from him to pick up the bubbles and empty bottle of soap.

He cleared his throat before burying his face in Laurie's neck. She giggled and squirmed, causing the towel on her hair to fall to the floor. "I'm just going to get her dressed."

"Yeah, good idea. I'll just clean up."

"Don't worry about that. You've done more than enough."

"It's fine."

"No, really. The nanny will take care of it."

"Right." Of course he had a nanny for her. I'd talked to her a million times. I didn't know her duties included cleaning a bathroom, but he was right this wasn't my house or my life.

He just wanted me to create a human, not take care of one. Even if he did call on me to help.

Would he do the same with my—our—his... God. How would I even classify him or her? Mine?

*Ours.*

I fisted my hands into my hair and tugged out my messy bun. "Fuck."

In the hallway, I could hear giggling and Seth's baritone voice. The love obvious between them. His heart was so huge for that little girl. It might be a little more reserved for others. He used charm to deflect emotions for other people in his life.

I'd seen it firsthand. The way my customers reacted to him. That half-grin and easy way with conversation left

everyone at ease. And half the town's female population would jump at the chance to do what he'd asked me to do.

But they would want more.

Every woman wanted more in his eyes. Mostly because of the lenses that Marjorie had left behind when she'd walked away from Laurie. He just assumed most women wanted something from him. And part of me understood that.

He could grant me opportunities that I'd have to work my ass to achieve. But then again, they would be my achievements. No one else's.

Part of me wanted to just up and leave this town and start over. Even if that meant I would be in debt up to my eyeballs for the next thirty years. It would be my debt, and my life, and a fresh start.

I lifted the towel that had fallen off Laurie's head and hung it on the pink unicorn hook on the wall. And because I couldn't stand to leave the mess in the bathroom, I listened to Seth tell his daughter a bedtime story as I tidied up.

When the rumble of his voice faded and I heard his footfalls, I shut off the light and met him in the hall.

He frowned at me. "I told you—"

I held up my hand. "Already done." I crossed to him and ducked under his arm to enter Laurie's room. His burnt sugar cologne mixed with the baby shampoo scent of his kid and my hormones decided that was the perfect aphrodisiac. Did I mention my life was unfair?

I focused on the little lump on the middle of the full-sized mattress. The bed was way too big for her, but she was surrounded by Care Bears and stuffed animals from various Disney movies. Dory, Hank, and the guppy from *Little Mermaid* guarded her. A nightlight spun from her bedside table, shooting starlight around her room.

Pink and perfect in every way. This little girl had everything I didn't have growing up. No wonder he wanted to give her the world.

I just wasn't sure I was the one to help him.

"She's out."

I lifted my shoulder in reaction to his deep voice against my ear. He slid his arm around my waist and pulled me away from the doorway. He shut the door most of the way, then pulled me down the hall.

"I don't want to wake her."

I nodded. Understandable, of course. He needed to back up though. I couldn't handle him in my space for extended periods of time. Even if I'd initiated it this time. What the hell had I been thinking?

Oh, right. I wasn't really thinking. Actually, it had been a luxury I couldn't afford for years. I was really good at ignoring my feelings for him. Why did he have to go and ruin it? Now all I could imagine was what he tasted like.

Fuck.

I tried to pull away, but he pulled me back against him.  
"Don't go."

I closed my eyes. "Please don't."

"Don't what?" His nose coasted around the shell of my ear.  
"Touch you?"

"I'm filthy."

He buried his nose in my hair. "You smell like lilacs and sunshine."

"Liar."

"Baby shampoo and lilacs?"

I tried not to smile, but I had no defenses for this man. The worst part was I was sure he knew that. And Seth Hamilton was always on the lookout for weaknesses to exploit to get what he wanted.

How the hell was I supposed to move out of his crosshairs?

Did I want to?



His hand slid along my midriff, his thumb grazing the underside of my breast. I groaned. “Honestly, you have to pick now to do this?”

“I’ve been thinking about this for days.”

I turned in his arms. “So this was all a ruse?”

“No. This was the last act of a desperate man. She’s been a handful all night. She misses you.”

“Low blow.”

“You’ve spent Mother’s Day with us since Marj left.”

I shut my eyes. “I know.” Didn’t he realize how hard this day was for me? Not only because it was Mother’s Day for Laurie, but the first without my mom?

He knew on some level. He’d sent me flowers, hadn’t he? But all my emotions were raw today. It just wasn’t fair that he was right here and finally noticing me.

Except he wasn’t seeing me as a partner. No, he was only seeing me as a woman because I had a functioning uterus.

He wanted something from me. It was just handy that he was attracted to me. It was how the world had propagated all these years. Just a biological response.

He swiped his thumb along my jawline. “I know today was rough. And it was completely unfair of me to push you to come over here and save me.”

I ground my teeth together and growled. I looked up at him. “Don’t be sweet, dammit.”

His fingers slid up into my hair and he gathered it tight at the nape of my neck. “You got it.”

I didn’t have time to dodge or pull away from him. I didn’t have the heart to do it either. I’d had a truly shitty day and I wanted to see what all the fuss was about.

Finally.

For years I’d seen women come and go from his life. A knowledge always seemed to live in their eyes when they

touched him. I wanted that too. I wanted to feel something other than sad and frustrated.

I met his gaze. The dark, turbulent anger swirled with something else. Something I couldn't define. I had a limited scope with men, but I had some.

Nothing came close to this man though.

I shifted against him and my damp T-shirt met with his wrinkled Oxford blue. Working class and old money between us in every way. And then none of that mattered.

He lowered his mouth and covered mine. My eyes fluttered shut and I fell into the kiss.

Nothing soft and hesitant here. He was no fumbling boy. I was pretty sure he hadn't been one of those in a very long time.

His other arm wrapped around me from the back, gripping the hem of my shirt until his fingers curled into the belt loops of my shorts. His grip drew me up until I rose on my tiptoes, desperate for more.

He dragged me closer and opened me for his invading tongue. No easy transition into a carnal kiss. Instead it was a tempest of flavors and heat.

I curled my arms around his neck and hung on, giving back as much as I could manage.

I was out of my league. Hell, out of the galaxy, but I was determined to show him I belonged here in his arms.

Before I could allow myself to analyze that little thought, I was swept up into Hurricane Seth. He turned me around and pinned me to the wall, my toes dangling off the floor as he ground his hard cock against my shorts.

God, yes.

My fingers dug into his shoulders and I groaned into his mouth. We were a tangle of tongues and limbs. His hand coasted down my waist to my hip before a groan buzzed through my tongue and along my mouth. Mine? His? Who knew?

Then he swept lower to hook my knee and drag my leg up around his hips. I hopped up with the other and finally his hard length was right where I needed it.

The seam of my cutoffs dug into my panties and the little bit of friction was better than anything I'd done alone. Sweet merciful heaven, there was a God.

Not that I'd tell Seth he was on par with God. He didn't need that kind of help ego-wise, but yes. So much yes.

My sandal thumped to the floor and my eyes flew wide. We both froze, praying that the noise didn't wake the little girl across the hall from us.

Right across from us.

What the hell was wrong with me? I struggled and pulled my mouth away from his. "Put me down," I whispered.

"It's fine," he said against my cheek. "She didn't wake up. She's a heavy sleeper, except for the nightmares." He grazed his mouth along my cheek to my jaw and headed for my ear.

*Nightmares?* I shook my head to clear it. "We can't do this."

He jerked his head back. "What? Why?"

"Because we're right down the hall from her. God, what the hell was I thinking?"

"You weren't. That was the good part."

I wiggled until I slid down the wall and my foot hit the floor.

"We can go downstairs."

"What and make out on the couch like teenagers?"

"We can go to my room if it makes you feel better."

"No, it doesn't make me feel better." I pushed him away from me and jammed my foot into my shoe. "None of this makes me feel better."

"I promise you I can." His eyes were hot and his shirt was wrinkled. Oh, and another button had come free thanks to our

little mauling make out session against the frigging wall. The little bit of hair at the center of his chest arched down his hard abs that were now showing.

Yeah, I was so not looking. I pulled down my shirt and cursed my overstimulated body. Everything was hot and tingling and it was all so wrong.

I spun on my heel and silently sprinted down the hallway to the stairs. I heard him curse under his breath behind me, but I kept going.

Yeah, I was running. Sue me.

There was no way I could handle any of this today. Not emotionally and definitely not intellectually. I'd found out why Seth made all the girls come around.

Five more minutes and I would have come.

And that was five minutes I could never get back, nor live through over and over again.

He caught me at the door and jerked me to a stop before I could make it to the safety of the night. To the normalcy of my piece of shit car.

"Dammit, Al." He turned me around and gripped both my upper arms. "Why are you running?"

"We can't do this. Not now."

His dark eyes fired. "Why not?"

My chest was heaving. My fight or flight instincts were in full-on escape route mode. "Please, let me go."

I don't know if it was the *please* or something he saw in my eyes. Whatever it was, he dropped his hands and I stumbled back and out the door.

I didn't look back to see if he followed. I could only pray he wouldn't.

My breath returned to normal when I was inside my car. I finally dared a look and quickly returned my eyes to front and center. To the moonlit water off the bank of his property.

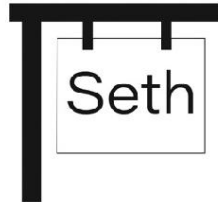
To the lake that had been the only home I'd ever truly known.

I had to.

I couldn't watch him stand on that huge staircase and drive away from him. So I stared out the back window until I was on the road again, and I didn't look into my rearview mirror.

Not even once.

## SIX



SHAKING OFF THE RAIN ON MY HAIR, I STEPPED INTO THE darkened, intimate atmosphere of the Sherman Inn. My stomach was roaring and my mind was in knots.

As for my dick, I wasn't going there.

It had taken me days of wearing her down, but Ally had finally agreed to meet me for dinner and "some time" in town on Friday night.

"Some time" probably being an hour or less, considering her skittish tone as we'd talked that afternoon. But hell, after Sunday's kiss, I considered it huge progress that she was talking to me at all. She'd run awful damn fast the other day.

I couldn't even really blame her. I'd pushed for the kiss to happen and it had still almost blown my fucking head off.

"Table for two, please," I told the maître d'. I was running late, but Ally tended to run even later so I felt safe in assuming I'd be snagging our table.

Normally, I would've placed a reservation, but this wasn't supposed to be a date. Reservations screamed dates, according to Ally, so she'd wanted us to try our luck for a table. At one of the busiest restaurants in Crescent Cove on a Friday night at the start of summer.

Right.

"This way, sir," the maître d' said, proving me wrong. Even as I followed the tall, severe-looking man in black, Ally's voice echoed in my head.

*Hamilton money buys tables. You don't need a reservation. Watch.*

“Did someone just leave?” I asked.

The maître d' shot me a cool smile. “On weekend nights, we're booked solid all day and night. Your table, sir.” He gestured toward a secluded corner table with a lake view and candles flickering under glass domes.

“You know who I am then.” Why I needed the confirmation, I didn't know. Maybe some part of me hoped Ally was wrong. She had to be wrong now and then.

It wasn't as if I didn't know my family's influence in Crescent Cove. Of course, I did. Hamilton Realty had been a fixture in the community since my grandfather was a young man. I was also a regular at the Sherman Inn. But I'd never seen this guy before in my life.

“Yes, sir.” He pulled out a chair and gestured. “Your server will be here in a moment with the wine list. Your companion's name so I can direct her to your table?”

“Alison Lawrence. She should be here soon—”

“Right behind you,” she said cheerfully. “Got a table, huh?” she commented as I turned and tried not to swallow my tongue.

She wasn't wearing anything special. Correction—she wasn't wearing anything I hadn't seen her in a hundred times before. She had on a pale-yellow sundress with tiny purple flowers, cowboy boots, and a tight jean jacket, with her long hair flowing in every which direction and matted a little from the misty rain. It didn't matter. She was simply stunning.

How hadn't I noticed before?

“Miss,” the maître d' said, pulling out the chair opposite me while I stood and stared. Mutely.

*Smooth, dude. Real smooth.*

Ally shot me a sidelong glance as she skirted around me to slip into her seat. “Thank you.”

“Enjoy your meal.” The maître d’ melted away and almost immediately, our server appeared.

I dropped into my chair and accepted the wine list, ordering a bottle of rosé for the table before my brain clicked back into gear.

Ally kicked me as soon as the server went to fulfill my request. “Hi there, remember me? I wanted a martini.”

“Since when?” Oh look, my lips could come unglued long enough to stick my foot between them.

“Since I felt like a damn martini. What is wrong with you?” She leaned forward and laid a hand on my forehead. “You’re flushed. Do you have a fever?”

“Some virus is running through Laurie’s class, so maybe.” I eased away from her hand and she picked up her napkin. Her touching me right now was not the best idea.

My cock thought it was awesome, but that part of me wasn’t known for its good judgment.

“And you left her with a babysitter just to come out with me?”

“She’s not sick,” I snapped irritably. “And I left her with her uncle. Oliver took her to the Faraday party so he doesn’t have to stay long.”

Ally paused midway through spreading her napkin on her lap. “He brought your little girl to a fancy work party? Why didn’t you go?”

“Because I’m having dinner with you.”

“Oh, right, because this is such an important event that you can’t miss it.”

“I haven’t seen you since the weekend. Every time I stop in the diner, you’re not there.”

“Darn. Must’ve missed you.” She glanced out the window. “Damn rain. Can barely see the lake.”

“Yeah, you’re wet.” I brushed a damp curl away from her cheek and she bristled, backing away from my touch just as



I'd done.

My words hung in the air between us. Heavy, rich with meaning well beyond what I'd intended.

"In your dreams, Hamilton," she said, her taunt falling short of the target.

She didn't know my dreams. I was only beginning to fathom their scope myself.

Our server returned with our bottle of wine. After pouring it into two glasses, I ordered Ally a martini even though her stare nearly burrowed a hole into the side of my head.

If she wanted a martini, a martini she would have. With an extra olive I could steal.

"He probably thinks I'm a wino," she muttered as she opened her menu.

"Can't please you, woman."

"Sure, you can. Stop ordering for me like this is a date. We never order for each other."

"I beg to differ. Did you or did you not order the tiramisu for me the last time we went out?"

"That's because it was a sacrilege you'd never had it. And you licked the plate clean." She disappeared behind her menu and I grinned down at mine, barely resisting the urge to make a sly remark.

Thankfully, we were back on an even keel. If she stayed hidden behind that menu, I might not be starstruck by just the sight of her again.

Maybe I did have a fever.

Through our salads, braised lamb for me and chicken parm for her, and our tiramisu desserts—hey, I could admit when I'd seen the error of my ways—we kept the conversation light and easy. She had two martinis and a glass of rosé, and I had two glasses of wine. Neither of us were drunk, just relaxed. Easy with each other, as we'd always been.

After the weirdness I'd introduced into our relationship with my contract, it was nice to be chill enough to laugh and tease each other as we usually did. My getting annoyed at her mention of a cute guy seated in her section of tables at the diner was new, but I chalked that up to thinking way too much about her reproductive organs lately. Thoughts in that direction tended to spread.

Kissing her senseless the other night—and being kissed back the exact same way—also probably didn't help.

I didn't actually care if she found another man "cute." Bully for her.

Okay, so I cared. A lot. And that might've been when I'd decided to go for that second glass when I usually stopped at one when I was driving. But we wouldn't be on the road for hours yet, since we intended to walk the shops that lined Main Street and head up the pier to check out the lake. If the freaking rain ever decided to stop screwing with our plans.

We had summer splendor to appreciate, goddammit.

Also rain meant Ally was more likely to make excuses about cutting the night short. I wasn't in any hurry for that to happen.

At least until we squabbled over splitting the bill. My insistence on paying added an extra sour note to the evening, but I pretended I didn't notice her dismay and headed up the street in the light drizzle as planned.

Eventually, she caught up with me, grumbling only a little.

"Cowboy boots probably weren't the best choice of footwear, though I do like how they make your legs look."

"You can't see my legs in this dress."

"Sure, I can."

"It's dark out."

"Your point?"

She blew out a breath and turned up the walk to one of the quaint old homes in our small town that served as a shop—in

this case, a year-round Christmas store. “You can’t see my legs and you have no reason to check them out in any case.”

“I can see your ass too.” I tilted my head as she climbed the stairs to the shop. “It’s kinda perfect.”

“I miss the old Seth who never said shit like this.”

“Blind Seth who never noticed what was right in front of him?”

“Yes, Blind Seth was awesome.” She rolled her eyes at me over her shoulder and opened the door before I could, slipping inside. She didn’t hold the door for me, and even that made me grin.

Damn, I liked having our rhythm back. Even if it was now heavily laced with innuendoes, we were on track once again.

Mostly.

As always, Ally touched every trinket and ornament she came across. She was so tactile. Always had been. She claimed not to have a special affinity for any holiday, but she took every opportunity to visit this shop and pick up something small for Laurie. An ornament for the tree, or a little figurine she might like. She never stopped thinking about my little girl.

“She’d love this, don’t you think?” Ally angled her head to study a tiny ballerina with a glittering tutu hanging from one of the higher branches of a Christmas tree. Her cowboy boots made her taller, but she still had to stretch to reach so I helped her by tugging the loop off the branch.

“She loves pink,” I agreed. “We’ll get this for her, and something for your new tree with Sage.”

“Oh, Christmas is so far away.”

“No further for you than it is for Laurie.” I moved around the tree and picked up a shimmery silver arrow ornament, cupping it in my hand when she tried to get a peek. “It’s a surprise.”

She tugged on the sleeve of my suit jacket, but I kept my fingers in a tight fist. Shaking her head, she laughed. “You’re a

silly man.”

“You haven’t had nearly enough silly in your life for a damn long time.” Something shifted through her expression and I leaned down to speak against her ear. “Let me give you some things you aren’t used to tonight. We’ll start with silly.”

I grabbed a string of mini flamingo lights off a small tabletop tree and draped them around her neck without revealing the ornament hidden in my hand. It was difficult since she kept trying to get a glimpse of it, but I had big hands and stealth.

And long jacket sleeves I could slip it into.

After I’d paid—and insisted she wear the still blinking lights out of the store—Ally shook her head and aimed for the next shop. This time, we walked together. Our hands brushing back and forth, fingers colliding, wrists bumping. Neither of us making the grab.

Best friends didn’t hold hands. God knows we never had before. But tonight, I wanted to. I wanted her fingers to clutch mine as I pulled her in close by that strand of madly blinking lights and met her smiling mouth with my own.

I’d give my right nut to keep that grin on her face. Pay any price. Risk anything.

Even us.

In the next store, she browsed the kitchen gadgets and cookbooks and household knickknacks with her typical curiosity. Her gaze touched every item before her hands followed suit. I swallowed hard, imagining what it would be like to be the object of all that fascination.

To be her sole focus, even for an hour. For a night.

She bought a cow salt and pepper set and some hot cocoa mix and we headed to the coffee shop where we studied rows of truffles through the glass cases and debated hot apple cider or cappuccino. She went for the cider and I chose black coffee with a shot of maple.

Maple like the golden-brown eyes that smirked at me when I gave in and dumped some cream into my coffee.

Getting to black only was a process for me, one she was sure I'd never manage. She thought I enjoyed my sweets too much.

If she only had a clue.

Outside the rain had started anew, so we ducked into another shop, this one with ship memorabilia and nautical apparel. I grabbed her a tote bag and tucked her flamingo lights and her surprise present and her kitchen shop purchases inside then threw it over my shoulder, ignoring her laughter at the picture I made in my business suit.

Whatever. It was only half a business suit, since I had jeans on with the shirt, jacket and tie as always.

Perk of owning my own business. Casual Fridays were every day of the damn week.

The next time we slipped outside, the rain had lessened, so we decided to take that walk on the pier. The long length of it was draped in white lights, and the tiny flickers bounced off the rippling expanse of dark water that stretched far in the distance. At the end of the pier, she stopped and leaned over the railing, her dark hair billowing behind her in the wind. Her flirty dress clung to the backs of her thighs and her ass, and the illicit glimpse I took of both probably had something to do with why I crowded her against the rail. I didn't move back as she stiffened and regained her full height, her ringed fingers suddenly clutching the rail.

"Personal space, Hamilton," she tossed back, but she didn't look me in the eye. "Ever heard of it?"

"I've been giving you all kinds of space." Testing us both, I gripped a handful of the fabric swishing around her thighs. Step one to touching her bare skin. "Doesn't seem like it's getting me anywhere."

"Since when is it supposed to? We're friends, remember?" There was no missing the thread of desperation in her tone,

even with the wind kicking up and making it harder to hear her.

I didn't need to grasp every nuance in her voice to know how she felt. Her body was telling me with every rigid, unyielding curve. She was holding herself as far away from me as she could, practically leaning over the water.

Her reaction was a clear sign to back off. To steer clear.

*Not interested, pal. Hate to break it to you.*

I could almost hear her lobbing the words at me even in the heavy silence of the night. But it wasn't completely quiet. There was the wind, and the lapping water, and my heartbeat thudding crazily in my head. In the distance, people were laughing, and music was playing, and life went on.

Out here, it had stopped. Suspended in a moment we'd never get back.

As if she sensed me moving too close, she whirled around, nailing me in the gut with her elbow then pressing her spine to the railing. Her gaze never lifted above my Adam's apple. "Here we go. Should've known you'd try this. Always gotta close the deal, and so much for giving me space to make up my mind. Ha. Like you or Oliver ever give anyone a chance to say no. You cajole and wheedle and insist—"

I braced my hands on the rail on either side of her hips. "I haven't said a word about it tonight. You're the one who has it in your head every time you look at me." I dropped my voice. "Speaking of, why don't you try doing that?"

"How am I supposed to not think about it? You didn't ask me to go for takeout or on vacation. Hell, you didn't even ask me to have a crazy fling, as insane as that would be."

"Alison. Look at me."

Her eyes flickered up to mine and away, holding on some far-off spot while the lights danced along the gold of her irises. She might not be able to meet my gaze for long, but I was riveted on hers. On how she couldn't seem to take a full breath that didn't shudder out between her parted lips. I didn't look

lower because I couldn't. One glimpse of those perfect tits straining the cotton bodice of her dress and I'd be a goner.

When she didn't make an effort to shift her focus to my face, I gripped her chin in fingers I deliberately kept gentle. I didn't want to scare her any more than she already was.

Hell, any more than I was too at this moment. So much hung in the balance, far more than contracts and deals and egg meets sperm.

"I'm not forcing your hand," I said quietly, staring at her eyes though she wouldn't look any higher than my mouth. "I told you what I want, what is important to me and why. Now the ball's in your court."

"You can't make a move like this based on the whims of a three-year-old. It's not logical. She wants a puppy too. Is that next?"

"Maybe, but puppies are easier to get my hands on than babies. And I'd rather like to see what a combination of our DNA would look like. Gold eyes, maybe, crazy temper, a slightly hysterical laugh? Should I invest in earplugs?"

"Ugh. You're impossible." She nudged me back, and I went, but only far enough for her to move to the opposite railing. "Laurie's going to change her mind, decide she doesn't want a sibling after all, and then what? My birth canal isn't the customer service counter at Macy's. You'll be stuck with the kid."

Though my temper jumped to life, I leaned back on the railing. Perhaps if I adopted a relaxed pose, the rest of me would follow suit. "Mind keeping your voice down? There's not many people out right now, but there's enough."

"Are you kidding me? It's storming. They can't hear us." As if she'd called down the rain, lightning forked through the sky and thunder rumbled in the distance.

"Okay, keep screaming. I'm cool with it. And guess what, Lawrence, I want the child too. To complete my family. Not that my family isn't complete now, but I want another baby. Is

that so crazy? If I was a woman, no one would be questioning why I'm doing this."

"Wrong. Big time wrong. They'd be thinking you couldn't get a man and wanted a love substitute."

"Well, that's not entirely wrong. I can't get a man, but I have to admit I haven't tried."

Her lips twitched. "You're such a jackass."

"Yeah, and I can see why you're wary about crossing streams with me. Hamilton men aren't easy to take on. Why we all end up divorced and bitter, or in the case of my twin, just the bitter part." I moved toward Ally, boxing her in again neatly against the rail. Some part of me enjoyed doing that far too much. "Why I'm giving you an escape hatch. Do the deed, make the baby, escape while you can."

Her lips trembled. "That's not why at all. You just want the kid, not a woman."

"Oh, I can assure you that's not true, especially right now." I tipped up her chin. "God did me a favor by blinding me to your beauty all these years. Otherwise I would've had you under me before we made it out of high school."

She rolled her eyes. "Do these lines work on other women? Because gotta say, I'm not falling for them—"

My mouth covered hers just as thunder shook the sky one more time, but the crack wasn't enough to disguise her moan. She lifted her hands up to my chest and I didn't press for more, just kept my lips against hers, sucking down her staccato breaths while I gave her the moment to accede or shove me back.

Then her fingers curled into the fabric of my dress shirt and it was on.

I buried one hand in her hair, tilting her head back so I could have her the way I needed to. The sweetness from our tiramisu and her strawberry lip gloss battled in my head, setting off a furious pounding in my groin that had nothing to do with making a baby and everything to do with getting her naked.



Now.

Whatever it took.

I lowered my hands to her hips, fisting the cotton that barely hid her curves from my view, twisting it as our tongues touched and tangled. Without warning, I lifted her up on the railing and she gasped, wobbling, her hair streaming behind her as her honey eyes went wild and frightened.

“I’ve got you.” Tightening my hold, I moved between her legs and ran kisses over her delicate collarbone, tracing the edge of the arrow necklace. Aiming lower, burying my face in her cleavage so that her frantic heartbeat seemed to throb in tandem with my own.

Turning my head, I nipped the side of her breast through the material, just to hear her broken moan. She didn’t disappoint me. One hand gripped the railing and the other came up to grasp a handful of my hair as I lowered my mouth, making a wet path to where her nipple stood so tight and proud.

I couldn’t breathe. Couldn’t think past wanting her. My sanity was gone, blown away with the rising wind.

Hovering there, my breaths puffing out against the swelled flesh, I searched for words. Something to make this okay. Her legs trembled on either side of my hips, and I was holding onto her with every bit of strength I possessed. Her long dark hair blew against my face, tickling my skin, and I was helpless not to suck her nipple between my teeth, to scrape the edge of them over that sensitive tip.

A quick yank on my hair drew me closer, not away. *Thank fuck.*

Only half aware of the rain now pelting my back, soaking through my jacket and shirt to the skin, I sucked on her, already thinking about how I was going to get inside her. This wasn’t the end. I couldn’t have her walk away from me tonight like she had on Sunday.

Not if I wanted to survive it.

She bent forward, leaning over me, her hair surrounding us as I tugged at the fabric and the lacy bra beneath. A hint of pink gleamed wetly in the darkness before she covered herself, her long fingers caging in her nipple. Keeping it from my mouth.

Acute regret cleaved through me. I set her down on her feet, already fighting to shove myself back in line. My tongue buzzed from the taste of her, from the tang of my own needs. I couldn't go home and jack myself off again with her flavor on my lips. Jesus, I'd go mad.

"Sage is home," she said, and I stared at her, not understanding. "She doesn't usually go out on Friday nights." She pinned me in place with her stare and clutched her arrow necklace. "Your house is on the other side of the lake. The Inn. If there's a room, we'll do it and be done."

Joy coursed through my body, and I nearly freaking dropped to my knees in gratitude.

Then what she'd said sank in.

"Just do it and be done," I repeated. "Just like that."

"If there isn't a room, that means this is a mistake. Hell, it probably is anyway." She started hurrying away, her heeled boots clacking on the cobblestones of the pier. "But you're the big stud, Mr. Important, so see if they give you a suite. Text me the number if you get it. I'll find you."

"What the hell are you babbling about?" I caught up to her in a couple long strides, seizing her arm and spinning her to face me. "You'll find me? Where are you going?"

"You may not care about being discreet, but I do. I'll go back to my car, give it some time. Go up once it's not obvious we've gone frigging nuts. And we'll take care of this...issue."

"This issue? The one where I want to fuck you until you're hoarse from screaming my name?"

She nodded primly. "That one."

I didn't mention the baby plan. She didn't either. Okay, so we weren't going there. At least we were going somewhere

that might lead to my balls getting some goddamn relief.

But that whole getting it over with thing? Was not happening. And she would soon realize that, too late for her to do anything but lie there and take every bit of what I dished out.

I tugged out my phone and hit the speed dial for my brother. Rock-hard dick or not, my little girl was my number one priority.

“Laurie?” I asked as soon as my twin answered, turning away so I didn’t have to see the melting expression that overtook Ally’s face.

“She’s fine. Curled up with some rum and an episode of *Empire*.”

“What?”

Oliver laughed. “Make that rum raisin ice cream and an episode of some Care Bears crap on Disney. So easy to rile, brother.”

“How was the party?”

“Good. She was a hit. I collected numbers like it was my damn job. Now to sort through the prospects.”

Christ, only my brother would use his three-year-old niece both as a way to ditch a party and as date bait. “Can you keep her tonight? I know it wasn’t part of the deal—”

“Well, now, this is interesting. What happened to Ally?”

I swallowed and tried to come up with something that wasn’t a lie. And also was absolutely not the truth. “Plans changed. Can you keep Laurie or not? I’ll be there early to get her.”

“Of course I can. This Care Bear shit isn’t half bad, if you’re practically wasted.” Before I could question him, Oliver sighed. “I had two fingers of Scotch. Your child is perfectly safe.”

“Thanks. I’ll owe you. Tell her I love her?”

Out of the corner of my eye, Ally turned away, and if I wasn't mistaken, lifted her fist to her mouth.

"Will do. Whatever happened to your plans, hope it's good. Don't forget the condom this time, little brother." Oliver clicked off before I could toss something back, probably rude as hell.

Pocketing my phone, I dipped back my head. The relentless rain streaked down my face as I hauled in a breath that didn't do a damn thing to ease the constriction in my lungs.

Time to get this night moving. First, some insurance she wouldn't run.

"Ally," I rasped, sure she could hear me, rain or no rain.

She turned, studying me warily.

"Your panties. Give them to me."

"What?" Her mouth rounded.

I moved in closer and spoke against her hair, raising my voice just above the rain. "You want to be discreet. I do too. I also want to smell your pussy before we get in that hotel room. Take them off and give them to me." I eased back enough so our eyes were level. "Nice and slow."

Even with the weight of what we were about to do between us, it was good to see I could still shock her. Enough that she seemed to move as if she was in a trance, casting a quick glance around to discover what I already had—the driving rain had sent the few tourists still wandering about scurrying into pubs and the ice cream shop, seeking shelter from the storm.

Right fucking now, the storm was inside me, throbbing in my head, my dick, my chest. Everywhere she'd touched and the places she still hadn't.

But she would.

She shifted closer to the railing, reaching out to use it for balance. And bent to whip off her panties, barely even glancing my way as she pressed them into my hand.

Warm. Even with the cool rain sluicing down my neck and face, there was no denying the heat I held in my palm.

Blinking the water out of my eyes, I held her gaze and lowered my head, drawing in a deep breath of Ally and rain, mixed together. Her excitement and the burnt ozone in the air, colliding together and somehow mixing. Sweetness layered over fire.

Helpless to resist, I buried my face in them and she watched me, hair streaming back from her face, lashes starred, mouth trembling and used from mine. The tip of my tongue touched the delicate fabric and she shuddered visibly, hauling her thin jacket in more tightly around her body.

We were both soaked to the core, but she'd had a goddamn head start.

Stepping in close again, I flexed my groin lightly against hers. Her breath hissed out. She was well aware of how she'd affected me. "I'll text you the room number. If you don't come to me, I'll find you."

She said nothing, her soft exhalations somehow loud in spite of the storm.

A finger under her chin brought her face up to mine. "Every moment you make me wait is one more I'll spend between your legs, making you beg." Cupping her panties in my fist, I stepped back. "The choice is yours."

## SEVEN



I COLLAPSED AGAINST MY SEAT AND SLAMMED THE DOOR closed. Rain thrummed against the roof of my car. Again, I was sitting behind the wheel with decisions whirling in my head.

I'd walked away from him a few nights ago.

Okay, ran. I wasn't proud of it, but my self-preservation instincts had been in full effect. And I'd been able to ignore him for the last few days. Moving out of my house and into Sage's apartment had taken up some time. Falling on my face in exhaustion had been the only way to survive after Sunday.

Now I was right here again. Choices had been made. Panties had been surrendered.

I bounced my head against my headrest. I hadn't even blinked, just forked them over.

I wasn't that girl, dammit.

Or maybe I was.

I squirmed in my seat as rain and my own slickness soaked my dress and coated my inner thighs. The rain had activated the dryer crystals I'd splurged on and my entire car smelled like wet springtime and a hint of sex.

Harbingers of the night to come?

He'd promised to make me beg. And sweet Jesus, I believed him.

The pocket of my denim jacket buzzed against the side of my breast. I hissed out a breath and fumbled it out.

Just a single number.

### **Seventeen.**

Was it wrong that Winger immediately popped into my head? And right now, I felt like an illicit seventeen-year-old girl making crazy decisions. Of course, things would have been a lot easier if I had lost my virginity at seventeen like most of the girls I'd known in high school.

But no, had to tack on another decade for me. Late bloomer times one thousand.

A second later, another text came through.

### **Countdown begins.**

Trumpets were blaring in my brain. Europe's "The Final Countdown" was on repeat. God, I needed to get a grip.

I curled my fingers around my phone and stuffed it back into my pocket. I couldn't even come up with a pithy reply. All we did was swap barbs. That was what we did. And all I could think of replying was...

*Okay.*

Yeah, not even close to worldly. Just dumb. So I didn't reply at all. Part of me wanted to race inside and get it over with.

I hadn't been lying when I'd said that to him.

As insane as it would be to do this with Seth, I was so damn overdue that my ovaries and hormones would officially go on strike if I said no to this opportunity. I had a feeling my sanity would be added to that list as well.

I shouldered the door open and winced at the grinding metal on metal action of the hinge. Time to oil that one up again. I needed to make this car last a little longer.

The winters were rough on cars in this area of New York. Snow and salt were as stubborn and bitchy as my boss, Mitch.

And I was officially stalling in the worst way possible.

My phone buzzed again.

**You're dangerously close to being carried in here, damn the consequences.**

Yeah, no. That wouldn't do. I could walk—well, drive. I could just turn over the engine and drive home. He wouldn't follow.

Maybe.

The heat in his eyes had been as thrilling as it was terrifying. There was no turning back on tonight. Honestly, there'd been no turning back for me the moment he'd let me know he was interested in seeing me naked—babymaking or not.

I dashed out into the night and headed for the front door. I couldn't get in the side entrance since I didn't have a card key. Evidently, I hadn't thought this out very well.

I kept my head down and skirted around the edges of the lobby. My hair hung in wet, ropy ringlets down my back. Not an inch of me was dry.

And I do mean not an inch.

At any second, it felt like everyone in the room would be able to tell I was sans underwear. The cute yellow dress had been a nice idea when I'd left the house, but now it was the consistency of damp tissue paper.

Good thing I'd made sure all the important parts were nice and tidy.

God, what a thought. Could people see my little landing strip through the skirt of my dress?

Would Seth when I went upstairs?

I dragged the edges of my jacket together to cover up my nipples, which were definitely on display. I'd worn a sheer bra so it wouldn't show through the summery dress. Mistakes firing every-damn-where tonight.



I glanced up to get my bearings and the woman behind the counter made eye contact with me. I couldn't remember her name, but she'd been in the diner. Everyone in the damn town had been in the diner at one time or three.

Fuck.

Quickly, I looked away and sprinted for the elevator, holding my skirt down with the other hand as I darted through the doors.

I slapped the button for the second floor, desperately happy there was no one else in the elevator. I should have taken the stairs, but the possibility that my ass could be on display if my skirt flared up had nixed that idea before I could even slot it in my brain.

The doors opened onto the ornate floor. The hotel was high-end with an ornate brocade runner over a finely stitched ruby carpet. The walls were a textured cream with paintings and sconces giving it a rich, old world feel.

Rich was the name of the game. New England money with a side of stately age.

Outside my comfort zone by miles. Hell, again this one could be measured by galaxies. All of this was Seth's life, not mine.

Even his booty call couldn't be normal.

Thankfully, the hallway was empty and quiet. I sure as hell hoped it was soundproofed to go with the fancy-ass decor. I glanced at my watch.

Evidently, I would have some begging to do.

Why did I find that so hot?

The feminist residing in my chest should have been appalled. Or maybe she'd request equal rights all around.

A little tit-for-tat on the begging. He could start.

Maybe.

Oh, who was I kidding? I would be the one standing there like a deer in headlights, praying he wouldn't figure out just

how much I sucked at this.

A fumbling accidental orgasm when I was nineteen was as close to experience as I had. And when I said accidental, it was the God's honest truth.

Enough friction could eventually give anyone an orgasm, even if it was a depressing and awkward trip to the finish line. It wasn't Craig Kimmel's fault—well, not entirely. We'd just had no chemistry.

I couldn't say the same about Seth. I'd felt the pull the very first day I'd laid eyes on him while I was making a mad dash for class. Seth had been amused at my graceless entry.

He'd also been—and still was—stupidly sexy.

I wasn't sure when I'd been slotted as the best friend. Maybe it had been that first day we'd met when I'd been wearing a shapeless sweatshirt over my pajama top and he'd instinctively saved me from a tardy slip on the second day of the school year.

Or maybe it had been when I'd laughed at him for checking out the chick in front of him as if her boobs were manna from heaven.

All I knew was I'd never had a chance before now.

And it was both hilarious and terrifying. I just wasn't sure which one was going to win out.

I slowly crept down the hall as the numbers increased. Seventeen was at the end of the hall. A suite, I'd guess, with a huge bed with sumptuous sheets and class. And I was a drowned rat on her way to get laid.

A testament of my life to date.

Before I could lift my hand to knock on the door, it flew open and Seth reached out to drag me into the suite. Good guess there. Everything was as high-end as the hallway, but right now, I didn't care.

Right now, there was only him and me and a flashing need in his eyes that mirrored my own. His gaze dropped to my

dress and the naked excitement went dark as his brows lowered.

I looked down at myself. In the brightly lit living space, there was no denying the see-through nature of my dress was even worse than I'd feared. My nipples pushed at the thin material of my bra and right on through to the cotton dress.

"You walked through the hotel like this?"

I lifted my chin. "Someone kept me out in the rain."

He stalked to me and dragged my denim jacket off. My skin instantly flooded with chill-bumps, making my nipples even tighter.

His hands fisted at his sides and the muscle in his jaw pulsed. Didn't he like what he saw?

I crossed my arms over my breasts, but he pulled them back to my sides. "No, don't cover yourself."

"Then why do you look like you're about to go all T-Rex at the end of *Jurassic Park*?" My question became more a squeak when he spun me around to look at the back.

"Jesus fuck." He fell to his knees and I yelped as his fingers raked up the outside of my thighs. "This perfect ass was on complete display to everyone?"

I tried to turn around, but he held me still. "Well, someone demanded my panties." The reply ended in a growl of exasperation. I didn't understand him at all.

My skirt rose as his touch grew bolder. When the cool air of the room hit my over-sensitized flesh, I had to bite back a whole different kind of growl.

His fingers went from my thighs to the heavy curve of my ass. He lifted my dress higher and I tried to move away from him.

"I know I'm not perfect."

His grip intensified as his tongue flicked over the crease where my butt met thigh. I wobbled on my feet, but he held

me still. “This ass is perfection.” He filled his hands and I wanted to die.

I could only imagine how much flesh overflowed even his big hands. No matter how much running around I did, I had a butt for days. Probably because of my deep and abiding love for ice cream.

Living over an ice cream parlor definitely wasn't helping my affliction.

“Open your legs, Al.”

“Seth, I don't need all this. I'm totally a sure thing.”

“Then open your fucking legs.”

My boots thudded on the carpet as I widened my stance. I felt ridiculous. On display in a way I'd never imagined.

He bunched up my skirt and maneuvered me until I was actually sticking out my ass. Before I could slap his hands away and smack him for being so ridiculous, his warm, wet tongue slid between my thighs and along my dripping pussy.

The little squeak became a moan as I dragged in all available oxygen in the room. I had no choice but to bend my knees or I'd topple onto my face.

He didn't let up. Didn't give an inch.

Or rather he gave me a lot more than I thought was possible with just his tongue and lips. He curled inside of me and carved out every space, every drop of wetness and I lost my balance as the room fuzzed.

I grabbed for something and found his wrist. He held my ass apart to get deeper. Leaving no part of me untouched. I didn't have time to be embarrassed.

There was nothing but his tongue and his hands, holding me open.

I gripped his wrist and his hand turned to lock onto my arm, then he did the same with the other until I was tethered to him. I should have had control at that point, but there was no controlling this man. There was only surviving.

And I wasn't entirely sure that was possible. His devil of a tongue slid between my folds and up to my clit then back until I was a mess.

God, I didn't have any resistance to this insidious level of seduction. He played my body like he played his piano late at night when he'd had too many glasses of whiskey.

He let one of my hands go and slowly slipped a finger inside of me.

I purred out his name and my body went tighter and tighter in reaction to his invasion. I was helpless against his mouth and the pressure of the pads of his fingers at my clit.

The first orgasm sucker-punched me. Somehow, I didn't even realize I'd coasted up and through the teasing and into the victory circle. My thighs shook and my scream ended in his name.

"Fuck, you're so damn tight." He pushed a second finger inside me and I arched to get away from him. My body was too sensitive as I soared and crashed in the space of thirty seconds.

"That's it, baby. Give me everything."

I tried to curl into myself, but he wouldn't let me go. My knees trembled and the heel of my boot tapped out the little aftershocks as my body tried to process this level of stimuli.

He stood up and buried his face in my neck as he turned his hand and fucked me with his fingers. I cried out as the pleasure twisted into pain. "Seth, wait."

He paused. "I'm sorry. Was I too rough? You soaked my face, so I thought you were with me." He made sweet hushing sounds against my ear. "I'm sorry. I got too into it."

I breathed through the invasion of just two of his thick fingers. How the hell was I going to take his cock?

God, I was so over my head.

"Don't tense up." He wrapped his other arm around my waist and fit his cock against my ass. "You're perfect. We're so good together, can't you feel it?"

I nodded, but I couldn't think around the invasion of his fingers.

He pulled out of me and went to my clit. "Sweet little circles until you're ready for me. I want inside you so bad I can't think straight, but I can wait. I've waited this long, right?" He laughed against my neck and I wanted to weep in reaction.

My stupid virginity was going to ruin everything.

"Where did you go?"

"Never mind."

His eyebrows snapped down and he pulled his fingers from between my thighs before turning me toward him. "No, not never mind. No matter how much I want you, if it's too soon, I'll survive. I promise."

I shook my head and wrapped my arms around his neck. "No. I want this more than you could ever know."

His fingers dug into my hips. "Thank God."

I stared at his chin and traced the bristles of his scruffy face. My fingertips went farther down to his neck, where his Adam's apple jumped under my touch.

The vibration of his growl made my skin prickle. Somehow, I'd thought I could just walk in and make this work. It wasn't as if I was a complete novice about sex. I hadn't actually had it, but I was a woman with needs. Some nights the only way I'd gotten to sleep with the stress and frustration of my life was to take care of myself.

But I'd been deluding myself that it compared to reality in any way.

He lowered his face until our gazes collided. "What?"

"I..."

"You...what?" He laughed. "You can tell me anything. You know that." His dark brows pinched together. "Has someone hurt you?"

“No! Oh, God, no.” I blew out a breath. I was doing this all wrong. I slid out of his arms and paced the wide living space. “It’s not that. In fact, quite the opposite.”

He tunneled his fingers through his hair and gripped the back of his neck. His anger and heat had ignited a dangerous prickle of excitement in my bloodstream. That he’d been so upset on my behalf was only one of the reasons I was so head over heels about this idiot. “What does that mean?”

As a hint of something I couldn’t read filled his eyes, suddenly it was Seth who was pacing the length of the room.

He tugged the tails of his shirt out of his jeans. “You aren’t telling me what I think you’re telling me.”

I pushed a wild curl out of my face. My hair was finally drying and my curls were a little intense, thanks to the rain. “I mean, I know it’s crazy, but look at it from my point of view. I’m always working, or I was always taking care of my mom. I didn’t really have much time to date.”

I couldn’t spit out the word. I knew he needed it, but I just couldn’t get it off my tongue. I blocked him from making another path across the Aubusson carpet.

“Seth.”

“No. Don’t you ‘Seth’ me.” He grabbed me by the upper arms and lifted me onto my toes. “You spit it out right now.”

“I’ve sort of never done this with a person before.”

He dropped me back onto my feet and staggered back as he jammed his fingers into his hair again. He pulled until his thick near-black hair was as wild as mine. “No one has ever been inside you?”

I winced. It was kind of crazy when he put it like that. And I felt even more stupid. I folded my arms over my chest. “It’s not a big deal.”

He crossed to me and lifted me up, then crushed his mouth to mine.

Well, okay then. Guess that talk was over.

He curled my legs around his hips and walked me through the suite and kicked open the door to the bedroom. He set me on my feet at the end of the bed and lifted my dress over my head before I could say another word.

I crossed my arms over my chest again instinctively. My boobs were too big and my ass too shapely. I'd gotten my hourglass figure from someone in my family. My mother had been slight for as long as I could remember, but there were pictures.

Ones with her smiling on the shore of Crescent Cove in a bikini. We could have been twins once upon a time.

He pulled my arms away. "No one has ever touched you here?" He skimmed the back of his hand along the swells of my breasts. The bra was too flimsy to really hold me in, but it went with the dress. And like the dress, the sheer factor was very in his face at the moment. He circled his fingertip around my nipple. "No one has sucked on these?"

I swallowed as I swayed on my feet. "I'm not a complete nun."

He peeled back the nude colored nylon and hissed. "Did he know to touch you like this?" He tugged my nipple with his first two fingers until the skin stretched a twinge past pleasure into pain before he let it go.

My nipple tightened even more and the quick rush of blood under the dark rose flesh made me gasp. "No."

He reached around me and unsnapped the bra and eased it over my shoulders, then set it with my dress on the chair in the corner. He lifted each of my breasts until they filled his hands, and my nipples were trapped by his thumb and forefinger.

"No one has ever taken the time to find out just what you need?"

I tipped my head back and fought against the quick rush of tears that had come out of nowhere. "No," I said brokenly.

"I will. I'll make sure I know every inch of your precious body."



He released one of my breasts and his hand slid lower. He coasted over my waist to the soft skin just above my slit. “And no one has been here?”

I shook my head. “Just me.”

His nostrils flared. “At night? In the dark?”

I swallowed. “Not often, but sometimes when the loneliness was too much.”

“Show me.”

I shook my head.

“Show me,” he said more forcefully. “I want to make sure I’m doing it right.”

“You are.” My lower lip trembled. “Everything has been right.”

“I was too rough.”

“No. I just wasn’t ready.”

He led my hand to my pussy and made small circles. My cheeks burned at just how wet I was. No, definitely not like when I touched myself. I was fuller and more swollen. My body had reacted to the differences and made room for my fingers and his as I gasped.

“Like that?” His voice was like gravel and his eyes were a touch wild, along with being kind.

I didn’t really want kind. I wanted the Seth who couldn’t wait to get his hands on me. I wanted the man who was so hot for me he couldn’t wait to touch me.

Hesitance was the last thing I wanted.

I slid my fingers out from under his and held him to my entrance. “You know what I need. I need you to trust that. *I* trust you with this.” I lifted trembling fingers to the buttons of his shirt. “I trust you with me.”

Swallowing hard, I pushed his shirt open and over his shoulders. We struggled with his cuffs and finally he was as bare as me from the waist up. I took a tentative step closer to

him and had to take a slow breath when my breasts touched his chest. The soft hairs along his abs felt different than the more wiry ones between his pecs. Both of them were rather glorious.

I chased the wonder and hoped it would lead me away from the nerves multiplying in my belly and brain. I wanted this with everything inside of me. Even knowing things would change between us on a fundamental level, I couldn't turn away from him any longer.

He kicked off his shoes and I did the same with my boots. His pants hit the floor next and we stood in front of each other nearly naked.

Me, completely, but I was sort of glad he'd left on his black boxer briefs. I wasn't sure I was ready to see just what my choices had led me to.

Especially with the bulge tenting under the snug cotton.

I lifted a shaking hand to his shoulder and he swept me up into his arms and deposited me on the mattress. "We're going to take this as slow as you need to, all right?"

"What if I want fast?" I scuttled toward the head of the bed.

He grabbed my ankle and widened my legs before fitting his shoulders between my thighs. "Oh, there's no way we're going fast." He grinned up at me and I was relieved to see the thrill in his eyes again.

*Challenge accepted.*

I could see the change building inside of him. I was pretty sure I was in a lot of damn trouble.

When he lowered his head, and slipped two fingers along my slit, I fell back against the pillows with a groan.

He looked up from between my thighs. "Let's just make sure you're ready for me. Now that I know I need to be a little more careful."

"Not too careful."

“It’s not supposed to hurt.”

“How many virgins have you deflowered, buddy?”

He twirled his tongue around my clit. “Just one.”

When I tensed, he grinned. “This one.”

“Oh.”

“So it’s technically a first time for both of us.” He rolled his hips into the mattress and I was suddenly very jealous of the high thread count sheets and his cotton underwear.

I wanted him to roll those hips against me, dammit.

“I’m a big guy. I’m used to having to get a woman ready for me.”

“Oh, that’s very kind of you.”

He grinned then dragged the flat of his tongue over my center. “Jealous?”

“How would you like it if I was talking about another cock inside me right now?”

His nostrils flared again. “I’ll be the only one inside this pussy from now on.”

“You don’t own me or my pussy.”

He dragged in a breath and slipped those two fingers in farther. I arched under him and groaned when he stretched me further. He went at my clit like a man possessed. I slapped the mattress and bowed up and pushed pillows out of the way as he drove me up and through another orgasm.

Not sweetly.

No, I’d asked for the sweet Seth to step aside and it seemed like that was exactly what I was getting.

Part of me wanted to tweak the demon out again, but I couldn’t quite breathe yet. The lights of the bedroom were sparking and my thighs wouldn’t stop quivering.

“Mine,” he muttered and went in for another round.

I was weak and my elbow collapsed beneath me as I giggled my way through the band of hysteria around my chest. How many orgasms were too many?

He blew over my clit and I shuddered and tried to roll away from him. "Seth, please."

"I like when you say that word."

"Don't get used to it."

He inched up my body finally and settled his hips between my thighs. He pressed his cock against my pussy and I cried out. Christ, I might just come from that little touch.

Every nerve ending was firing and my synapses had crossed and recrossed until I was so wrung out, I was ready to flip him over and take care of things myself.

Too bad he was so goddamn tall. And the endless flexing muscles of his shoulders and thighs were deceptively heavy.

A perfect kind of heavy.

One I could become addicted to.

*No. Don't go there, girl.*

I sifted my fingers through his sweaty hair and gave him a long lazy kiss. He groaned against my lips and his hips shifted. God, yes. Finally.

"I need you inside me."

"I don't want to hurt you."

"It's not like you have a damn python in your pants." I stroked my fingers down the intricate tattoo along his left arm. I rarely got to see it since he was almost always dressed for business, but the white snow leopard was stunning. Using his skin tone and a deft hand, the artist had created a stunning animal that climbed up his arm and over part of his shoulder. I leaned over and licked the muscles that twitched and flowed under the art.

The cat's blue eyes were sharp and assessing, and the claws and jaw were in mid-attack. Just like him. Sleek and

panther-like, with a bite that could surprise you when you weren't paying attention.

He finally lowered his boxer briefs and butted the head of his cock along my pussy. He leaned down and tugged at my lower lip. "Someday I want to watch these full lips widen around me. Take me deep."

I swallowed a shuddering breath. I wanted that too. I wanted everything.

He reached for the bedside table and a black wrapper sitting on the corner.

My eyebrows shot up. Everyone, even a virgin, knew what a black labeled condom meant. He slid the length of his cock along the outside of my lips until the flared head rested right above my slit.

Good grief, he wasn't being boastful with the Magnum condom.

I was a dead woman.

He leaned back until he was kneeling between my legs and I was suddenly worried that maybe I really wasn't ready for this. As he rolled the condom over his length, the almost angry hue of his cock made me wonder just how on edge he really was.

I looked a little closer at his face. Because, seriously, I needed to not look at that monster between his damn legs. Sweet merciful heaven. There was a tension around his eyes and his lips were pinched. He'd been giving me the royal treatment to make sure this night was amazing for me.

Now I'd have to figure out how to give some of that back.

I reached up to cover his hand at the base of his cock and pulled him back down over me. The tension I'd been trying to avoid suddenly didn't seem so overwhelming. I guided him between my legs and he slowly slid inside. My body was never going to be ready for him, not to this level.

Not until he stretched me and made me his.

He paused and blew out a slow breath. I reached around him and gripped his ass to pull him deeper.

“Ally—” But he groaned and his head tipped back. His neck rippled with each swallow and the tendons raised in reaction.

I let out my own slow breath as I took him deeper, stretching, opening. But then he was just mine.

Just everything.

I wrapped myself around him and my hips lifted to meet him as he slowly withdrew and pushed forward. “God,” he muttered against my neck.

I tightened my grip around his shoulders and my legs around his hips until we were moving as one. I wanted more. I wanted it harder. Some part of me was craving the stretch, but he kept each stroke measured.

He reached between us and suddenly, with a few flicks of his talented fingers, he tripped me back into the whirling pleasure. He’d truly primed me for this moment. He pumped inside of me a few more times, his rough movements just what I needed, and I cried out.

I wasn’t ready to be done. But the orgasm slammed into me just the same, and the chain reaction seemed to pull him under too.

My name was a prayer on his tongue as he kissed me through the end of his release. I encircled his shoulders and held on as he shook over me, and there was an overwhelming sense of peace that flowed through his muscles.

He rolled off me and disposed of the condom with tissues from the bedside table. His eyes were so heavy, I wasn’t sure he was actually still awake.

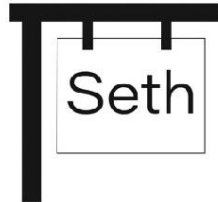
When he rolled me under him and threw a thigh over me, I knew he was half asleep. The actual confirmation came a moment later when he softly snored in my ear.

“Seriously?”

I tried to move him, but I was utterly pinned.

Afterglow, my ass. He had literally tapped out.

## EIGHT



HOLY FUCK, I WAS DEAD.

No, wait, I was still alive. That was oxygen puffing out of my lips against the pillow under my cheek. There were definite scratches on my back from—

I jerked up in bed, gripping my head so it didn't revolve off my neck. I wasn't in my bedroom at home. Swanky suite. Friday night in the summer, all booked up, but I got a room for sex because I was old town money. So that meant I got to fuck a beautiful girl on the fly, since no one wanted to deny my dick a thing.

Sweet, really.

Christ, was I hungover? No. Fucked over. Completely. I'd had the best sex of my life, and now I was in an empty bed.

Eyes still half closed, I swung out and patted the sheets. Ice cold. She'd been gone for a while. Probably the moment I passed out.

And passed out about summed it up. I'd drained what was left of my smarts and my sense into that condom and gone to sleep quicker than a drunk at the tail end of a bender.

Wasn't completely my fault. I hadn't had a childless night for a while, and my little girl tended to have a few crappy dreams. Monsters with snapping teeth. Wild dogs. Demons in closets I had to dispel with wise words and hugs in the dark.

I wasn't even going to touch on exactly how long it had been since I'd had sex. Well, sex with someone other than



myself. Self-created booty calls happened often, but with an actual flesh-and-blood woman? It had been a while. Hell, Ally was *the* woman, even if I hadn't fully realized it before I'd presented her with that contract. I'd been rocking a boner ever since.

So yeah, I'd been kind of pent-up. Exhaustion had claimed me swiftly, and it had been much preferable to fighting to stay awake to talk about...

Way too much.

No wonder she'd sneaked out on me. Supposed best friend, and I'd dirty-talked her and taken her virginity—which was *not* my fault, since she'd never seen fit to tell me that little fact until we were getting naked—then fallen asleep as if it was any old night.

Jesus, and I thought my brother was a douche? He had some stiff competition for the title.

Forcing my heavy eyelids open against the sun trying to carve my brain in two, I glanced around and wished for alcohol. Maybe there was something worthwhile in the mini bar.

*Those days are over, pal. They ended right about when the condom slipped when you were banging Marjorie in the Mustang. Now you're a responsible father, remember?*

I braced my head in my hands and sucked in a breath. Responsible, right. I had to pick up Laurie. It had to be mid-morning from the amount of sunlight, and I'd told Oliver I'd be there early.

Rubbing my eyes, I kicked off the sheets. And noticed a bright red splotch on the fitted sheet.

Christ. I'd tried to be careful, to take it slow, but I hadn't at first. I'd rammed my fingers into her like a damn bull, and she'd never—

Before I could argue with myself, I fumbled for my phone on the nightstand. I had to know she was okay. She could hate me, probably did, but I couldn't move from this room until I knew she was all right. She'd certainly come last night, and I

was pretty sure she'd been right there with me for most of it, but she wasn't here now. She was alone, and I couldn't fucking bear it.

I typed out a quick text.

**Missed you this morning.**

Oh yeah, that was how to demonstrate my concern. By couching it in a healthy streak of douche swagger.

She answered swiftly.

**Had an early shift at the diner. Eggs Benedict & burnt coffee wait for no man.**

**You didn't even leave a note.**

Good lord, I might as well have taken out my tampon with that statement. She was probably laughing at my pathetic ass.

From her next reply, it was close.

**Was I supposed to? Didn't realize we'd progressed beyond booty call status to something else.**

I gripped the back of my neck. Yeah, so she was annoyed. Whether it was because I'd fallen asleep right after or because we'd had sex in the first place was anyone's guess. Only way to find out for sure was to piss her off enough to be honest.

**I know you're clearly unfamiliar with booty call protocol, but yeah, it's good to let the dude know you're leaving in case he wakes up with a hard dick and wants round two.**

Her response was instantaneous.

**Sorry, Charlie, that was a one-time event. But good luck finding a more suitable partner. I hear Tinder is nice.**

**Tinder, huh? You tried that? Is that why you couldn't find anyone to finish the job?**

**Thank God you came along. Willing prick and all. You're such a good Samaritan. When I can walk straight again, I'll send you a thank-you note.**

Pride surged first. I was a man, after all, and fucking a hot chick until she couldn't move was pretty much every dude's dream. But she wasn't some random hot chick. This was Ally, and she wasn't just a conquest.

She'd been a virgin, for fuck's sake, and if she was hurting from my lack of finesse, I'd saw off my own dick. Okay, maybe take a swing or two at it at least.

Ah, to hell with it. I was asking, straight out.

**Are you all right? Physically? I was rough.**

**Fine. Dandy. All good under the hood.**

**I didn't mean to fall asleep. Laurie wakes me up every night & super-charged O put me down for the count.**

She took longer to reply.

**Just as well. Talking makes stuff messy. We did it, it's done.**

While I was pounding a dent in the mattress beside my hip, she texted again.

**How's L?**

**Don't know. Haven't gone to get her yet. Just woke up. I should've checked with Oliver first, but I was worried.**

**Don't be. I'm perfect. Thanks for not making this weird, okay? Gotta go. Work calls. Give L a kiss for me.**

**Al, come over for dinner or something?**

I waited a few minutes for her to answer. When it became clear she wouldn't, at least anytime soon, I headed into the bathroom and took care of business. The shower beckoned, but I wasn't in that much of a hurry to wash her off me. Especially since I was fairly certain this would never be happening again.

Forget making a baby. Our friendship was probably in shreds.

*Never learn, do you? Last time you thought with your dick, you ended up married to a woman you hadn't even intended to keep dating.*

Of course, that was entirely different, and out of that relationship had sprung the best thing to ever happen to me. Sure, I'd been divorced by the age of twenty-five, but eh, shit happened. Especially in my family. The key was getting out of a bad situation.

With Ally, I'd been thinking practically. The kid thing had been building for a while. Approaching her about it had only come about after I'd mulled it over from every direction. Sure, they were sticky parts. I'll admit I hadn't expected the sex thing to go down so well. I mean, she was beautiful, no denying that, but I didn't want to fuck every lovely woman I saw. And it was *Ally*.

So yeah, the lust had been a surprise. Even more so? The morning after, I wasn't regretting we'd done it so much as I was regretting we hadn't done it again before she split. And there had been no babymaking involved.

Just Ally and her soft, lilac-scented hair and rain-soaked skin. Her full lips and her curves and those perfect thighs, spreading for me...

Swallowing hard, I braced a fist on the sink. Maybe I'd better take an ice-cold shower so I didn't go to my brother's with a damn hard-on.

A quick glance at my phone made me curse. Almost noon. Laurie was probably wondering where I was. Oliver too. My brother didn't like his schedule being disrupted, so his lack of a phone call was surprising.

I texted him as I grabbed my jeans off the floor.

**On my way. Sorry. She ok?**

**Who's this? Not my derelict brother who was probably getting laid this entire time while I doted on his offspring.**

In spite of my bleak mood, I grinned. Leave it to O.

**I wish on the getting laid. More like sleeping it off.**

**It being previous laying?**

**Gentlemen don't kiss & tell.**

**Waiting...**

**Asshole. I'll be there in a few.**

I finished dressing and went downstairs to check out. The woman behind the desk didn't wink or waggle her brows or do anything to indicate she knew I'd gotten a room for the purposes of sex, but it was pretty obvious. I lived on the other side of the lake. Sure, my excuse of having a few too many to drive home might hold water, but small towns and suspicious minds went together.

As long as no one had seen Ally enter the hotel too, all good. I didn't care what people thought of me.

“Thank you so much, Mr. Hamilton. Please come again. And give our best to Ms. Lawrence.”

I stared at the concierge for so long that my vision blurred. Then I shook my head and strode toward the door.

Maybe she knew Ally and I were friends. Sure, she did. And maybe we'd be the hottest topic of gossip by lunch. Probably before then. I just hoped Ally didn't have to deal with shit at the diner.

The drive to Oliver's place didn't take long. He lived about a mile away from me, also on the lake. The Hamilton family home was about a mile away on the opposite side of Oliver's. We were like three points of a triangle of dysfunction with beautiful views of the water.

I pulled up behind Oliver's BMW and parked in the circular drive. To torment myself some more, I checked my silent phone. No response from Ally.

Surprise, surprise.

I jogged up the steep flight of stairs to the porch and went inside without knocking. I followed my little girl's laughter into the kitchen, already smiling. No matter what kind of shit

brewed in my gut, hearing Laurie was the way to put me in a better mood.

Especially when she was covered in chocolate chip batter from making cookies with my not so stern, older-by-six-minutes brother.

“Well, look who it is, L-monster.” Oliver swung Laurie up onto his hip and carted her over to me. He was all smiles, but his eyes were a little wild.

I knew that look well.

“Daddy!” Laurie said, already extending her arms to me and leaning half out of my brother’s hold.

“Hiya, sweetie. Sorry I wasn’t here sooner.” I grinned and took her from Oliver, setting her on my hip as he had done.

Every now and then it occurred to me how similar our mannerisms were. Oliver didn’t have any children, of course. I wasn’t sure he ever would. He’d used my experience as reason to double and triple bag ever since. For all I knew, he could’ve gotten snipped, he’d been that freaked out about unplanned procreation.

But he was a damn good uncle, as evidenced by my little girl’s giggles as she recounted her night with my brother.

“We watched movies. Poor Dory. And Hank. Unca O loved Hank.” Laurie looked back at my brother for confirmation. “Didn’t you?”

“I did. So much so that I decided I need Hank bedding for my Alaska King bed. I may have to get it handmade, but such sacrifices are made for love.” Oliver ruffled Laurie’s messy blond curls. “Right, baby girl?”

“Unca O has the biggest bed ever.” Laurie held out her hands as far apart as she could, tilting precariously on my hip until I righted her. “He said it has enough room for all his favorite big ladies to come over for sleepers.”

“Sleepovers,” Oliver corrected, winking at me before he turned away to clean up the cookie mess on the counter.

I narrowed my eyes at O's back. "That sounds fun. We should do that sometime. What do you think? You, me, and—"

"Ally! She'll come over for a sleeper. And her friend. The one with the bouncy hair." Laurie grinned. "Like Goldilocks."

"Your hair isn't too far from Goldilocks's hair yourself, princess." Oliver turned back to brush a kiss over Laurie's hair while mouthing the word "no" at me.

"That sounds fun. I'm not sure Ally and Sage could make it, but we should ask them. And we'll get lots of snacks. All your favorites. Cheetos, and caramel popcorn, and gummy worms. Wouldn't that be fun to eat all of that in Uncle Oliver's big special bed?"

"This is how you repay me," Oliver muttered, shaking his head as he swept the tray of cookies into the oven.

"Yes. So much fun. And we could get a puppy too." Laurie's big blue eyes glowed. "Puppies love sleepers. Right, Unca O?"

"Sure. Why the heck not? Might as well get a marching band in there too."

"I'm sure it could be arranged. I'll get back to you."

Oliver flipped me the bird behind Laurie's back and I swallowed a laugh.

Half an hour later, we were eating warm chocolate chip cookies while Laurie played on a blanket in the living room. Dory was on TV again and Laurie was babbling happily as she dressed the dolls Oliver had bought her to leave at his place.

And I was shoving cookies in my mouth faster than I could speak, so hopefully I wouldn't have to.

"Out with it. If I'm on overnight babysitting duty, you're at least going to tell me which townie is now off-limits."

I picked up a stray chocolate chip and popped it between my lips. "You have a filthy mind."

"Yeah, and you are long overdue for a reckless night. I hope it was worth me missing three hours of sleep because L

kept waking up.”

“Fuck, more nightmares? That’s a new thing. Well, relatively new. The last six months or so. I chalked it up to her seeing a movie she shouldn’t have.”

“Yeah, some of those porn chicks have traumatized me too.” Oliver gave a mock shudder, but I could tell from his furrowed brow that he was worried.

“How bad was it?”

“Not awful, but she was spooked, so I read to her and she eventually fell back asleep.”

“Just once?”

Oliver shifted on his stool. “Three times.”

“Ahh, fuck.” I raked a hand through my hair, guilt swarming my belly like drunk locusts. While my little girl had been crying in her sleep, I’d been fucking Ally.

Father of the year material for sure. Jesus.

“I’m sure it’s just a phase. Kids go through tons of them. Remember that year you wouldn’t eat anything but bologna and cheese sandwiches?”

“It wasn’t a year, more like three months, and this is a bit worse. I wonder if—”

Oliver held up a hand. “Don’t even say it. If you mention that bitch, my good humor will be ruined.”

I leaned forward. “Regardless, she’s her mother. And maybe there’s just no getting around that fact.”

Hearing myself, I frowned. What business did I have trying to set up this arrangement with Ally? My needs—and even Laurie’s—weren’t all that mattered. I’d told myself I could be both parents to my children, but maybe that was crazy talk. I couldn’t magically become the children’s mother. And when it came to the baby I had with Ally, he or she would have a mother. The *best* mother. Even without seeing Ally have kids of her own yet, I knew that just from watching her



with Laurie. So how could I ever consider Ally might want to have a baby and walk away?

Christ, I was a selfish fuck. No wonder Ally didn't want to talk to me. I'd thought up the most insane plan ever and I'd asked her to make the ultimate sacrifice for a few pennies. All right, a lot of them, but still. Exchanging a child for a college education was nuts.

Ally wasn't Marj, and asking her to make a deal like that proved that I didn't deserve a best friend like her.

I just fucking hoped she'd give me another chance.

"Seth?"

Shaking my head, I held up a finger at my brother and yanked out my phone. I texted Ally as fast as my fingers would work.

**I'm so fucking sorry. More sorry than you'll ever know.**

She didn't respond, and by now, I almost didn't expect her to. I couldn't have screwed up this situation any more if I'd tried.

I jerked to my feet and almost without thinking, tucked two cookies in my suit coat. Chocolate chip was Ally's favorite.

Oliver rose, clearly reading my intentions to split. "You're leaving? Just like that?"

"Yeah, I have shit to fix. I'm sorry, man. I really appreciate last night." I clapped him on the shoulder and went to talk to my daughter.

She wasn't in a hurry to go, of course, but I mentioned a possible hot fudge sundae at the diner in her future if she came without a fuss. More sugary snacks weren't the best idea, and I'd probably pay the price for the rest of the weekend, but desperate times.

Oliver shook his head before I carted Laurie and her bag of toys and clothes out the door. "Whatever you're up to, I hope it ends well."

“Me too. I’ll call.”

I was already halfway down the steps with Laurie, who was waving frantically at my brother. “Bye Unca O! Bye bye!”

“Bye sweetness. Be good for your daddy.”

She wriggled in my arms, smelling of powder and chocolate. “We go see Ally?”

“Yep, we’re going to see Ally. But Daddy needs to talk to her alone for a few minutes, so Aunty Sage will keep you company.” If Sage was even working. And if Sage didn’t hate me too for being a jackass and debauching her roommate, assuming Ally had told her what had happened. Part A and Part B.

Shit, I’d asked a virgin to have my baby. Not knowing she was a virgin didn’t make it any better. Somehow, I should have known. Ally was a lockbox under the best of circumstances, but something like that...

Not to mention that I’d agonized more than once about her choice of dates over the years, imagining her going home with some of them and needing to drink to get the pictures out of my mind. I’d been certain it was just my streak of protectiveness in her direction kicking in, but what if?

What the fuck if?

I placed Laurie in her car seat and adjusted the belt, snapping it into place. “Extra sprinkles on your sundae if you’re good for Aunty Sage.”

“Sage has pretty hair. Yellow like mine.” Laurie touched her curls.

“Yes, just like yours, though yours is the prettiest in all the land.” I leaned forward to kiss the tip of her nose and she giggled.

A minute later, we were on the road to the diner. I debated giving Ally a head’s up that I was stopping by, then decided a sneak attack was best. I wasn’t trying to corner her or convince her of anything. All I wanted to do was look her in the eye and

make sure she was okay. And to apologize. Possibly fifty times or so.

I parked up the street from the diner and released Laurie from her car seat prison. Setting her on my hip, I checked my jacket pocket to make sure the cookies were still intact. Laurie wasn't about to miss a chance for more sweets, however. She got one forbidden glimpse of them and screwed up her adorable face, her big blue eyes going shiny with unshed tears.

“For me?” she wailed. “For me?”

God save me from women. I truly wasn't equipped to deal with them. Every time I thought I could handle the task, new obstacles were thrown in my path.

I dug out one of the cookies and resigned myself to a sleepless night with my child. Just as well. God knows I had no other reasons not to sleep at night. Last night's event had been a one-off, certain to never be repeated again.

*Virginity destroyer.*

The little bell over the diner door dinged as I entered with a now contentedly munching Laurie. She was spewing crumbs all over my wrinkled dress shirt, but my attention snagged on all the faces that turned my way. It seemed like every patron in the place was staring at me and Laurie.

All but one person with a high, bouncy dark ponytail, and that was because she had her back to me. Luckily, she was talking loudly enough that I could hear her just fine.

“Oh, not you too, Sally Mae. As I was just telling Vern, I was just helping him with a problem. You know, as a friend.”

Sally Mae was looking past Ally at me. She cleared her throat. “Uh, dear, I'm not sure—”

“Certain issues of a performance nature,” Ally went on. “Any good friend would help. Now would you like eggs over easy like usual with red potatoes and a side of sausage? We have the summer fruit cup on special today. Comes free with any meal.”

“Alison,” I said in an undertone.

Ally's shoulders went tight in her uniform, but she didn't glance my way. Didn't acknowledge me at all.

"The fruit cup has blueberries, honeydew, pineapple, and slices of fresh strawberries. The first crop this year from Happy Acres Orchard, right down in Turnbull."

"Alison," I said again.

Laurie finished scarfing down her cookie and pulled her chocolatey fingers out of her mouth. "Ally!"

Yeah, my best friend might be able to ignore me, but she definitely couldn't ignore my little spitfire.

Ally turned, a genuine smile creasing her face and lighting up her honey eyes. "Hiya you. What're you doing here?" She moved forward and snatched Laurie out of my arms without acknowledging my presence. "Look at these cheeks, all covered in chocolate. What has your daddy been feeding you?"

"Cookies. Unca O and me made 'em. Daddy brought you one."

"Daddy actually brought you two, but a certain thief felt the need to sample more of the merchandise." I cupped my daughter's head, leaving my hand there until Ally had no choice but to meet my gaze.

"I texted you."

"Sorry, working."

"And gossiping. About problems of a performance nature." The diner was far too quiet around us, and I wasn't about to give the town anything more to chat about today. "Is Sage working?"

"Sure am." The cheerful blond crossed the restaurant with a tray full of dishes. "How can I help you?" Sage asked as she passed us, stopping to say something to Mrs. Negley in one of the booths.

They both giggled and glanced my way.

Fabulous.

“By the way,” I said, raising my voice, focusing on Ally’s face as it paled, “we both know my performance was just fine. Spectacular, in fact.”

“Enough to knock you right out?” Sage asked, blinking innocently when I narrowed my eyes.

“Back room,” Ally muttered, handing off Laurie to Sage without even waiting for my direction. Even with all this shit between us, we had a rhythm.

A damn fine one, in and out of bed. Fuck performance issues. Mine had been spot-on.

Sage hugged Laurie and carried her to an empty booth. “How about a nice cup of fruit while your daddy and Ally talk?”

“Ice scream. Daddy promised ice scream.” Laurie glanced my way and banged a tiny fist on the table. “With sprinkles if I was good.”

“Were you good?”

“Yeah, put a hot fudge sundae with sprinkles on my tab. A small one,” I said out of the side of my mouth.

Sage nodded. “Will do.”

Ally was already headed down the hall that led to the bathrooms, the break room, and the storage room, so I followed, figuring she’d aim for the break room. Instead she went right for the storage area.

The second I shut the door, she whirled on me.

“What was I supposed to say? Everyone knows, Seth. *Everyone*. Someone must’ve seen us at the hotel, or hell if I know.”

I started to reply, but Ally wasn’t finished.

“They asked me questions all shift. I had to make a joke out of it, so people didn’t think you and I could—that we could ever be—”

“Had to make a joke out of me, you mean.” I tucked my thumbs in the pockets of my jeans. “Think you got your wish.

Probably half the town is now wondering how I even managed to make my daughter.”

She bowed her head and her jaunty ponytail drooped over one shoulder. “I’m sorry. It was just a joke to save face and I guess I went too far.”

“Save face why? Even if someone got the idea that we were together, why not just roll with it?”

“*Roll with it?* Are you crazy?”

“I must be, considering the last week.” I stepped forward and forced the irritation from what she’d told people out of my head. When compared with my recent sins, it didn’t really rank. “I texted you that I was sorry.”

She tucked a stray curl behind her ear. “For what, exactly?”

“I never should have asked you to have my baby.”

Ally’s gaze shot to the door as if she expected it to blow open at any moment. “About time you realize that.”

“It was completely unfair of me. I’m not enough to be both mom and dad to a new child. I mean, with Laurie, it just worked out that way, but to set up a situation where I’m the only one making all the decisions for another child isn’t right. I’m simply not enough.”

“What the hell are you talking about?” Ally stepped forward, going toe to toe with me. “Laurie is a happy, well-adjusted little girl. She adores you.”

“I’m not her mother. I can never be her mother.” I swallowed hard. “No matter how much I love her, it’s not the same as—”

“You think a child knows the difference as long as they’re treasured? Sure, they might wonder what if, but the lack comes from not being loved enough, not from whether the person who tucks them in at night was mommy or daddy. I didn’t know my father, and I grew up just fine with only my mom. She was everything.” Ally gripped my wrists and jerked

my arms until my eyes snapped up to meet hers. “She was way more than enough.”

“Your mother was amazing.”

“You’re right. She was. And so are you. Laurie couldn’t be any luckier if she had two parents. No one could love that little girl more than you do. Just like you’d love that new baby. I never doubted for a second that you were enough. It wasn’t that.”

“I didn’t know you were a virgin. If I’d known...”

“It’s not about that either.” Her nails scraped my wrists, and the bite of pain made my cock spring to life. I wasn’t proud of it, but this woman was like a goddamn torch to my libido.

One taste of her hadn’t been enough. Would never be enough.

“Then?” I asked softly, fighting the urge to cup her cheek so she had no choice but to look into my eyes. I hated that she never fully looked at me anymore. That was a new thing too.

So much of this was new, and she wasn’t the only one struggling to keep her footing. With every step, I felt as if I was sinking in quicksand.

“You’re the most important person in my life. If this goes sideways and I lose you—” she began.

“Not gonna happen.” Even after the past week, I didn’t have to fake the confidence in my voice. “We are solid. Always. No matter what.”

“A baby would change things. You thought you’d make it easy on me, give me the chance to walk away. But I couldn’t. Just like I can’t turn my back on you or that little girl.” Her face tipped up to mine and her pleading tone cut me to the quick. “Do you honestly think I could walk away from a child we’d made?”

“So do it with me.”

Her mouth quivered. “What?”

“Have the baby with me and we’ll raise it together. Why the hell not, right? We’re both single, and we’re friends. As close as could be before sex, and now that’s obviously a go too, so why not?” I rushed on, the idea gaining speed. I didn’t know all the logistics of what I was suggesting, but right now, I didn’t care.

This way, we could both get what we wanted. And I wouldn’t lose her. She wouldn’t walk away from town for school, or if she did, she’d come back.

She’d always come back to me. To *us*.

Ally backed up and spun around, facing the stacks of boxes along the far wall. “What about Laurie?”

The question barely registered, because all I could think about was that she hadn’t said no.

Hadn’t said yes either, but she definitely hadn’t said no.

“She wants another sibling. You know that.”

“But if it’s me you have the child with, won’t it confuse her? We’ve spent years telling her we are just friends.”

“She loves you. She’d be thrilled to have you around more. As would I.” Unable to stay away a second longer, I wrapped my arms around her from behind.

She not only bristled, but she pulled her body not so subtly away from mine. Something else she was always doing lately. Now that I knew she was attracted to me too, it seemed like just one more confusion to pile onto the rest. But maybe she wasn’t comfortable being attracted to me yet. In her mind, we were still off-limits. Still strictly friend-zoned.

“Hey,” I said gently. “It’s just me. Last night doesn’t change all that came before.” She let out a broken laugh and I swallowed over the dust in my throat. “Does it?”

She laughed again, weakly. “I know you’re not a chick.”

“Not so much, no.”

“But yeah, for women, sex changes stuff. Probably not all women. I’m sure there are plenty who can do it and not



overanalyze, but I'm not one of them. Not when it's you."

I stroked a hand over her arm. "Plus, it was your first—"

"God, don't." She buried her face in her hands. "So embarrassing."

"What is?"

"I'm almost thirty and I hadn't done it with anyone yet. I'm a freak with super-high expectations."

"Having super-high expectations makes you a freak? Good to know." Carefully, I turned her to face me and skimmed my thumb down the side of her throat. The skin was more than a little pink there, and my dick stirred again. My stubble had branded her as surely as my cock had.

*Mine.* I would always be her first. No matter what.

"I'm glad it was me," I said hoarsely, tightening my hold on her throat. That brief show of dominance had her glancing up warily, but she didn't back away. "That it was us. You gave me a gift I won't ever forget."

"Yeah, well, ditto, Hamilton." She took a breath and the next time she spoke, her voice was stronger. "It didn't quite compare to your Mustang exploits for your first time, but as far as first time fucks go, it probably wasn't too bad."

"Probably not." I brushed a kiss over her forehead and she softened in my arms, melting against me in a way that didn't make me want to stop kissing her. Or touching her.

Ever.

"Now we have time to perfect the technique," I added as lightly as possible when my vocal cords were squeezed as tight as my swollen cock in my jeans.

"Do we?"

"Oh yeah. If you want to." I wrapped my hand around her ponytail and tugged. "With or without a baby, I want you again. In every goddamn way possible."

Her chin trembled. "But the baby is important to you. You wouldn't have gone to a lawyer to draw up a contract if it

wasn't. It wasn't a lark."

I was tempted to deny what she'd said, but I couldn't. She was the only person I'd always been honest with.

Her and my little girl.

"Yeah, it matters. Not just because Laurie's asked for one. That might be a passing whim, who knows." I shuffled my feet, feeling idiotic. Still, telling the truth was important. "Growing up without my mom around for more than random holidays was rough. Not because my dad raised us, but because he wasn't into it. He cared more about his work. And yeah, I know I have the tendency to get caught up too, so I want some insurance Laurie has what I did."

"Your twin," Ally whispered.

"Yeah. We always had each other. Even when he stole my Legos or hid the second Xbox controller or put rice in my socks, the little fucker." I had to grin. "She should have that too, and soon, before the age difference is too much. She's already almost four, and it's not like there's anyone special in my life." I sucked in a breath. "Except you."

She shifted out of my arms, but not before the wetness in her eyes stole the oxygen right back out of my chest. "Ally—"

"Give me a few days, okay? Some time to work through all of this, to figure out how I feel."

I wanted to argue. To try another tack. That was what I did. I negotiated for new angles, new perks to throw into the deal. Whatever it took to close the sale.

And she deserved so much more than that.

"Okay." I nodded and shoved all the jagged edges inside me back in line. "As long as you need."

She glanced back, surprise erasing the raw emotion on her face. "Seriously? Maybe I wasn't the only one who needed to get laid."

I laughed, shocking us both before I leaned forward to press my lips to her forehead again. "Definitely not."

Though it about killed me to walk away from her, I headed for the door. I placed my hand on the knob and looked back, memorizing the way the lone overhead bulb gave her dark hair an angelic glow. But those deep brown eyes were temptation unparalleled.

“If people ask what we did in here, don’t suppose you could say you found out my little problem was miraculously solved?”

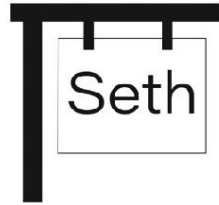
Her lips twitched. “Never said it was a little problem, Hamilton. All your problems,” she cleared her throat, “are huge.”

I grinned and stepped out, shutting the door behind me. Now I just had to wait.

A peal of girlish laughter flowed down the hall and my grin widened.

And eat ice cream with my baby girl.

## NINE



“NO, BART, I DON’T FORESEE ANY ADDITIONAL HOLDUPS WITH the check. Like I told you yesterday, we’re just waiting on the bank to—”

“Fucking bureaucrats,” Bart Jenkins mumbled. “I don’t have time for their bullshit. Maybe if I golfed more often with old man Chandler, I’d get better service.”

“Doubtful. I’ve heard his swing is killer. He’d probably annihilate you.”

Bart huffed out a laugh. “You know, Hamilton, you’re the oddball in your family, aren’t you? Your father and Oliver, they’re the serious ones. The sharks. You just make jokes and amble through life, smiling at everyone while you quietly pile up your assets.”

“Some of my friends would debate the quiet label, but yeah. That’s me in a nutshell.” I smiled and kicked back in my chair, crossing my legs at the ankle on the edge of the desk. It was almost lunchtime, and I was starving.

Maybe I’d meander over to the diner and—

Nope. With a side of hell no.

Ally had asked me for space to make up her mind, and I was going to give it to her even if it drove me crazy. I was already more than halfway there, so it wouldn’t take long.

“All right, I’ll check in again tomorrow.” Bart sighed. “I hate fucking waiting.”

“You and me both,” I said under my breath as I hung up.

Phone in my hand, I debated my lunch choices. If I wasn't heading to the diner, I needed some sustenance. Maybe I'd ask Shelly to pick me up a sub when she was down at the bank, since Thursday was payday.

Thursday already. I hadn't talked to Ally since Saturday afternoon. Almost a freaking week.

But who was keeping score? Not me. I scarcely had even noticed that we never went this long without talking. Even after the kiss following Laurie's bathtub adventure, we'd bumped into each other at the diner midweek.

Bumped into meaning I'd gone over there intentionally because her blueberry pie was the best on the planet, but whatever. I wasn't going to do that this time. Even if it meant I starved to death.

I reached for my office phone just as the button for the receptionist's line lit up. I grinned. That woman was a godsend. "Hey, Shell, can you stop by Jersey Angel's while you're out at lunch?"

"Sure. Pastrami on rye, light mayo, extra Russian, leaf lettuce, not shredded, tomatoes, extra peppers and onions?"

"You're the best. And a brownie. Cheesecake if they have it." Damn sweet tooth.

"Of course. Grape soda?"

In front of anyone else, I would be slightly embarrassed about my pedestrian food choices. Shelly, however, had worked for the family business for more than a decade. She knew my weaknesses.

Even those that came in purple cans.

"Yes, please. Thanks so much."

"No problem. One more thing, sir."

"Ahh, Christ, not the fucking sir shit—" I broke off as the door to my office swung open and Ally stepped inside carrying a Hamilton Realty folder.

The one that probably contained the contract I'd had drawn up.

I swallowed deeply enough that Shelly probably heard it. Maybe Ally too. Fuck, had she always been this beautiful?

Probably. I'd just been blind. A complete fool.

"Sorry to interrupt," Ally said tentatively, gripping the folder until it dented.

Good sign? Bad sign? Impossible to say for sure. She might've returned the signed version, or she could be plotting to throw it in my face. With Ally, one was never certain.

Just another thing I loved about her. Platonically loved. Like a friend I had sex with.

*Great sex.*

"You're not interrupting," I said to Ally. "You know you have a standing invitation. Just a second."

I returned to my phone call. "Thanks so much, Shell. Gotta go." I clicked off without finding out if Shell's one thing was to announce Ally's impending arrival.

It didn't matter. I'd deal with anything else later. Like next year.

"It's the middle of the workday. I should've called first, but—"

"No need. Standing invitation," I repeated, rising and coming around the desk. I met her at the door and closed it, using the wood for support as I indulged in a nice long look at her. "You look incredible."

It wasn't an exaggeration. Her dark hair had been left long and loose, flowing down her bare back. She had on a red sundress type thing that showed off her breasts and narrow waist, not to mention her long legs that went on forever and ended in strappy red sandals.

Even her toenails were a dark, vampish red. My tongue tingled. I'd never been one for sucking on feet, but for her, I just might start.

Her cheeks reddened. Seeing Ally blush was a new thing. I liked it. A lot.

“Thanks. Had the day off today, so I figured I’d wear something fun.” She walked toward the windows, checking out the view from this floor as she always did.

The building that contained Hamilton Realty had a primo view of the lake, and today the sunshine was dappling the restless water. It was breezy today, and the whitecaps proved it.

“Day off? Imagine such a thing.” Feigning nonchalance, I sat on the edge of my desk.

No part of me was nonchalant around her, not anymore. Not after we’d had the most amazing sex of my life and all I wanted was to do it again. And again.

Oh, and maybe to have a baby with her.

But at the moment, even that want paled in comparison to fucking her. The insistent pressure in my cock was making *everything* pale in comparison to sex.

Sex with my incredible, smart, funny best friend who also happened to be hot as hell.

I was a lucky man.

“Then Jean called off and Sage is probably going to get stuck working a double, but she was insistent she needed the money,” Ally continued, happily oblivious to my sex-starved mental meandering.

“I thought she was set financially from her parents. The Hummingbird’s Nest always did well. They certainly got a nice check from the sale of the property.”

I frowned. Why did I care? Sage was a nice girl, and I didn’t want her to struggle financially, but her family wasn’t exactly poor. Her parents had sold their B&B and retired to the west coast, leaving their sheltered only daughter on her own.

Working at a diner. Hmm. So yeah, maybe they hadn’t left her as much as I thought. Not my business though.

Ally shifted away from the window, standing sideways so she was framed in sunlight. “It did, but Sage wants to make her own way. A loft on the lake doesn’t come cheap.”

“I should know,” I said drily, “seeing as I brokered the sale.”

“Yes, real estate guy extraordinaire.” She fingered her arrow necklace. “Is your father back yet?”

“Later today supposedly. Al, why are you here?”

A wrinkle formed between her brows. “I thought you said I had a standing invitation.”

“You do, always. But you’re fidgeting and you’re holding that folder and c’mon, you don’t really care where my dad is. You’ve never liked him.”

“More like he never liked me. I wasn’t good enough to be friends with you.”

I frowned. “He never said that. Not once.”

At least not to me. He wouldn’t dare. He better not have dared to say it to her either.

“But it was heavily implied. And of course he’d wonder what you saw in me. Our worlds couldn’t be more different. We just happened to land in the same classroom in the same high school and somehow we ended up here.”

I pushed off the desk and stalked closer. Somehow now that I’d been inside her, even having a room’s distance between us seemed like too much. “Right here.” I brushed my hand down her hair and she shuddered, and fuck if that didn’t make me harder than steel. “My father hasn’t mentioned you in years.”

She rolled her eyes. “Probably hoping if he denies my existence in your life, I’ll disappear.”

“I don’t give a shit what my father thinks, and you shouldn’t either.”

“Sorry to say, I’m not as good at going with the flow as you are.”



“Just takes practice. I’d be happy to demonstrate anything you’d like.”

“Mmm-hmm, I just bet.” Her lips twitched with the beginnings of a smile, then she pushed the folder at my chest. “Okay.”

I took the folder with suddenly boneless fingers, but I didn’t open it. “Okay?”

“Okay, I’ll do it. I’ll have a ba—”

“Fuck yes.” Threading my hand into her hair, I tugged her against me and dragged her lower lip between my teeth. Her pupils flared wide and I did it again, making her moan. “Say it again.”

“You didn’t—” She paused to drag in air. “You didn’t let me say it the first time.”

“Sorry. Say it now.”

“Bossy.” She smiled as she stroked a hand down my tie, and I swear she might as well have stroked my dick. “It may be the craziest thing I’ve ever done, but I’ll have a baby with you.”

I slanted my mouth over hers, slipping my tongue inside. She curled hers around mine, all heat and need, as she rose up to her tiptoes and tightened her grip on my tie. Pulling me closer, sinking deeper into the kiss. I dropped my hand from her hair to her ass, palming it brazenly, hauling her against me so that she could feel the rigid outline in my pants. She gasped, her eyes popping wide, and I relinquished her mouth long enough to fumble for her hand and drag her around my desk. I opened the top drawer and threw the folder inside without looking at the contents, then pointed at my chair. “Wait here.”

I opened the door and leaned into the hallway until I caught Shelly’s eye. She had the phone cradled against her ear. “Hold all my calls until further notice.”

She nodded and waved me off. It didn’t look like she’d be going out for lunch just quite yet, which might be awkward if I gave a shit.

I stepped back inside my office and shut the door, locking it. Then I glanced toward my desk.

Ally was not sitting. She had her arrow necklace up to her mouth, between her teeth, sucking on it as I hadn't seen her do in a million years. Nervous habit 101.

“What're you doing?” she asked as I skirted the desk. Coming toward her like a damn panther scenting his mate.

Because she was. She would be. Again and again until we accomplished our aim.

Not just mine. Ours now. That it was a joint mission made it more important. This would be the biggest thing we'd ever done together. The absolute best. A little of her, a little of me. Combined into a little person with all their own hopes and dreams and wants.

It was scary as fuck to do this again. To make the choice this time. The circumstances weren't perfect, and most people—including the members of my own family—would think I was loco for posing the suggestion. They would think she was equally nuts for agreeing.

But in my gut, this felt right. Being with Ally had felt right since the very first day. Nothing else in my life had ever felt this natural. This perfect.

I picked up my desk phone and set it on the floor. Then I did the same with my iMac, power strip, and various peripherals. Overkill, perhaps, but I wanted us to have space.

“Seth...” God, that tremulous tone of hers was making my balls throb.

Once I'd gotten the tech stuff out of the way, I leaned over the desk and swept everything to the floor, blotter included. Ally screeched and jumped back, sending the desk chair rolling away across the hardwood floor. Worked for me. I needed room to move.

“I didn't mean right now,” she said as I approached. “Like right this instant.”

“You didn't, but I did.”

“You’re at work.” She took a step back, then another, finally bumping into the wall. “Clients are coming and going. Oliver is on the other side of this wall.”

“In the field,” I said easily, drawing her purse strap down her arm before setting the small, weathered bag aside and caging her in with my arms against the wall. “But I wouldn’t care if he was standing in the hallway. Let the jealous bastard listen.” At her gasp, I dropped my mouth to her ear. “I can’t walk out of here until I’ve had you again.”

“You’re insatiable. I never guessed.”

“Did you think about me in bed?” I trailed my finger underneath her jaw and down along the tops of her cleavage. She fought not to shiver and to hold my gaze, but she was on the verge of losing it, I could tell. “I thought of you.”

“Liar. You did not.”

“Only when you went out on dates with assholes,” I admitted. “And it was entirely unwitting. I tried to stop it. To not see you in my mind naked and writhing on their sheets, mainly because no one was ever good enough for you.”

She lifted her chin in challenge. “But you are?”

The question stopped me in my tracks. A tremor went through my hand and she must’ve noticed, because she gripped it and held it against her cheek. “This is where you say yes. That you’re everything I could ever ask for in a guy. More than. And you fuck like a goddamn champ, even though technically, I don’t know the difference. Just roll with it.”

The laugh started in my gut, spilling out of me with a freedom that had never occurred with anyone but her. I buried my face in her hair, pulling in deep breaths of her summery scent. It centered me, just as it always did. She was the embodiment of the lake and the town that had been my home for my entire life.

I eased back to study her. Memories of the long summer days we’d spent chilling with a picnic basket by the lake—or doing way riskier stuff like joyriding in my dad’s Porsche

when he was away—stretched out in my mind, somehow reflected in her eyes.

She was safety, and home, and family in a way no one else had ever been except my brother. And now she was so much more. That fresh-air-in-a-bottle scent of hers was capable of making my dick hard in an instant. The way she'd tied off her sundress so neatly behind her neck drove me wild, making me imagine the strapless bra she had on underneath.

Or nothing. I was voting for nothing.

Fuck, I had to see. But first...first, I had to make sure.

Sucking in a breath, I turned around and braced my hands flat on my now-bare desk.

“What’s—what’s wrong?” Her tremulous question nearly broke me.

I didn't want her to ever doubt the effect she had on me for a moment. I'd already fucked up so much with my stupid contract and crazy scheme to have a kid when if I'd just talked to her, explained where my head was at, maybe we could've made some decisions together. I'd caused her to think that any attraction I might have in her direction was just based on my wanting to knock her up.

Truth was, I'd been trying my goddamn hardest not to notice her that way for years.

Now I didn't have to shove those errant thoughts away. We were both single. There was no reason we couldn't do the family thing our own way. With sex and kids and our own rules.

Love wasn't a necessary component. At least romantic love. I didn't see her that way. Of course not. I mean, I loved her, but to love her romantically would be taking a huge fucking risk.

The biggest of them all.

“Hey.” She stepped forward and stroked my back, and even in that single touch, she conveyed her growing

confidence. Not in general, but in this particular space with me. “You’re running hot and cold.”

I laughed. “Far from it. I’m so hot right now that I’m amazed I haven’t torn a hole in my pants yet.”

“So why did you pull back?”

For fuck’s sake, I knew she was blushing just from that little breathy catch in her voice. I knew so much about her, and instead of that making this boring, almost routine, it made every moment better. Bigger. I wanted to find out everything I didn’t know. How her eyes hazed over as she came, the tremble of her lips just before she went over. The way she’d soak my dick with her release.

Without a condom between us this time.

I pressed my palms into the desk, searching for clarity. For restraint. “Every time, it feels like I’m pushing you.”

I expected her to argue. That’s what she did—what we did.

Instead she reached around me and stroked my cock through my pants, so slowly that I hissed air between my teeth. “Mmm. You weren’t lying.”

Christ, that little purr in her throat? Gonna be the death of me.

She didn’t wait for my affirmation. Her first task was to undo my belt and toss it on the desk, where it hung half off like a waiting snake. The metallic sound of her undoing my zipper seemed loud in my head, competing with the throb of my heartbeat. She dipped her fingers inside, grabbing my shaft through my boxers. I was so hard that just her light grip had my balls drawing up, full and tight.

I might not plant a baby in her this afternoon, but it wouldn’t be from lack of coming. Holy shit. It was going to happen whether or not I wanted it to if she kept touching me like that.

As if she heard my thoughts, she pushed down my pants and my boxers and turned me around to face her before going to her knees. I didn’t breathe. Didn’t make a sound. Just

watched and waited as she stroked my dick from root to tip and flicked her gaze from mine to my length, over and over.

It fucking grew in her hand, and she laughed. Softly. Like a damn vixen.

“Some magic trick,” she whispered a moment before her lips engulfed the tip.

I grasped the edge of the desk and threw back my head, fighting not to command. It would be so easy to grab a handful of her hair and pull her down my erection, but she probably wasn't ready for that. Her tentative licks and sucks were working a magic all their own.

“Undo your top,” I rasped. “Let me see you.”

She kept me in her mouth while she reached up with one hand to undo the tie behind her neck. The red straps fell and my breath caught.

Holy fuck, her gorgeous bare tits had been pushing against the material all along.

“You went out like this.” I reached down to twist her hard pink nipple and she gasped around my shaft. “Showing off all this perfection.” I gave her other nipple a twist and swore I could feel pre-cum pulsing onto her tongue.

She eased back and licked her lips. Naughty vixen. “It's only for you.”

“Again.” Already her mouth was full of me again, precluding talking, but I didn't care. As much as I was dying for her to suck my cock until I spilled myself in her throat, I had to hear her say it. “Say it again,” I demanded, hooking my hands under her arms. She barely had an instant to release my dick before I drew her to feet. “Say it,” I repeated, latching my mouth onto her tight little nipple and pulling it between my teeth.

Her moan made my erection lurch into the softness of her belly. But I didn't stop working her nipple, using teeth and tongue. She writhed against me as I pressed my hand between her legs, right through her dress. “Gonna walk out of here with a wet spot so everyone knows?”

Her hips pulsed, driving her covered pussy against my hand. I couldn't wait another second. I dragged the dress down her body, letting it pool on the floor around her red sandals. She wore only a scrap of white panties, and yes, they had a telltale wet spot right in the center.

I growled. All for me.

It was my turn to drop to my knees. Locking my gaze on hers, I licked that damp spot again and again, groaning as her taste filtered through the fabric. Sweet. So sweet. Peeling the material away from her swollen lips, I flicked her clit with just the tip of my tongue. She whimpered, swaying on her heeled sandals until I banded an arm around the backs of her thighs to keep her still. Taking off her panties would require too much time, but I had to have her. Opening my mouth over her pussy, I ate at her like the starved man I was. The man she made me. Her legs trembled so I hauled her closer. Impatiently, I yanked at the thin material, almost as shocked as she was when it gave way. I shot her a glance and her wide eyes tore a laugh from my chest as I tossed the strips aside.

That laughter ended in her moan as I resumed my task.

When the angle wasn't good enough, I rose and picked her up, setting her on the desk. I kissed her, slanting my mouth over hers as I yanked up her legs, placing her heeled feet on the edge. Spread open obscenely in front of me, the tatters of her panties still guarding part of her pussy, she shivered. And I looked my fill, drawing my fingertip through the wetness she was making for me.

“Say it again,” I said as her dazed eyes lifted to mine. “Tell me who this belongs to.”

“Seth, please.” She bit her lower lip. “God, it's you. It's always been you. Okay?”

Her breathless, annoyed words slashed through the roar of blood in my head. Always.

Yes, fucking always.

I dipped my head and cupped her breast in my hand, squeezing it so the nipple stood taut and proud. Then I licked

my way around it as she dropped her head back, her long dark hair trailing over the desk. Brushing my knuckles over her soaked slit, I found her clit, so hard and full and pulsing lightly under my touch. I circled it again and again while I sucked on her breasts, switching my attention from one to the other. Her whimpers grew and I slipped my fingers lower, pushing them inside. All the way in. She lifted her hips off the desk, her thighs falling open even wider.

A sterling invitation.

I bent to lick her, sealing my lips around her pulsing clit as I rocked my fingers in and out. She grabbed my hair in her hands, pulling me against her without shame. That just turned me on more. Barely aware of it, I fisted my throbbing cock in one hand as I lapped at her pussy and she gasped, making me lift my head.

She was watching me jerk my cock, honey eyes wide. Fuck.

“Like this?” Regretfully, I slid my coated fingers out of her pussy, swallowing a groan at the way her body clutched at me. I slicked those wet fingers over the side of my dick, making it jump. Ally’s eyes ate up the wet trails I left behind. “So wet. Gonna get even wetter before I get inside you.”

“Not possible.” She was staring at my hands, watching me work my length. “You look bigger in daylight.”

“Thanks. I think.” I had to laugh again, even if it hurt. Christ, even that movement had my erection stretching farther up my stomach.

“Oh, it’s definitely a compliment.” She licked her lips and my balls tightened. “Your cock is beautiful.”

“Beautiful, huh?” I undid my shirt and dumped it on my chair before following instinct and grabbing her hand and bringing it back to my cock.

She didn’t balk. Far from it. Together, we stroked my erection until I was panting. “Fuck, I gotta have your pussy. But first...”



Holding her gaze, I grasped her fingers firmly in mine and brought them back between her legs. She pulled back slightly but I kept my hold steady until she relaxed again. Slowly, I rubbed her clit with our joined fingers. Her wetness seeped between them and she let out a few broken breaths, not quite moans but almost. Her thighs shook. "Seth," she whispered.

Already I was learning her tells. "Yes. Come on our fingers."

She licked her lips and dropped her head forward, her long hair tumbling over her gorgeous tits as her chest rose and fell. Without my prompting, her fingers sped up and she lifted her head, her pupils flaring before she closed her eyes and her hips rose from the desk.

She came silently, her body shuddering and her pussy contracting beneath our fingers. And it wasn't enough. I needed more.

Before she'd even stopped spasming, I gripped my cock and lined it up with her slit. She registered the movement and opened her eyes, letting out a gasp at the nearness of my erection to her pussy.

Bare. No condom this time. I was going to spill myself inside her, intentionally.

Fuck, my dick was rock-hard just imagining it.

"You're sure?" I murmured. "You want me to come inside you naked. Want me to fill you up with my cum." It was probably cheating to stroke my cock, knowing how it affected her, but she couldn't nod fast enough.

"God, yes. Want all of that...inside me." She rubbed her damp fingers over her mouth and I lurched in my fist. "Please."

"Suck them," I said, and she edged the tip of one inside. That red nail dipping just past her lips as her lashes fluttered and her tongue sneaked out. "Taste your pussy like I did. So fucking sweet."

She whimpered and drew the finger deeper. Then I gripped her wrist and brought her hand to my mouth, tasting the finger

she hadn't yet, savoring her flavor as I pulled back and drove deep.

Goddammit, she felt good. So fucking good.

Her broken moan—tinged with pain—made me still and relinquish her finger with a wet little pop.

“You're so goddamn tight. Are you okay?”

Eyes wild, she nodded. “Yes. So full.” She pushed against me and I threw back my head, searching for strength. “Seth, please fuck me. *Please.*”

She didn't need to ask again.

I pressed her hand to the desk. “Better reach back and hold on.”

She did as I requested and I slid my hand up her leg, gripping her thigh to drag her closer. Hooking her ankle over my shoulder, I wrapped her other leg around my waist. Swiveling my hips, I let her get used to the feel of me inside her for another moment—bare, finally bare—before I drew back and slammed home, rocking the desk on the floor. She gripped the edge of the desk with one hand and pressed the wrist of the other against her mouth to stifle her sounds as I pulled back and drove forward again, over and over.

Dammit, she was going to end me. Right here and now.

Grinding my pubic bone against her clit, I smacked her hand away so I could smother her cries with my mouth as I fucked her until she was shaking with the need to come again.

I was way fucking past that point.

She gripped me like a fist, squeezing me past my endurance until I had to switch positions or end this right now.

I shifted her opposite leg to my waist and picked her up, holding her on me, lifting her up and down with every thrust. She clung to me, her kisses biting, her moans spilling out like the liquid coating my cock. I could hear each stroke. Smell the scent of us together like the sweetest, dirtiest perfume.

Ours.

Hating to break our connection for even a second, I withdrew and set her on her feet before spinning her around so she faced the desk. I pushed her down and cupped her perfect ass in my hands, tracing that silky pucker between her cheeks while she bit her knuckles to keep from crying out.

And I plunged.

There was no hiding her moan this time. It seemed to fill the office, or maybe it was just my head. Either way, as I pulled back and drove home again, that sound spurred me on. I needed to hear it again when she soaked my dick. Hell, while we soaked my desk. I wanted every dirty drop inside her, but I wanted the proof on the place I worked every day too so I could never forget.

She was mine. Had always been mine. And now I was going to fill her up with my release.

Scooping her up, I reached around her to rub her clit. Hard, fast. She scrabbled to hold onto the desk and bucked back against me, her ass bouncing. “Come with me,” I grated out.

“Going to.” Her ragged response had me hauling back and shoving deep as I circled her clit.

She splintered apart around me, and I couldn’t hold on. I managed to pull out once more and sank home while she was still coming, her relentless ripples milking my cock. I turned my head and bit her shoulder, sinking my teeth into her flesh as my hips flexed and I squeezed out every drop into her giving pussy.

Then I collapsed onto her, trying like hell not to crush her before I got to fuck her again.

“Oh shit.” She slapped the desk once, twice. “Tapping out.”

Groaning out a laugh, I pulled out of her. “Don’t move.”

“Not gonna. Can’t.”

As carefully as possible, I turned her over and eased her back on the desk, hoisting her legs high. She gaped at me.

“What the hell are you doing?”

“Keeping my cum inside you.”

She threw an arm over her eyes, chest still heaving. Her tits were distracting as fuck, and my supposedly used up dick was already waking again. “That’s not necessary, is it?”

“Can’t be too careful.”

“Good to the last drop,” she muttered, and I laughed.

## TEN



I'D JUST LET A GUY COME INSIDE ME, AND HE WAS NOW OUT IN the hall, discussing lunch with his secretary.

He had a secretary. The guy I'd just fucked to make a baby.

A baby, for God's sake, when I wasn't even entirely sure how to make Eggs Benedict. That logic didn't fully track, but it did for me. I had cum running down my thighs—*so much for your legs up trick, Hamilton*—and the dude I'd banged like a drum was ordering me a salami sub. Sweet, really, since it was my favorite.

Holy crap, I had to get out of here. First, I had to get to a bathroom.

My gaze swung wildly around the office. Spotting a closed door, I let out a breath. Of course he had a private bathroom, though I'd never had the need to make use of it before.

I bent to gather my discarded dress. Not panties, since they were destroyed. The shreds were scooped up and thrown in the trash. Good thing they were a Walmart special and not La Perla. Not that I actually owned any La Perla, but—

Panic babbling had officially overtaken my brain. I wasn't as weirded out by this whole thing as I was the first time we'd had sex—God, we were on multiples now—but the addition of procreation followed by shared salami was definitely upping the strange factor.

I needed to get cleaned up and get out so I could think without those sexy chocolate brown eyes unraveling me. Was that so much to ask?

After tugging up my dress and tying the straps behind my neck, I reached for my purse and cleaned up as quickly as I could with the single tiny tissue—fine, cocktail napkin—inside. Then I carefully walked on my tiptoes to the bathroom, more to remain as tidy as possible than to hide my escape. Tiptoeing wasn't particularly easy in heeled sandals, but I was used to a number of foot tricks to distract myself from long hours waiting on tables. Prancing sideways to that closed door like a polo pony, however, was a new one.

I grabbed the doorknob and ducked inside, shutting my eyes on a grateful breath. Even having another door between us was a relief. Harder for him to work his magic on me through multiple layers of wood.

Then I opened my eyes and discovered the supposed bathroom was a dusty storage closet.

“Shit.”

No private bathroom meant I had to leave the office and slip down the hall. Which might not have been so bad if Shelly wasn't at her desk, but since he'd been talking to someone out there, chances were good it was her. And oh my Lord, the humiliation. She had to have heard everything Seth and I had done. We weren't exactly quiet. I'd tried to be, but this was all new to me and I guess good sex meant making a lot of noise. Then again, maybe it was just as Seth had said—he didn't mind if others heard. Was that his kink?

The depositing-his-cum-inside-me thing definitely seemed like another one, even if it did have an established end purpose. Still, did he have to relish it quite so much?

I rubbed my forehead. Okay, time to think. I still needed a bathroom, and I wanted some air, and I was also hungry, according to the roar currently emanating from my stomach.

Oh, lookie there, that window led to the fire escape. Score. Of course, there was the small matter of my still slightly damp thighs, but delicate steps.

Forget the walk of shame. I'd patent the matching tiptoe.

I crossed the room, dodging boxes and miscellaneous paper goods, and stopped at the window. The fire escape snaked down the side of the building. Perfect. I could slip around Barb's Bakery and into the alley, then cross the street and cover the short distance to the diner.

Where I would finish cleaning up, fold up this beautiful dress, and put on the spare uniform in my locker so I could get to work. Day off or no day off, I needed some normalcy in my life. Routine. A way to keep my hands and my mind occupied.

My spine prickled and I gripped the window, pausing long enough to haul in a breath. Maybe I shouldn't do this. I couldn't keep running out on the guy. Though this wasn't that, precisely. I just needed to work. To figure out why I'd had sex with my best friend twice and was now trying to have a baby with him, without happening to mention the pesky fact that oh, I'd been in love with him forever.

No big.

That wasn't all that relevant anyway. We were having sex, weren't we? I'd never even expected to have that much with him. Any last flickers of hope in that direction, small and rare as they were, had been stomped out when he'd married Marj. Even after they'd divorced, that hope hadn't returned. I was nothing if not pragmatic, and Seth and I worked as friends. Lovers were something else entirely.

But we seemed to be working there too. At least physically. Though that was pretty much a key-in-lock situation.

I shoved up the window. Yeah, I had to get out of here.

Gingerly, I climbed out, adjusting my dress as I went, and turned to push the window back down. I hurried down the surprisingly sturdy metal steps, sure everyone in town could see my midday flight. At the bottom of the steps, I realized I didn't have my purse. Fuck. I'd just have to come back for it later. There was no way Seth wasn't back in the office now. Besides, I lived with Sage and she would have a key. There was nothing I needed urgently in my purse. I rarely used my cell phone and I'd walked over to Seth's from the loft so my

car keys were still in our apartment. Other than a spare tampon, breath mints, and my wallet that contained a slim ten singles, my emergency credit card, and driver's license, the bag was empty.

And I wasn't risking running into Seth again right now, whether or not that made me a coward.

Now I was a coward who was ducking my head and rushing across the busy street to the safety of the tree-lined opposite side. Tall, stately buildings shielded me as I jog-walked to the diner, smiling at people as I passed, still walking as if I was carrying a glass time bomb between my jittery thighs.

Nah, not a time bomb, just Seth Hamilton's possible progeny.

The diner was like an oasis in the center of Main Street. I slipped inside and immediately aimed right for the back, tossing smiles and hellos as if they were confetti. But the second that swinging door shut behind me, I closed my eyes and breathed. Just breathed.

*Made it.*

My state of euphoria was short-lived.

"What the hell are you doing here?"

Swallowing a sigh, I lifted one eyelid and faced my best friend. The other one, with cherub blond curls and green eyes that didn't miss a trick. "I work here, last I knew."

"Today is your day off," Sage said as if I'd forgotten. "You're all dressed up and everything. Love the shoes, by the way."

"Thanks. My favorite pair." I almost said my *only* dressy summer pair, but she already knew that, living with me and all. She'd seen the pathetic lack of nice clothes and shoes in my closet.

I sucked at girling.

"Yet you sneaked in here, all spy-like. So what's up? I want details." Sage crossed her arms over her ample breasts.



I'd been envious of her rack a time or two, until Seth had shown such appreciation for my set. Now it was hard to want any others.

Nope, I didn't have it bad or anything. Badder, since I'd been sunk over him to begin with.

I grasped Sage's arm and towed her along with me past the kitchen and out the door to the back hall and on to the storage room where I'd had that confab with Seth almost a week ago. A week where I'd spent more nights tossing and turning than sleeping.

I'd nearly confided in Sage about Seth's latest suggestion, but I hadn't because I didn't know what she'd say. Would she tell me he'd clearly gone off his rocker and to run while I still could? Or would the diehard romantic inside her insist I throw all caution to the wind and have a baby with the man I'd loved for so long?

So what if he wasn't suggesting a real relationship? Those were so 2016. Besides, it wasn't like I'd ever had one that lasted more than the change of a calendar from one month to another. A few dates, a few makeout sessions and things always petered out.

A therapist would probably say I drove men away and had too high expectations. I'd say that I spent so many years being a caregiver to a woman I owed everything to and loved so much that I was too tired to waste emotional energy on dating. I'd already used up so much on just getting through every damn day.

But being with Seth didn't require that whole getting-to-know-you dance. Even sex with him had been surprisingly effortless. We had a rhythm, even when he scared me shitless with his hidden dominant side and dirty talk.

Dirty talk, for God's sake. From Seth. To me. The girl whose hair he'd held back after the prom when I lost every bit of the tequila I'd loaded up on to try to have a good time and get wasted with my friends. I'd never been skilled at cutting loose. As proven by the fact that the first time I had sex, it was

with a man who wanted to impregnate me, so obviously, I made weird choices.

And now I was going to have to admit them. Out loud.

I opened the storage room door and pulled Sage inside with me, shutting the door safely behind us. “You have to swear not to breathe a word of this to anyone. You have to promise me.”

Sage slapped her hands on her hips. “You think you need to ask? Of course your secrets are safe with me.” She held out a hand, pinky extended, and I smiled a little as I hooked mine with hers. “To the grave,” she said solemnly, and my smile turned into a slightly misty grin.

“To the grave,” I echoed.

“Did you make love with him again? Tell me.” Her eyes gleamed and she leaned closer, reminding me of a nosy news reporter. Her face was a few inches below mine but it didn’t lessen the invasive factor. “Was it amazing? The first time isn’t supposed to be, but the second...” She sighed dreamily. “Were there sparks?”

I slid away from the door so she couldn’t hem me in. She was like a pug—adorable, pushy, and relentless. “Don’t call it making love. That’s creepy. We fucked. Both times.”

“I knew it. I knew you had that sex flush going on. You’re the same color as your dress. Was it incredible? Was it all you hoped for? Did he give you a climax?”

“More creepiness. No, he didn’t *give* me a climax. He helped me to get there but I’d like to think I had a lot to do with it myself. The mind is the biggest sex organ, you know.”

“But it was better this time. It had to be better because you’re barely answering my questions.”

I gripped my shoulders, turning away to stare at a dusty corner of the storage room. I’d run from Seth’s right to this one, and my flight was weighing on me now. He’d been so incredible, so careful to make sure I was right there every step of the way, and I’d repaid him by taking off.

Again.

“It was more than I ever imagined,” I said softly, swallowing over the grit in my throat. “He was almost desperate to have me. I never fathomed that could be real. That he could want me the way I always—”

“The same way you want him.”

“Yeah.”

“But he did. Oh Ally, that’s so awesome.” She stroked my arm, but didn’t try to get me to turn around. Under her relentlessness was a heart of pure platinum. “Did he take a long lunch break or something and bring you back to his house? Handy living so close.”

Heat blasted my face. “Um, no.”

“Don’t tell me he went for a room at the Inn again. Is he just trying to make tongues wag?”

“Not that either.” I cleared my throat. “We did it in his office.”

“You did it in his office?” she screeched and I winced and covered my face with my hands.

If there was anyone left in town who didn’t know that Seth and I were slapping skin, there wouldn’t be after this conversation.

“Yes. Please keep your voice down.”

“Like where, on the floor?”

I shook my head.

“Against the wall?” Sage lowered her voice about a quarter of a decibel. “On the—on the desk?”

The sheer scandalization in her tone made me laugh. “It’s not that shocking. People have office sex all the time. There’s even a category on porn sites.”

“Huh. Anyway, on the desk. Really.” She whistled. “Wow.”

I cleared my throat again. “Yeah, it was fairly wow. I didn’t expect that when I went there, by the way. I just came over to tell him all systems were a go, and he surprised the hell out of me by—”

“You said yes? Oh, my God.” Sage let out an excited peal of laughter and darted in front of me before pulling my hands off my shoulders to grip them. “So you could be pregnant, like right now? Oh God, I need to prepare. We’ll need to have a shower. Are you planning on finding out the sex? We can go neutral themed for the party.”

“Sage.” I huffed out a laugh. “The first time, he used a condom.”

“But this time he didn’t, right?” Sage demanded. “So you could be with child this very instant.”

## ELEVEN



THOSE WORDS MADE MY BRAIN CHUG TO A STOP. THOUGH they were funny as hell, especially when combined with Sage's expression.

I swear to God, hearts swam out of my best friend's eyes and aimed for the ceiling. Imagining exactly that only made me laugh harder.

And distracted me from thinking about the reality bomb she'd just laid on me.

"With child? Really? What are you, a nun?" I wiped my eyes and found Sage's smile had vanished, along with her bubbly excitement.

"Yeah, guess I kind of am." She tucked a strand of hair behind her ear. "I should get back to work. I didn't let Jean know I was taking a break."

My stomach clenched and I grabbed her arm. "Wait. That didn't come out right. It wasn't a virginity dig. Hello, I'm barely not one myself anymore."

"There's no barely not a virgin. Either you've ma—fucked or you haven't. And you have. Twice."

"Yeah." I wanted to smile, and it so wasn't the time. "The nun comment wasn't referring to that though. I meant you make it sound so spiritual. So holy. Sometimes people just lean over a desk and get plowed into from behind."

She forgot to be mad at me long enough for her eyes to go wide. "That sounds hot."

“It was. Extremely.”

“And he didn’t use a condom this time.”

“No.” Since Sage’s imminent flight risk seemed to have passed, I released her to rub my throat. I was having Seth coming flashbacks, and the heat between my legs was swiftly outpacing the flush in my cheeks. “He did not.”

“Did it feel different? Like you know, no condom vs condom.”

“Yes. It felt very different. The biggest difference was when he…” I couldn’t tell her this. I couldn’t tell anyone this.

Dear God, I had to tell someone.

“After he, um, let go inside me, he did this thing. He, ah, lifted my legs up. Straight in the air. So—”

“So the ejaculate didn’t run down your legs.” Sage fanned herself. “Lordy, I’m about to blow.”

I laughed again. “Skip using the word ejaculate, because ick, but yeah, me too. It shouldn’t have been hot. It freaked me out more than a little. But it was hot. Everything he does is hot, and now I might be pregnant, and I should be running the other direction. Instead, even though it’s insanely premature to even think this way, I can’t help wondering what if I can’t do this for him. What happens then.”

“If you can’t do what?”

“If I can’t give him a baby.” Just saying it sounded ridiculous, so I laughed again, right on cue. I wasn’t prone to fits of tears all that often. Hysterical laughter was another story. “I’m untried in that area, you know? I could have fertility issues. We could be a mismatch. So many reasons why this might not work, and that’s not even why I’m wiggling the most.”

Sage just waited.

“I loved the guy before we got naked,” I whispered. “Now I can’t imagine life on the other side. Where he gets where he wants or he doesn’t, but he can move on.”

“What if he can’t? What if he feels exactly the same way as you but, I don’t know, concocted this elaborate ruse so he doesn’t have to put anything on the line?”

“Oh please. Seth Hamilton? Do you not know the guy? He oozes confidence. He could have any woman he wants, and—”

“And he wanted you. Not just you, but to have a baby with you. A lifetime bond, Ally. Do you get that? You have a kid with someone, you’re not walking away. Even if you think you can, there’s always that tie. That piece of you linked.”

Shaking my head, I rubbed at the sudden moisture in my eyes and looked away. Anywhere but at her. “He wanted to pay me off for my egg, basically. Send me away and raise the kid on his own. He might not think I’m a bad risk DNA-wise—and even that’s a crapshoot with my family’s history—but he didn’t even want me involved much at first.”

“At first?” She inched up on her tiptoes and got right in my face. “Lawrence, you’re holding out on me.”

I sniffled. Stupid allergies. “After I bailed on him after we did it, when he found me here at the diner the next day, he apologized for coming up with such a crazy plan. And he suggested we do it together instead. I don’t know, it could’ve just been his new way of getting me to say yes.”

“Have it together. Raise it together.”

“Yeah.”

Sage let out a laugh. “Girl, I might be the virgin, but you’re the dummy. He so wants to put you on lockdown. Forget put a ring on it. He wants to put a baby in it.”

“You’re being silly. He just wants to have a kid for Laurie, so she has a sibling like he did before they’re too far apart in age.”

“You just said he could have any woman. Does that or does that not include their wombs as well?” She propped a hand under her chin. “I wonder what the average woman would say if a man like Seth Hamilton asked them to have his baby. He’s a wonderful, devoted father already, and he’s rich, smart, suave, kind-hearted, and judging from today’s office

performance, a near stallion in the bedroom Olympics. Sure, he has his jackass tendencies as well, but I'm sure he'd get few takers."

"He didn't ask them, did he? He asked me." Hearing myself, I shut my eyes. "He offered me money, Sage. As if I was a common—"

"As if he wanted to make things easier for you and knew you'd never accept the help any other way." Sage's voice turned soft. "Honey, you don't always make it easy for people to love you. Me, I make it so easy people aren't interested." She laughed weakly and my eyes popped open. "There's a fine line between playing hard to get and being impossible to get. You're practically a fortress, and Seth's the only man brave enough to try to find a way in."

"He was always in, and he never even knew it." And now my shitty drugstore mascara was running from the heat in that stuffy room. Never buying that brand again. Nope.

"Al, after he put your legs up," she paused to fan herself again, "what happened next?"

"We talked for a minute or two then he went to speak to his secretary about lunch." I gripped my stomach. The hole inside it was growing vaster by the second. "Wonder if I can grab a hamburger before my shift. I'm starving."

"His secretary was right there the whole time while..." Sage blinked and swallowed. "Stallion," she said reverently, and I had to laugh or flush forty shades of red.

I probably did both, but I was laughing too much to care.

"What happened after that? You're talking hamburgers, so what, you didn't like lunch?"

"I didn't stay." My laughter fell off quickly. "I left."

"With his knowledge? Or did you run away again like last time while the poor guy wasn't even aware." When I glared at her, she lifted her hands, palms out. "Just calling 'em like I see 'em. You ditched the dude at a sensitive moment. Question is, was it once...or twice?"



“It wasn’t like that.” I paced away from her and pushed a hand through my hair. And inhaled such a strong whiff of Seth’s cologne that he might as well have been standing in the room with us.

*Because he was all over you. Up against you. Inside you.*

Christ.

“If you say so.”

“It was awkward with Shelly right outside. She probably heard, and this is all new to me, and God, it’s still so strange to face him after having him—” I exhaled. “It’s so intimate. I don’t know how to do intimate. My leaving is actually doing him a favor, saving him from all the awkward.”

“I’m sure he appreciates it.”

“Jerk.” I turned to smack her, but she darted away and reached for the doorknob.

“I gotta get back. But it’s your day off. You should probably take it. Run home, take a bubble bath.”

“Oh, God.” Her mention of bathing reminded me that yeah, I could use some serious bathroom time. “Yes, let me go take a quick shower. I’ll be back in half an hour. Can I borrow your key? I forgot my purse.”

She rolled her eyes and pulled the lanyard with her keys over her head. “So that means he’ll have to chase after you. Unless that was exactly what you hoped.” She handed me the lanyard. “If it was, I have to say good move. I never think that clearly in the heat of the moment.”

“One second you think I’m a skank for ditching him.” I shook my head, running my thumb over the battered edge of the key to our loft. “Then I’m the chick with all the moves, and let’s face it, I so am not.”

“You’re the one who has hottie Seth all tied up in a knot. I’d say you have a lot more going for you than you know.” She winked and ducked out the door, closing it behind her.

A second later, the door opened again and she stuck her head inside. “Oh, and start thinking about that shower. I’ll

come up with a theme, but a gender would really help my design.”

“Get out of here.”

“Gone. And I’ll make sure that hamburger is waiting for you at your preferred table in back once you’ve showered.” She winked. “A mother-to-be needs her calories.”

She shot back out the door before I could screech.

In spite of everything, I grinned. And glanced down at my mostly flat belly, hating that she was making me wonder. It was too soon. It couldn’t be a thing already. I’d know, wouldn’t I? Maybe even the instant it happened. How could you not? Something that incredible, that special, taking place inside you...

Dear Lord, I was sounding as woo-woo as Sage.

I shook my head and aimed for the door. I needed to run down the street to our loft and get cleaned up. Then I’d come back and eat my hamburger—oh God, so hungry—and read a book on my day off, instead of panic-working. I could totally handle all of this.

Maybe I’d take that meal to go and eat on a bench near the lake. A picnic for one. Yay.

Not.

Half an hour later, I was freshly showered and changed into a pair of capri jeans and a tank top. I felt like me again. Dresses were fun, but I’d always be a jeans and T-shirt sort of woman. Reason twelve-hundred-fifty I’d assumed Seth could never see me as more than a friend. He preferred the uber feminine type. Or at least he had.

I wasn’t sure what he preferred anymore.

The bell dinged as I stepped into the diner, and this time, I didn’t hunch my shoulders. I wasn’t running away from anyone or anything. I was...taking a pause. There. That sounded better. Mature.

Of course, that maturity fell away the instant I glimpsed dark hair shot through with silver and a twin version of the

man I'd just had sex with seated at the booth beside the one I always selected. Awesome.

I plastered on a smile and went right up to their table. This was Seth's family, after all. I'd just say hello and escape to my booth while clinging to my gratitude that they hopefully hadn't overheard Sexathon 2017.

"Alison," Mr. Hamilton said before I could speak. "You're not working today?" he asked, taking in my attire.

I was probably imagining the faint sneer in his voice. Had to be. He'd never been warm to me, but he usually wasn't rude either. Militantly civil was a more accurate description.

"Nope, day off," I said as cheerfully as I could manage. "Nice to see you're back in town. Successful trip?"

"Of course." He went back to his menu, signaling our brief exchange was over.

Okay then.

I shifted to glance at Seth's twin. As always, their similarities nearly knocked me off my feet, especially when I could still smell Seth's scent on my skin no matter how much soap I'd used. "Hi, Oliver."

"Al," he said, smiling thinly. "Haven't seen much of you lately."

"Oh, I've been around." I gripped Sage's lanyard hanging out of my jeans pocket. "Well, I won't disrupt your lunch—"

"Did you and Seth have a falling out?"

I frowned, unsure if I'd heard Oliver correctly. "What?"

"Are you and Seth beefing?" His lips twitched and for a second, I almost smiled too. Seth was the lighthearted twin, but occasionally, the normally uptight Oliver let loose with a sarcastic remark or a joke.

"No." I tucked my hair behind my ear and hoped my embarrassment didn't show on my face. The inferno inflaming my cheeks didn't give me much hope. "I'm fine. We're fine. Why would you ask?"

“Just haven’t seen you two together lately.” Oliver smoothed a manicured hand over the laminated menu he had to have memorized by now. The diner wasn’t his typical hangout as it was Seth’s—and it definitely wasn’t Mr. Hamilton’s—but it was almost impossible to live in Crescent Cove without patronizing it now and then. “You’re usually glued at the hip. The only other time you weren’t was when he was married, and even that was a brief interruption. Marjorie couldn’t compete with you.” The corner of his mouth ticked up. “Not sure any woman can.”

The hum of conversation around us had nothing on the buzz in my brain. “What are you talking about?”

He adjusted his tie, stroking it as if he was already bored with the conversation. “Nothing. Nothing at all.”

“Why, Alison, you didn’t know Oliver introduced Marjorie to Seth? He thought she was just the sort of woman his brother was—” Mr. Hamilton fell silent, and when the heavy beat of approaching footsteps cut through the chaos in my head, I understood why.

“Oliver was as dense then as he is now. Hey, Dad. Good trip?” Before his father could answer, Seth rested his hand on my lower back. The weight of his stare seared the side of my neck. “Hey, you.”

“And the natural world order is restored,” Oliver said, glancing pointedly between me and Seth before flashing me an I-told-you-so smile. “I was afraid you must’ve been dead in a gutter somewhere if Al was left alone for more than a moment or two. Oh, and love your new accessory. It’s so you.”

I glanced down and bit my lip at the sight of my bright red patent leather dressy purse in Seth’s big hand. He didn’t relinquish it, and I didn’t ask.

“Such a comedian.” With his free hand, Seth brushed my hair away from my cheek and I bristled. We were affectionate in public, but not to this level. “Did you eat?” he asked in a way that didn’t befit a guy who a—had just been ditched post-sex for the second time or b—was my purely platonic friend.

Rather than reply, I jerked my chin at the burger at the next table. My stomach promptly grumbled, making Seth laugh and steer me in that direction. “Lunchtime. See you later.”

“You don’t want to eat with your family?” I asked out of the side of my mouth.

“I work with them every day. I don’t have to eat every lunch with them too.” So much for being polite.

“Nice to see you, Mr. Hamilton.” No matter what Seth did, I never forgot my manners.

“What, not nice to see me?” Oliver smirked and wiggled his fingers.

“No,” Seth responded before I could, guiding me to one side of the booth.

I pried out the well-worn paperback I’d shoved in the back pocket of my capris before sitting down. Seth dropped on the bench on the other side. I frowned at him, well aware we couldn’t have anything resembling a semblance of a normal conversation. He simply slid my purse across the table and lifted a brow at the book I still clutched.

“The Sun Also Rises?”

“So? I enjoy the classics.” I picked up my burger and bit in, letting out a moan. Sage had made the burger just the way I loved them—medium rare, extra mushrooms and pickles, light on the ketchup and mayo, heavy on the cheese. I was so into it that I didn’t glance at Seth again until I’d taken another bite, chewed, and swallowed.

He seemed to be short on air. He was breathing too fast, and he’d grabbed a napkin to lay across his lap.

Not because he was afraid of a flying pickle either, I was willing to bet.

I giggled. Honest to God giggled like a high school girl. And risked his family overhearing me as I leaned forward and whispered, “You can’t be.”

He nodded frantically and I laughed harder.

“You think it’s funny.”

“What was your first clue?” I bit in again and deliberately did a Meg Ryan style eyes-rolling-back expression just to make him lose his mind.

“Payback is a bitch.” His low, intimidating tone had me wiping my mouth with my napkin and reaching for my nonexistent glass of water. Guess Sage hadn’t thought of everything.

“Hey Jean,” he said to my passing coworker before I could find my voice. “Mind getting the lady a glass of water? She seems parched.”

“Seth. Didn’t see you sneak in here.” Jean smiled so widely that I was amazed Seth didn’t get sunstroke. She was sixty if she was a day, but he had that effect on women. All women.

Even me.

Especially me.

“Jean, it’s okay. I can go get it myself.” I started to rise from the booth, but Seth held out a hand, stopping me.

“Day off. Sit.”

I was too surprised by his authoritative tone to argue. More dominance from him, this time outside the bedroom. Just like that night he’d ordered for both of us at the Sherman Inn. It wasn’t as if I didn’t want my voice to be heard, but something about him occasionally taking charge worked for me.

Lord, I was fucked.

“It’s no trouble. Be right back.” Jean bustled toward the kitchen.

A moment later, Sage returned with my water, not Jean. She made a big production of setting it on the table and smiling at both of us, making enough small talk to set my teeth on edge.

“And look at that, didn’t realize y’all had come in too,” she said to Oliver and Mr. Hamilton at the next table. “Is Jean

taking good care of you?”

“Not as good of care as you would, I’m sure.” I wasn’t positive, but I got the feeling Oliver winked at her, because she blushed twenty shades of red.

“Hamilton men are charmers. Why, they’d charm the panties off a woman before she knew otherwise.”

“You don’t wear panties. C’mon now.”

Mr. Hamilton cleared his throat and lifted his menu like a shield as he leaned forward to talk to Oliver. His son’s smile dimmed, but only slightly.

Sage was still beet-red. “I do so wear panties. Not thongs either. Thongs ride up your crack. Ask Ally.”

Mid-picking off a slice of pickle to eat, I paused. I did not look at Seth. “Sage.”

“Just saying. Anyway, I gotta get back. Call me if you need anything.”

“Not fucking likely,” I said under my breath.

The moment she was gone, Seth leaned forward and mouthed, “You wear thongs?” Then he cocked his head, as if he was imagining what I had on under my denim capris.

I ignored him and popped my pickle into my mouth.

“Laurie’s birthday is next Saturday,” he said after a few moments of charged silence had passed between us. Oliver and their father were laughing quietly in the next booth, and Seth was eye-fucking me with enough force to have my clit pounding. It was kind of impressive, if I didn’t want him to stop.

Right now. This instant.

Okay, maybe tomorrow.

“She’s going to be four,” he added, as if I didn’t have the date circled and red-starred in my planner. “I want to have a big party. Will you help?”

“You want to have a big party in a little over a week. Have you planned any of it yet? Figured out a guest list, sent invitations?”

He bit the tip of his thumb and shook his head. “No, not exactly.”

“What does that mean?”

“I haven’t planned it at all yet.”

I sighed, the joy from my orgasmic burger already fading. “People need more notice than a week. It’s almost summer. Little kids have activities and family stuff going on.”

“I know, and I should have done it forever ago, but I got busy at work. Laurie’s counting on it.” His dark eyes silently pleaded with me.

I pointed. “That look is getting you nowhere.”

His lips curved and he mouthed, “Already did.”

I pried off the last pickle round on my plate just for the pleasure of tossing it at his smug, laughing face. “I don’t have my planner with me here, but we need to figure some stuff out.”

“So I’ll come over tonight.” The way he tucked his tongue in the corner of his mouth didn’t make me think he had party planning in mind.

More like he was envisioning how many spots in my loft he could desecrate.

“Your child,” I reminded him.

“So you can come over,” he said.

“I have work early.”

“So come over tomorrow.” He leaned forward and skimmed his fingers over the back of my hand. “Come every day.”

“Incorrigible, and no. We can do this via Skype.”

He did that tongue in the corner of his mouth thing again. “I can work with Skype.”



I reached for my purse and pulled out the pen and small notepad tucked in my wallet. He had to spring this on me the one day I didn't bring my planner.

Before I could begin my list of what we needed to accomplish, he grabbed the pad and my stubby pen. He scribbled something and turned the pad my way.

***Why do you have a condom in your purse?***

I glared at him and wrote a quick reply.

***You went through my purse, you bastard?***

He took back the pad.

***You ditched me again, your fault I had to look for clues.***

I snatched the notepad.

***I just needed time to myself. To process.***

He eyed me suspiciously and grasped the pad.

***Girl thing?***

I nodded. It was a little insulting, but hell, lesser of two evils. Then I returned to an earlier point of contention.

***You were looking for clues that include condoms?***

He snatched it back.

***Condoms? Is there more than one?***

In spite of myself, I laughed. He was so ridiculous sometimes. I took the notepad and wrote what I felt was a reasonable reply.

***No. Just the one.***

Which I'd gotten free at a bar some time ago, but whatever.

***I thought it was good to be prepared. Wasn't sure if you'd want to go for the gold yet. Thought you might want to practice first.***

The look he gave me after reading my words sent a jolt of pure arousal through me. Especially since he didn't look away as he wrote out his response.

***Oh, I want to practice. Over and over. But every time I want to be dripping out of you like I was this afternoon.***

I clutched the pen and breathed. Honestly, that was all I was capable of for about thirty seconds.

***You're saying that stuff with your dad and brother two feet away? Don't you have any shame?***

I nudged the pad at him and he grabbed it up fast enough that he tore the edge of the page.

***Oh yeah, I do. Notice I haven't thrown you on this table yet and fucked you right here? Trust me, that's a feat.***

He started to push the notepad back then took it again before I could.

***You keep licking your lips and looking at me and looking away, and I know what all those signs mean. You want it too. Want me.***

I read his words and debated a comeback. They were what we exchanged. Always, over everything. Rarely serious, always messing around and antagonizing each other. That was our way.

Telling the truth was so much harder.

***Duh.***

Okay, I didn't say it was a reveal worthy of Dr. Phil, just that it resembled honesty. Hesitantly, I slid the pad back to him.

He laughed. Just sat there laughing at me, or with me—hell, maybe at us—and I laughed too, because he wasn't the only one who was ridiculous. We both were.

For a moment, he just stroked the pen. That shouldn't have been sensual, but somehow it was. When he started to write, I inched forward on my seat, too eager to see his message to wait until he passed it back.

***Skype tonight?***

I nodded and he wrote more.

*Naked Skype?*

I shook my head, smiling faintly.

*Maybe a still or two?*

I bit my lip, pretending to think it over.

*For sustenance during toddler party planning.*

“Maybe,” I mouthed, knowing I’d probably send him any naughty pictures he wanted. Even if I blushed the whole time.

This was Seth. I didn’t have to worry he’d upload the pictures on the internet or do anything sketchy with them. We could have the world’s biggest fight and never speak to each other again and I’d never have to worry about that. He was a decent, honorable guy.

So why I had been so sure he just wanted me for my eggs? It was as if I’d read that stupid contract and forgotten everything that had come before.

But God, I couldn’t forget what had come since.

He smiled and scribbled a single word on the pad before nudging it back.

*Tonight.*

He kissed his fingertip and pressed it to the back of my hand before sliding out of the booth. The gesture was so sweet, I sat there dazed while he said goodbye to his family and loped out of the diner, every one of his long-legged strides doing something funny to my belly.

Oliver got up to go to the bathroom and I tucked away my notepad. Might as well wait to take notes when I spoke to Seth. I grabbed my book and my purse and was about to take off when Mr. Hamilton turned in the booth to smile at me. But it was the expression of a shark who scented blood.

Mine.

“It’s never going to happen, you know.” He stretched his arm along the back of the booth. “You’ve played a long game, but he’ll never settle down with you.”

My spine locked and I gripped my well-loved book until the pages crinkled. “I think you have me confused with your son’s ex-wife. I don’t play games.”

Except wasn’t that exactly what I was doing? Pretending I wasn’t in love with Seth. That I could have a baby with him and we’d still be friends and everything would be hunky-dory.

Having a baby together was a life changer. A friendship changer. What would our new reality look like on the other side?

“No? I bet Laurie’s mother would have something to say about that.”

Not Seth’s ex-wife. Laurie’s mother. Another reality I didn’t like to face. That little girl didn’t just belong to him. She had a mother out there, and whether or not she’d been paid to split—and had accepted that payment—she could come back anytime. Rules were made to be broken. Contracts made to be ripped up.

Bonds meant to be rebuilt.

“Laurie’s mother’s feelings have nothing to do with me. Now if you’ll excuse me...”

“No? She knew you would always be between her and her husband and she grew tired of second place.” Mr. Hamilton shifted back to face forward, adding over his shoulder, “Laurie not having her mother around is on you.”

Oliver approached the table as I stared at the back of his father’s head. Seth’s twin hadn’t returned to his own table, he’d come to mine.

“Hey, Al, you know next time you don’t have to whisper —” Oliver stopped and frowned. “Are you all right? You’re shaking.”

“Fine. I’m fine.” I started to slide out of the booth, but he halted my movement with a hand on my arm. “Don’t touch me,” I snapped.

He immediately drew back. “Okay. I won’t touch you. Do you need a ride somewhere?”

“Oliver,” Mr. Hamilton barked, but his son didn’t pay him any mind.

“I’m fine. Really. I just need some air. I think I’m getting the flu or something.” I attempted to get out of the booth and this time, Oliver let me pass.

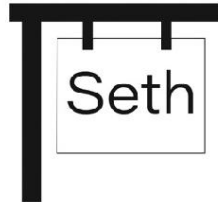
My mistake was glancing up into his dark eyes, so familiar and so foreign at the same time. They matched Seth’s in color and shape, though not in feeling. Not in humor or mischief.

No one was like Seth. And maybe that did make me a game-player, because I’d been lying all this time. To myself most of all.

Now I wasn’t the only one without a mother. Laurie was too. I wasn’t dumb enough to completely believe what Mr. Hamilton had said, but if any part of it was true, it was too much.

Swallowing hard, I sidestepped Oliver and hurried out of the diner.

## TWELVE



MY DAY WAS GOING TO CONSIST OF CHAPERONING TWENTY-plus four-year-olds—and a three-year-old or two—and instead of drinking beforehand as any other intelligent father would be doing, I was again trying to bathe my daughter. Without success.

“I thought boys were the ones who didn’t like to take baths,” I muttered as Laurie gripped the edge of the bathroom door with both hands so she couldn’t be nudged any farther into the bathroom.

“Ally,” she said again. At this point, it was starting to become a chant.

“She’ll be here in a little while. Wouldn’t you like to be all dressed in your pretty party dress for her? She’s so excited to see it on you.”

Since the only reason Laurie even had a new party dress to wear was because of Ally taking pity on us and coming shopping with us last weekend, I’d wanted Laurie to be ready when Ally showed up. But naturally, my willful child was not having that. God forbid I demonstrate my competency at parenting even once per month.

Hell, per year at this rate.

“Wait for her.” Laurie changed tact and decided to push the door shut, effectively shoving me into the hallway. I slammed a hand on the wood, halting her efforts. It wasn’t much of a victory, considering she was four and all, but hey.

“If you want to take a bath by yourself, fine. I’ll wait out here. But you have to start now. Your friends will be coming over soon and we can’t wait for Ally. She might be late.”

Or not come at all.

I didn’t truly think she’d bail on Laurie’s party. There was no denying Ally had been weird lately. Our Skype session had definitely gone in a surprising direction, though she’d still helped to plan Laurie’s party.

Forget helped. She’d asked all the questions and made most of the phone calls to make it happen. That was my girl. She got things done.

Even if she didn’t have nearly as much to say to me anymore.

Ever since I’d presented her with that contract—that was now collecting dust in my desk drawer where it belonged—she’d been...off. That was probably understandable, since it involved a big life change. And seeing her best friend in a different light, yadda, yadda. Then there was the girl processing thing she’d mentioned.

And she’d been a virgin.

Fuck, I’d been the only man to ever have her. Still couldn’t believe it.

I shut my eyes. I was not getting an erection right now. Just was not gonna happen.

Moving on.

We’d been on a damn rollercoaster since that day. Having sex definitely represented the highs. We’d been together another two times over the past week, which wasn’t exactly optimal for pregnancy-achievement, but I was rolling with her schedule. She claimed she was busy. That was the same reason she gave for never staying for more than a few minutes afterward. A couple of nights ago, I’d made the mistake of falling asleep after we’d christened the couch.

Unsurprisingly, I’d awakened alone.

Most of the time, she was oddly quiet and not as eager to toss back her usual zingers. The one place she was uninhibited was in bed. Or against the wall, since that seemed to be our favored spot. We hadn't actually done it in a bed again since the first time. I also hadn't been able to lift her legs in the air again. That was all right. I was just as happy keeping my cock inside her until she squirmed. I was all about improvising.

"You stay out." A thud against the door indicated my little girl was leaning against it. Apparently, shoving me into the hall wasn't enough of a signal. She wanted me to get the message loud and clear.

Ally—awesome.

Daddy—major suck.

"The door needs to stay cracked if you're getting in the tub. And you are getting in the tub, Lauren Elizabeth."

The cry on the other side of the door surprised me less than the windy sigh and tap of heels. "This again?"

I turned to see Ally marching down the hall toward me, once again in heels, her hair up in some complicated knot thing and her dress...

Fuck, her dress was like sheer gauze or something. A pale lilac wrap that hugged her curves and made me harder than the wood my daughter was currently pounding against.

"Front door was unlocked."

"Mmm." I couldn't currently speak, and from Ally's little smirk, she knew what her outfit was doing to me. This wearing dresses thing of hers was all new.

I fucking loved it.

"Down, boy," she said, pressing her knuckles against my chest as she grabbed the bathroom doorknob with her other hand. "Laurie, honey, it's Ally. Can I come in?"

Moving quickly, I snaked my hand into the back of her hair and yanked her mouth to mine. I had to. There wasn't any conscious thought involved. She drove me to a point no other woman had before.



Some kind of fruity lip gloss mixed with cherry cola hit my senses and I slipped my tongue inside, already desperate for more. She moaned, her hand curling in to fist my shirt.

And Laurie opened the door.

Gotta say one thing about my daughter catching me kissing Ally—it stopped her tears. Immediately. Instead, she started to giggle. She slapped her hands over her face as I drew back, not looking at Ally because I knew she'd be giving me that accusatory glare she'd patented in tenth grade.

*Nice job, Hamilton. You fucked up again.*

I cleared my throat. “Ally’s here.”

Laurie giggled more.

Ally swept in the bathroom and lifted Laurie onto her hip. That caused the wrap dress to shift and bunch in ways that had me shifting and bunching like a motherfucker.

I turned away. Christ. I’d need a cold shower myself if I didn’t find a distraction.

Watching Ally with my kid wasn’t going to work either. It might slow my roll sexually, but seeing them together churned me up in a different way altogether. Made me think impossible things. Like maybe we didn’t have to be friends who had a baby. Maybe we could be more. A couple. For real. With two children, instead of one.

A fucking family.

“Were you giving your dad a hard time again?” Ally swept Laurie’s sweaty blond hair back from her brow. “Today’s your big party. You don’t want the birthday fairy to hide all your presents.”

I winced. Laurie was half and half on believing such things. If she decided you weren’t telling the truth, she was apt to call you a big fat liar.

Delicate, my child was not.

“Birthday fairy?” Laurie screwed up her mouth and looked at me. “Daddy?”

I pointed at myself. “Are you asking if I’m the birthday fairy? Or asking if I know the birthday fairy?”

“Both. Real?” she demanded.

Ally sent me a secret smile over Laurie’s head and I would’ve sworn this was her form of payback for having the softest, fullest lips I’d ever kissed.

“Ally is the birthday fairy, know why?” I took advantage of Laurie’s curiosity to once again step foot into the bathroom. “She’s the one who made your party as magical as it’s going to be today. But you won’t get to enjoy it if you’re not clean. Dirty girls don’t get to play with their friends.”

Laurie sighed and tugged on one of Ally’s brown curls that had come loose from her updo. In the light from the window, all the red highlights in her hair made it look as if it were streaked with fire.

Christ, I was barely a dude anymore. Anytime now, I’d whip out paper that curled at the edges and start composing sonnets about the wonder of a summer’s morn.

Or Ally’s pussy, which probably meant I wasn’t quite ready to give up my man card yet.

“You do my bath?” she asked.

Ally stroked Laurie’s hair. “You sure you don’t want Daddy to do it? Or he can stay with us. How about that?”

Laurie shook her head and stuck out her lower lip, her most common expression these days.

I sighed. “I have to get the grill started anyway. Whose idea was it for me to feed hamburgers and hot dogs and veggie burgers to twenty kids and their parents, anyway?”

“Yours. I mentioned catering. You said you could handle a little grilling. That it was your manly duty.” Ally hid her smile in Laurie’s blond hair.

“I said nothing about my manly duty. Just that I like grilling.”

“So go grill then. We’ve got it under control.” Ally shifted Laurie in her arms, tipping her upside down until she squealed. “Don’t we, shortcake?”

“Yes!”

“Okay then. I can tell when I’m not wanted.” I turned in the doorway. “No bubbles this time though. It has to be a quick bath. Your friends will be here soon, and you don’t want me entertaining them.”

“Why not? You’re so good at playing horse.”

I narrowed my eyes at Ally. “Yeah, and if I throw out my back, guess who’ll be rubbing it later?”

Ally took long enough to reply that I wondered if what I’d said was more sexually explicit than I’d intended. Especially since Laurie was glancing between us as if we were the most fascinating people ever.

She’d definitely never seen us kiss before. A hug here or there, a playful shove, sure. But anything resembling making out, absolutely not.

“That’s what you think,” Ally finally responded. “I’d suggest you invest in some Icy Hot, pal.”

“I’m going to start the grill,” I muttered, deciding my best place was far away from where I could somehow scar my impressionable daughter. I might be tempted to kiss Ally’s smart mouth again and then Laurie might end up in psychotherapy years later because I couldn’t control my hormones.

When they finally came downstairs, the first wave of dogs and patties were on the grill and I’d already fielded two phone calls from crazed parents who were having issues of their own rounding up their kids. One of Laurie’s preschool classmates and her little brother were both attending the party, and their frantic Mom had called to commiserate about trying to get them ready. I’d figured she was just explaining why they’d be late until she asked me out after making a DILF joke.

I wasn’t an idiot. I knew that among many women of childbearing age, I was considered something of a prize. An

employed man who was willingly parenting his child singlehandedly—though not necessarily with any skill—was basically a unicorn, except my horn was in my pants. And many of them wanted to ride it.

Usually, I managed to divert conversations away from the topic of dates, or finding a good woman to settle down with. I must've been off my game today because this one had broadsided me and I'd ended up fumbling through an excuse and basically hanging up on her.

I didn't have an answer why I couldn't go out with her. Technically, Ally and I had no rules. No arrangement that precluded either of us from seeing anyone else. We were friends who were fucking and trying to have a baby. There was no box to tick on Facebook for that one. Even "it's complicated" didn't begin to touch the reality of our existence.

But I didn't want to date anyone else. And I sure as fuck didn't want Ally to. Ever.

"There's Daddy. Wait 'til he sees you in your pretty, sparkly dress." Ally's voice carried out to me.

When she stepped out on the deck, carting my daughter in her arms, the inane thoughts in my head spewed out. "What does your Facebook status say?" I demanded, as if it was the most important question in the world.

Ally shifted Laurie in her arms. "What? Look at her dress," she commanded.

Laurie's grin tilted precariously. And her big blue eyes filled with tears.

Ah, fuck.

"Look at you in your beautiful dress," I said, setting down my spatula to step toward them. I reached for Laurie but she pushed out a hand, nudging me back. With her other hand, she clung to Ally's neck and buried her face in her chest.

The look Ally gave me was mutinous.

I stroked a hand over Laurie's curling wet hair. She burrowed more into Ally. "You look like a princess, honey. All

these purple sparkles.”

She didn't reply. Ally just glared.

“What do you say you open one of your presents before your friends get here?” I wasn't above bribery. Besides, I was keeping a pretty big secret about the party. But hell, it was supposed to rain, and how else could we entertain twenty kids indoors?

Laurie lifted her head and knuckled one of her eyes.

“Let's go to the family room.” I checked the food on the grill, making sure I could leave it for a moment or two. “You want to man the grill while I take her downstairs?”

Ally stuck out her chin and her hand. “I can do it.”

“Thanks. We'll be right back.” I exchanged the spatula for my daughter and had to swallow a chuckle as Ally poked at the simmering meat. Even after all these years of working at the diner, she still wasn't very adept at making food, with a few notable exceptions.

Laurie poked me in the chest. “Down.”

Sure, Ally could carry her all over, but me? Not gonna happen.

Swallowing a sigh, I set her on her feet and she immediately took off down the hall, reaching up for the doorknob that led into the basement. She couldn't quite turn it herself so I helped, and she rushed down the stairs. And stopped at the bottom, still gripping the railing.

Saying absolutely nothing.

I descended the steps behind her and taking advantage of her surprise, swooped her up again and set her on my hip. “It's a giant sandbox.” I walked around the edges of the mostly contained mounds of sand I'd had trucked in on a whim yesterday while Laurie was at Pre-K. I'd had to pay outrageously for it, as well as call in a few favors, but I now was the proud owner of a shit-ton of sand that would be hauled out tomorrow at great personal expense. Not to mention all the

furniture in this room had been shoved into the spare room and would need to be brought back out again.

Too bad Laurie was frowning at the giant, cool-as-fuck sandbox as if she didn't get what it was.

“See, look.” I put her down outside the sand and bent to grab one of the oversized beach balls. I tossed it and it got stuck in a little valley, so I leaned forward to grab it—

And my mischievous child saw fit to push me into the sand, letting out a huge squeal of laughter.

“Think that's funny, huh? You rascal.” I darted forward on my knees and snatched her up, lifting her sideways and holding her over a big mound of sand. “Maybe I should push you into it too.”

“No, no, Daddy, no!”

The door upstairs opened and closed and footsteps sounded on the stairs. I turned, still holding my squirming kid, to see both Ally and the mother who'd asked me out on the phone, Tina, gaping at me.

“You filled your entire family room with sand?” Incredulously, Ally hurried down the rest of the stairs and hiked up her dress to pick her way around the sandbox. “You do realize how impractical that is? You're never going to manage to get every grain out, and it's going to embed in the floorboards.”

“There's safety rubber underneath.” I glanced past her at Tina. “Hi there. Is anyone manning my grill by any chance?”

“Yes, Mr. Robinson from down the street took over. Tina was worried about you. Said you guys were in the midst of setting up a date when the phone disconnected.”

Oh fuck.

“Al—”

“Then we heard squealing and hurried down here.” Ally bent gingerly to push one of the inflatable beach balls across the sand. “I can't believe you did this.”

I had a feeling I'd be hearing that a lot today.

I righted Laurie in my arms and gave her a quick hug before setting her on her feet. "Your friends are here. Why don't you go back upstairs with Mrs. Johnson while I talk to Ally?"

"Okay." She scampered off, scattering sand.

I'd just made it to my feet when she spun back around and charged up to me again, gripping me around the legs. "Thank you, Daddy."

It came out sounding a little like *Tank Eww, Dabby*, but close enough.

Though Tina held out a hand for Laurie, she was staring fixedly at me. "I hope we can continue that conversation later, Seth."

"Actually, it's probably good if we don't." I smiled at her to soften the blow. "I'm committed to someone right now. But thank you for your interest."

It was a toss-up which one of the women gave me a more scathing glance.

"C'mon, Laurie," Tina said. "Let's go upstairs so you can say hi to everyone in your pretty dress!"

Laurie trotted along after her, chattering happily.

The door shut behind them, and Ally kicked one of the beach balls hard enough that it nearly took out the TV on the other side of the room.

"Committed right now? Like this instant? You should've given her an end date. Don't want her to get discouraged and give up too soon." Ally aimed for the other beach ball and did the same thing, this time nearly missing the one lamp we'd left behind because it was also on the opposite side of the space. Lawrence had some serious leg power.

Which wasn't hot at all.

Not even a little bit.

I scratched the back of my neck. It wouldn't do to seem pleased by this recent turn of events. Being stupidly overjoyed that she was jealous was simply not appropriate. I should be ashamed.

I might be tomorrow.

Or next year.

"I'm getting the feeling you're angry."

"Oh, are you? Are you now? What was your first clue?" She crouched to pick up the plastic bucket and slotted scoop, and I quickly rushed over to take them out of her hands before they left a dent in my wall. "Don't crowd me."

"I wouldn't dream of it." I tossed the toys aside and hooked my fingers in the bodice of her dress, hauling her against me. "You know, I thought this purple was my favorite color on you, but I was wrong." I bit down on her lower lip, tugging it between my teeth. "It's green."

She shoved at my chest and moved her face away from mine. "You think this is funny?"

"More like ridiculous."

"I don't know what idea you had about this whole impregnate-my-bestie scenario, but while this is going on, you're not going to be hitting on other chicks."

"Noted."

"And if I actually do get knocked up, you're not going to be bumping uglies with anyone while I'm waddling around in muumuus. It's not going to happen."

"Also noted. Will you be barefoot while walking in muumuus? I'll probably need pictures if so."

She poked me in the side. "This isn't a joke. I get that you just can't help being so damn sexy that women throw themselves at you right and left, but you better freaking try."

I cocked a brow and framed her cheeks between my hands. "I'm going to need you to repeat that. All of that. Like twenty



times. Feel free to add some heavy breathing around the sexy part for effect.”

Her lips almost twitched into a smile, but she wouldn't meet my gaze.

“Hey.”

Nothing.

“Ally Cat,” I said softly, and she looked up at me, her golden-brown eyes wary. “I'm not interested in that woman. In any woman, for that matter, except the one standing in front of me.”

“I didn't say you had to lie. Just while you're dipping your wick in this pot, you're not going to in any other. All I'm saying.”

“Your pot is all I need or want.” I nearly added more. So much more. Every hour that passed, I had more inside me for her, and I was just beginning to untangle what that might mean.

But she wouldn't have believed me anyway. Not now. Maybe not ever.

The corner of her mouth ticked up. “You do have your own form of sweet talking, gotta give you that.”

“I have my own form of many things, as you're learning.” I brushed a kiss over her ear. “I asked you what your Facebook relationship status was. I think we need to come up with one for this.”

“Oh, we do, do we? Because being Facebook official is very important.”

“It is.” I reached down and cupped her ass through her thin dress, swallowing a groan at the barely there outline of her panties beneath. Would they be white lace? Blush pink? Maybe some other nearly translucent color that would never be enough to hide her swollen pussy from my gaze. “If another guy comes near you, even looks at you, I may rip his eyes out. Just fair warning.”

“Is that so?” Her breathless question had me tightening behind the zipper of my pants.

“So you might want to consider a Facebook status as a humanitarian gesture. A warning sign to save other men from a fate worse than death.”

“I’ve never seen you get violent. Or jealous. For that matter, I’m simply not the kind of woman men go batty for.” She shrugged and shifted her feet. “I think it’s because I’m missing the feminine gene. I’m wearing this dress right now, and all I want to do is take it off and get back into my jeans.”

“You think dresses are what make you feminine?” I looped a couple of strands of her hair around my fingers and tugged. “I’d say what makes you feminine is that you’re the bravest, smartest, most kickass woman I’ve ever known.” I lowered my voice. “And the way you purr deep in your throat when you come. That too.”

“What am I, a cat?” But there was no mistaking the pleasure in her voice.

Pleasure I’d put there, just by telling the truth.

My reply was smothered by her placing her hand over my mouth. “No pussy jokes. We have to get back upstairs.”

“Mmm-hmm.” I nudged her hand aside and squeezed her perfect ass one more time. “Don’t suppose you’d be willing to play sex-on-the-beach later? I don’t have an ocean nearby, but I do have this nice pile of sand...” I gestured.

“The sand thing was really sweet. Laurie will always have these memories.”

“Not sure she likes it any more than you do.”

“Sure she does. Wait until all her friends come down here and see this. It’s like a kid’s dream come true.”

“Yeah, yeah, they’ll love it. Now back to sex.”

She grinned. “As nice as this sand is, you also have a nice big bed.” She patted my stomach and my cock jumped visibly enough that she laughed, her eyes dancing. “Thumbs up?”

“All the way up.” I cupped my hand around her neck and brought her mouth to mine, sinking into a kiss that was equal parts need and want and relief that she was still mine.

This hadn't ended yet. She'd be in my bed tonight, and if I was lucky, again and again after that.

For as many tomorrows as I could beg, borrow, and steal.

Our tongues tangled and she moaned as I cupped her cheek, tilting her head so I could take more. Always more. Her body curved into mine and I hooked my foot through hers, desperate to feel every part of her flush against me.

The sound of someone clearing his throat jerked us apart. I blinked away the Ally haze and shifted my gaze toward the stairs, somehow not surprised that my cat-quiet brother was standing there with one eyebrow winged up. Then he glanced around the family room, his frown deepening.

“If that's truly sand, your contractor deserves a bad review on Yelp.”

## THIRTEEN



“ARE YOU DADDY’S GIRLFRIEND NOW?”

I stilled the backyard swing with my foot and turned toward Laurie. It was the end of a long day of children running, and laughing, and occasionally crying, usually after tripping on a toy or being denied something vitally important.

Like a second hot dog. Or a Transformer. Or for one little boy, not being allowed to take home the bunny we’d seen scampering through the yard.

That had led to Laurie once again asking for a puppy. Seth had said no, as he always did, but he was definitely weakening.

Softie.

I smiled and stopped fingering the ends of Laurie’s curls long enough to remember her question. Not the best time to zone out and think about Seth and floppy-eared puppies.

A quick glance at the back door told me Seth still wasn’t on his way back outside. He was probably eating a scoop of ice cream for every one he put in our bowls. We’d had cake earlier, of course, but the man had a sweet tooth for days.

Not that I could talk. I was starving. Again.

And I still hadn’t answered Laurie’s question.

“I’m still exactly what I always was to him, and to you.” I pushed off with my foot and the swing kicked into motion again. “Unless you don’t like what you saw today,” I said

carefully, hoping I was just referring to that aborted kiss she'd witnessed outside the bathroom.

It certainly hadn't been the only incidents of kissing or touching today. Seth couldn't keep his hands off me for long. I wasn't much better, especially when Tina sashayed past, her attention still far too focused on him. I'd had a lot of years of toning down my jealousy where Seth was concerned, but sleeping with him must've toggled off that switch because I'd found myself cleaving to his side more than once. Maybe it was the way he smiled down at me or brushed his hand over my hair or whispered something for my ears only. He'd always treated me as if I were special, and now that we were sleeping together, his attention was even more potent.

Even more dangerous.

Laurie fluffed out her sparkly purple skirt, her forehead wrinkled. I had a feeling she had something she wanted to say, but maybe didn't know how.

I understood far too well, because I did too. Ever since Mr. Hamilton had put that stuff in my head about driving away Marjorie, I'd been full of guilt. I tried to dismiss it as just his way of getting me out of his son's hair—and his bed. But maybe there was a kernel of truth.

“Honey, I hope you understand I'm not trying to take your mother's place. I wouldn't do that. You have your daddy, and he loves you so much, and I love you too, but—”

“But not like my mom.” Her chin wobbled and I shifted toward her, my chest tightening until I couldn't breathe.

“No, no, that's not what I meant at all. I just meant I would never try to take her spot, to try to pretend I'm your mom, even though I'd like nothing better.” I swallowed over the lump in my throat and reached for her small, chubby, popsicle-stained hand, squeezing it tightly. “Being your mom would have to be the best thing in the world.”

She stared hard at me, that wrinkle deepening and reminding me so much of Seth. “Then, why can't you?”

Such a simple question, with such hard answers. The last thing I wanted to do was to give her false hope that her mom might come back into her life. From what I understood, that wasn't going to happen. I also didn't want to indicate I could fill that role. I didn't know how to be a parent, which probably made this whole situation that much crazier. I so didn't feel equipped to take care of anyone. Not even myself sometimes. After the years of caring for my mother, my reserves were low. I wasn't sure I could provide for anyone else.

If we had a baby together, I'd be in that caretaking role all over again in a much more formal role than what I had now with Laurie. Did I want that?

Even as I asked the question, the answer came through loud and clear.

*Yes.*

Yes, I wanted a child. But rarely dating tended to limit one's chances on finding someone to make that happen with.

Someone *else* anyway.

I'd found my someone early, and he'd found others while I waited. And that was exactly what I'd done. Waited for years for a bus that might've never stopped for me.

Before I'd found more with Seth—stumbled into via his idiotic baby contract—I'd found a strong, pure love for his little girl. One that would never go away.

“I will always be here for you, no matter what,” I whispered, making her a promise in my head. My heart. Whatever happened with Seth, Laurie would always have me in her life. “I might not be your biological mom, but I love you just as much.” I stroked a hand down her hair. “So if there's ever anything that bothers you, or you want to talk about, I'm here. Okay?”

Laurie didn't say anything for a long time. Then she hurled herself into my arms, clinging tight. Just when I was sure she'd move back and run across the lawn, she glanced up at me. “Can you marry my Daddy?”

Panic wrapped around my throat and squeezed. “Um.”

Laurie nodded enthusiastically. “I could wear this.” She pulled at her skirts, her smile wide. “Please?”

It sounded like *pweese*, and my heart broke a little that she actually wanted that.

She wasn’t the only one.

“Maybe someday,” I murmured, hoping like hell I wasn’t cursing the situation just by saying that much. In my world, wishing for more got you less. It was so much easier not to hope.

Or dream.

The back door opened and Oliver and Seth stepped outside, carting bowls of ice cream. They were so different despite looking alike. Oliver’s hair was shorter and straighter, cropped close to his head. Seth’s tended to get shaggy when he wasn’t paying attention. Seth had scruff, Oliver was militantly clean-shaven. Seth wore jeans and a raggedy T-shirt, and Oliver had on a dark suit sans tie, his idea of casual wear.

I was pretty sure every single woman in town—and some not—spent a good chunk of their time trying to figure out how to land one of them. Some industrious types might’ve imagined snagging both for a night or three of fun. Not that they did stuff like that, at least that I knew about. And I would have, because Seth had never been quiet about his hookups.

Killing me a little with every damn one.

“Who wants ice cream?” Seth called, rushing down the steps with Oliver at his heels.

Oliver hadn’t said a word about what he’d witnessed before the party. I’d expected him to make some snarky remark about the kiss, but he’d just slanted me a knowing smile now and then, as if we were sharing some private joke.

I’d expected more surprise from him. Unless maybe others had seen something between me and Seth I never had.

Mainly because I’d been so afraid to wish. Wanting was bad enough.

“Me, me, me! I want ice cream,” Laurie said, pitching sideways off my lap and nearly tumbling to the ground. I caught her just before she went flying, and Seth shot me a panty-wetting grin.

“Nice save, Lawrence.” He sat on the swing and held out a small bowl of ice cream for his daughter. “Neapolitan for Princess Laurie,” he said formally, making her giggle as she settled between us and dug in with her spoon.

“Why, isn’t this cozy,” Oliver said, passing Seth the bowl of ice cream he carried after Seth gave me his.

“Isn’t it?” Seth returned before I could reply. “Don’t you have stuff to do at home?”

I gasped. “Seth, don’t be rude.”

“He wants some alone time with his ladies.” Oliver winked at Laurie. “Especially Princess Laurie, who was the most beautiful girl at the party.”

Laurie giggled and fumbled with her spoon, getting more of the ice cream on her face than in her mouth. I immediately turned to help her, and looked up to catch Seth watching me far too closely.

“Okay, I’m outta here.” Oliver leaned forward to brush a kiss over Laurie’s head. “See ya, squirt. Sleepover on Friday night?”

“Yes!”

“Great. Bet your daddy will enjoy his sleepover too,” Oliver added out of the side of his mouth when Laurie went back to attacking her rapidly melting ice cream.

Seth flipped his brother a discreet cheek middle finger, and Oliver backed away, laughing. “Goodbye, Alison.”

I was flushing, I just knew it, so I decided to just wave a few fingers while I shoveled in ice cream.

We stayed outside, eating ice cream and swinging and talking, until it was nearly twilight. By then, a full Laurie had burned off her sugar high by racing around the yard in pursuit of one of the balloons that hung from every tree and post.



There was a lot of clean-up left to be done—even beyond Seth’s giant sand pit in the family room—but when I stood to see to it, Seth pulled me back down, so close that our thighs rubbed together.

“You’ve done enough today. Time to relax.”

Oh yeah, like I could do that when he was stroking my hip through my flimsy dress. All the while, I made sure Laurie was still occupied with her balloon and not watching us.

“We can’t just leave everything out here. If it rains tonight —”

“So stuff will get wet. No big deal. They’re folding tables and cheap tablecloths. Easy to replace.”

“But that all costs money. No reason to—what are you doing?” I asked breathlessly as he inched up my dress to caress my bare skin.

“Not nearly enough.” He turned his face into my hair. “Next time, don’t wear panties. I want easier access.”

I snorted out a laugh. “Dude, you want me to go commando at a children’s party? I was running around all day. Pretty sure a random kid doesn’t need to see my muff and be scarred for life.”

Seth chuckled and tugged at the edge of my panties. “I’d love to see your muff.” He dropped his voice until it was barely a whisper over my skin. “Actually, I’ve been fantasizing all day about going down on my knees between these pretty pale thighs and licking your pussy until you come all over my chin.”

My fingers slid off the condensation on my empty bowl of ice cream. “Hi, little ears nearby.”

“She’s not paying attention.” He tipped up my chin with his thumb. Sometimes he seemed to have ten hands and he knew exactly how to use all of them. “Stay over tonight.”

Arguments formed in my head. It had been a long day, and I wanted my bed. Needed that space to myself to regroup after the confusing feelings being with Laurie and her friends had

stirred up in me. I'd enjoyed playing with them and keeping them from getting into too much mischief. It was tiring, sure, but it was rewarding too.

Add in Laurie's questions and the whole Tina thing that morning and the conversation with Seth that had come afterward, and I was seriously in want of some alone time.

But then I glanced over at Laurie, babbling to herself as she sat on the grass and poked at her Sleeping Beauty balloon, and absorbed the warm muscles pressed against my outer thigh and I absolutely didn't want to leave. My loft with Sage was fine. I liked it well enough, and maybe someday it could be a home.

This place—and these two people—had been home for me since the day Seth bought the house, right after his divorce.

“Okay.”

Seth frowned, his expression so like his daughter's when she was trying to puzzle out something. “Seriously?”

I fought not to smile. “Seriously.”

“Babycakes, it's bedtime.”

Laurie glanced up and pouted. “No.”

I had to laugh. He was about as transparent as glass. “How about a story first?”

“She needs a bath too,” I added under my breath.

“Another one?” Seth asked, sounding as petulant as his child. “Twice in one day? A little soil never hurt anybody.”

Laurie picked that moment to stand up, revealing the streak of dirt all the way down one leg, ending in a glob on her frilly white sock. I glanced pointedly at Seth.

“Not it,” he said under his breath.

“I'll do it.” Chuckling, I pressed my bowl into his rock-hard belly and rose to go scoop up Laurie off the ground, balloon and all. “Bath first, then a story. Can even have bubbles tonight.”

“Yay.” Laurie wrapped her arm around my neck and pushed the balloon in my face. “Here.”

“Thanks.” I grinned over my shoulder at Seth, and he was doing that way too intent watching thing again. It made my knees tremble and my belly do somersaults. Especially since he was smiling, his eyes warm and brown like melted chocolate.

He liked seeing me with Laurie, almost as much as I enjoyed taking care of her.

Maybe my reserves for taking care of others weren’t nearly as low as I’d believed. Somehow taking care of her—and of Seth—filled me up in other ways.

“You coming in?”

He stretched out his legs, still holding the empty bowls of ice cream. Just the shift of his pose widened his legs enough for me to see exactly what was going on in his jeans—and the late day sun definitely wasn’t creating any shadows. That gloriousness was all Seth.

I wet my lips and looked up into his eyes. He did the same, except on him the gesture was lazy and lion-like. A king surveying his backyard kingdom, and I was one of his belongings. That should’ve set my hackles up, but instead, all it gave me was a flutter, way down low.

“I’ll be right in,” he said.

Nodding, I juggled his daughter in my arms and smiled. “You ready for bath time and a story? Maybe *Mr. Peppermint and the Pushy Poodles?*”

“Yes!” She gave me a loud smacking kiss right on the mouth. “Love you, Ally.”

It didn’t matter that “love you, Ally” sounded like *lub eww, Awee*. It was probably the sweetest moment of my life.

Sucking in a breath, I tipped my head down to hers. “Love you right back.”

The rustle of grass behind me gave me a second to regroup before Seth pulsed his hips against my ass. He truly didn’t care

that he was harder than wood and just the feel of him against me was enough to soak my panties. In fact, he'd probably done that intentionally.

Casually, he looped his arm around my waist and caught his fingers in the unused belt loops of my dress. "My two favorite girls," he murmured, his breath warm on the nape of my neck.

More flutters, by the dozen this time.

I passed Laurie's balloon to Seth and watched as he tied it to a chair. Then we trooped together toward the back porch stairs. "In we go."

"Not you, Daddy," Laurie said, and Seth gave a big sigh.

"Yes, I know, banned from my own bathroom. Or am I now exiled from the house too?"

Laurie clutched her balloon and stuck out her lower lip while she thought. "Come in."

"Thank you, Princess Laurie." Seth ate up the steps with his long-legged strides and opened the back door just in time to let us pass. "After you, Princess Ally Cat."

"Cat?" Laurie's head came up and she grinned toothily. "I like cats." She turned her head and stared hard at her father. "My little sissy wants a cat."

I lifted my brows. I'd heard much talk about how Laurie wanted another sibling, and supposedly it had spurned Seth's crazy baby-making idea. But I'd never heard Laurie actually talk about the sibling as if she was real—one who could make pet requests, no less.

"Your little sissy?" I asked through the cotton in my throat. "Did you fill out an order form?"

Laurie giggled and dangled from my neck, stretching her arm out as far as she could so she could encompass her father. "Boys suck."

"Nice, kiddo." Seth sighed and tweaked her nose, meeting my gaze over her head. "My child has very specific requests. They seem to get more specific by the day."

The way he was looking at me again... God, it was as if he could see inside my womb and plant a kid there—a girl, because hey, ask and ye shall receive—from the sheer force of his stare alone.

He could definitely get me in the mood to practice, that was for sure.

“Or a dog,” Laurie added. “My sissy likes dogs too.”

It was so weird to laugh about something that potentially had a big effect on my life too. If she got that sissy she wanted, it’d be via my girl parts. And I didn’t mind that thought.

One bit.

“Good to know.” I brushed a kiss over Laurie’s forehead and sneaked a glance at Seth. “We’ll see how that whole ordering thing works out.”

It was a dangerous thing to say. To pretend we were a little happy family. A happy, *normal* family, who wasn’t playing house for the sole purpose of procreation.

But right now, with Seth’s gaze hot on mine, and his hand on the small of my back, it certainly didn’t feel like we were playing.

Nor did it when we tucked a freshly clean Laurie in her bed—Seth had waited in his bedroom, as requested—and she asked me to read her story. I figured she’d want her dad to read it to her since he was right there, but nope, she pushed the book into my hand then patted both sides of her bed so we could sit on either side.

My voice was trembling as I started to read about Mr. Peppermint’s pushy poodles. The story was lighthearted and fun, and Laurie giggled as the pushiest puppy fell face-first in a puddle. But by the time the puppy was plopped in the kitchen sink to get cleaned up, Laurie had fallen asleep, her cheek smushed adorably into the pillow and her damp ringlets draping like spun gold across her face.

Gently, I stroked her curls, unable to keep from touching her.

“You love her too,” Seth said, and there was more than certainty in his voice. There was awe. Gratitude.

Even relief.

I nodded. “Yes. Didn’t you know that?”

His Adam’s apple bobbed as he adjusted her thin blanket. He wouldn’t look at me. “Different seeing it.”

He brushed his hand over her hair, nearly bumping my hand. The ink that swirled up his forearm caught my eye, and following the path higher to where it disappeared under the sleeve of his T-shirt was an imperative. I’d studied his tattoos so many times. The snow leopard one, and most of the others too. Hell, I’d been there as he added to the collection over the years. But it was so much different when I could touch them.

Touch *him*.

“Different seeing this too,” he added huskily. I didn’t need an explanation of what he meant.

He was reading my desire as plainly as I was feeling it. Because he could read me. He’d always been able to, and I’d finally dropped my shields when it came to wanting him. Now he was getting the whole story.

Or a lot closer to it.

In silent agreement, we eased back from Laurie and rose, trooping silently out of her pink bedroom. Seth stopped to turn out her Winnie the Pooh light, leaving her cheerful carousel nightlights to illuminate the room in case she had a nightmare. He never wanted her to wake in the dark.

He quietly shut the door behind us, then he reached for me. Hands grasping my face, he brought his mouth down hard on mine. Lips that were soft in contrast to his rough touch teased me into responding. Encouraging me to keep up. I went up on my tiptoes, clutching his shirt, my nails digging into his skin. He made a hungry noise in his throat and nudged me into the wall, hiking up my leg to wrap around his hips. He shoved my panties aside and slipped his fingers inside, burying my moan under his insistent kisses. His daughter was feet away from us,

safe behind the door, but God, his bedroom was just down the hall.

We couldn't wait. Just could not.

We'd spent so many years stuck in the space between friends and more, and now that we'd moved forward, there was no slowing this train. It was ride it or...

There were no *ors* left. I wanted to ride.

I reached up to tangle my fingers in his hair as he pushed his fingers deeper into my pussy. I couldn't keep from crying out and he kissed me harder, so hard that I couldn't breathe. My head was spinning from lack of oxygen and I was wet, so wet. His thumb brushed my clit over and over while his fingers pumped, and God, I was shameless about rocking into his movements. I couldn't get enough.

When he moved his head, I chased his mouth, my teeth scraping his lips, our noses bumping as I sought his tongue. I needed it almost as much as his touch. He was turning me inside out, owning the parts of me only he knew. They were his.

*I was his.*

"Goddammit, not like this. Not this time." Abruptly, he yanked back his hand and I whimpered, dropping my head to his shoulder to breathe. I was so close. A heartbeat away. I was throbbing so hard, and I could hear him licking his fingers. Jesus. Then he fisted his other hand in my hair and tugged my head back, offering me his fingers while his wild eyes settled on mine in the dim light of the hall. "In my bed. Not against another wall. Not again."

Consumed with my taste on his skin, I nearly didn't hear him. He watched me suck on him and growled, backing me into the wall again. Bending his knees, he drove upward and the rigid column in his jeans rubbing against my clit was almost enough to push me over.

*Almost.* I gasped, dizzy, still holding onto his hand as I licked his fingers. I couldn't stop.

He thrust up against me again with only the thin barriers of my panties and his jeans between us, hitting the angle just right. So good. I dropped my head back, closing my eyes as flashes of light went off at the edges of my vision.

It wasn't an orgasm but it was the next best thing. I couldn't stop shaking. If he'd shoved me down on my knees and told me to deep-throat his cock, I would've done it without blinking. Anything he wanted.

I wanted it too. Any way he could give it to me.

"Christ, you're so fucking hot," he mumbled, buzzing his scruff along my cleavage, on the verge of popping out of the top of my dress. "How did I miss it?"

"Asshole." Indignation fought its way through the heavy lust pulsing in my lower belly. In my breasts. Hell, everywhere. I bit his palm, making him laugh.

He dropped my leg and swooped me up in one smooth move. Epically smooth, since I started to screech and he caught my mouth with his before I could. If I hadn't been more than a little off-center from my near-miss orgasm and being hauled into the air, I wouldn't have kissed him back. Probably. But damn, he was good at it. He kept me thoroughly distracted as he carried me down the hall and backed into his room, kicking the door shut gently behind us.

His next move was to flip on the lights. I expected to be tossed onto the bed like a sugar sack, but he placed me on his messy comforter carefully, as if I was made of porcelain. "Never know," he whispered, reading my thoughts as he drew his fingertip down my belly.

I was still reeling from that when he stepped back and reached behind his head to drag his T-shirt off. Golden abs covered in swirling dark ink rippled, and I swallowed hard, suddenly riveted by the slash of his navel above his jeans. He undid the button teasingly, leaving it gaping while he stepped toward me again where I was spread out on the bed like his feast.

Quaking, wet, needy. All for him.



I still wasn't through kicking his ass for his missing my hotness—though come on, my hotness was debatable anyway—but he was already peeling off my dress as if it served as wrapping for his very favorite present. He touched me reverently, pulling the fabric aside to bare my bra and tiny panties before dispatching those too. Lowering his head, he licked one tight nipple, his gaze locked with mine. Every minute movement made me clench inside, tighter and wetter than I'd ever been. I splayed my legs wider so he could move between them, already writhing against the soft spread under my back.

“Tell me what you want.”

I shook my head and shut my eyes. Dammit, he was supposed to know. Wasn't that his job? Best friend and all, for fuck's sake. He was supposed to know I was dying for him to keep doing that to my breasts while he fingered me and made me come. Then he was supposed to move down my body and —

“That's it. Tell me. Every dirty word.”

I blinked. Had I spoken? Oh, that wasn't good. Except maybe it was, because he was doing all of that. His big hand covered my pussy, rubbing gently before he parted my swollen lips and stroked my clit in circles. Over and over so that I had to grind myself wildly against his palm. He released my achy nipple with a pop and slid down my body, his intended target clear. Instead of closing my eyes again, I leaned up on my elbows and licked my lips, ready to watch every lewd moment —

“Daddy!”

## FOURTEEN



THE CRY FROM DOWN THE HALL HAD SETH SCRAMBLING BACK so fast that I nearly fell off the bed. I grabbed hold of the bedding and tried to haul myself up, but all the build-up without a finish for a second time was giving me one hell of a head rush.

Almost in slow-motion, the doorknob started to turn. Seth flung himself at it while I scrambled for my dress, for a corner of the comforter, hell, even for a damn shoe to cover my nakedness. I settled for Seth's T-shirt where he'd tossed it on the footboard and yanked it over my head just as Seth blocked Laurie's flight into the bedroom.

"What's the matter, sweetheart? Come here." He scooped her up in his arms and cupped her head, holding it to his shoulder while he pivoted and ascertained I wasn't flashing any T and A at his young daughter.

I was already ruing not making a grab for my dress, because what was I supposed to do to cover my lower half? Lace panties were not adequate. But without any alternatives, I tugged the comforter halfway over me and tried to unobtrusively tug them on.

And Laurie was crying, and it just did not matter. Nothing did but making her feel better.

As soon as I'd yanked them up my ass, I flung off the comforter and scrambled toward Seth and Laurie. "What's wrong, honey?"

She cried harder and clung to her father, and for the first time in a long time, I felt as if I didn't belong. As if I didn't have a right to intrude. This was a private moment between them and I wasn't her mother.

I stepped back, pushing my messy hair away from my face, and would've aimed for the bathroom—possibly to have a good cry, though I wasn't even sure why—if Seth's voice hadn't stopped me.

“Ally, c'mere.”

Frowning, I looked back to see Laurie knuckling her red eyes with one fist and reaching for me with the other.

I moved toward them and took her chubby hand. Seth shifted to slide his free arm around my waist. “Let's go back to your room.” His voice was low and soothing. “We'll read you the rest of the story from earlier.”

Laurie curled into his chest while I rubbed my thumb over her soft skin. “Spend the night?” she asked me, peering out from underneath her father's chin. Her lashes were starred with tears.

Seth answered before I had a chance to think of an answer. “Yes, Ally's spending the night. She's going to be spending the night a lot more often from now on. Okay?”

Laurie nodded and stretched out her other arm to me so I could take her. I glanced at Seth, and he held her out to me as if she was mine too.

Eyes scratchy all over again, I pulled her into my arms and buried my face in her still damp hair.

“Story time,” Seth murmured, and I nodded.

Together, we walked down the hall to Laurie's bedroom. Gently, I unwrapped her from her ferocious hold on me and set her back on her bed, taking my spot again on the side as if I belonged there. Seth sat on the opposite one. We took turns reading the story, with Seth playing the part of Mr. Peppermint while I played Mr. Peppermint's nosy neighbor. By the end, Laurie was laughing at our exaggerated play-acting, but her eyes were heavy with fatigue.

“We’ll stay until you sleep,” I said, fussing with her sheet.

Seth nodded.

It didn’t take long, maybe ten minutes. We waited another fifteen beyond that, making sure she was out. Then we tiptoed back down the hall to his room and carefully closed the door behind us.

“I like this on you,” he said, fingering the hem of the shirt that brushed my thighs. I still hadn’t felt comfortable wearing it without pants in front of Laurie, but at least it had covered everything. Mostly.

I started to shrug off the compliment. My emotions were raw and jagged and all over the place. I was still horny yet I wanted to sniffle. So much was changing, and even trying to hold on to what I knew was impossible. Nothing was the same. Not Seth.

Not even me.

“I like wearing it,” I said instead, turning my cheek against the worn cotton and taking a nice big sniff of Seth’s sugar sex cologne.

“So don’t take it off.” He grabbed my hips and pulled me close. “I can do what I need to do over, under and through it.”

“That sounds promising. And filthy.”

“Filthy promises are the best, baby.”

The affectionate term made me cock my head at him. I was still Ally, he was still Seth. We fucked, but ‘baby’ was new.

He took that moment to grip my chin and haul my mouth to his. And like always, his lips were tender when everything else about him was hard.

Especially the stiff cock trapped in his jeans between us.

“I want you so much,” he said between kisses, and I nodded, because I got it. Every part of me was trembling to be with him again. Craving that instant when he’d slide inside of me and fill me up.

“But Laurie—”

“Might wake up,” I finished.

“Come to bed.” He gave me a quick smack on the ass, making me laugh.

I skirted around the bed and got in while he quickly shed his jeans, boxers, and sneakers and followed suit.

Now what? Move toward him? Cuddle with my pillow? Wait for him to be bowled over by the sight of my collarbone revealed by the saggy collar of his T-shirt?

He didn't suffer from such indecision, however. He just hooked his arm around my waist and dragged me closer, covering my mouth with his before I could so much as sigh.

“I need you,” he said, and I couldn't argue. I needed him too. So much.

“Will do better later, promise,” he said, anchoring my leg over his hips. I wasn't fully sure what he was apologizing for until the damp head of his cock rubbed against my slit. I bit my lip as he slid all the way in, relishing that stretch even as I winced.

“All right?” He frowned.

“You're big.”

“God, I love virgins.”

“Not a virgin anymore, wise ass.” Slugging him in the chest while his cock was inside me was a new thing, but it fit us somehow.

As did him gripping my thigh and shifting me slightly on my back so he could thrust in and out, over and over, until I couldn't do anything but dig my nails into his shoulders and try to hold on.

“Damn straight you aren't a virgin.” He cupped my breast through his T-shirt, rolling the nipple between his thumb and forefinger. “Goddamn, woman, I love fucking you. If only I'd known.”

So many things nearly sprung from my tongue.

*I knew. I always knew. At least I wished it could be like this with us.*

But I didn't say anything, just savored the way he was moving inside me. The rhythm he was building, stroke by stroke.

"Now this pussy is mine. This too." His hand spanned over my belly and shock and pleasure and fear twined inside me, each fighting for dominance. "All fucking mine," he said, staring straight into my eyes as he pulled back and sank home, deeper than before. He braced on one hand, rising above me, his muscled, tattooed chest glistening with sweat in the faint moonlight. "I'm gonna come inside you. So fucking deep."

Part of me, the side that stayed safe behind a wall of sarcasm, shouted out a mental insult.

*Yeah, yeah, so do it already so I can finally come too.*

But the me who yearned to belong to him only nodded and moaned, scraping his back, jerking my hips to prod him to go harder, faster.

"God, Ally." Desperately, he sucked on my breast through his T-shirt, getting the material all wet. My pussy throbbed in tandem with the nipple between his teeth. "You feel so damn amazing. Wanna fuck you over and over, fill you up with my kid. God, I want that."

I tried to swallow over the dust in my throat, to blink away the haze in my eyes. I was so twisted up, so hot and achy all over. All I needed was to come. Then I could think again.

His movements stimulated my clit with every pass, and I'd been so long denied now that probably a strong breeze could've set me off. I cried out, turning my head to bite the pillow.

"Yeah, yeah, that's it." He leaned over me, speeding up until his sweat dripped on my lips. And God, even that was hot. The salt burned where he'd bitten me through our crazy kisses. "Fucking come on me. Now."

It wasn't instantaneous. Maybe later I could take pride in that. But straining toward that peak and not getting there made

me frustrated enough to drag my nails down his arm, ripping a groan from him that sure as hell didn't sound like pain. Especially since his cock started to jerk and spurt inside me.

And that was what did it. Not his breathless demands. Just feeling him let go so far inside me, that sticky warmth making me feel so full. It didn't matter if I was imagining I could feel it or not. Just knowing he was coming inside me bare was enough to make me give in too, my hips rising and falling against the mattress as I relished every pulse. I couldn't stop moaning, and this time, he didn't try to cover up my sounds.

We were both too far gone.

He grunted and kept pounding into me with his half-hard dick until we were broken and sweaty and panting.

Then he dropped his head to my breast. I stroked his hair, the words on my lips.

Finally, the truth would be out there between us. No more secrets.

*I love you.*

But in the end, I couldn't ruin the perfection of this moment. I couldn't ask for more when he'd already given me so much. More than I'd ever thought could be possible between us.

Maybe we'd even have a baby together. Our own kind of family.

Our own kind of miracle.

## FIFTEEN



I DIDN'T REALIZE I'D DOZED OFF IN HIS ARMS UNTIL I TRIED TO move. The watery fingers of early morning light peeked through the edges of his dark curtains. He'd pinned me between him and the mattress with his leg and arm. I tried to be annoyed. It would've been easier if I was, but I couldn't work through the molasses-thick emotions threatening to choke me.

Love.

Greed.

Need.

I wanted to belong to him so very badly. Almost as overwhelming was the equal need for him to belong to me.

And that was so very dangerous.

I wiggled out from under his arm and he moaned into my ear. "Where are you going? You said you'd stay tonight."

"And I did. It's morning."

"No." The word was more of a moan and rumbled through his chest and along my back. "I missed the whole thing?"

"We were a little tired."

"There were many little boys and girls, and a very excited one who didn't want to go to sleep last night. Then...a nightmare." He curled his arm under me and danced his fingertips over my inner thigh. "There was also another not-so-little girl who tired me out."



“You wouldn’t be calling me fat, would you?”

“God, no. Perfect.” He skimmed his finger over my thigh to my hip and cupped my ass to shift us even closer. “You fit me in every way.”

I bit back a moan. “Sex is easy, Seth. We’re good at that.”

“Yeah, we are. It’s more than that and you know it.”

I stiffened and tried to wiggle free again. I didn’t want to hear this now. Not when he was all soft and rumbly with sleep. When he could say things he didn’t really mean.

I longed to hear them so badly, and it was way too easy to believe him while my shields were down. Exactly why I didn’t want to stay the night with him.

Pillow talk was dangerous. Recriminations were even worse.

He rolled me over and nudged my thighs open.

“Seth.” I wasn’t sure I could resist him and he must have heard the warning in my voice. He settled down until I couldn’t move, but he didn’t slip inside.

He could have.

He was hard and I was weak when it came to this part of us.

Instead, he cupped my face. “I love that you slept with me all night. That you allowed me to fill you up and hold you close. That even now we may have a family growing between us. But that’s not all this is about. It hasn’t been for a damn long time.”

I closed my eyes.

I couldn’t face those dark eyes. I knew he loved me in his way. The hugeness of our history would always be full of complicated emotions. But there had been so many changes around us and between us.

“Ally.”

His voice was low and patient.

I tried to move my hips a little. Maybe I could distract him.

He groaned and buried his face in my neck. “No fair. And I’m not letting you distract me. Open your eyes, babe.”

The different endearment startled me enough for my eyes to pop open. Yesterday he’d called me baby. Now babe.

The couple vibes were everywhere, but I didn’t dare believe them. If I did and he was just being affectionate—like he might with a friend he loved but wasn’t in love with and liked banging—I wasn’t sure I could survive it.

“There you are. Don’t shut me out. I don’t like it. That’s not what we’re about. We’ve always had each other’s back.”

“I know.” I hated that my voice was so tentative and shaky. He was right. I was the one changing things, not him. Well, minus his insane idea that had started all of this in the first place. But I was the one who couldn’t box up my emotions when it came to him any longer. “Things are different now.”

“Not for me.”

Well, they sure as hell were for me. Could he really not see that? Was this ever going to work between us if I had to pretend every day?

I leaned up to kiss him. To distract him so I could finally get some much-needed space, but he turned away from me. “Distracting me again. I don’t just want this. I love this part of us, but the family we’re creating is even more important.”

“For Laurie,” I said on an unsteady breath.

“Not just Laurie. For us. We both came from families that were a hot mess. I want Laurie to have an amazing mom as well as a sister. That’s because of you.”

I swallowed hard. Deep down, I’d never truly believed I would have the opportunity to be a mom. His little girl was more than I could’ve ever wished for. And if I couldn’t have all of Seth, at least I’d have a part of him.

A child between us could be enough. I hoped.

“I learned from the best.” I blinked away the rush of tears.

“You sure did. I wanted your mom to adopt me. One of the many reasons I want you in Laurie’s life. Can’t you see how perfect this is? How we are?”

“I’m so not my mother.”

“You’re even better.”

I tried to shift him off me. “Stop. I don’t need you to butter me up. I already said yes.”

“That’s not what this is.” He let me up, but didn’t move away. In fact, he reached for me, gripping my hair and dragging my gaze up to meet his. “I couldn’t imagine anyone else being the mother of my child. I wish you really were Laurie’s mother too, but I can’t wish away her mother because she’s part of Laurie. And Laurie is perfect just the way she is.”

“Yes, she is.”

“But the fact you love her so completely makes up for the rest.”

*The rest.* Aka his brief, shitty marriage.

My chest tightened. It really was my fault Marj had left. He’d practically admitted as much.

I wanted to roll into a ball. I was the reason that little girl didn’t have a mother.

He lowered his mouth to mine. “Don’t cry, baby. I know you miss your mom.”

I clung tighter to him, letting him believe the grief living inside me was because of my mother. I missed her desperately, but I also knew she was at peace.

And she hadn’t been for a long, long time.

My tears mixed with his soft, sweet kisses. Because I didn’t have it in me to say no. And because I needed this as much as I needed oxygen, I melted into him.

Soft and gentle as rain. Maybe, just maybe...as healing.

I strained under him as we moved together faster. As the morning light streamed over our bed, with Seth braced over

me, I wound my legs and arms around him as if I'd never let go.

When he came inside me, I held nothing back.

He nearly shouted out his release when I lifted my mouth to swallow it down inside me. I held that too. I held every piece of him close. I trailed my fingers up his back until his breathing evened.

I liked the stillness of the morning and my brain was too wired to drift off again no matter how tired I was. I sifted my fingers through his shaggy hair. The dark curls twined and teased my skin. Even in sleep, he was hard to ignore.

A thud from out in the hallway made him jump. "Laurie?"

I kissed his temple and slid out from under him. "I'll get her. Go back to sleep."

"Are you sure?" His dark eyes were blurry and unfocused, but the father in him was ready to get up and take care of his little girl. It melted my heart even more.

"Yes. We'll make some breakfast."

He curled his arm under the pillow and slid the rest of the way off me with a low groan. "That sounds amazing. I'll be down in just a few..." He didn't even finish the sentence.

I laughed and pulled the sheet over his distractible ass. I slipped out of his bed and darted for the bathroom. I'd fallen asleep wearing his T-shirt, but it was hopelessly wrinkled. I tossed it into the hamper and glanced at the huge glass shower. Those jets would probably feel amazing.

A second thump from down the hall and Laurie's exaggerated shush put an end to that fantasy. I cleaned up as best I could before rummaging in Seth's drawers for something to wear. I hadn't packed an overnight bag, so a pair of boxers and T-shirt would have to do.

I darted out the door, closing it quietly behind me. Down the hall, Laurie's door was open and her dolls and Care Bears were arranged around a white table. A plastic tea set from one

of her friends was set up ever so carefully. Except for the teapot that had somehow ended up under Laurie's bed.

Laurie's tousled blond hair was a halo of snarls around her head. She was searching around the room, picking up toys and discarding them.

"Under your bed."

"Ally!" Her huge blue eyes went wide and she slapped her mouth shut. "Shhh," she said through her fingers.

I tried not to laugh. "Nothing's going to wake up your dad right now. But if you're looking for your teapot, it somehow got under your bed."

"Share Bear was very rude." It came out more like *berry rood*, but she was too adorable to correct.

She was a super smart kid and often spoke in a manner that seemed far beyond her years. But sometimes she was just a four-year-old.

"Well, that's not good. Why don't you grab it and we'll go down and make some breakfast for Daddy?"

Laurie crawled across her rainbow rug to the ruffle of her bed. "There you is."

"You are," I corrected.

"That's what I said."

I snorted. She picked up her teapot and set it on the table then proceeded to take each of her stuffed animals off the table.

"You can bring down one of your friends."

She looked up at me with her arms full of Care Bears. "But Ally."

"We're going to make pancakes. It gets too..." I trailed off when she dropped three out of the four in her arms and ran for the door. "Sticky." I crossed my arms. "Laurie?"

She halted. "Yes?"

"Is that how you treat your toys?"

She scrunched up her face and hugged Share Bear tighter.  
“Um, yes?”

“I don’t think so.”

She sighed dramatically. “Okay, but only because I should put my friends on my bed.” She set Grumpy Bear and Leo on the bed. “There, just like Daddy.”

“Grumpy?”

“No. Friends in bed. All snuggled like you and Daddy.”

My eyes widened and I choked. “Uh, let’s go downstairs, okay?”

“Okay. Can we have chocolate chip pancakes?”

“How about banana?”

She put Share Bear in a headlock as we neared the stairs.  
“Ohh. I’ve never had those before.”

“Never? We need to fix that ASAP. How about banana with peanut butter?”

She squinted up at me. “I don’t know. That sounds gross.”

“Banana and Nutella?”

“Now we’re talking.”

I laughed and took her hand as we went down the stairs.  
“Sounds like a plan.”

When we got downstairs, I pulled out the ingredients for pancakes. I’d been with Seth when he picked out all the things for his kitchen. I knew where almost everything was.

Well, except the cinnamon evidently.

I opened doors and backtracked to the pantry.

“What are you looking for?”

“Cinnamon.”

“Oh.” Laurie zoomed out of the kitchen into the hallway. She came back with a white bag full of supplies. She couldn’t quite lift it, so she dragged it along the floor. “Daddy went to the store for cookies stuff.”

“Thank goodness for Daddy,” I murmured as I moved forward to reach for the bag.

“I got it.”

I held up my hands in surrender. “All right.” Still watching her, I pulled down the cast iron skillet and started the bacon.

She huffed and I prayed the bag wouldn’t explode as she dragged it over the threshold and over every grout line of tile. When she stopped in front of me with the biggest smile ever, I decided right then and there I’d have cleaned up five pounds of flour and sugar for her without complaint.

“When did you get to be such a big girl?”

“I’m four, silly.”

“You sure are.”

She looked up at me with the bag straining from her fingers. “Okay, you can have it now.”

I lifted the bag onto the island counter. “In fact, you’re such a big girl, I’m going to make you help me with the mixer.”

“You are?”

“Yep. Where’s your chair?”

She zipped away again to get the little chair Seth had bought so she could help him cook. How many times had we cooked dinner with her? A dozen. More?

Had to be more.

And yet Laurie seemed even taller now. She was growing out of her baby face and chubby legs and arms. My eyes misted. She wasn’t even mine, but I was mourning the loss of the baby I’d helped raise.

The nights when Seth was beside himself with worry, the triumphs, and even the meltdowns. I’d been here with him more than not.

Until my mom had taken a turn for the worse. There had been little room for anything other than her at the end and I’d

missed out on a lot with Laurie. I didn't realize how much I'd missed this little girl until now.

She pushed the chair beside me and climbed up on it, then held up her hand. "Oh. Forgets."

She clambered down and I had to stop myself from helping her as her feet dangled before she dropped to the floor. Instead, I busied myself with flipping the bacon and pulling off more strips from the package.

I tightened my hold on the tongs when she skimmed too close to the counter. She was so very independent. Allowing her to do things for herself was one of the hardest things I'd had to learn. She made a beeline for the far wall. There were two adult height hooks with a black and a white apron on each, then a shorter one adorned with fairy wings that held a smock and two child-sized aprons. One purple with yellow flowers and a hot pink one with white butterflies.

Laurie went right for the pink.

I grinned and followed her. "Think your Daddy would mind if I borrowed his?"

"No. Just don't touch Unca Ollie's black ones. He no like people touching his stuff."

I grabbed one of the white ones and looped it over my head. Seth was quite a few inches taller than me, so I had to tuck it up a little higher before wrapping the strings around my waist.

Laurie pulled the pink strap over her head and twisted around in circles to try and get the ties around the back. After she made three rotations, she finally huffed. "Can you help me?"

I laughed and crouched down in front of her. "Of course. Turn around."

She spun around and lifted her hair out of the way. She smelled of baby shampoo and watermelon. I dragged her in for a quick squeeze and tickle. She giggled until I lifted her to set her on the chair.



“I can do it!”

“I know you can, but I need to get you in front of the mixer real quick. Your dad is going to come down as soon as he smells bacon and coffee.” I reached for the coffeemaker that was always full and ready to go in the morning. One thing Seth never skimped on was his java.

Laurie wrinkled her nose. “Coffee is gross.”

“Coffee is heaven, but it’s not for little girls.”

“I’m a big girl.”

“Yes, but not quite big enough for coffee.”

She made a little humming sound. “I don’t want it anyway.”

“Coffee is manna from heaven.”

The deep voice behind me made my skin instantly flush. Seth slipped his arms around my waist and dragged me back against him. He tucked his chin into my neck. “I thought I liked the T-shirt, but those boxers are giving me ideas.”

Right then, I was very glad I had an apron on. I elbowed him and Laurie giggled.

“Hi, Daddy.”

“Hi, Munchkin. What are you making?”

“We’re gonna make nana pancakes,” she said.

“Banana pancakes? I could go for those.” He flicked his finger under the apron and stroked across my belly. “Are you having a craving maybe?”

I rolled my eyes and slipped out of his arms. I felt weird cuddling with him in front of Laurie. Weird because I wanted it so very badly.

Her eyes tracked over us and a lopsided smile tugged at her lips. “Daddy has scruffles.”

I slid my palm over my neck. “He does.”

“You have red marks all over. Did Daddy play tickle monster with you?”

Seth snorted and covered his laugh by turning toward the bacon on the stove.

“Don’t eat all of the bacon.” I glanced over my shoulder and sure enough he had a piece in his mouth.

“Just one.”

I moved to Laurie and poured flour and cinnamon into the mixer.

“I can do it!”

I winced. “Sorry, kiddo. You can crack the eggs. Hang onto your chair.”

“M’kay.”

I swung over to the fridge for supplies and with my arms full, I couldn’t avoid Seth’s ambush. He cupped my face and settled a soft kiss on my lips. He tasted like toothpaste and bacon and all of that was wrapped in his toasted sugar scent.

“Daddy!” Laurie’s giggle filled the room.

“Sorry.” He turned and did the same to his daughter, you know, without the tongue part though.

My system had little time to readjust from the highest highs of touching him, and sleeping with him all night, and now to domesticity. It was all so jarring. I’d been careful not to allow our interactions in front of Laurie to be too familiar and now it seemed like every boundary was gone.

Was it just my imagination? Or maybe I just wanted it that way.

“Ally, hungry.”

“Right.” I blinked out of my stupid overthinking moment and grabbed the bananas on my way by. I dumped all the fixings on the counter and went to work teaching Laurie how to make banana pancakes.

By the time we were done, we were covered in flour and my arms were dusted in cinnamon. The three of us soon figured out a system for the pour, flip, and finish of each silver dollar pancake.

Seth stole a kiss when I passed him the cup of Nutella.

“Hey. None of that.”

He leaned down with a smile and nibbled at the corner of my mouth. “Was just getting the bit of chocolate there.”

“Uh huh.” I flicked out my tongue to find he’d actually been telling the truth.

“Don’t tease a man. I have other things I want to do with that tongue.”

My stomach jittered and my heart pounded. Before he could lean down again—and God, did I want him to—Laurie yelled from the dining room for the chocolate spread.

“Coming,” Seth said against my mouth.

“Not yet.”

His smile slid from sweet to calculating. “Oh, I’ll fix that soon enough.”

“Daddy!”

I laid my hand against his chest. “Go on. We’ll finish later.”

“Oh, you will. Again and again.”

I swallowed as he backed through the swinging door. I quickly washed my sticky hands and grabbed the bacon to follow him when I caught the telltale colors of our high school on an envelope stuffed in the napkin holder on the counter.

I set the bacon down and slid the card out. Seth’s bold checkmark was the first thing I saw. I scanned upward and my stomach pitched.

Reunion.

God, how could it be ten years already?

Ten years and I’d done absolutely nothing.

I dropped the invitation and had to curl my fingers into my palm. For God’s sake, they were shaking.

Seth pushed his way back into the kitchen. “What’s taking you so long? Your pancakes are going to be ice-cold.”

I looked up at him.

“Hey. Are you okay?” He rushed forward and slid his hand along my hip.

“Fine. Just gotta get the bacon.”

He frowned down at me. “I know that fake smile. That’s the one you give Patty Duncan when she’s gossiping.”

“It’s nothing.”

His gaze slid down to the counter. “I forgot, I was going to mention that to you. I wasn’t sure if they were forwarding mail to your new place. I gave Jill your new address, but I wasn’t sure if you got the invite.” He stroked his thumb over the raised type on the card. “I’m excited to see everyone.”

“Yeah, definitely.” My voice was flat, and I had to tamp down my astonished laugh. No way did I want to go back and see those people.

High school held a lot of crappy memories for me. My mom being sick on and off, along with generally just feeling as if I didn’t fit in. I’d never really come to terms with being the best friend of one of the most popular guys in school. Not that Seth tried to win over people. He just attracted them without effort.

Basically, he was the anti-me in so many ways.

He picked up the bacon. “Yeah, Brad and JT texted me. They’re coming in from California. The Three Musketeers ride again. Come on, let’s eat.”

“Right.” I followed him and tried to shake off the dread filling my chest.

Seth set the bacon down as he filched another piece. “Hey, Munchkin. Did I ever tell you that Ally and I went to school together?”

Laurie was nibbling around a misshapen pancake on her fork. A ring of chocolate stained her lips. “Mmm. Big kid’s

school? Or like me.”

“Half-day pre-K is almost big kid’s school.” I smiled. “We went to high school together. You’ll go to high school in about forty years.”

Laurie’s mouth rounded and I laughed.

“Not quite forty, but close. Don’t want you to grow up too fast, munchkin.” He took a bite from his plate and popped another piece of bacon in his mouth. “These are really good.” Then he pushed his chair in so he could round the table to go to the hutch.

My stomach dropped as he licked his fingers and pulled out the yearbook standing beside his senior picture. He still loved looking back on those glory days.

“God, you still have that?”

He grinned and sat down at the table. He pushed plates out of the way and flipped pages. “Of course I do.” He spun the book to show his daughter. “Do you remember Daddy’s friends? Brad and JT?”

Laurie cocked her head. “I don’t think so.”

He was grinning down at the picture of the lacrosse team. I remembered how amazing he looked on the field. All those muscles and aggression wrapped in a boy becoming a man.

And now he was so much more than the cocky kid on the field.

And me? Not so much. I was stuck in the same place as if ten years hadn’t gone by at all.

Before I could stop it, I blurted out my disbelief. “You really want to see all of them again? All those judgy people.”

He laughed and looked up from the pages. “Well, most of them are still in town with us. Not like it’s a big deal. Besides, let them judge me. I have everything I could want.” He swiped his hand over Laurie’s head then tickled behind her ear.

Laurie grinned around a slice of banana.

I stabbed at my pancake and forced down a few bites. Of course he did. All the things he wanted were right in front of him.

And me? I was looking in on the world again. The almost family behind glass. I was good enough to make a baby with him, and to help take care of his daughter, but I wasn't part of them. Not really.

He flipped the page. "Oh, man. Remember those letters we had to write to our future selves? God. I don't even remember what I wrote."

I certainly did and it made everything worse.

I pushed back from the table and picked up empty plates. I'd barely eaten, but my stomach was twisting so much I couldn't choke down any more. "Done, sweetie?"

Laurie was poking at the banana on her plate instead of eating. She set her fork on her plate with a nod.

Seth didn't look up from the glossy pages. "I got it. You cooked. I can clean up."

I nodded. "Okay. I need to go upstairs and get dressed."

"What?" He stood, closing the book. "Why? I thought we were going to hang out today."

"I didn't agree to that. I have to work. As it is, I'll probably catch he—um, heck—for being late."

He glanced down at his watch. "You don't usually go in until ten."

I swallowed. I couldn't be around him right now. Too many memories were bumping into my pathetic reality. "I need a shower and to get ready."

He sighed. "Are you sure you can't call in?"

"Some of us don't have that luxury."

Seth blew out a breath. "Dammit, you know I didn't mean it that way."

"Dollar to the swear jar!" Laurie chirped happily.

I wiped my fingers on my napkin and pressed a kiss on top of Laurie's head. "You tell him, kiddo. Thanks for helping me cook this morning."

She grinned up at me with chocolate smeared all over her face. "Thankie, Ally."

"Daddy will wash your face." I gave him a pointed look and escaped.

Not that I got too much of a head start. Five minutes later, he was bounding upstairs with *The Care Bears* blaring from the living room.

I'd slipped into my dress from the night before. *Hello, walk of shame.*

"Do you really have to go?"

"I do." I didn't want to turn and look at him. He was too good at making me forget just what this was between us. I had to remind myself that we weren't a happy little family.

No matter how much I wanted it to be so.

He crossed to me. "Can you come back tonight?"

"I'm tired, Seth."

He tugged me close and linked his arms around me. "We have baby-making to accomplish."

One more reminder. *Thanks, buddy.*

I pushed out of his arms. "Can we take tonight off?"

"Is everything okay?" He slid his fingers into my hair and turned me toward him.

"Fine. I'm just tired. Someone didn't let me sleep last night." *Please don't see my fake smile. Just let me get out of here.*

"I'd really like to not let you sleep again tonight." He tipped up my head and pressed a kiss on my lips.

I closed my eyes and almost let myself slide back into him. Back into the status quo we found without skipping a beat.

I cupped his face and ended the kiss, reluctantly opening my eyes. “Maybe tomorrow, okay?”

He sighed and pressed his forehead to mine. “All right. I have a ton of meetings this week anyway. I guess I should get ready for them. The birthday party kind of took over.”

“See? Perfect.” I swallowed down the lump in my throat and stepped back. “I’ll text you later.”

He frowned and twisted his fingers around mine. “All right.”

Grabbing my purse, I strode out of the room and jogged downstairs. I didn’t wait for him. I couldn’t.

Not if I really wanted to leave.

I stopped in and said goodbye to Laurie, but she barely looked away from the screen. *The Care Bears* were far too enthralling.

He followed me to the door and dragged me back before I could go down the front porch steps. The kiss was hot and heavy and the lump in my throat grew even larger. So much that I thought I was actually going to choke.

I wouldn’t cry. It wasn’t his fault I didn’t know how to keep up with how things were supposed to be.

I wasn’t supposed to want more.

I pulled back and smiled. “I’ll see ya.”

His smile was soft and sweet and it took everything inside me not to let the tears brim over. “See ya tomorrow.”

“Sure.” I turned to leave and he snagged my hand.

“Hey. The munchkin’s graduation?”

God, I’d almost forgotten. “Of course. I wouldn’t miss it.”

“Are you okay?” His eyebrows lowered.

“Yes. Just can’t believe she’s growing so fast.” I sniffed. At least these tears made sense as far as Seth was concerned. Right now, I was more than willing to hide my face in his shoulder. “She’s getting to be such a big girl.”



He laughed. "I'm so glad I'm not the only one freaking out."

"Not just you." But if I didn't get out of there I was going to absolutely melt down and that wouldn't work. He'd never believe it was just Laurie growing up on us.

*Him.*

Me. Sort of.

God, what a damn mess. I stepped back again. "I've got to get to work."

"All right. But hey, wear something extra pretty. Not that you're ever anything else of course." He kissed my temple. "But I want to show off my girls."

"I'll do my best."

There was no way I was going to be able to hold off all the emotions running amok in my damn head.

I ran down the driveway to my car and turned to wave at him. As soon as he went back inside, the tears fell. I couldn't have stopped them if I wanted to.

## SIXTEEN



I SAT IN MY CAR NIBBLING ON OYSTER CRACKERS FROM MY stash from the diner. I'd been a complete wreck the whole night and anything I ate this morning made me nauseous.

Oliver and Seth stood together under the stately oak tree at the edge of the property. Main Street was alive with pedestrian traffic thanks to the shops, and the forty or so parents trying to wrangle children.

One of Laurie's boyfriends—the girl had a few—had escaped for the lake. Weston's dad, Dare Kramer, had him tucked under his arm as he hauled him back up to the white folding chairs.

He was a handful, but Dare was patient if a little frazzled most of the time. Another single dad who stepped up when needed. There were far too few of them in this world.

All the little perfect pieces of the town I loved so much.

The perfect place to raise a kid.

I'd been doing it informally with Laurie for years, and now Seth was dangling the possibility in front of my face.

I focused on the little girl twirling between the twin brothers. So different, and so much the same. Even here, when they were both dressed for work, somehow they were still on the opposite ends of the spectrum.

Seth with his laid-back summer-weight jacket in a perfectly acceptable wheat color over dark jeans and a white dress shirt sans tie. And then there was Oliver, who looked

like he was about to head into the city for a meeting with people on Wall Street. His navy Savile Row suit was crisp and perfect even with the sun beating down on them.

The only thing that matched on the two men were the indulgent smiles for Seth's daughter. She was full of happiness from the colorful purple and pink dress with butterflies dotting the hem, to her slightly crooked blond braids. Somehow Laurie had turned into a little girl instead of staying the baby I'd helped to raise. Even when I'd drifted away from them for a few months, she was so much mine in more ways than I ever wanted to face.

Why the hell couldn't I just calm down about all of this? Let things happen as they happened.

*Because you love him madly.*

I slumped down in my seat and cursed when Laurie spotted me and came running. No turning back now.

I took a swig from my water to swallow the paste the crackers had become in my dry mouth. Then I swung the door open and rose, catching Laurie against my leg before she could knock me down. "Hiya, munchkin."

"Yay, you came."

"Of course I did. I wouldn't miss it." I crouched down in front of her and smoothed a flyaway blond curl around her ear. "I love your dress."

"Daddy got it for me."

"Did you guys go shopping together?"

"Yes." She buried her face in my neck and looped her arms around me. "Do I have to go up there?"

I laughed and wobbled on my heels thanks to the gravel path. "No. You don't have to. But don't you want to go up there and show your dad what a big girl you are?"

She shook her head against my shoulder.

I swung her up into my arms. "Yes, you do. You'll be up there with all your friends. And you want to show off your

pretty dress, right?”

“Yeah.” Her voice was small, but less scared.

“See? Oh, and you get a diploma. Just like the big girl you are.”

“Diploma?”

I shifted her onto my hip. “Yep. A paper that says you are a very important little girl.” I moved toward the brothers, still carting my precious cargo. “Even though we already know you are, right, Dad?”

Seth’s eyebrows shot up behind his aviators. “Of course.” He gave his little girl a huge smile. “What are we doing?” he asked out of the side of his mouth.

“She’s a big girl now. She’s definitely going up on stage to get her diploma.”

“Oh, right. Definitely. I can’t wait to take a million pictures of you, munchkin.” He poked his finger into her side and she wiggled in my arms.

“No, Daddy.”

“Okay, maybe one hundred pictures?”

She giggled. “No. Ten is good.”

Seth laughed. “Ten, huh?”

“Yes. One for you, one for me, one for Grandpa, one for Unca Ollie...” She put her hand against my cheek. “One for Ally. She’s just like a mama, right?”

I nearly dropped her.

Seth moved in close to me and slid his hand down my back. “Would you like that, baby girl?”

“Big girl,” Laurie said quickly.

“Sorry. My big girl.” Seth brought his hand up to my ponytail and stroked it absently. “Our big girl.”

Laurie leaned into me and tangled her fingers in the chain of my arrow necklace at the nape of my neck. “I would.” Then she reached up to her dad. “A lot, a lot.”

I swallowed down a lump threatening to strangle me.

Seth hugged us closer to him. "I'd like it a lot, a lot too."

I looked up at him, but couldn't see exactly what was going on behind his mirrored glasses. His familiar cologne and the smell of coffee mixed with the watermelon scent of Laurie and they made my head spin.

Did he have any idea what he was saying?

Was he really saying it?

I opened my mouth, but screeching feedback from the podium cut me off.

Laurie winced and slapped her hands over her ears. "Loud."

A woman in a bright yellow dress leaned toward the microphone. "Parents, we're just about ready to begin."

"How about that? It's time to begin. Ally and Uncle Ollie will be sitting with me right there." Seth pointed to the left side of the folding chairs. "Let's bring you up there, okay?" He swung her out of my arms and up high in the air. "My pretty girl is graduating today."

She laughed and clutched at his arms. "Carry me, Daddy?"

"You got it." He turned back to me. "I'll meet you up there?"

I nodded and blinked back the sudden wash of tears threatening again. God, hadn't I cried enough last night?

I met Oliver at the chairs and noted that only three of them were reserved. None for me?

Oliver looked up from his phone. He took the program off the chair to his left. "I saved you a seat."

"Where's your father?" I sat down and crossed my legs under my long summer dress.

Oliver's jaw flexed. "Not here."

"Right." I swallowed and turned my attention to Seth and Laurie. How many times had the elder Hamilton bailed on

these things? And yet there was Seth, bent down talking to Laurie as the teacher lined them up. He never missed a single event for her. Somehow I knew he was giving her a pep talk. A single father completely devoted to his little girl.

Even if his father and mother had been less than ideal in that arena, Seth excelled at parenting. So much so that I was afraid I'd never be as much of a natural as he was.

He headed back with a sweet backwards wave to his daughter before he took the seat beside me. His knee bounced as he cracked his knuckles. He scrubbed his palm down his thigh with a laugh. "I'm nervous. Crazy, right?"

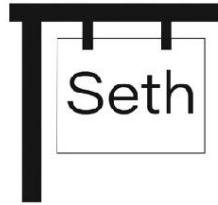
"First of many graduations." I smiled up at him.

He flipped his hand, palm up and spread his fingers. "I guess you'll just have to hold my hand through all of them."

My throat clogged again, but I couldn't resist the gesture. I laced my fingers with his and turned to watch our little girl.

For the first time, I felt as if we could truly be a unit and it scared the crap out of me.

## SEVENTEEN



WHAT WAS THAT OLD SAYING? YOU CAN NEVER GO HOME again? I was learning that applied even when you'd never left your hometown.

The old homestead wasn't all you couldn't return to. You also couldn't go back to high school and pretend you were still eighteen when all you cared about were the three Ps—partying, Pabst, and pussy.

I still loved pussy. Ally's in particular. I sat back in my chair and rubbed my forehead. Actually, I didn't want any other.

*Ever.*

Christ, lightning bolts hurt. This one had jabbed me before, causing sizzling little bursts of revelation—usually quickly ignored—but now reality speared me between the eyes.

We weren't just making a baby. We were making a life.

“I think we need to go out the night before the reunion and get fucking trashed,” JT said on the phone, and I grunted.

Not in agreement. Not in approval. Nope. Wasn't gonna happen.

“I have a kid, you know. I can't just spend the night getting lit.”

“So what? I might have a kid out there too, somewhere. You don't see it slowing me down, man.” JT laughed heartily and I swallowed a sigh.

I'd called JT to rehash old times while I ate half a turkey sandwich at my desk in between meeting with clients. Afterward, I intended to bike ride down to the bank before my slate of appointments later in the afternoon. It was a nice day out. Maybe I'd even stop at the bakery and see if they had any of those half-moon cookies Ally liked. If I brought a couple to the diner, maybe she'd soften up enough to talk to me.

It had been several days since the graduation. Surely by now she had to be over the whole wanting space thing she'd mentioned the day we'd made breakfast.

Her weirdness had started right around when she'd found that reunion invitation. But that didn't make sense. She'd had a good time in high school too. Or so I'd thought.

All I knew was that right now, JT wasn't funny, and I wasn't feeling the old times gig as much as I'd expected. Maybe because the best part of my past was also part of my present—and hopefully my future.

“Yeah, well, mine lives with me, and I'm not going out to get wasted. She's already spent the night with her uncle once this month.”

“Come on, the kid needs some freedom.”

“Freedom like I had? My dad never gave a shit if I was home, but I better not do anything to tarnish the precious family name.”

Even as I said the words, I regretted them. My dad could be thoughtless, and he definitely wouldn't win the father of the year award, but he hadn't been a bad parent.

At least he'd stuck around, unlike my mother.

Unlike Laurie's.

Fuck, were we doomed to repeat every pattern in our lives? Just like I'd pulled a page out of my father's playbook by paying off Marjorie, I'd tried it again with that stupid contract.

I yanked open my top desk drawer where the contract still resided. I was going to set that stupid thing on fire.



Ally and I didn't need signatures between us. We weren't about that. We made our own damn rules.

“Look, dude, I'm just saying it'd be fun if we cut loose and partied like we did in the old days. But if you're not cool with that, then me and Brad will just see you at the reunion.”

“That's probably a better idea. Maybe we can get a beer afterward,” I added, though I already knew that probably wouldn't be happening. Ally would be with me, and she'd been clearly uncomfortable when the subject of high school had come up. I wasn't entirely sure why, but it didn't matter.

If she didn't want to do the whole reunion thing, we'd make our appearances, talk to a few people, and split. I preferred spending the night with her and my little girl anyway.

“Sure, man, whatever you want. I'm just glad to be seeing you and Brad again. I've been missing those old days something fierce. Nothing's been like them, you know? We had the life back then.”

His words were still echoing in my head after I'd hung up. I'd had fun going down memory lane for a few minutes the other day, but perhaps I didn't need that blast from the past as much as I'd thought.

My present was pretty damn awesome.

I pushed aside the remnants of my turkey sandwich and flipped open the folder. I would tear up the contract. And in case Ally didn't get how serious I was about her—about us—I'd bring the damn thing back to her in pieces. Maybe then she'd relax a little and let things happen.

If that was even what she wanted.

My gaze scanned the page on top automatically. She'd faxed over the house paperwork separately, so the only thing that should be in this folder was the contract I'd given her. And it was, all signed, sealed, and delivered.

Just not with her name.

*Your Ally Cat* was written in her tight little scrawl, and fuck if it didn't make me smile.

She *was* mine, and she had been since high school. And if we went to that reunion together, there wasn't a person there who wouldn't know it.

Especially her.

I shoved the folder across the desk and rose. Actually, nope, I wasn't going to tear up the contract. Not where I had it in writing that she was mine. I'd take proof in whatever way I could get it.

She wasn't going to shut me out forever.

I'd made it halfway to the door when Oliver swung into the room, his briefcase in one hand and his eyebrow already climbing for greatness. "So you drove her away, hmm?"

Frowning, I stopped dead. "Drove who away?"

"Why, Alison, of course. She's the only woman in your life, isn't she? Perhaps not." Oliver moved forward to sit on the corner of my desk. "That would explain the secrecy. You have to know friends with benefits never works out well long-term. Or maybe you don't. Consider it free advice. Just another of Oliver's—"

"You don't have any friends, so what would you know about it?" I muttered, not caring if the jab hurt. My brother certainly never worried overmuch about his pointed remarks in my direction. "Oliver's Life Lessons", he called them.

I usually offered a lifted middle finger as thanks.

"I know Alison has called out sick all week to work and Sage grew desperate enough to ask me if I'd seen her. I indicated I had not. Clearly, she's not warming your bed either."

As if he'd dropped a giant weight onto my shoulders, I returned to my desk and sank into my chair. "She's called in? She never does that. Maybe she really isn't feeling well." Hope bloomed inside me as I did some quick calculations. It

was early, but possible. She could definitely be feeling some twinges if something had taken root.

But she hadn't called me.

I reached for my desk phone just as Oliver snatched up the folder. And started to read while I stared almost unseeingly at him.

My slowness to react had to do with the possibility Ally could be pregnant. That was the only reason I had for not leaping to my feet and yanking the folder out of my snoop of a brother's hands.

"Well, now, isn't this interesting? A baby contract. Is Ally feeling the need to procreate? She is nearing thirty. I can see why she'd want to move on that sooner rather than later."

"Give me that, you jackass. And no, Ally wasn't feeling anything. I was the one who wanted the baby."

Oliver's brows snapped down as he peered at me over the folder I wasn't getting back unless I wrestled him to the ground—and that might end up happening. "I think you better cut back on those vitamins you've been taking. That ginseng-biloba-whatever mix must be messing with your wiring."

"My wiring is just fine."

"You have a baby. Why would you want another?"

"Laurie is four. Hardly a baby. And I'm not justifying my decisions to you." I narrowed my eyes. "Why is it so shocking that I'd want another kid? The first one came out pretty damn good."

"She did, but one is plenty. What do you think you're going to do? Quit your job and play house husband?" He glanced at the contract. "Seems like you just want her eggs and want her gone. Paying for her school, huh? Guess that explains why Sage mentioned her applying for classes in New York City. Free ride."

Oliver probably kept talking, but I wasn't listening anymore. All I could hear in my head on a constant loop was that she'd applied for school in New York City.

Miles and miles away.

I had no right to feel hurt. That was what I'd suggested all along. We'd make a baby, then she could go to school wherever she wanted. In the back of my mind, I'd always known it was a real possibility whether I gave her the funding or not. Ally mentioned splitting town much less frequently these days than she had right after her mother passed, but every now and then, it still came up.

She wanted a fresh start. Hell, she *deserved* one. My money could give her that.

Equal exchange. And hey, she could always come see our kid on weekends and breaks and holidays. The city was only a little over four hours away. Not that far at all.

"Fuck." I slammed my fist into the desk, barely registering the sting.

Oliver shut the folder. "Didn't know she was applying to schools in New York City?"

"No. I mean, I told her anywhere was fair game."

"You told her. As if she isn't an unencumbered adult capable of making her own choices."

I stayed silent for that one. The truth hurt as much as my now aching knuckles.

"Don't know if you know this, but Dad paid off mom."

My head snapped up. "What?"

"She didn't just take off. They made a deal. He'd finance her lifestyle elsewhere if she didn't try to take him for half in the divorce, thereby forcing him to expose her cheating and other misdeeds in court. Neither of them wanted messy, so she went for it. Last I knew, she was living in Cabo with her new family."

"Cabo?" I rubbed my thumb between my eyes. "Who the hell lives in Cabo?"

"Our mother does. From what I've heard, we have a younger half-sister too. Unsubstantiated, of course. Dad isn't

exactly forthcoming on the subject, and the internet coughs up only so much.”

I didn’t say anything. My mind was so full of Ally that I couldn’t focus on anything else.

If she missed work, she must’ve gone to New York to scope out schools. There was no other explanation. If she was truly sick, she would’ve been home with Sage. She didn’t have any other friends in town she’d stay with. Nor did her budget extend to spur-of-the-moment vacations.

“I did drive her away. Somehow.” I braced my elbow on the desk and raked a hand through my hair. “I don’t know how to do this. Every time I think we’re getting somewhere, we lose even more ground.”

“Hamilton men are meant to walk single file.”

Normally, I laughed off Oliver’s certainty in that direction. For a long time, I’d been half convinced of the very same thing.

Not anymore.

“Meant to end up like Dad, you mean? Bitter and alone, with only his money to keep him company?”

Oliver adjusted his tie. “He has two rather strapping sons as well. One more so than the other.”

“Keep trying with your workout routine. Persistence is key.” I tipped back in my chair. “Fuck, Ol, how do I fix this?”

No sooner had the words left my mouth, I shook my head. “No. Never mind. I did not ask for your advice. There’s desperate and then there’s suicidal.”

“Actually, maybe I should fix this.”

“What? No. God, no.”

His laughter was rich and throaty, like any good movie villain. “Seriously, man, pull yourself together. I thought you only wanted use of her eggs. And from the way you were making out the other day at Laurie’s party,” he cleared his throat, “I’m going to guess you already achieved liftoff there.”

“We weren’t making out. It was a kiss. We just kissed.”

“Hmm, and here I thought you knew how babies were made already.” Oliver whisked his fingers over the hairline-straight seam of his trousers. “That might actually explain a lot.”

Despite everything, I laughed. “Why are you still here?”

“Because you need help, and I’m a giver.”

“You don’t even like Ally. I don’t know why, but you don’t.”

“You are as dense as a two-by-four without all the uses.” He gave a heavy sigh when I stared at him. “I was jealous. Possibly.”

“Of Ally? Why?”

“Not of Ally, per se. Of your relationship with her. The two of you have always been a unit against the world. Before Ally, it was you and me, in case you’ve forgotten.”

“It’s different with Ally.”

“No kidding. But you never fully realized just how much.”

I shook my head. “No. Not until now. Even Marj—” I stopped. “You introduced me to Marj. Kept telling me she would be great for me.”

Oliver shrugged and set aside the folder beside my sandwich wrapper on my messy desk. “I never thought you’d knock her up. Or marry her.”

“One kind of led to the other,” I said drily.

“Yes, well, some of us know how to bag it up. Then again, you’re going bag-free intentionally now, so there’s no understanding you, brother.” Oliver rose and glanced down at me with all the paternalism being six minutes older brought to bear. “Let me try to fix this.”

“No. Absolutely not. You don’t even know what the issue is, and I’m supposed to let you sweep in and muck things up even further?”

“She’s left you without a word. What further muck can I cause?”

I had no answer for that.

“As for not knowing the issue, it’s fairly clear. You made up a nonsense reason to sleep with her that didn’t require brutal honesty, and now you’ve finally realized you’re in love with her.”

“That’s completely—” I exhaled. “Accurate.”

“Now you’ll be stuck with a kid too when all you had to do was admit you wanted to fuck her. As if she would’ve said no. That woman has looked at you with heart eyes since day one.”

“So not true. I drive her crazy. If she had heart eyes—whatever the fuck that is—she wouldn’t run away from me every time I get near her. It’s like I have a fungus or something.”

Oliver held up his hands, palms out. “Officially entering territory labeled ‘do not need to know’.”

I laughed again. “Oh, and the stuck with a kid part? Wrong. I want that kid with Ally more than anything. I want a family with her. Goddammit, we already are a family, and I want it to be official.”

Oliver shook his head. “Oh no, you don’t. I already reached my wedding quota with you, pal. One was awful enough. Another would be beyond the pale.”

“I didn’t say we were getting married. Yet.” But now that the idea was rattling around in my head, I had to admit it wasn’t displeasing.

She was having my baby, assuming all went to plan. Why not be my wife too?

“Why not?” I repeated under my breath while my brother gazed at me as if I’d grown horns, a tail, and sprouted red skin.

“Before you hear wedding bells, Romeo, you need a bride. Yours is currently MIA. I offered to help you, but if you’re so certain you can continue to bungle this all on your own, then fine.”

“Seth!”

We both glanced toward the doorway as Sage scuttled into the room. Actually, that was a misnomer. A few days ago, Sage might’ve scuttled. Her self-confidence appeared to waver with the tide, and she often seemed content to hug the wall.

Today was a different story. She walked into my office with her head held high and her assets swaying. *Visibly* swaying in her tight denim miniskirt and a top that barely covered her breasts. Not that I paid much attention. Sage was a cute girl—and I imagined she had gotten more than her share of catcalls on her way over here in that outfit—but my eyes were solely for Ally.

Now and forever.

“What are you wearing?” Oliver demanded, shocking me almost as much as Sage, who apparently had just noticed he also was in the room. She’d zeroed in on me at my desk like a laser pointer.

“Pretty sure they’re called clothes.” She sniffed at Oliver and returned her attention to me. “Ally hasn’t been to work for three days. She hasn’t been at your house so you can impregnate her, has she?”

My eyebrows lifted. So much for assuming Ally had employed discretion regarding our activities. Thanks to Ally sharing with the diner patrons her comical observations about my prowess the day after we’d first had sex, I’d understood it was known that we were lovers. But being lovers didn’t mean babymaking necessarily.

“What has she told you?”

“Are the private details besties confide in each other really important?”

“I’m her best friend, and yes, they are.”

“No, you’re the best friend with a dick, which automatically slots you lower on account of the dick.”

“She likes my dick, thank you very much.”

Oliver stepped away. “Awkward moment.”



“If she liked it so much, why did she run away? She never misses work. And she hasn’t slept in her bed. So whose bed is she sleeping in?” Sage stepped forward and impaled my chest with a flame-red nail. “Huh?”

“Thanks for the vivid picture, but I can guarantee she’s probably sleeping alone and is perfectly safe.” I tried to ignore the icy jabs of panic pricking between my ribs. “She’s extremely level-headed.”

Sage made a noise in her throat. “Until she hooked up with you.”

“Since when do you hate me?” I held out my arms. “I always thought we were good.”

“You could hurt her, so I have you under a very watchful eye, buddy. If she’s with child, she doesn’t need additional stress from your inconsistency.”

“With child?” Oliver snorted. “Welcome, Madonna. Oh, and I’ll have you know, Seth said they only kissed. Virgin birth, is it now?”

“I did not say that. I said when you saw us—never mind.”

As if I’d never spoken, Sage whirled on Oliver, swinging her hips in a way that made my brother’s eyes flare wide. “Did I ask you? No. Why are you even here? Don’t you have shameless hussies to lie with?”

“Shameless hussies? The fifties ended a long time ago. Oh, and newsflash.” He dropped his gaze lewdly to her attire. “Depending on point of view, you might fit into one of those categories you’re casting aspersions on.”

I winced. Now he was going to get it. And he deserved it too.

Instead, Sage beamed. “Really? Do you honestly think so?” She fluffed her hair. “I’m going for a new look. Wholesome hasn’t really been working for me.”

“Why?”

“I’m hoping to encounter no-strings sex,” she said matter-of-factly.

Oliver smirked. “*Encounter* it? Like sex is a living, breathing entity of its own?”

“In my world, it might as well be.” She glanced back at me. “Anyway, that’s irrelevant right now. I’m worried about Ally.”

“I am too. But I’m sure she’s fine. You’ve tried calling her?” I dug out my phone. I hadn’t done anything but text her now and then, wanting to give her time and space.

“Yes. She worked on Sunday, then told me she was taking a few days personal time. But she didn’t book it with the boss. She just keeps calling in sick. I don’t know what’s going on.”

“You think she went to check out a school?”

Sage shrugged. “Maybe. She didn’t say much about that either. Just that she had to start going after what she wanted. She mentioned before that she was interested in Baruch in the city.” She tugged up her V-neck top. “Maybe we should drive down there, scope out the situation?”

“Scope out what situation? And I think we need a bit more to go on than to just pay a visit to some random school.” Oliver glanced at me. “I’m going to play a hunch, and if it pans out, I’ll get back to you.”

“Oh, hell no,” Sage said. “Any hunches get routed through me. She’s my best friend.” She pointed at me. “Quiet, you. You’re the one who wouldn’t know how to give a girl the fairytale if someone gave you a picture book with directions.”

I stayed quiet. I was still tangled up thinking about my supposed inconsistency. And handing out fairytales—what the fuck was *that* about?

Perhaps I was the cause of Ally being so wary to take the next step. Hell, I’d never told her in so many words that I wanted to either. But she was my closest friend. Surely, she had to have some inkling about my inner workings. All of this had taken me by surprise. I was still feeling my way. It wasn’t as if I was some expert.

I’d never fallen in love with my best friend before.

Never wanted to be with someone so much that everyone—and everything—else except my little girl paled in comparison.

So maybe I was screwing this up without even knowing it. By not coming clean. By not being clear and saying the words.

By not giving her the goddamn fairytale.

“I’m handling this on my own,” Oliver told Sage. “I may be completely off-base. In any case, I have private business with Alison myself.”

I pushed my phone back in my pocket and crossed my arms. I was still working out the proper method of handling this, but obviously the phone was not it. No fairytales granted there. “What private business?” I demanded.

“Private,” Oliver repeated, already moving toward the door. “If I find out anything, I’ll be in contact.”

Sage chased after him. “I’ll tail you in my car if you don’t tell me where you’re going.”

His laughter drifted down the hall. “Honey, you couldn’t keep up with me if you had a Ferrari. Stay here, pet.”

“Pet?” Sage spun around and propped her hands on her hips. “He’s a complete jerk. How can you even stand him?”

I jerked a shoulder. “Probably comes from sharing a womb. It creates a bond.”

“Ugh.” Sage flopped in the chair opposite my desk. “He’s going to find her and make everything worse. She needs the womanly touch, not an interfering male.”

“Ally knows her own mind. She can handle Oliver.” I gazed at the folder on my desk. My fingers were itching with the need to trace the words she’d written.

*Your Ally Cat.*

If she wasn’t mine yet, she would be.

A knock sounded at my door and it opened. “Seth, the Parsons are on their way in to sign the papers for the—” My father broke off, his gaze alighting on Sage. “Well, hello there,

Sage. What a pleasure. I didn't expect to see you here." My father's smile could have burned a hole through glass.

"Hi, Mr. Hamilton. I'm sorry to interrupt business." Sage was already jumping to her feet.

"No, no, you're never an interruption. Stay, please." He glanced between us, a disturbing glint coming into his eyes. "I can talk to Seth later."

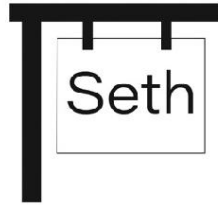
I frowned. What the hell was his deal? He was always sweet as could be to Sage. In fact, he was kind to most everyone in town except Ally, which royally pissed me off. Of course, Sage's parents had just landed one hell of a nice deal when they recently sold their B&B to a developer who had plans to make sleepy Crescent Cove "more cutting edge" and "more in line with the times." Whatever that meant.

As much as I hated thinking my father was that shallow, this certainly wasn't the first time I'd been confronted with evidence that money was all that mattered to him.

But it would be the first time I called him on it.

"No, we need to talk right now."

## EIGHTEEN



I ROSE AND WALKED TO THE DOOR. “SORRY ABOUT THE timing,” I said to Sage as she sailed out. “It can’t be helped.”

“Par for the course from a Hamilton,” she said under her breath before turning a sunny smile on my father. “Have a nice day, sir. It was good seeing you again.”

“You too, Sage. Don’t be a stranger. You’re welcome here anytime.”

With a bounce of her blond curls and a flounce of her non-flouncy skirt, she was off.

I closed the door and turned back to my father. He raised an eyebrow and gestured with the Hamilton Realty folder in his hand. “Why do I have a feeling this has nothing to do with the Parsons deal?”

“Because unlike you, work isn’t the center of my world.”

“Forget center. Sometimes it’s barely even in your peripheral vision.” Huffing out a breath, he sat in the chair Sage had vacated and crossed his legs. “What is it now, Seth?”

I didn’t sit. I leaned against my desk and crossed my arms. “I’m starting a family with Ally.”

Wow, those words didn’t burn my throat nearly as much as I’d feared. Not because they weren’t true, but because they were. Saying them to my father was acknowledging their truth. Their power.

And from the expression on my dad’s face, I might as well have thrown down a gauntlet.

“Is this about that contract business?”

I didn't ask how he knew. In an office this small with paper-thin walls, he could've easily overheard us talking.

Which also meant Shelly had probably heard Ally and me having sex. That should probably embarrass me. And yet...

I wanted to tell the world she was mine, in every possible way. Even the graphic, inappropriate ones.

Or Oliver could have told him. I wouldn't have put it past my twin to hop on the phone to my dad the minute he had walked out of my office. The timeframe was insanely tight, but Oliver worked fast.

Still, he'd said he wanted to fix things with me and Ally. Telling my dad wouldn't fix anything.

Then again, there was my lawyer. My lawyer who golfed every Sunday with my father and had a shark emblem on his golf shirt rather than an alligator.

“Talked to Artie, hmm?”

My father glanced away, all the proof I needed. “Don't be ridiculous. That would violate client confidentiality.”

Yep. I'd called that one right. At least it hadn't been Oliver who'd blabbed. I really didn't want to have to kick his ass since he was purportedly doing me a favor with Ally.

Though, God, I'd sunk low if I was accepting his help. Oliver's love life was even worse than mine. He went through women like ties. Actually, he probably used ties with women, since his tastes veered toward the dominant side. Yet another thing I had no desire to ponder.

“That contract was a mistake.”

My father didn't reply for a long moment. “But she signed on the dotted line, didn't she? She agreed to take money for your child. Just like Marjorie did.” He lifted his head and narrowed his flinty eyes on mine. “Women are all the same, Seth. You may think I was wrong for offering a payout to your mother.”

“Considering I only learned about that today, can’t say I’ve had much time to process. But wrong seems like a good place to start, yes.”

My father went on as if I hadn’t spoken. “The truth is, it was a test, and she failed.”

“Ally didn’t fail, and who tests someone you love?”

*You did. You were probably playing Hamilton games without even realizing it.*

“I wouldn’t do something like that to someone I love. I won’t do it again,” I amended, though the situations were vastly different.

“You don’t love Alison.”

“How the hell do you know? Because you didn’t love Mom? Because I didn’t love Marjorie the way I should have?”

“I loved your mother. You will never understand.”

“Then tell me. Explain it to me. I’m begging you.” I spread my arms wide. “I’m standing right here, waiting. Listening.”

“She wasn’t faithful to me,” he said in a nearly inaudible voice.

Laughter ripped from my chest. “So? You weren’t faithful to her either. That’s why we have that damn camp that you refuse to go near any longer. Which mistress lived there, Dad?”

He didn’t look at me, just cracked his knuckles. “It doesn’t matter. Your mother was unfaithful first. She bore another man’s child.” He forged ahead before I could finish processing what he’d said.

Did he mean the daughter she’d had with her new husband? Or...worse?

“Do you even know if Laurie is yours? Did you ever ask for proof?” he demanded.

Though I knew the question was just his version of lashing out, it hit me square in the gut just the same. I started to respond, but he cut me off, his low voice as brutal as a whip.

“Or did she use her as a bargaining chip as your mother used you and your brother?”

I gripped the back of my neck. “Laurie looks like me. She’s mine. But you know what? Even if she wasn’t, it wouldn’t matter.”

Deep down, it was true. I couldn’t deny it would hurt like a bitch to find out she wasn’t my child biologically. But I’d get over it. Because she was mine in every way that counted, and I didn’t need a useless slip of paper to prove it.

Every time she called me Daddy, I knew the truth all over again. She was mine and I was hers. Against all odds, we’d made a family.

And now with Ally, hopefully our family would expand.

“Sure, it wouldn’t.” My father laughed mirthlessly. “How much of your savings did you use to buy her safety from her mother?”

“She wasn’t in danger from Marj. Not physically. But neglect is just as hurtful. I would’ve emptied my bank account to ensure my baby didn’t have to deal with a parent who didn’t want her.”

He lifted his head. “So would I.”

I exhaled and moved around my desk, dropping into my chair. “She didn’t sign it. Ally. She wouldn’t. Even when she said she had, it wasn’t legal. She didn’t want a contract between us. If I’d been thinking straight—hell, if I’d been less of a coward—I never would have either.”

When my father didn’t speak, I leaned forward and braced my forearms on the desk. “I don’t know why you don’t like her, but I hope to God it’s not for the reason I think. Because all these years, I’ve told myself there’s some good in you, some decency. If you’ve let your feelings about her bank account color your attitude toward her all these years...” I trailed off before I said something I probably wouldn’t regret.

Defending Ally came before everything else except protecting my daughter.



“You would see it that way,” he said tiredly, and I jerked up my head, shocked to hear the fatigue in his tone.

My father was a bull of a man. Strong, healthy, larger than life in every way. Years had passed since I’d really looked at him and seen him as anything but a force of nature.

Until now. Now the lines on his face seemed like a roadmap, where most of the best days of his life were behind him.

I swallowed hard. “Then explain it to me. Please.”

“She has the power to break you.”

“You just insinuated I don’t love her, and now you’re saying she could break me?”

“I wanted to see if you truly knew your own mind yet, or if you were just playing games with a future you weren’t ready for.” His shoulders relaxed. “Maybe it’s finally time.”

Words left me. Just completely vanished from my head.

“I was you once.” He leaned back in his chair. “I loved your mother more than was wise, and what did it get me?”

“Christ, did everyone see what I couldn’t when it came to me and Ally?” I exhaled. “What I didn’t have the balls to acknowledge?”

“You were smart enough to tread gently. Because you knew. You understood that once you committed to her, there was no going back.”

I wasn’t sure he was saying that as a positive thing, but I nodded. “You’re right. There isn’t. I love her and I want to spend the rest of my life with her.”

Coming clean didn’t scare me anymore. The truth just filled me with a sense of rightness. Like I’d been traveling down a road with my headlights off, and now I’d finally turned them on.

My future was right in front of me, and all I had to do was reach out and take it. And nurture it, and care for it, and protect it with everything I was.

My father nodded and steepled his hands over the folder in his lap. “Does she feel the same?”

“I don’t know. I hope so. I think so maybe.” I blew out a breath. “But if she doesn’t, I’m a patient man. I’ll just keep at her until she has no choice.”

He surprised me by laughing. “Stubborn to a fault, you and your brother.”

Questions sprung to my mind about what he’d said about my mother having a child with another man, questions I wasn’t sure I was ready to hear the answers to. Not now. Today Ally and Laurie and our future family was where my head was at. As well as my heart.

“Yeah. Not too bright when it comes to pleasing a woman either,” I added. My father coughed and I smiled. “Not like that. We’re both good there. Well, I know I am. He’s probably just all talk.”

“He is about most things.”

My smile grew. “I meant more about saying the words, giving out the romance. I kinda suck at that.”

“Oprah,” he said gravely.

I laughed. “What?”

“She told women not to settle. Now they all want a free car and a fairytale.”

Back to that again. Obviously, the universe was trying to send me a message. I was listening.

“If any woman deserves one, it’s Ally. She deserves the grand dream, all wrapped up in a big bow.”

Maybe I did too.

I reached for my phone. I had some preparations to make before the reunion. Good thing I had money to burn, because I’d have to move fast.

It was fucking fairytale time.

## NINETEEN



I SNAGGED MY KEYS ON THE WAY OUT THE DOOR. MY PHONE was in my back pocket, but it was off. I wasn't stupid enough to go out without it, but I didn't want to talk to anyone. All the voices were too confusing.

Sage and her effervescent positivity.

Seth and his seductive laugh rolled in innuendo and faint promises.

Laurie and her wide smiles and happiness.

All of it was too much. I didn't know which to trust, especially when my own voice was so very silent. Tucked in like a turtle in front of a predator. The problem was, I didn't know where to turn, so the shell seemed prudent. Only my shell was Seth's house.

Again.

This one—one of the half dozen properties his family owned on the cove—wasn't often used. It was known as the Mistress House after one of the Hamilton men who kept his affairs away from the main house. Hell, Seth's dad may have done that too. Now it mostly lay empty and served as one of the few places I could be alone in this town. The small-town vibe of everyone in and out of each other's business was generally a comfort to me, but right now, every person I ran into wanted to know when Seth and I were going to get married and make babies.

How that little tidbit had gotten around, I had no clue. But I figured a certain blond might have something to do with it.

The diner was the center of the town in more ways than one, and remarking on Seth's skills in the sack to several patrons certainly hadn't helped my cause.

Not that it mattered. No one could actually have a fling in this town.

Even if the mere idea of a fling and Seth in the same sentence made my chest tighten.

He'd never been that for me, even when I wanted him to be. When the idea of making a kid with him took hold, there'd been little hope for my heart to truly stay mine. It had always been his, but only I'd known it. That had been somehow easier than this.

All my dreams and happiness were wrapped up in his little girl and the man himself. I wasn't sure I could face all of that again. Loving him could be the one thing that would actually break me.

I hiked up the grassy hill into the trees and the path that rounded Crescent Cove. The house was beautiful, but not as pristine as the other Hamilton holdings. But that didn't much matter when it came to the view. The lake, the town, and the little gazebo looked picturesque from this vantage point. The sun glittered off the lake. No mirror sheen here. No, our cove was choppy and a bit wild. It suited me right to the ground.

The idea of moving out of Crescent Cove killed me. Because if things didn't work out between us, I'd have to leave. I wouldn't be able to face seeing him in town. My hand slid over my flat belly. Especially if there was a child growing inside me. Would he get what he wanted and be done with me? Or just keep me around in a mother capacity?

Would I be forever on the outside looking in?

I honestly wasn't sure how I was going to do that. Even though I wanted a family so very much, I wasn't sure I could take half-measures now.

I'd hiked these hills for days and still couldn't find an answer. So many fears churned inside me, and they were often the loudest voices of all.

Looking away from the town and the water, I caught sight of the little abandoned church on the far side of the cove. The only thing there now was the cemetery. The town had taken the church in the center square as their own many years ago, but the cemetery had always been up away from the lake.

I hadn't been there since we'd buried my mom that one sunny day. I'd been at peace about her leaving me. Mostly because the woman I'd loved had left long before. Even at the end when her body had turned on her so completely, she'd had a sweet smile until the very end.

She just hadn't been my mom.

I ducked through the trees and up the less used path to the little church. There was an old dirt road that the processions used, but I didn't want to drive. The stretch of muscles and the sun helped the nausea that had been living inside me for the last week. Another thing I wasn't quite ready to face.

As evidenced by the plastic bag tucked away in my knapsack at the Hamilton camp. The one burning a hole in the worn canvas.

I'd traveled two towns over to buy it, visiting a nearby city where no one knew who I was. I'd wrapped the box in two bags and shoved it deep down. Fitting since all I ever did was shove things down so I didn't have to look at them.

It was getting really tiresome.

I lifted my face to the sun and uncapped the water bottle at my hip. Even if I didn't want an answer just quite yet, I wasn't stupid. A few signs might add up to nothing. Or a damn lot.

One of those signs was that a few hours in the summer sun could put me down like a puppy. So I guzzled down half the bottle and stuck it back in its little holster. I kept hiking, taking a shortcut up across the path instead of using the lazy walking trail.

Right then, it felt more important to get to the little hill under the Japanese maple at the far side of the cemetery. The headstones came into view and my chest ached. I ran my fingertips over the old stones at the front. The mausoleum to

the left with Hamilton engraved across the top told the history of our town better than any story in the library.

Huge. Moneyed. Overwhelming.

I turned away from the testament to privilege and status and headed toward the edges of the cemetery where the plots were smaller, but no less taken care of. I aimed right for the ivory angel standing guard over my mom's grave. She was small and fairy-like beside the simple marker with her name and the dates. I brushed away the leaves and tugged out a few weeds before dropping cross-legged in front of her headstone.

"Hi, Mom."

I didn't even know what I really wanted to say, but it felt good to say hello. I cleared my throat. "I hope you can hear me. Even if you can't, I'll just pretend. I'm good at that." I dashed away a tear I hadn't realized was rolling down my cheek. "So I did a thing. I swore I wouldn't, but I did it anyway. I didn't mean to. Honestly. I look back now and wonder how I lasted as long as I did. Actually, that's probably one more lie I've told myself." I laughed before leaning forward to brush away dust on the base of her headstone. "I love him, Ma. So much that it scares the crap out of me. Like my chest feels overfull with it. And his little girl? God. She's the sweetest thing. She's gotten so big since you've seen her."

I dashed away another tear. "I think you'd remember her. Seth used to bring her to see you, but I know the stuff they gave you had you really out of it."

But I remembered the smiles. Whenever Laurie came over, there was always a smile on my mom's face. Of course, that little girl brought sunshine with her everywhere.

My little girl.

She was mine for all intents and purposes.

Just like Seth.

I bowed my head as the tears kept flowing. They didn't hurt though. Crying finally felt freeing. "I miss you so much. Sage is good to talk to for most of this mess I'm in, but I miss crawling up next to you on the couch and letting you play with

my hair while you told me everything was going to work out. Because I'm so afraid it won't. I'm not sure I could bear it if he doesn't feel the same."

But it really felt like an empty fear. There was so much in my head. The touches, the laughter, the little moments with Laurie.

And then me running.

Always running away when things got too big, felt like too much.

Instead of staying to see how things went, I escaped before the answers could hurt me.

I tipped my head back to the sun and the breeze lifted my hair to whip my ponytail around. I laughed and brushed back the tears. "Okay, I got it."

If I didn't stick around, I wouldn't have to face reality.

The reality of asking for more. Of deserving more. I brushed my hand over my middle. For hoping for more.

"I think I'm finally creating a family of my own, Mom." I huffed out a laugh when the breeze whirled around me and leaves danced. "I *know* I am." I pressed my palm to the cool marble stone. "I know you always loved him. And you probably knew I did this whole time too."

I sniffed as the tears dried and the sun peeked from the clouds that were ever present thanks to the lake. I spun around and leaned against my mother's headstone and let the sun soak into my bones. It was peaceful here and that feeling had been a rare commodity in my life lately.

When a handful of people came to pay their respects to their own families, I stood and brushed off my pants. I kissed my fingertips and touched the angel then the marker. "Keep watch over her."

I went for the winding road this time. Then followed it down to the little picnic area to feed the bold ducks who swarmed the children. By the time I'd gotten to the little cabin I'd been hiding in, I was finally hungry.

I climbed the back steps to the kitchen and unearthed the peanut butter crackers I'd brought with me. It was the only thing that didn't seem to annoy my touchy stomach.

Cleaning up was definitely in order. I was dusty from the trails and sweaty from the sticky humidity clinging to the air. I grabbed my bag on my way down the hall to the small room with black and white tiles. My shower was infinitely more luxurious. The bathroom in the apartment I shared with Sage—sort of, considering I spent most of my time with Seth or working—had two shower heads and steamed up to a life-changing level. But the ancient claw-footed tub would do for today.

In fact...

I dug into one of the lower cabinets and found an old bath bomb I'd left there a few summers ago. The girls from the diner had given me a big spa kit to relax. Since I wasn't really great at relaxing, I'd left it here when I'd done an overnight with Laurie.

The only kind of camping I'd ever do was spending a night in this cabin.

I filled the tub and dropped the purple cake of soap into the water. It fuzzed and bubbled, releasing the sweet scent of lilacs and vanilla. I turned on my phone for music and flicked away the dozen messages that came through. I wasn't quite ready to face all my realities just yet.

I shrugged off my clothes and stepped into the scalding water with a hiss.

Nope, it was time for some Keith Urban and a bath to clear my head of the last of the cobwebs. I had to allow myself to really think through my options.

A glossy brochure stuck out of the top of my bag. Carefree students walking up pathways lined with lush green grass with stately buildings behind them. That could be my life.

My hand crept over my flat stomach. Or maybe I could embrace another life, while still achieving my hopes of getting my education. My mom had dreamed of me leaving and doing



something grand. She'd worked her fingers raw to tuck a little away for me until she couldn't keep pushing on anymore.

The thing was, I didn't have to leave my home and start over in a new place to have a new beginning. It was hard to imagine a more perfect place for me than Crescent Cove. My home was here. My job, my friends. Sage.

Seth and Laurie—my family. My heart.

The pregnancy test hiding at the bottom of my bag.

It was probably too soon. My period was late. But that happened sometimes, so most likely it was nothing. I wasn't going to take the test here in any case.

When and if I took that step, I would do it with Seth.

My fingers drifted up to cup my sore breasts. My nipple tightened at the mere thought of his name. Seth, who'd shown me just what I'd been missing this entire time.

I slid up higher to the curls at the nape of my neck. Would our little one be dark like us? My rich brown hair, and his near black? Or would her hair be auburn like my mom's?

I lowered myself into the scented water that was rapidly cooling.

So much to deal with, so much to plan.

So much to discuss with Seth.

I stood up and rinsed with the little handle showerhead. It felt as if I was rinsing away the fear and excuses at the same time. I liked to think it was easier to hide behind them, but that wasn't really the truth either.

I tucked a towel around me and drained the tub, rinsing out the last of the bath bomb as I drip-dried enough to tug on my clothes. My worn jeans that I couldn't part with, the old lacrosse shirt I'd stolen from Seth.

Always Seth.

After grabbing my phone, I wandered back out to the main living space and my gaze drifted around the rustic, glass-walled room. We'd sprawled on the faded green rug on the

first day of classes we skipped together junior year, passing back and forth a bottle of some foul-tasting stuff Seth stole from his dad's liquor cabinet. He'd stopped short of getting drunk, but I hadn't. I'd savored the freedom in laughing at nothing and lying on my back on the sun-warmed floor, staring up through the skylight at a sky full of marshmallow clouds. I was the girl with too many responsibilities, and he'd always been my ticket to fun and possibilities.

He still was.

I sat on the couch and dumped my phone in my bag, then reached for my iPad. I flipped the cover closed and tucked the tablet into my bag, setting it on the wicker chair beside me.

I couldn't even pretend to care about the class list on my iPad or the glossy school brochures anymore. Not right now, with so much else going on. As much as I wanted to make my mother proud, and to spread my wings, I had to admit the truth. Online classes might be something I investigated more someday, but right now, I was firmly invested in my life just as it was. Part of me always wanted to see what was out there, but my current reality was looking better and better.

If I didn't chicken out before I went for what I truly wanted.

The *thwack* of the screen door dragged me out of my musings. No one knew I was here. I reached for my purse and the can of pepper spray I kept in the zipper pocket. Sage insisted I carry it at all times, even when I had nothing on me but my wallet.

“Alison?”

I sagged back against the chair, still clutching the keys I'd pulled out and my safety spray. Not a burglar. A Hamilton. “Back here. What are you doing here, Oliver?”

He stepped into the sunroom, his back ramrod straight. His impeccable three-piece suit didn't dare look wilted. My T-shirt was already sticking to me. The little house by the water was usually cool, but there wasn't a single cool corner of Crescent

Cove right now. Humidity and heat sat over the town like a shroud.

Not that you'd know it from Oliver.

"Finally. Do you have any idea how many people are looking for you?"

"I told Sage I needed a few days." I lifted my chin. "I wasn't feeling so hot."

"The whole town is buzzing about this stupid reunion and here you are, tucked away."

All the sureness I'd been feeling filtered right out of me. The reunion was tonight. Ignorance really was bliss. Why did he have to remind me?

He tilted his head. "May I?"

I shrugged. "It's your place." I sighed. "Actually, no. How the heck did you know I'd be here?"

He paused mid-step over the threshold. "Because I come here to think too."

I frowned. "You're the one who's been staying here?"

His eyebrow rose. "Just how often do you come here, Alison?"

"Not often. It's been months, actually, before the past few days. I didn't think anyone came here, but the sheets in the bedroom were far too fresh."

Oliver let out a frustrated sigh and tugged at his tie. "Yes, well sometimes one needs the simple and the quiet to think. May I come in?"

He owned the place, and he was asking *me* for permission. Unusually sweet for Oliver, but I needed some kindness right now. Desperately.

"Depends. Are you friend or foe?"

"I hope friend."

I couldn't remember the last time I had seen Oliver show an emotion other than disdain or disinterest or mild

amusement, typically at someone else's expense. Especially toward me. "Since when?"

"Fair question. I believe we may have gotten off on the wrong foot."

"For thirteen years? I think that would be an understatement."

He dipped his hands into his pockets. "The Hamilton men aren't known for their grace with the fairer sex."

"Maybe you and your father, but I'm pretty sure Seth got the bulk of your share."

"Probably true."

Yet Oliver was the one who'd found me, not his brother. Did Seth even notice I'd been missing? And now I was just being melodramatic. Seth had been texting me a few times a day, every day.

I'd told him I needed a little thinking time.

I slid my hand over my belly self-consciously and sat forward, hunching my shoulders. I was already going into protective mode for a child who might not even exist. Along with heavily protecting myself.

Then again, perhaps Seth was waiting outside, planning a sneak attack.

"Is Seth with you?" I asked.

"No."

I breathed out a sigh of relief. "Good."

"Is there a reason you wouldn't want to see my brother?"

"No." I shoved my keys and pepper spray back into my bag. "Yes." I stood and crossed to the windows of the screened-in porch, hoping for a breeze off the water. It had helped earlier, but my mom wasn't talking now.

The vast, mirror-like lake shone and in the distance. Now I could see the white string lights around the gazebo, winding down the pier. Night was creeping over the town and the sun

was sinking behind the trees with fantastic red and pink slashes across the sky. Music and laughter traveled with the occasional snatches of breeze on the heavy night. The pier and park was all tricked out already for the reunion. It was time to celebrate the ten years of our lives we'd put behind us.

Ten years I'd spent not moving forward.

I swallowed hard. "I don't know. That would be why I'm here. I don't know anything."

"Not surprising since my brother is the king of cowards."

"What?" I turned back to Oliver. "No, he's not. He—"

"No, that's exactly what he is. Both of you are. There's a reason no one ever fit either of you over the years. I may not want to tie myself to one woman, but Seth has been a family man since the moment that little girl was put into his arms. I just put the wrong woman in his path."

I flinched. "What does that mean?"

Oliver tugged at his tie again until it snapped out of his collar. He jammed it into his pocket before shrugging out of his suit coat. "It's too blasted hot."

I lifted a brow. "I thought you were impervious."

"Yeah, well, don't look at the line of sweat down the middle of my back. I'm not a fucking machine, no matter what you people think."

"I..." I didn't even know what to say to that, actually. Oliver had always been mostly cool and aloof around me. Had I started it? Or had he?

He blew out a breath. "This wasn't where I wanted to go with this. I'm here to save my meathead brother from making a mistake."

"Meathead?" I blinked. First, he was de-suiting and now he was plain-speaking.

I squinted at him to make sure he wasn't Seth playing a joke on me, but the edges of his tattoo demonstrated clearly which twin was which. They were both covered in ink, which

was interesting considering Oliver's penchant for suits. But their ink was as opposite as their personalities. Seth's was more dark and heavy, while Oliver's contained more streaks of color.

Not that I would ever mistake the twin brothers for each other. The differences were staggering to me, if no one else. But there was a new glint in Oliver's eyes. Frustration and an openness I'd never seen before.

"Look, Ally." He swiped his hand over the back of his neck and my heart melted. Such a Seth gesture. For the first time, he really looked and acted like his brother. They'd always seemed like the opposite sides of a coin. "I may have had an idiotic moment when I pushed Marj into Seth's life. Intentionally."

I wrapped my arm around my middle, the quick flash of pain hitting me harder than I thought it would. A part of me had always known Oliver didn't want his brother with me. And it wasn't like the revelation was a total surprise. Oliver had mentioned introducing Seth to Marj at the diner. But a casual intro wasn't the same as an intentional one. I could tell from Oliver's expression he'd had a method to his madness far beyond Seth just meeting his friend.

"Why?"

"Because he didn't need me anymore, dammit."

My eyes burned and I blinked away the quick rush of tears. "What? Of course he did. Of course he *does*. You're his brother."

"The minute you came into his life, there was nothing else. We even went to different schools, for fuck's sake. He was supposed to try out public school for a year and then come back to prep school junior year if he didn't like it, but he met you. He didn't want to leave here after that, no matter what he thought of the school. He didn't say that, but that's the truth of it."

I frowned. "You think he chose me over you?"

“I know he did.” Oliver’s dark eyes were fierce. “And I hated you for it. Stupid, petty, and small, I know, but I did.”

“We’re just friends.”

“You were never just friends. You both may have hidden in that role for the majority of your relationship, but deep down, you both knew it wasn’t just platonic.”

“I...” I had to swallow hard. I’d always loved him. Even when my mother’s caregiving took over my life, I’d always put him in the back of mind as the end goal. The unattainable goal.

Maybe that was why I hadn’t ever managed to choose a college away from Crescent Cove. The only thing I’d ever really wanted was here—Seth, and the family we could make. Simple maybe, but honestly, it was the only thing I’d ever really wanted.

“I love him so much,” I whispered.

Just saying it was like dropping a burden. I’d held those words back for so long.

“I know you do.” Oliver sighed. “And he loves you too.”

“How can you—”

“Look, if you want to question it after all this? After he found every reason in the known universe to get you to stay in his life, then I don’t know what to tell you. But I had to at least try to help out for once. Because that man is drowning. You’re everything he ever wanted, he’s just too stubborn to put the label on it because he’s afraid you’ll run.” Oliver shook his head. “You’re both so fucking afraid.”

“Well, look at what we come from.”

“Guess what, sweetheart? We aren’t what we come from. We’re exactly what we choose to be. You want that idiot I call a brother, then you go after him.”

A loud pop and whistle startled me and I swung around. A huge spray of white fireworks fanned up into the night sky. In the center of it was a spray of red that shot out in dual arcs.

A heart.

My vision wavered when another one went up. Then another. A succession of them lit up the cove and kept on coming.

“Well, finally.”

I tried to turn back to Oliver, but I couldn’t pull myself from the display. “They’re beautiful.” And I should be enjoying them with Seth, not locking myself away in the little shame-shack his family owned.

We’d spent hours here as teenagers. We’d told each other secrets, we’d even confessed a few dreams, and shed some tears. But this was our past. Out there was our future.

Those hearts had to be a sign.

I stepped forward, then stilled, clutching my arms around my middle.

“Stop fighting it. Why the hell are you so afraid?”

I whipped around. “You’re one to talk, Oliver Hamilton. I don’t see you getting caught up with anyone.”

“No one has ever mattered enough.”

“No, you never *let* them matter enough.” I was breathing heavy. But he was right. I’d let fear rule my life for long enough. “I’m sorry. That was uncalled for. I know how it is to hide.”

Oliver’s chin lifted. “There’s a difference, Alison.”

I tilted my head. So much Seth in him and yet, not nearly the same. Seth put Laurie first—put me first—in so many ways. Maybe Oliver would be the same someday.

But now I had to trust in Seth. And myself. “I’m going after him.” I grabbed my bag off the chair.

“Hallelujah.” Oliver lifted his arms then waved to the window. “He even gave you a map for once.”

“Huh?” I hooked the knapsack over my shoulder and made sure I had my wallet, keys. My fingers brushed the early



pregnancy test at the bottom of the bag.

“The fireworks. He said he was going for the fairytale.”

My eyes flooded. “He did that? That’s him?”

“God, you guys are so dense. Of course it’s him. Even after he paid to put hearts in the sky, you still question it?”

I dashed away tears with my wrist. “Guess he should have taken out a skywriter.”

“I’ll tell him to do that next.”

I laughed and jangled my keys. “Let’s hope it doesn’t come to that.” I swallowed the nerves threatening to slow me down. “It’s time to go get my man.”

“Finally.”

## TWENTY



I RAN THROUGH THE CABIN AND OUT THE FRONT DOOR. MY fingers shook as I got in the car and tried to get my keys in the ignition. I saw more sparks through the trees and the fireworks floated higher into the sky with each explosion.

The white made the crinkly fuzzing sound that made my skin crackle in reaction.

Another heart speared the sky.

Then a succession of three.

For all of us?

The family we made?

The red and white shimmered as my eyes burned. I slammed my car into drive and hit the winding road with a scatter of dirt and gravel in my wake. The lake never felt so big as it did tonight. In my head, I knew it was a mere seven minutes into town. Thirteen years of traveling these roads had left an imprint. I could probably drive them blindfolded.

Good thing since my eyes kept filling when I glanced up at the sparkles and hearts dotting the sky.

“I’m coming.” I didn’t realize I’d said it aloud until my voice wavered. Sureness filled my chest and my heart pounded in my head, echoing in every nerve of my body.

I finally turned onto main street and slammed the heel of my hand on the steering wheel at the line of cars. Some were leaving the park, but others were simply sitting there in awe of the light show. The lake held fireworks for the Fourth and

sometimes Labor Day, but it was pretty rare. They were expensive and the restrictions were a headache.

I only knew it because I'd stupidly signed up to help with one of the celebrations. Sage was a joiner and a pleaser. Watching her flounder during the Fourth of July preparations a few years ago had prompted me to help. Never again. Small towns were full of way too many helpful hands that never ended up doing anything but complain.

No thanks. I'd rather volunteer to babysit a dozen three-year-olds.

Right about now, I'd empty my bank account to get rid of every car on the road. I looked around for a place to park, but of course that wasn't going to happen either. My fingers ached from squeezing my steering wheel in frustration.

I rolled down my window and looked for a break in the line of cars to get to a side street. I slapped the side of my wheel when the hearts started slowing in the sky.

God, I didn't want him to think I wasn't paying attention.

I scanned the people on the sidewalks. I was about ready to scream for help from sixteen-year-old Madison Kohl when a familiar laugh floated my way.

Sage.

I twisted and turned looking for her familiar flyaway blond hair and my mouth dropped at the bouncing curls that swung down a woman's back. A woman with more curves than I'd ever seen in Crescent Cove.

Sage was talking to the new teacher, Mike London. And had she just tossed her hair over her shoulder?

"Sage?" I swerved over to the curb in a no-parking zone. This wouldn't work for long.

She twirled at my call then slapped her bare thighs. Sweet mercy, was she wearing Daisy Dukes?

"Finally! Where the hell have you been?" She turned back to Mike. "Um, sorry. I didn't mean to curse, Mr. London."

“Mike.”

“Right, Mike.” Sage’s voice was unusually breathy. And loud. Her sunny smile lit up her face and Mike’s eyes glazed over.

Of course, half of that was probably the miniscule strappy tank top Sage was wearing that showed off just how generous God had been when stacking her deck.

“Can you come over here, please, Sage? Like now?”

Sage carefully picked her way over the cobblestones of the sidewalk to the asphalt in her espadrilles. Navy ribbons climbed up her ankle to her calf. “Are you cock-blocking me?”

“I’d have to have a cock, Sage.”

“Oh, right.” She huffed out a breath. “You know what I mean.”

I slammed my car into park. Now wasn’t the time, and I knew I was going to regret asking, but I just had to know. “What the heck are you wearing?”

“Oh.” She frowned. “Don’t you like it?”

“You look hot as hell, girlfriend.”

She smiled. “Well, thank you. Just something I found in my closet.”

“You did not find that in your closet.”

Sage gave a lengthy sigh. “All right, it was a store in Laurel. This isn’t exactly the kind of thing you can buy in Kinleigh’s”

That was for sure. But if Kinleigh got a look at that outfit, she might make some changes to her little shop. “Can you drive for me?”

“What?” Sage looked over her shoulder at Mike and wiggled her fingers. “Just a sec,” she called out.

He waved and then slid his fingers into his thick black hair.

“Isn’t he dreamy?”

I blinked and peered around her, then back at Sage. “For real?”

“I mean he’s cute, right?”

“Um...” I honestly hadn’t looked at anyone other than Seth in so long that it felt foreign to look at a man objectively. “I guess.”

“You guess? Do you see how he fills out a pair of jeans? I mean, he’s from Texas first of all, and then he wears honest to God cowboy boots. The kind that are actually broken in because he rides real horses. I mean just wow.”

I nibbled on my bottom lip. “I’m sorry. Can I be the altruistic best friend tomorrow? I really need your help.”

“Of course. I’m sorry. I’m just not even paying attention. All these blasted hormones are messing me up. That’s why I’m on the hunt. I figure I gotta get this virgin thing done. How else am I going to breathe in this town? All the lovey stuff with you and Seth. He did those fireworks for you, you know?”

I resisted the urge to roll my eyes. “I know. I’m trying to go find him. But...” I waved at the traffic snaking down Main Street and around the park.

“Oh.” She grabbed my door handle and hauled me out of the car. “Of course. Honestly, that man finally is listening and you went MIA. You two are going to be the death of me.”

“You had something to do with this?”

“Well, not exactly. I just told him that he’d have to be knocked over the head before he did something really special to let you know how much he loves you. So I did a little knocking. A few well-placed insults never fail to get a man moving.” She paused, her smile fading. “He does love you, Al. I saw it in his eyes.”

My own eyes filled again and I blinked the tears away. I simply didn’t have time for them. The sky was still smoky from the aftermath of the fireworks, but they were getting few and far between. “I really hope so.”

“Oh, girl. He does. How can you even question it?”

“I’ll remind you of this conversation when you’ve got real hearts in your eyes, not just the lusting kind.”

Sage blushed and fussed with the strap of her tiny tank top. “He is dreamy. But we’re not here to talk about Mike London. Go get that big hunk of real estate before he turtles again.”

“You do have a way with words, Sage.”

She bumped me out of the way and slid behind the wheel of my old car. “Go on.”

I looked up at the sky, then to the pier. There was only one place that would allow for those kind of fireworks. “Can I have my bag?”

“Right.” Sage leaned over and hauled my knapsack onto her lap. “Good Lord.”

“My life is in there.”

“It’s heavy as hell.” She handed the bag through the window. “Now go get him.”

I grinned. “Thanks, Sage.”

“I didn’t do anything. I just told him to get with the program. Just like I’ve been telling you.”

I resisted the urge to roll my eyes. Actually, as of late, she’d been lamenting how stupid Seth was, but it was just easier to nod.

At the moment, I had bigger fish to land.

I took off across the street and over the grassy hill that led to the path around the lake to the park.

My heart raced inside my chest as a single heart speared the darkness. My legs pumped and I was eternally grateful for my sneakers right then. They squeaked as I rounded the bend and the gazebo and lights came into view.

So close.

*Don’t lose patience with me now.*

A stitch lanced my side and I slowed to a fast walk. I was not a runner by any means. I could hike for days, but speed was definitely not my thing.

I stared up at the star-strewn sky as sulfur and smoke burned my nostrils.

*Please, just one more.*

The pop and whistle of a single flame speared upward. A huge purple heart shined in the sky over the lake. A lonely boat was tethered to one of the fishing docks off the shore. Two men stood on the little steel deck.

But only one mattered.

Seth's broad shoulders nearly blocked the short, burly man at his side. They were arguing. Only snatches of conversation came across on the wind as it kicked up. Seth was shoving his hands into his hair and pacing the tiny space.

I dropped my bag as I got to the end of the pier.

Relief bubbled up inside me and out on a sobbing laugh.

“Seth!”

The wind was rising and the boats along the pier were slamming around. There was no recognition. Just more of Seth stalking around with his phone to his ear.

I dug into my bag, but I couldn't find my phone among all the clothes and books.

I stood up again and climbed onto the lower rungs of the rail enclosing the lookout at the end of the pier. I cupped my hands around my mouth and yelled his name again, but the wind was too strong and kept snatching my voice.

I turned around and saw people at the other end of the pier. Some I knew, some I wanted to forget. But there were so many of them—and they were all voices I needed right now.

I jumped and waved. When Brad, one of Seth's high school best friends, broke off from the group, I quickly motioned him closer. “Can you help him hear me?”

Nodding, Brad waved people up from the gazebo to the wide pier that jutted out of the park. Our entire class—or what was left of it at this late hour—came tromping toward me.

My eyes burned as everyone came to help. People I'd barely spoken to in my classes started jumping, shouting, and waving. Girls I recognized and others I didn't were jumping up and down like manic puppies.

Brad slung an arm around my shoulders and hauled me in close. He was a bit rounder than I remembered from school, but he had always been a sweet guy.

Jessica, the head of the cheer squad, clutched my hand. "I can't believe how romantic this is. Is this man for real?"

"Yeah, he really is."

She sighed. "You're so lucky. I don't think my husband has ever done anything like this for me. Like ever."

One last firework whistled into the night sky and the white sparks illuminated Seth's body.

I yelled his name and the assembled crowd parroted it behind me.

Seth finally turned around on the small dock and held out his arms. He tipped his head back and did a fist-punch into the air like Bender from *The Breakfast Club* and I laughed.

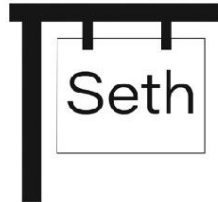
Jessica squealed in my ear and then started hopping around with the other cheerleaders. Brad slapped me on the back as Seth jumped into his boat and headed my way.

My heart raced as I picked up my bag and made my way through the dozens of people. The guys from his lacrosse team started chanting Seth's name and laughter thundered over the lake.

I took a shaky step onto one of the docks lining the right side and waited for him to come to me.



## TWENTY-ONE



I PUSHED THE LITTLE SPEEDBOAT FARTHER THAN I SHOULD, BUT Crescent Lake had never felt so big in my goddamn life. Fireworks had brought her to me. I'd hoped, but I knew it was a big gamble.

If my girl wanted to stay lost, she would stay gone.

I blinked away the grittiness from the wind and spray off the water. The only thing that mattered was getting to the pier. Lenny let off one more spray of white cracklers and a waterfall from his waning arsenal. I'd been worried we were going to run out of them before she showed up.

But there she was, standing in front of a crowd of our classmates. All the people who had rallied around me in my days of lacrosse. While not as big as some of the other sports, we enjoyed a status of our own. Sometimes lacrosse was even more rough and tumble than the town's beloved football.

Ally hadn't really been in that scene. She'd always been on the fringes, thanks to her mother's health.

And if I wasn't such an asshole I would have realized that before I got so excited about the reunion. But there they all were behind her, hooting and hollering as if we were at a championship game.

She moved to the side ramp where the docks were.

I rode the waves I was making with the motor on my speedboat. I rarely took it off my dock, preferring to drive most of the time. Not to mention the small nightmares that my little girl would go flying off the back and be lost in the lake.

So yeah—not so much of a boat guy these days. But right now? Right now, all I wanted was to get her alone.

I wanted to tell her everything that was bursting out of my chest.

It started with the silly hearts I'd shot off into the sky. I'd needed to get her attention. She couldn't deny that I was making a statement now. She also couldn't deny the truth that I was about to lay all over her. Even if it cost me more than a little to be that honest and vulnerable.

For her, I would.

I fishtailed on a wave and bumped over the wake I made in my haste to get to her.

I finally made myself throttle down the engine so I didn't come in too hot. I didn't want to hurt the one person on this earth who had been created for me. The person I'd been desperate to lock down, only to do the exact opposite in every way.

The last sparks of the waterfall fireworks lit her beautiful, smiling face. She dropped her trusty knapsack by her feet and folded her arms as I slowly pattered to the dock. Brad and JT hooted behind her, and a few catcalls from other members of my team rang out as well.

The front of my boat bumped into the mooring as I tossed up a rope to tie me off before I drifted back out to the cove. She rested her sneakered foot against the sloping bow and tipped her head. "Had to make a spectacle, huh?"

I widened my stance against the wild rocking from the waves. "Yep."

"Don't you do anything small, Hamilton?"

"Nope." I leaned forward and lifted my voice. "I've got a secret."

"Is that right?" Her lips twitched as she tried not to smile.

"Yeah. It's kinda a big one. Though maybe not such a big secret now." My stomach pitched in time with the waves banging my little boat against the moorings.

She pushed her dark hair out of her eyes as it whipped around her shoulders. "I'm listening."

I looked behind her for a second. No one was dispersing. At all. Everyone was leaning in to hear what I had to say.

*God, please help me not to fuck this up more.*

I took a deep breath. I valued my privacy, but this was important. "I love you, Alison. In a big, stupid, crazy way. So much that I can't even put it into words."

Her dark eyes widened and her hands fell to her side. "What?"

"Don't 'what' me. Deep down, you had to know."

Her hand flew up to her mouth and a smile broke between her fingers.

I glanced behind her and growled when I spotted JT with his hands over his heart.

She waved her hand toward the idiots catcalling behind her. "Never mind them. I'm not sure I heard that."

I pulled out of the slip that was too far away from her and moved closer. I didn't want her to have to strain to hear a word of this. "I love you. I wanna marry you."

"Marry me?"

I gripped the throttle and spun the boat around until it was sideways at the end of the slip. I held out my hand to her. "Yeah, you. This is the marrying kind of love. Being the mother of my kid kind of love. The one I already have," I quickly corrected at her crestfallen face. The last thing I wanted her to think about right now was that ridiculous contract. "I want to build a life with you. A family. I want forever, Ally Cat."

She blinked madly and looked down at me, her hands fisted at her sides.

"Please take a chance on me, Al."

She lifted her bag and tossed it into my boat then jumped in and I caught her. There was nothing else I could possibly

do.

I wrapped my arms around her waist and dragged her into me. “You’re killing me, Alison.”

“I love you so much.” Her voice was ragged and her eyelashes starred with tears. “Besides, if I didn’t I would have after you gave me fireworks, for God’s sake.”

“Go big or go home, baby.”

She lifted her arms around my shoulders and went up on her tiptoes. “I really like the idea of going home.”

Jessica let out a “Whoop, whoop!” and everyone clapped on the pier.

Fairytales achieved? Maybe. At least the start of one. I had a lot of work to do yet.

I settled Ally in the seat beside me and waved as I throttled back away from the dock.

JT curved his hands around his mouth and shouted, “Lucky bastard!”

“You’re damn right I am,” I called back.

I sat down and dragged her close as I opened up the motor again and raced across the cove to my house—*our* house. We couldn’t talk above the wind and waves, but I didn’t need words right now.

I just needed her by my side.

It only took a few minutes to get to my dock and to moor the little speedboat. I tied off and jumped out to help her up on the dock.

She wouldn’t look at me as I handed her the oversized knapsack she forever carried.

There was no way I was going to stand for that. Not now.

I dragged her close and lowered my head to catch her mouth in a swift, hot, heavy kiss. I poured everything I couldn’t say into it, taking my time. She moaned and gripped the front of my shirt.

Reluctantly, I eased back a fraction. “You’re all I’ve ever wanted. I was just too stupid to face the truth—never mind say it out loud. All I could think about was fucking things up between us and losing you forever. I’m still going to have nightmares about it,” I said with a harsh laugh against her mouth. “But it’s better than not having you be mine. And most of all, being yours.” I touched my forehead to hers. “It’s scary as hell to know you could break me into pieces.”

“I’d never.” Her voice was a sandpaper whisper.

“I know. That’s what I figured out. I trust you.” I sucked in a breath. “I know it didn’t always seem like that. My dad has a way of looking at the world, and I think some of that seeped into me despite my best intentions. Sometime I’ll tell you more about what I learned today.”

She frowned, but she didn’t push me. She just gave me the space to finish my thoughts.

“I don’t want to live that way, mistrusting everybody. Assuming the worst. I believe in you. I want to believe in me too, that I can do this. We can make this work.”

Eyes wet, she nodded. “We can. We will,” she said fiercely.

“And I want to support your dreams. Whether that’s going to school, or maybe traveling to see other places—whatever, I don’t care. Your dreams are mine and we can make them happen together.”

“Maybe school someday. Maybe traveling. But you know what I want most?”

Swallowing deeply, I shook my head.

Her fingers twisted tighter into my dress shirt. “You’re all I’ve ever wanted. Just you.”

Finally hearing those words was a goddamn miracle.

“Well, you’ve got me,” I said hoarsely. “And you’re never getting rid of me, baby or not.”

Ally would always be enough, even if I couldn’t help wanting to expand our family. Now and possibly even again in

the future.

We'd take everything one day at a time.

She smiled, increasing her hold on me even more. "Is that so?"

"Oh, it's so. We can certainly practice all night long though," I teased, stroking her cheek. "Laurie's at my dad's place."

A little hiccup sneaked out along with a bubble of laughter. "Yeah, about that." She dug her hand into the endless contents of her knapsack and came out with a little white bag.

There was just enough illumination coming from the solar lights that lit up the dock and the path to my house for me to see a telltale logo through the plastic.

My chest tightened. My shoulders locked. Hell, my life flashed before my eyes. Not the one I'd already lived, but the one we would create together. "Are you?"

"I wanted to wait for you to do it with me."

I lifted her into my arms, and her canvas bag and the one with the test folded between us. "Can we do it now? Is it too early?"

She laughed. "It's a little early, but this test is made for that."

I blinked away the quick prick of tears. I didn't want to ask, but I knew I had to. "Is this okay? It's okay if you're not. We can wait until we get married. You know, make it all official. And if you want to do the school thing..." I swallowed down the nerves. I didn't want to wait, but I would for her.

I'd do anything for her.

"I don't remember saying yes. Or you actually asking."

My breath stalled. "I mean, you're going to say yes, right?"

She tried to keep a straight face, but her lips kept twitching into a smile. Her fingers slid up my chest and around to the

nape of my neck, then finally to the longer part of my hair where she could grip me tight. “I just might.”

I looped her legs around my waist and kept on walking. “Well, then I’m just going to have to convince you.”

She giggled. “Put me down, you idiot.”

“And let you run again? I think not, lady.”

“I’m never running again.”

I lowered her to her feet. Mostly because I was afraid I’d do something stupid in the dark and drop her. No way was I ever going to let anything happen to her.

Taking her knapsack from her, I stuffed the test back in and put the bag over my shoulder before turning her around and slapping her ass. “Get going. We’ve got a test to take.”

She dashed forward and we both ran up the stone steps to our home, then across the short distance to the back porch. When we reached the top of the stairs, I couldn’t wait any longer. I scooped her up and fumbled through opening the door. Somehow I managed not to drop her, which was a feat because we were laughing like idiots.

Still carrying her, I rushed through the house, finally depositing her in front of the bathroom door. “Okay. Go, you know. Do whatever it is you do.”

“What if I don’t have—”

I pushed her into the bathroom and turned on the taps full strength. “Need a glass of water?”

She slapped at me and took back her knapsack before shoving me out the door. “Neanderthal.”

I paced outside the door and was sort of glad that she left the water running. Not that her peeing on a stick was weird—much. I mean, I did have a kid. Bodily functions were just part and parcel of my day.

But this was a really important stick.

She opened the door and I spun around. “Well?”

“Five minutes, buddy.”

My shoulders slumped as she dried her hands. “That’s forever.” I looked down at my watch and set the timer.

She grinned and walked into my space. “Then maybe we should make out for a few minutes.”

“Well, I can certainly do that.” I lowered my mouth to hers and slowly drew out the kiss. I tried to concentrate on the little things I knew she liked, but I kept sneaking glances at my watch.

She plowed her fist into my belly. “You’re incorrigible.”

I rubbed my ribs. “Ow. I can’t help it.” She tried to hide behind her curtain of hair, but I saw the nervous smile peeking through. “You want to know just as bad as I do.”

“No, I don’t. Well, maybe. What time is it?” She grabbed my wrist. “It has to be time.”

“It’s only been three minutes.”

She dropped my wrist. “Ugh.”

I tried to loop my arm around her waist but she wiggled free. “Seth, don’t try to distract me now. You had your chance.” She couldn’t stop laughing as I grabbed for her again and again. “What time is it now?”

“Twenty seconds later.” I banded my arms under her butt and lifted her until our mouths lined up. I stared at her as our lips met. “It doesn’t matter what it says.”

She looped her arms around my shoulders. “No?”

I shook my head, but then my timer started beeping and she scrambled down and we both raced to the bathroom. She elbowed me out of the way and grabbed the little plastic wand.

“What does it say?” I asked over her shoulder.

Her hand flew up to her mouth.

I banded my arms around her waist as we stood in front of the stick. “It’s okay, Al, we’ve got—”

“Positive.”



I swear I went blind and dumb for a full ten seconds.  
“What?”

“Positive.” She twisted in my arms. “I think we’re having a baby.”

I crushed her to me.

“Seth, the stick.”

“Who cares? I’m getting that sucker framed. My girl said yes, and the test said yes. Best day ever!”

“I didn’t say yes yet.”

I scooped her up into my arms again and strode out of the bathroom. “Oh, you will.”

She grabbed my shoulder. “You’re so certain?”

I locked my gaze with hers. “More certain than I’ve ever been about anything.”

Her eyes were shiny, but the biggest, brightest smile lit her face.

Finally, I got the words right.

—

# EPILOGUE

## Ally

THE AIR WAS CRISP, AND THE WIND FLUTTERED THE CURLS cascading down my back. The lace of my veil lifted and settled around my shoulders to brush my arms. Fingertip length. All the things I'd learned about weddings had gone in one ear and out the other, other than a little of the background on my veil. The piece offered a touch of the traditional. As did the empire cut of the gown that hid some of the swell of my belly.

I slid my hand over the bump growing larger every day. February was coming like a freight train and so here I was... getting married on the first of October.

I peeked around the gazebo to the long pier I had to walk down.

Alone.

"I'm here, I'm here." A little voice carried on the wind.

I glanced behind me to see Laurie coming around the corner in her pink tulle and ribbons. "What are you doing down here? You're supposed to be next to your dad."

"Nuh-uh. I walking you down the aisle, silly."

My eyes burned. "Oh, sweetie."

She held out her hand to me. Such a big girl these days. Four going on forty sometimes. Her nightmares had faded away with family reading time every night. We'd all settled

into a crazy sort of normal. “It’s okay, Mommy. I’m a big girl, I can do it.”

“Oh, I know that you can. I just thought you had to be brave for Daddy.”

She shrugged and stepped next to me. “Nah. He has Unca Ollie.”

“Are you ready?” Sage rushed down the hill to fuss with my train. “What did you do? I told you to stay still.”

I looked over my shoulder at my maid of honor decked out in a navy off-the-shoulder dress. “Wind.”

Sage sighed and set down her tight bouquet of Gerbera daisies in burgundy, orange, and gold. “You’re going to take off like a sailboat today with this wind.” She fluffed my little train and shifted one of the buttons of my bustle. Why had I let her talk me into this thing? It was too formal for an outdoor wedding. I should have just gotten the little tea-length dress.

Sage tucked the daisy crown behind Laurie’s ear. “Hey little mama, what are you doing down here?”

“I’m gonna walk Mommy down the aisle.” Laurie clutched my hand.

“Oh, I swore I wasn’t going to cry until the actual ceremony.” Sage tipped back her head and blinked rapidly. “You’re just the best little girl.”

Laurie smiled brightly. “I know.”

Sage and I laughed.

My maid of honor slapped her thigh. “Well, I think it’s time to get this show on the road. I know there’s a very nervy groom waiting at the end of that pier.”

I slid my hand over my bump and the little boy kicking around like crazy. “I think both of us...” I looked down at Laurie and swung our clasped hands. “All three of us are ready to go down.”

Laurie patted my belly. “He’s gotta stay in there cooking.”

I laughed. “Yes, we still have a few months to go.”

“Okay. I’m heading down.” Sage picked up her bouquet, stood, and looped her arm around my waist. “I’m so happy for you.”

“Thanks.” My eyes misted. “Now go, before I start bawling. You know all it takes is a stiff breeze these days.”

Sage fanned her face. “Right. No tears. At least not for a few minutes.” She blew out a breath. “Was the pier always that long?”

I laughed. “Yes.”

“At least we’ve got two hotties to look forward to at the end.”

“Yes. Well, at least one.”

Laurie wrinkled her nose. “Ew.”

Sage shook back her blond hair and checked her earrings. “Here we go.”

My mouth went dry as she walked over the uneven ground in her stilts. I had no idea why Sage was suddenly interested in fashion and things like heels, but she pulled off the look.

As for me, me and my ballerina flats were going to do this long walk.

I tightened my hold on Laurie’s hand. “You sure about this?”

She nodded. “I can’t wait for Daddy to see your pretty dress.”

“Then let’s do this thing, huh?” I bent down, wrinkles in my dress be damned. I kissed her cheek. “I’m so excited to be marrying your dad.”

“Me, too!” Laurie moved forward, tugging me after her. “Let’s go.”

There was no slow processional down the pier. White and red daisies dotted the railing with lace snapping in the breeze. I didn’t really get to take it all in. In fact, I didn’t even get to catch my breath before Seth came into view.

He took a step forward, and his brother yanked him back.

Seth lifted his fisted hand to his mouth and the shock and happiness on his face tumbled every nerve out of my body. Laurie and I nearly jogged down the pier to get to him.

To get to my very happily ever after.

I glanced down to the daughter of my heart and then to the man who'd owned it since I was fifteen years old.

Sage took the bouquet I forgot I was holding and then it was Seth's hand in mine.

The preacher behind Seth cleared his throat as he looked down at Laurie. "Would you be giving this beautiful bride away?"

Laurie squeezed my hand and looked down at her feet, then up at her father. She nodded. "I would."

Seth crouched down and held his arm open. "Thank you, Munchkin." She launched herself into his chest and he gathered her up against his hip, and never let go of my hand. He turned to me. "You're so beautiful."

"I love you so much." I leaned in to rub my nose with Laurie's. "Both of you."

His eyes were red-rimmed as he brought our joined hands to rest on the little life between us. I sniffled and laughed then all three of us turned to the preacher.

"We're ready."

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# CEO DADDY

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# A CRESCENT COVE STANDALONE



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CEO Daddy

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# CEO DADDY

*I'm having a millionaire's baby...*

New Year's Eve, a night of new beginnings.

Asher and I talked and sipped champagne. Eventually, we went up to my room at the bed and breakfast and...

Let's just say when I left that room, I was no longer a virgin.

And that was it.

No last names, no numbers, no pressure. Something we both desperately needed.

Just a night of fun, with so much pleasure.

Until I was approached for a nanny position that I wasn't sure I was equipped for.

And the man behind the curtain raising his best friend's little girl was...

Asher.

A single dad unprepared for his unexpected responsibility.

A wealthy, powerful, conflicted CEO of a newspaper empire on the verge of extinction.

And the father of the baby I just realized I was carrying...

***Author's note:*** *CEO DADDY is a standalone single father and virgin nanny forced proximity romance novel set in our small town Crescent Cove. It has a happily-ever-after ending.*

*For those who step up even when you think it's impossible to  
find your way out of the sadness.*

# ONE



---

*I might be single and alone on New Year's Eve. But I'm not woe is me. No, ma'am. I'm looking at this moment as an opportunity to cherish my solitude.*

---

WITH A SIGH, I SET DOWN MY PEN AND PICKED UP MY WATER glass. I should be drinking alcohol at least. Maybe I still would. I wasn't much of a wine fan, but I could use tonight to broaden my horizons. A cocktail sounded nice. Very adult.

A drink I could enjoy happily on my own.

Okay, cut the crap. In my diary, I should be honest. The diary I was writing in while I ate my dinner of consommé—fancy soup essentially—and garlic breadsticks, because who was I going to kiss at midnight? No one.

Joyfully solo, that was me.

In reality, I was fresh off another broken Tinder date. Broken by *me*, no less. I could never quite close the deal. Probably because a date with me held more weight than the usual hookup.

I'd been adult about that too. Virginity was a burden, so I'd just rid myself of it quickly and quietly. No fuss. Until the time came to actually meet Joe Blow in the flesh—yes, that was his name on the site—and I'd balked. I'd made up an excuse about getting together with an ex and that had been that.

As if I had any exes. Just a few high school boyfriends who hadn't amounted to much.

Since then, I'd stuck close to home, the dutiful older sister who raised her younger siblings after our parents had died in a plane crash. Now that the twins, Emma and Rachel, had turned nineteen and gone off to college, that left me at loose ends.

Alone for real.

"Can I get you anything else? Maybe you'd like a look-see at the dessert menu? The lemon bars are my favorite. They're my mama's recipe."

I blinked up at the grinning blond waitress. At least I thought she was a waitress, though she had a more commanding air about her despite her small town friendliness. "Your mama works here too?"

"Not anymore. She used to own the joint. Then she retired and sold it out from under me with no warning, but I got it back because of my lovable pain-in-the-ass baby daddy. Well, husband too. So, lemon bars?"

I rubbed my temple. Whoa, information overload. "You have a husband? You look...youthful."

Luckily, I'd managed not to say she looked twelve, which was a misstatement in any case. She looked at least sixteen. But not old enough to be married, at least in New York.

She laughed and sat down opposite me at the table. "Sure do."

"And a baby."

"Yeah, she's not even a year old yet. Star's the light of my life. Want to see?" She was already tugging a folding wallet of pictures—many, many pictures—out of her apron pocket.

"Um, sure?"

She showed me an array of photos of a chubby baby with bright green eyes and a drooly smile.

"She's beautiful. Her hair is so dark."

"Like Oliver's. Unless it changes. I hope it doesn't. It's my ace in the hole I wasn't impregnated by the milkman."

Unsure if she was serious, I smiled faintly. “I think I’ll try those lemon bars, please.”

She nodded enthusiastically and bustled off to the kitchen. She seemed sweet.

*Everyone* in Crescent Cove was sweet. It was a picturesque village, nestled against the long curve of Crescent Lake. At the holidays, the place really shone.

The big formal banquet room I was seated in was jammed with guests. Most were families, along with a good amount of couples and solo businessmen passing through the area due to the proximity to Syracuse. I lived in between Crescent Cove and Syracuse, in a town so tiny you could miss it if you shut your eyes.

Which you shouldn’t do while driving, especially in the fall and winter. We were in deer and wild turkey country.

Spending New Year’s Eve in Crescent Cove was a luxury. I didn’t have the funds to spare on such things, but I’d asked for money for Christmas from my sisters and my bestie just so I could splurge.

Now I was wondering if it was a huge mistake.

I’d thought I would feel less on my own in a crowd.

Wrong.

I’d had to wait a half hour for this table. There was holiday music playing, and cheerful lights twinkling, and every surface seemed to be decked out with candles and poinsettias and big satin red ribbons. People were laughing and enjoying time with their loved ones.

And I was scribbling lies in my diary about how I didn’t mind that my sisters had chosen to return to campus early rather than hang out with their big sister. That I wasn’t at all jealous my bestie had a date for New Year’s with a guy she worked with.

Worst of all? The prospect of homemade lemon bars excited me more than the gorgeous fireplace suite I’d reserved to spend the evening—you guessed it—alone.

“Here you go. I gave you an extra one. On holidays, calories don’t count.” The blond proprietress smiled and set the plate in front of me. “Can I get you anything else?”

“Yes, actually, you can. I’d like some champagne, please.”

“Oh, sure.” She nodded as if it wasn’t weird at all I was ordering champagne with lemon bars after drinking water since I’d sat down. “Flute or bottle for the table?”

Did she know something I didn’t? Was it usual for women dining alone to drink a whole bottle of bubbly? Maybe on New Year’s Eve, anything went.

“Bottle for the table, please.” The deep voice barely registered. In fact, I didn’t even look to see the owner. He couldn’t be speaking for my table. I definitely didn’t know anyone who sounded like *that*.

Hello, man, not a boy.

The blond shifted away from me and I dazedly followed her gaze to where one of the businessmen I’d noticed earlier stood beside the chair opposite me. I hadn’t seen his face, just the tidy queue of dark hair on his neck as he was seated. A solo diner, just like me.

Unlike me, he hadn’t been writing in a journal with flowers on the tattered cover. No, he’d been flipping through a thick sheaf of paperwork, and he’d barely looked up long enough to order.

I hadn’t seen his face, but he’d seen mine. Or else he was in the habit of joining strangers once the alcohol was served. Judging by his well-cut pinstriped dark suit and fancy Italian leather briefcase, he wasn’t hurting for money. I preferred looking at those things rather than his features. If his looks matched up with his voice—

Well, let’s just say I wasn’t in any shape to handle that level of disappointment once he rethought his decision. Because, seriously? Why did he want to sit with *me*?

“Oh.” The blond smiled. “Are you joining her?” She glanced at me. “Dinner date?”

Normally, the blond's presumptuousness might have irritated me, but it felt as if she was on my side. Like she was making sure I wanted this guy to sit at my table. I must be giving off vibes that I did *not* know this dude. No matter how handsome he was and how important he seemed, a woman had to be careful.

"Two people eating alone on New Year's Eve should eat together." His deep voice caused a tingle low in my belly. "Sage, you know I'm harmless." His smile was anything but.

The blond—Sage—raised an eyebrow. "So said Ted Bundy." She smiled sweetly and shifted to glance at me. "Your call."

He switched his briefcase to the other hand, allowing me to see the bundle of winter tulips he also held, wrapped with a burlap bow and with pine greenery overflowing the colorful tissue paper. Tulips were a weakness of mine, and I'd never seen a winter bouquet of them before.

As if he'd noticed me staring at them, he held them out as additional incentive. "For you."

I borrowed a page from Sage's book and lifted an eyebrow, saying nothing. But I accepted the flowers. I was no dummy, and the tulips were gorgeous. I could already imagine them in the center of my table at home, cheering me up as I experimented in the kitchen. The pale reds, pinks, and yellows were perfect.

"He can sit."

Sage nodded. "Would you like anything else besides the bottle of champagne?"

"A cup of coffee for me, please." His smile was easy and self-assured, and he never looked away from me as he took the seat opposite me at the table.

Sage left us alone with a waggle of her brows.

"Friend of yours?" I set the bouquet of tulips in my lap and drew a nail through the powdered sugar beneath the lemon bars on my plate. I rued not redoing my nail polish for tonight.



The silver was chipped at the edges. Surely, a man like him would notice.

“Oh, Sage? No, not exactly, although we’ve met a few times. I make it a point to eat here when I’m in town. Something I’ll be doing a lot more soon.”

He paused as Sage brought over the bottle of champagne and two glasses. She popped the cork and poured for us both, then left us alone again. A moment later, she brought his coffee, which he largely ignored.

I picked up my glass, clinked with my new dinner guest, and sipped. The bubbly went straight to my head as it always did, so I set the glass down.

He was still watching me, his lips curved ever so slightly. He hadn’t taken a drink yet.

“I’m Asher,” he said as the silence extended uncomfortably. Somehow our personal silence was much more noticeable because of all the excited chatter around us.

“Hannah.”

“Nice to meet you. What brings you here tonight of all nights?”

“I didn’t want to sit alone at home.” *Nice one, Hannah. Can you sound any more pathetic?* “It’s a night for parties and fun.” I saluted him with my champagne and drank.

Heat flowed out from my belly through my limbs. I couldn’t decide if I liked the sensation or not. Or maybe the heat was from Asher’s gaze. His eyes weren’t as dark as I’d originally believed. With the candle flickering between us, I’d guess now they were a warm hazel, perhaps varying depending on his clothing.

Apparently, his black pinstriped suit didn’t offer any appreciable change to them. But whoa nelly, that suit was working wonders on me.

Maybe three-piece suits really were the equivalent to lingerie for a woman. His was definitely revving my motor.

Revvng everything.

“So, do you have plans after this? A party perhaps, or some other kind of fun?” He ran his fingertip along the rim of his glass.

“How old are you?” I blurted.

His dark brows drew together. “Thirty-two in March.”

“Hmm.”

“Is that a good *hmm* or a bad *hmm*?”

“I’m twenty-three. I’ve never...” I took a deep breath. *Try not to embarrass yourself again.* “Well, this is just sharing some lemon bars and champagne, right?”

“That’s up to you. Why don’t we start with some conversation and go from there?” His slow smile only served to stir me up even more.

Relax in this gorgeous, commanding man’s presence? Not likely.

“Sure. Let’s begin with why you came over to my table.” I picked up my dessert fork and cut off the corner of one of my lemon bars, belatedly remembering he didn’t have one. Sage hadn’t brought over another plate.

By accident or design? Even without knowing her well, I could easily see her as the matchmaking type.

“Sorry, it’s rude of me to eat when you don’t have anything. Here.” I set down the fork and lifted the plate toward him, swallowing deeply as he pushed aside the vase and the flickering candle to make room for the plate between us.

“We can share.” His fingers brushed mine as he broke off a corner and lifted it to his mouth.

His perfect mouth. His lips were neither too full or too sparse. Just right.

As everything he possessed seemed to be. And I hadn’t even gotten a look at him beneath the waist.

Probably good. I didn’t need to be any more intimidated, especially by pinstriped thirty-two-year-old cocks. I was already freaked out enough.

*Hello, out of my league.*

“No fork?” I asked a little breathlessly. He seemed the fork-and-knife-at-all-times type to me.

“Nah. Fingers are better. See?” He broke off another piece and lifted it across the table to me, not dropping so much as a crumb. “Lean forward.”

I obliged him and his fingertips brushed my lips as he fed me the treat. His voice was entrancing. I was afraid to imagine all the things he could make me do with just one of those husky commands.

His eyes held me in his thrall so completely that I barely noticed the burst of lemon as I swallowed. The bars were a delicious mix of sweet and tart, but I probably wouldn't have noticed if the dessert had been undercooked and bland.

“Good?”

I nodded and he repeated the move several more times. He wasn't even eating himself, just feeding me. He had long, elegant fingers with a surprising bit of ink swirling down his hands. The bold Roman numerals and heavy, old typeface of a latin phrase were mixed with a bit of artistry.

So incongruous to the buttoned-up businessman. It somehow made him even hotter.

Once, out of the corner of my eye, I noticed Sage start to approach with the bill in hand. She took in what was occurring at our shadowy table, widened her eyes, and sped off in the opposite direction.

I would've laughed had I not been so turned on that I could barely think.

What was happening here? We weren't even talking. Was this what occurred when under the influence of a lonely holiday meant for couples and some expensive champagne? I'd had a couple more sips in between rounds of Asher feeding me. Big, bolstering sips. The kind that made a normally shy, awkward woman feel bold.

“No ring,” I said casually—or so I hoped. I’d had plenty of time to see his hand as it came closer to my mouth. “You’re single?”

“Very. The kind of single that means I’m alone on New Year’s Eve, just as you are.” He lifted his thumb to his lips and licked off a stray crumb from the piece he’d just fed me. The movement was far more sensual than it had any right to be. “You are alone tonight, aren’t you, Hannah?”

Something about the question and his use of my name made my throat tighten to the point that if I hadn’t gulped more champagne, I might’ve choked. This time, I didn’t mind the floaty feeling that overtook my body, or the resulting wave of warmth.

“I’m alone far too much these days. But right now? No. Neither of us is alone.”

He nodded, lowering his head for an instant while his jaw locked. He finally took a few sips of coffee before he met my gaze once again. “I have a room upstairs. Just for tonight.”

Questions flitted through my mind.

*Who are you, Asher?*

*Why did you pick me to talk to?*

*Was it just that I looked lonely, so I must be an easy target for sexual advances?*

In the end, I didn’t really care. We were both alone, and no one was waiting for me at home. What did it matter if I chose this handsome man to spend the evening with? No one would be hurt. And I would finally be able to cross one thing off my bucket list.

*Sex with a gorgeous man, check.*

Sex, period.

But that didn’t mean I’d make it easy on him.

“Who were the flowers for?” I stroked the downy soft petals of the pink tulip on top of the bouquet in my lap.

“My grandmother.” He smiled wryly. “She thinks I need to get out more, so she’ll approve that I gave them to the most beautiful woman I’ve seen since...” He trailed off, looking uncharacteristically unsure. Even with only knowing him a very short while, I was quite certain Asher rarely faltered. “Ever.”

“I believe you don’t get out much after that statement.” I rested my cheek on my fist. “My hair isn’t really blond, by the way. I put in a rinse today. Truth in advertising and all that.”

“It doesn’t look blond. Not exactly. More like the color of honey.” His voice deepened. “Rich and luxurious.”

“Glorious Tones hair color thanks you for your appreciation of their product.” I toyed with the stem of my now nearly empty champagne glass. “When is the last time you approached a woman with that line about having a room upstairs?”

“Never. I’ve never had a room upstairs here before.” His lips twitched. “And to be honest, I don’t have one now. I wasn’t planning on staying until I saw you. Writing so furiously in that.” He nodded to my abandoned journal. “What were you writing?”

“Where were you going after this?” I countered.

“To my grandmother’s. She was going to be who I counted down to midnight with.” He finally reached for his champagne and took a single sip. Easing back in his chair, he licked his lips, slowly and surely. “I’d much rather kiss you once the ball drops.”

“Which balls are we referring to?”

I didn’t know if he’d find me funny or crude. It was usually half and half, depending on my company. But his laughter was quick and appreciative. “You’re different than I expected.”

“Oh, really? What did you expect? A meek little mouse who’d trot after you and hop right into bed?” Okay, this had to be the champagne talking, because this was next level, even for me.

“No. I wasn’t even thinking about bed when I came over here. I just wanted to hear your voice. To see if you ever smiled. You still haven’t, you know. Not at me.”

“Smiles are earned. Keep trying. You might get there.”

“Luckily, I don’t give up easily. Why are you alone tonight? No family?”

“No.” The lie came easily, and sometimes seemed far too true when my sisters were busy with school and out of touch. My family was a fraction of what it had once been. “Let’s just say I live an isolated existence.”

It wasn’t that far from reality. I was alone too often.

I couldn’t stand another moment of it.

“No lover.” The word dripped off his tongue, laced with a sensuality that was far beyond my realm of experience.

“No.” I tilted my head. “So, what’s your story?”

His lips lifted on one side. “I’m a man who works far too much and spends New Year’s Eve with his grandmother. What more do you need to know?”

Indeed.

I nodded at the bottle of champagne. “Think we can get that to go?”

## TWO



COMING OVER TO HANNAH'S TABLE HADN'T BEEN IN MY plans.

I was supposed to eat dinner, read through the dry paperwork I'd brought to keep me company, and go spend the evening with my grandmother. That was all true.

What I hadn't mentioned was the other reason I was headed to Gran's. She was babysitting my daughter, Lily, who was just celebrating her six-month birthday and didn't have a clue that her father was a workaholic. Thank God.

Her *new* father. I wasn't her biological father. Technically, I was her godfather, the one who'd taken on an honorary role in her life thanks to my best friend. I was never supposed to be called into service.

And Billy wasn't supposed to die two months ago with no other relatives, leaving me the sole support for his little girl.

Hannah also didn't know that I was a single parent. Why hadn't I told her? Maybe she wasn't the only one who wanted to be someone else tonight. I didn't doubt for a second she was lying about the no family thing. But sometimes even good people needed a respite from their lives.

I cared a lot about Lily. But tonight, I wanted to be someone other than Asher Wainwright, publisher and CEO of the struggling Wainwright Publishing Inc. Another man other than the equally struggling single father of the cutest baby girl ever.

Even if I didn't quite know what to do with her.

At least where work was concerned, I'd once felt competent. Now I was drowning on both the professional and personal fronts, and I wanted a win.

Needed one.

For tonight, I would be the man Hannah perceived me to be while her big blue eyes ate me up as if she was equally unnerved and fascinated.

She wasn't the only one.

Something about her utter solitude as she ate her soup and scribbled in her worn book had called to me in a way I didn't quite understand. I hadn't dated in a long time. Not all that long ago in the scheme of things, but a lifetime when considering how many nights I'd gone to sleep with only paperwork for company.

I was married to my job. Trying to save the company my grandfather had built from nothing took almost all of my time. What was left I gave to Lily and my grandmother.

Not enough was left, to be honest, and it was probably irresponsible of me to even consider taking this night for myself.

For myself and for Hannah, who seemed just as desperate for a night away from reality as I was.

Gran would understand. She always encouraged me to try those dating apps or hell, even to just go to a bar and see what happened. Her mindset was much more freewheeling than my own. The idea of meeting a stranger at a bar was beyond my scope.

*What do you think this is? You think meeting her in the restaurant of a bed and breakfast makes it much different?*

Not hardly.

Hannah was still staring at me, not moving, waiting for me to reply to her statement about getting the champagne to go.

Fuck, did I even have any condoms in my wallet? I wasn't prepared for this.



For *her*.

“We can get a bottle sent to our room.” I cleared my throat. “They have gorgeous ones here—”

“They may be booked. It’s a holiday, and this isn’t exactly a by-the-hour motel.” She spoke directly, without the hint of a blush tingeing her features.

I liked that about her. She didn’t beat around the bush. So to speak.

Jesus, I was so out of my depth here.

Shrewd, clever, driven Asher Wainwright never made a misstep. If he fucked up, he damn well never admitted defeat. But that was just one side of me. My public persona. The guy underneath, who was still flailing at becoming a parent without going through the steps to get there, who had to figure out a whole new life as well as be responsible for one—that Asher was a few drinks away from getting so blitzed he didn’t get up for a day. Or a week.

A month.

So, I couldn’t let myself take that tumble. The only one I was allowed was this brief slice of time with beautiful, straightforward Hannah.

“I’ll speak to Sage.” I was already removing my wallet. I gripped the platinum American Express card as Hannah reached out to still my hand.

“She’ll know. This isn’t a booty call sort of place.”

I had to smile. The term was ridiculous when it came to me and my lifestyle. “We don’t have to do anything but talk.” Even as I said it, I watched the furrow of her brows and the way her lips tightened in lieu of a smile.

I was still working on earning one. I hadn’t gotten there yet.

She released my hand and sat back, crossing her arms over the soft swell of her belly. She was curvy in all the right places, and her deep green dress had a V-neck that drew my eyes right to her breasts. I’d tried repeatedly to keep my gaze

above her neck, but she was seriously stacked. Her little cardigan covered her arms and not much else, only serving to draw more attention to her cleavage.

*Talk?* She nearly rendered me fucking speechless.

“Do you live nearby?” She shifted to unhook her bag from the back of her chair. “Perhaps that is more—”

“No.” My voice came out sharper than I’d intended. “Visiting my grandmother, remember? I live in Syracuse.”

It was sterling truth. My grandmother wouldn’t mind if I brought Hannah over. In fact, she’d probably be pleased as could be if we got naked right there on the living room floor. She worried far too much about my lack of a social life.

But Lily was also there, and I didn’t want to explain. Especially not to someone who was just passing through. It wasn’t as if Hannah and I would be anything to each other after tonight. I had no time for a woman. My days were filled with work, and my nights were full of Lily.

And figuring out how to bathe a baby without blinding her with harsh soaps or scarring her with water that wasn’t the proper mix of warm and cool. And choosing a formula that didn’t upset her delicate stomach. And on and on.

*Father failure for five hundred, Alex.*

Hannah nodded. “Let’s see about the room here then.” Surprising the hell out of me, she motioned for Sage, who beamed so brightly at us that she was in competition with the candle.

“All set with dessert? Do you need a refill? Or perhaps—”

“We need the check, please.”

Sage nodded and clasped her hands against her chest. “Was your meal satisfactory?”

“It was delicious. Your lemon bars are almost as good as mine, and that’s saying something. But now we need to go.”

I cleared my throat. “About that—”

“We’re all set,” she said to Sage, covering my hand with her own to shut me up.

Sage put down the folder that contained the bill and left discreetly. As discreetly as one could while still wagging her brows and watching us over her shoulder.

I leaned forward. “What happened to asking about the room?”

“I didn’t say I’d ask. I said let’s see about the room here.” I was so busy staring at her that she had time to sign for the check with a flourish and put down her own credit card. “Which I don’t have to ask for, since I already have one and am presently checked in.” She closed the bill book and handed it to Sage, who managed to sweep by our table at the exact right instant.

“So, you were dicking around with me?”

“No, I was just making sure you didn’t get a guilty conscience and confess about your wife. That usually slows someone’s roll right down. But no ring,” she said again, looking at my hand. “No tan line either. And you didn’t so much as blink when saying you didn’t live close by. Not that Syracuse is that far.”

I slid my credit card back into my wallet and said nothing. I couldn’t decide if I admired the way she was taking charge or if it pissed me off.

“I’m sorry, did your sweet, unassuming lay just change into something more challenging? Having second thoughts?”

“Hell, no. But you’re not the only one who isn’t sweet all the time.” I didn’t have to fake the growl in my voice.

Clearly, she had more levels than were readily apparent just below the surface. She wasn’t the only one.

“Glad to hear it. Because Tinder dates really aren’t doing it for me.”

The growl was back again, although this time it never left my chest. The sound rumbled there as if I was a disgruntled bear. “You use those apps?”

She gave a dainty shrug. “Hard to meet suitable men nowadays. I never felt comfortable enough to just sit down at someone’s table.” She tilted her head.

For a second, I was sure she was going to smile. And denied.

“If you want something, you need to go out and get it. That’s my life motto.”

Or it was, before my business started to crumble thanks to new technologies and changing times. Also before a beautiful brown-eyed baby with red curls fell into my lap.

Literally.

“Time goes by too fast to deal with regrets.” I was thinking of Billy now, and how quickly—and unexpectedly—he’d lost his life. He’d had so much ahead of him. So many years to spend with his little girl.

Now I was tasked with standing in for him, and somehow making him proud. That mantle weighed heavy on my shoulders, even heavier than keeping the business afloat. At least with the business I had some idea what I was doing, even amidst the changes in the industry.

With Lily? Clue-fucking-less.

“And I’m something you wanted?” Hannah asked quietly.

“Isn’t that obvious?”

“I didn’t even see you looking my way.”

“You were too wrapped up in that book.” I tapped the cover with my thumb. “Diary, is it?”

Smoothly, she tucked it into her bag. “More like an agenda. Some journal aspects too, you could say.”

“So, your life is busy enough you need to keep a running to do list.”

Her pale brown eyebrows lifted. “You, sir, are asking far too many questions for a random hookup.”

“Keep calling me *sir* and maybe you’ll distract me into forgetting them.”

Her lips parted a fraction, and I swore I could hear her rush of breath despite the conversation all around us.

“Here’s your credit card, Hannah.” Sage set down the bill folder. “Hope you two have a nice night. Don’t be a stranger, Asher.” She wiggled her fingers in a wave and moved on to the next table.

Hannah took back her credit card, slipping it into her wallet. “The nice thing about Sage knowing you is it gives me some comfort you may not be a serial killer.”

“She only knows me to say hello and goodbye when I have dinner. We aren’t buddies. And remember, even she mentioned Ted Bundy earlier.”

“Thank you for allaying my fears.”

“You take far more chances on those apps.”

“I cancelled my last date with Joe Blow. Let’s go.”

Arching a brow, I rose and moved around the table to help her out of her chair. She did not wait for my assistance and was soon halfway across the room.

I followed her out, my gaze firmly on her swaying hips in her clingy dress.

Goddamn, she was gorgeous.

I came up behind her in the foyer when she stopped at the base of the sweeping staircase that led to the second floor. She turned toward me and shocked the hell out of me by placing the room key in my hand. Then she leaned up on her tiptoes and spoke near my ear—which was pretty damn close, since she seemed on the high side of average height and her heels gave her just enough of a boost. Her breath smelled sweet and fruity, a cross between the lemon tarts we’d shared and the champagne.

“You probably prefer to be in charge. So, let’s pretend the room is yours.”

I caught her wrist before she eased back. “Let’s get one reality straight.”

Blue eyes huge, she nodded.

“For tonight, you’re mine.”

She wetted her lips. “Same goes, Asher.”

Just her saying my name had me going harder than the beams that held up the damn ceiling.

“*All* night.”

Again, she nodded.

Christ, it burned me to acknowledge that all too soon, she would no longer be in my sphere. And that was crazy. “I won’t go further than you want me to, but now’s your chance to say no.”

She’d have a million other chances to say no, but of course I hoped she wouldn’t want to. I wasn’t trying to scare her, just figure out what her limits were.

Even what mine were when it came to her. Right now? It didn’t feel like I had many left. She’d tested my boundaries in ways I’d never expected, simply by being herself.

Unless even her personality was a game, just like her mysterious persona. If that was true, I didn’t want to know.

I wanted the fantasy every bit as much as she did.

“Yes is the only word I plan on saying tonight.” She jogged up the stairs, weaving around a couple who was coming down.

Swallowing hard, I followed her to the room. She waited while I unlocked the door, then stood aside to allow me to enter first.

She went right to a small vase by the door and shifted the fresh flowers over to make room for the tulips I’d given her, fussing with them for a moment before stepping back.

The lights were off, but the fireplace was burning. Whether Hannah had left it that way, or it was one of the features

provided by the staff, the flickering firelight added a warm glow to the rich furnishings in the room. Even in the low light, opulent touches seemed to be mixed in with the rustic decor. A four-poster bed in knotty pine was paired with what appeared to be a handmade quilt. An Aubusson rug in jewel tones drew the eye to the large fireplace with its wide mantel still decorated for the holidays.

Across from the door, huge windows framed the space. Outside lights glimmered on the lake. The bed and breakfast had the perfect view of the water, but tonight that view was obscured by snowflakes. The few meandering flurries that had been falling when I'd come inside for dinner had turned into a deluge.

"The storm is here," Hannah murmured, dropping her bag by the bed to rush to the windows.

I was tempted to turn on the lamp so I could see every bit of her, but I didn't know if she'd shy away at such intimacy. The dancing flames offered just enough light, streaking her long fall of light brown hair with hints of gold.

When I came up behind her, she barely seemed to notice. She laid her hand upon the glass as if she could touch the snow even through the window.

"Were we supposed to get a storm?"

"Oh, yes, it's been forecast for days—" She broke off when my arms encircled her waist.

She felt so good. Solid, warm. Strong. The scent of lilacs wafted over me from either her perfume or her shampoo. Fuck, I'd never smell them again without thinking of her and this moment.

Of us alone in the firelit dark while a storm raged outside.

Then she stumbled backward, stomping on my foot. And I laughed.

"Sorry. Sorry. I shouldn't have moved. I just didn't expect you to be so—"

“Close?” Her unexpected bout of nerves after her bravado downstairs was refreshing. Maybe the mask was slipping a bit?

“No. Hard. All over.” She cleared her throat and shifted toward me, lifting her head. “I was distracted by the snow.”

I gripped her chin, rubbing my thumb over the shallow dent in it. “Must not be that impressive if snow is more interesting than the prospect of being alone with me.”

“First big snowfall is late this year.”

“That it is.” I brushed her hair back from her face. “If I don’t have any condoms on me—and the chances are probably 60/40, odds not in our favor—I want to lay you in front of the fireplace and devour you all night long.”

When she only watched me with heavy eyes, I moved in that much closer until our bodies were flush. Wedged together. Carefully, I drew her full lower lip between mine, tugging softly with a scrape of my teeth until she let out a low moan.

The sound tore something open inside me. Later, I’d wonder if I had really lunged at her, cupping her face in both hands as I kissed her. My lips molded to hers and my tongue delved inside, sweeping over hers before I explored every nuance of her mouth. Then our tongues were twisting together, sliding against each other while she pushed up my suit coat and spanned her hands over my lower back through the thin cotton of my shirt.

Not enough. I needed to feel every inch of her pressed against me.

Naked.

No clothes again, ever.

Fuck, I was out of control. Already. Still. She made me do things I normally never would. Hell if I understood it. Even approaching her had been far outside my comfort zone.

My life wasn’t for me anymore. It was for the business. For Lily. Even for my grandmother.



But this...*this* was all for me. And for Hannah. Especially for her.

“Asher.” Her harsh whisper as she moved back made me open my eyes. Everything was fuzzy and indistinct except for the fiery blue of her irises.

What had we unleashed here?

“I’m so—”

She stopped me with a flick of her thumb over my lips. Lipstick probably. Already I wore her on my skin.

I wanted more of her on me. Surrounding me.

“I have a condom in my purse. Two, actually. Though I have to say that whole devouring thing?” she said breathlessly. “Suits me just fine.”

## THREE



WAS I REALLY DOING THIS?

*Yes.*

A thousand times yes. First and foremost, I wanted to be rid of my pesky virginity, but this man... There was no way I was supposed to be this lucky. To have a man like Asher want me. To actually be shaking a little in his need for me.

It was beyond my scope in about a thousand different ways. But here we were. In the ultimate romantic getaway spot.

I mean, for God's sake, there was actually a snowstorm raging outside. I'd read this in a romance novel or seven. Heck, I'd watched it on the deluge of Hallmark holiday movies I'd binged this season.

Though the Hallmark movies weren't nearly as carnal as I was about to get.

I cleared my throat. "Let me just go clean—"

"No. Don't overthink this. If you go into that bathroom, you'll come out with a million reasons why this is insane."

"Oh, no. We're doing this." I was resolute. I had high hopes based on his kissing skills. Because whoa, boy, did he have skills.

I was getting this done. I was going to treat myself in every way that counted this New Year's, dammit. The room, the ambiance, the man.

God, did I ever hit the jackpot on the man.

He grinned down at me, then loosened his tie and jerked it out of the knot. “Oh, we’re definitely doing this.” He looped the unfurled tie around my waist and dragged me in close.

Shocked, I laughed up at him and braced my hands on his chest.

“Finally, I got a smile.” He leaned down and flicked his tongue along my cheek before burying his face in my hair. “Dimples even.”

I lifted my shoulder against the ticklish spot. “I hate them.”

“There’s something about a woman with dimples.”

“Yeah, we look like a perpetual fourteen-year-old.” I pushed him back when he dug deeper to scrape my neck with his five o’clock shadow.

“No fourteen-year-old ever kissed me like you do.”

My breath shorted out in my chest. That was a good sign. Maybe I wouldn’t be totally inept at this sex thing. “I should hope not. Unless you were fourteen at the time.”

His dark eyes lit with the devil. I was sure of it. And I wanted to let the devil in. “Maybe when I was twelve. I’ve always been an overachiever.”

“I just bet.” I shivered when his hand slid up my back to find my zipper.

“Right now, I need to get my hands on your skin. To watch the firelight kiss every inch just before I do.”

“You’re sure you haven’t done this before?”

“Seduced a woman?” He peeled the dress away from my shoulder so it pooled between us. “I’m no innocent, Hannah.”

*Oh, but I am.*

Part of me screamed to tell him, but I didn’t want this to stop if he got weirded out about it. To chance that this could end without me getting what I needed.

I pulled my arms out of the dress and let out a slow breath as the material slid down to swish around my ankles, his tie floating to the floor as well.

“Sweet Christ.”

“I hope that’s good.”

“So good.” His eyes seemed even more intense in the dim light. As if there were shadows living in them. Some that made me wonder beyond my own selfish needs.

But others—like the heat growing between us—pushed away the pesky thoughts of reality.

His fingertips trailed up my middle. That was an area where things weren’t as tight as I wished some days. I baked and liked to eat my own cooking. But wonder filled his expression, not exasperation or disdain.

He lightly traced the lace of my forest green bra. I’d worn the one set of underwear I owned that wasn’t made of cotton and designed to be purely functional. I’d specifically bought it to match this dress and this night. For the wild, sexy Hannah I wished I could be, not the careful woman who spent too many hours dreaming up recipes and food combinations.

I wanted to be an adventurous woman who took exactly what she needed.

My head tipped back as he made lazy circles around my tightening nipple before plucking one lightly, then the other. Just that brief touch left me breathless.

It wasn’t me fumbling in the dark when the nights got too lonely.

This was a real man touching me. Wanting me.

Suddenly, warmth blossomed over the lace followed by a strong, sure pull from his lips. His tongue pressed against the lace, wetting it and making it malleable enough for me to feel every movement he made.

My fingers slid into his hair. The short hairs tickled as I grasped enough to hold him in place. I didn’t need to worry—he wasn’t stopping. No, he was more than happy to keep going

with his light touches chased by little nips of his straight white teeth gleaming in the darkness.

I couldn't look away as his laser focus became my lifeline. A rhythm only he seemed to understand and I ached to figure out.

Each pull from his teeth and mouth arrowed down between my thighs. When I swayed, he caught me, when I tried to back away from the intensity, he pushed for more.

I threw back my shoulders as he opened the clasp on my bra. I should've been worried that they weren't as perky without all the support, but his jaw tightened as he cupped them together and met my gaze.

"Fucking beautiful. You were made for firelight. Made for me." He swung me up in his arms and strode over to the fireplace. On the way there, he looked around.

"Bed?" It was pretty big. Not sure how he could've missed it.

Especially since I was the one who'd had the bubbly.

Speaking of, had Sage forgotten to send up our requested bottle? Or was it waiting for us in the hall?

Not that I intended to stop long enough to find out.

"No. I need you spread out just as I said. In front of that fire where I can worship this lush, perfect body."

I swallowed. "Oh, boy."

One corner of his mouth tipped up. "Are you amenable to that plan?"

"Is there a contract to go with it? Where do you need me to sign?"

He laughed. "Maybe just that condom in your stash."

"Bag." I pointed to the mint paisley bag on the floor by the bed.

He rerouted to that side of the room and lowered me enough to grab it without putting me down. I dug into the little

side compartment and dropped the bag again. Two condoms would need to be enough.

*Please God.*

As he passed the bed, I snatched the throw blanket at the bottom. He laid me gently on the floor, then grabbed the pillows off the bed and scattered them behind me. He knelt over me, his dress pants hugging him from thigh to knee and more importantly, just along his zipper.

And mercy, did the fabric hug it tight.

I could see the curve of him and everything clenched inside of me. There might have also been a little bit of panic since this was my first time.

Then again, Asher didn't seem to be average in any capacity, so why would that particular appendage be any different?

He untucked his shirt the rest of the way and slowly unbuttoned the crisp pearl-colored shirt. A tight white T-shirt stretched across his chest. So many freaking layers.

If I'd been a little braver, I would have risen up to push the shirt up and out of the way, but let's be real.

Every part of me was shaking at the idea of exactly what was under those gloriously tailored slacks.

Even his undershirt was something more than off the rack. Ripples of muscle showed under the superfine cotton. And the hint of something else.

Another tattoo?

"The way you look at me. God, I hope I don't disappoint you. I'd hate to lose that gorgeous expression."

"I think the worry is the other way around."

"You couldn't disappoint me. You don't look like the kind of woman who lays there like a dead fish."

A quick laugh rolled out of me. "That's a thing?"

"You'd be surprised."

“I’m sorry you’ve had to deal with that.”

“Let’s not talk about anything other than us.”

“I like the sound of that. Just like the first time.”

His smile softened. “I’m as nervous as the first time.”

“Yeah?” I swallowed hard. “Me too.”

He reached behind his neck and tugged the shirt over his head. His neat hair was tousled a bit and I liked it even more. Not so perfect. Especially when I was anything but.

He tossed his undershirt aside and crawled over me. “Now I can finally get you skin to skin.”

The arrow of hair fanned down his pecs and trailed down his muscular stomach. I trailed my fingers through the fine hairs there and shivered at the warmth of his smooth skin. “So beautiful.”

“You’re the beautiful one, not me.”

I followed the winding beads of his rosary tattoo. So much ink on someone I’d thought was so buttoned-up upon first glance. “I beg to differ.”

He closed his eyes as I followed the intricate lines and shading to his neck before he lowered himself to rub against my breasts. His groan matched my own as he covered me and my mouth.

My legs opened for him and the soft wool of his pants cushioned the decadently hard line of his shaft as he moved lightly against the lace of my panties.

Such small barriers, and yet they felt like too much.

I wanted his skin on me—all of it.

I curled my arms around his shoulders and moaned as he settled on top of me.

“Am I too heavy?”

“No. You’re perfect.” I curled my leg around his hip. I’d never had a man between my legs like this. The few boyfriends I’d had were more interested in getting a hand

between my thighs than in actually fitting themselves against me. Forget taking the time to touch and kiss with meaning.

Asher's mouth slid down to my neck and back to my breasts. He stared up at me in the firelight, his dark eyes dancing with flames and intent while he sucked my nipple with just a little too much force. Enough that I arched up off the soft rug.

Again, the pleasure arced through me and pooled under the lace of my panties. I was probably going to leave wet marks on his beautiful suit. Before I could mention that fact, he curled his arm under me so my shoulders bowed back, giving him more access.

As if there was a single place left on me from my neck to my breasts he hadn't touched.

I ached for more. So much more.

"God, I want to taste you."

"Aren't you?"

"More." He slipped down to the underside of my breast and to the soft line of my rib cage. "Everything."

"I..." I didn't have an answer for that. I craved every bit of experience, but I wasn't sure how much honesty he could handle.

He scraped his teeth around my belly button, just above the dip of my panties. "May I?"

"Anything."

"Oh, don't give me that opening. I'll take it all. I'm a greedy bastard."

I swallowed down the rush of fear under the excitement. If this was the one and only time I'd have this chance, I wanted it all. Even the extra frosting of that amazing tongue where nothing but my fingers had been. "Show me."

He inched lower and tucked the tips of his fingers under the stretchy lace and dragged them down my legs. Rather than looking down at the most hidden part of me, he stared into my



eyes as he lowered his mouth to me. Our gaze was locked for what felt like forever.

“Breathe, Hannah.”

I let out a soft laugh and it faded into a groan as his tongue slipped through my wetness. “Oh, God.”

The rumble from his chest buzzed along my thighs before it reverberated through my skin to where his very clever tongue was tucked. I resisted the urge to push him away. It was intimate and overwhelming, but then there was nothing but a wash of intense pleasure as he flicked his tongue around my clit with a skill I didn't want to think about.

Instead, I concentrated on the way it made me feel.

As if I was floating and drowning at the same time. The sounds of my wetness made me want to push his head away, but it seemed to intensify his need for more. The greed he mentioned seemed to diffuse into me and made me stretch up with little tendrils of need.

Instead of pushing him away, my fingers slipped into the longer hairs at the top of his head and held him closer. He groaned against me and slipped a finger underneath where his tongue had been. Sliding it into me while I gasped.

I arched off the rug and reached up with my other hand for the pillow above my head. Anything to hold on and not fly apart as one finger became two and he stretched me.

“You're so fucking tight. As if you were made only for my mouth, my tongue, my fucking fingers.”

I panted out a sob. “Yes. No one else's.” That was the truth. No lies there. “Never anyone else's.”

He slowed and looked up at me. “Never?” He stopped driving his fingers deeper into me. “Hannah?”

I swallowed. I didn't want to lie, but if he stopped—dear God, I'd kill him and cry for a month, maybe even a year.

He turned his hand until his thumb was tucked under my clit. My brain shut off and I lifted my hips for more. Madness clawed at my brain like a fever.

“No one?” His voice was reverent, not accusatory.

I turned my head away. “No.”

His fingers slipped out of me.

“Asher, please.”

“God, Hannah. I could have lost control. I was a second from ripping my zipper open and driving into you.”

*Yes.* Yes, I wanted that. So very much. To just have him let go and I’d finally be whole. To finally know what I was missing.

A tear slid down my temple. “Please don’t stop.”

“I couldn’t.” He quickly moved up to me, turning my face to his. “I wouldn’t. I just don’t want to take you like an animal. You’re twisting under my mouth and you taste so good.” He covered my mouth and I gasped at my taste on his tongue—now on *my* tongue. He tugged on my lower lip. “Taste that?”

I let out a shuddering breath. “Yes.”

“Times a thousand for me. You taste like honeyed peaches and perfection.”

I’d never look at peach pie the same way.

He cupped my cheek, brushing away the tears that had leaked out. “I don’t deserve this gift, but when I said I was a greedy bastard, I meant it.”

I covered his hand. “And I meant it when I said I wanted everything. Show me.”

He inched back off of me. “God, you’re going to kill me, but that’s what you’re going to get. But your first time isn’t going to be on the floor.” He lifted me again and I yelped. “Round two maybe.”

“Round two could have been on the bed.”

He grinned and set me down on the huge mattress. “I want to make this amazing for you. I’m an overachiever.”

Oh, Lord. I wouldn’t make it through this if he made it any better.

My gaze fastened to his hands as he lowered his zipper and peeled back the pinstriped charcoal wool to the jet black boxers underneath.

I swallowed thickly. That was a lot of man in there. A whole lot.

He stepped out of his pants and tossed them on the chair near the bed. Socks went with it before he climbed back up between my legs again. “We’ll figure this out together. The first time for both of us.”

I reached up to stroke back the little lock of hair that fell forward to mar his perfect face. “As long as both of us aren’t acting like virgins.”

He laughed. “Definitely not.” He covered my mouth with his and lightly stroked his way down my torso to between my thighs. His sweet kiss turned heated, then grew wilder as he groaned. “So wet for me,” he said against my mouth.

“So ready.”

“I’ll let you know when you’re ready.”

Up close, I could see the little flecks of gold in his hazel eyes. Almost predatory. I shivered, but not with fear. I’d been holding onto my virginity for so long, it had seemed as if I’d never know what it felt like to be with someone, let alone a man like Asher.

I didn’t even know his last name.

Maybe that was better. There was nothing outside this little snow globe we’d created. No baggage, no family, no burdens.

A space of time that was only about us.

My hips lifted as he slowly stroked one then two fingers inside of me. He took his time to learn my body. Even when I tried to urge him on, to go faster, he stayed the course.

He had his own plan for how this was going to go.

I was so impatient to reach the finish line. To just get him inside of me to feel part of something—*someone*. But Asher had his own agenda.

And that included death by endless orgasm.

Each time I got close, he backed off and slowed his tender movements. Added a kiss to my shoulder, my neck, even my collarbone. But he only touched me between my legs.

I arched up to get that deliciously soft hair of his chest against my skin, but he shifted so it was only about me and his fingers.

“Relax, Hannah. Just let me inside.”

“That’s the freaking object of this and yet...”

The rumble in his chest ended in a low chuckle. “We have all night and only two condoms.”

He was right, but I was so restless and lost. I didn’t have any choice but to follow him.

I turned my face to meet his mouth and wrapped my arms around his neck. He gasped into the kiss and the long, strong hardness of his shaft dragged along my inner thigh. “Yes,” I said against his mouth. “Closer.”

He tore his lips away from mine and inched down to my hips. “Is that the way you want to play it?”

I sat up on my elbows. “I don’t want to play anything but you inside me. Fill me up, Asher. Please.”

His eyes were wild, but his determination was overriding everything.

I fell back on the pillows. I didn’t know this man, but I knew one thing. I was on his timetable.

He yanked me down then hooked my knee over his shoulder and all his teasing double-timed until I was writhing on the bed.

Fingers, tongue, even his breath was focused on the very center of me. I tried to grab onto his shoulder, but I swear my brains were leaking out my ears. I pushed pillows out of the way and grasped the headboard as he feasted on me.

There was truly no other word for it.

My thighs shook as he slipped two fingers inside me and lapped at me. I arched up as the crackling fire, the dim light, even the howling wind outside fell away and there was simply nothing but my own harsh breathing and my heartbeat throbbing under his tongue and reverberating in my head.

“Fuck, Hannah.” He bit down on my inner thigh as he thrust inside me again and again with his fingers.

I couldn’t take it. The pleasure mowed me down and left absolute destruction in its wake.

Then he was gone and I couldn’t articulate what I needed. *Something*. Even while I basked in the ruins of what he’d done with me, there was something missing.

In an instant, he was back. There was no space between us this time. Just him ranging over me before he parted my sticky thighs and slid forward.

Finally.

“I’m sorry,” he whispered in my ear, but I was already too far gone.

Too far past the point of no return.

I accepted him inside me as if I was made for him. A twinge of discomfort, then a fullness I’d never dreamed possible.

He curled his arms under my back and enveloped me from chest to waist as we joined in every single way. He cradled the back of my head, his fingers tangling in my hair as he held me still. And watched me as he broke down every defense I’d ever thought I had.

I could deny him nothing.

Even if I’d wanted to, he wouldn’t allow it.

He stretched me out, wrung me out, and demanded more. Sweat poured between us thanks to the roaring fire beside the bed, but I didn’t care.

I wrapped my arms and legs around him. Maybe even my heart.

The friction of our bodies, and the seeds of my orgasm, grew until his name was a chant against his mouth, his neck, even his shoulder as I tried not to scream the roof down.

My name was a plea, then an oath as he finally released his rigid control and drove into me. I chased him, the fire, the edges of insanity, and a moment before he did, I broke.

Fully and inexorably.

He filled me in more ways than should have been possible. This stranger shouldn't have been able to touch me so deeply, so completely.

Yet somehow he'd left only the ashes of Hannah Jacobs in this big, beautiful bed.

What I'd become next, I just didn't know.

The rage of our own personal snowstorm eventually abated. The sweat cooled and our wild breathing slowed. Still, his heart beat a steady tattoo against mine while I traced a never-ending circular pattern on his back.

There were no words between us. None that could really convey just what *that* had been.

Finally, he slid away and sat on the side of the bed to dispose of the condom he'd luckily remembered to put on. My brain had been in a very dangerous place where I wouldn't have questioned it.

That in itself was damn scary.

I sat up and gathered the sheets over me.

“Don't think you're going anywhere. We have all night.”

I gave a nervous laugh. “Even if I wanted to, the snow says no anyway.”

He turned toward me. “Do you want to?”

I lifted a shoulder. “No. But this can only be for tonight.”

Everyone knew fairy tales ended, and I wanted to take control of mine. I knew better than most that nothing good lasted forever.

He narrowed his eyes and his gaze flitted to my hand.

“Hello, remember that pesky virginity thing?”

“Right.” He stood and the firelight bronzed his perfect skin. And mercy, all the rest of him too.

I rubbed my legs together. I could still feel him there, like a permanent imprint.

Emotions and desire had coalesced into something hazy and feverish. Something I’d drag out on the lonely nights to remember when I’d done something just for myself.

I snuggled down into the blankets as he walked around the bed and into the small bathroom before returning.

“Enjoying the show?”

I grinned and pulled a pillow in front of me to hug it tight. Maybe then I wouldn’t lunge for him and embarrass myself. “Maybe.”

He lifted the edge of the blankets and crawled back into bed with me before taking the pillow away and tucking it behind his head. “If you’re looking, I get to as well.”

I burrowed deeper into the covers.

“Now you’re going to play shy?”

I shrugged. “Orgasmic haze has left the room.”

“I should fix that then.” He pulled the covers over both our heads and dragged me closer.

The kisses were filled with laughter. I didn’t realize I had that in me after all the intensity of before. And to be honest, I didn’t know Asher had that side of him. There was a touch of charm in his reactions to me at dinner, but for the most part, there had been an aching loneliness that I’d recognized and been drawn to.

*This* part of him made things warm and expand in my chest. Things that I had no business feeling for a man who was a one-night stand.

By choice. I'd rather this be one perfect, happy memory than for it to turn into something tinged with regret.

That wasn't for tonight.

Instead, we found ticklish spots on one another and new screams filled the room. There was only laughter and the rich rumble of his teasing voice as he covered my entire body with stubble burn.

It was so worth it. And when we came together a second time, it was soft and dreamy, the exact opposite of the wild storm we'd made between us the first time.

If I'd been a more fanciful woman, I would have called it something more.

Wished it could be.

When he turned me so he could curl around my back, the firelight shimmered with more than just the gasps of my pleasure.

I felt more cherished by a stranger than anyone in my life since I'd lost my parents. When he slipped inside of me, stretching me so perfectly, I laced my fingers with his across my middle. We moved together in a rhythm of heartbeats and the snap of fire while the wind howled outside.

I reached back with my other hand to grasp the back of his neck as he buried his face in my neck. His low, throaty groan was the loveliest end to our evening.

We slept in a tangle of arms and legs. No fighting for pillows or deciding which side of the bed we'd sleep on. There was no side. Just us in the center with no space in between.

I woke with the dawn as was my habit, no matter how many hours of sleep I'd gotten—or not gotten.

There definitely hadn't been many with Asher.

I laid there for a few moments, appreciating the weight of a man behind me for the first time in my life.

It had all been so brief.



My chest ached as I slipped out of his arms and tucked a pillow beside him when he reached for me.

I moved to the window and saw the streets were already plowed. A snowstorm was no match for the cleanup crews in central New York. I dressed in silence then crouched beside the bed for a moment to watch him sleep. His hair was mussed and the harsher lines around his eyes had eased in slumber.

So beautiful. And he'd made me feel exactly the same. Beautiful and whole and strong.

I just had to be strong enough not to make it more than it was.

My bestie Gabriela had a phrase for this.

*Fuck and run.* Split before reality intervened.

Because really, what could we have in common outside of bed? He'd been all about work before he stopped by my table, and I wasn't ridiculous enough to think I could compete with his likely high-powered job.

Nor did I want to try.

Suddenly, his eyes snapped open. He went from sound asleep to wakefulness in a blink. Sadness filled his gaze before his expression became steady and blank.

"Were you going to say goodbye?"

I brushed the back of my hand along his bearded cheek before he jerked away from my touch. Sighing, I stood. "You knew what this was. *We* knew what this was. Would it be better to do this after breakfast?"

His jaw tightened. "Guess we won't find out." He rolled to the opposite side of the bed before he swung his feet to the floor. I got one more flash of his spectacular butt before he firmly shut the bathroom door.

Part of me wanted to go to the door and knock. To talk to him and tell him just how amazing last night had been. Maybe even find out more about him. A last name and a number.

But that wasn't how this ended.

I might be a virgin—scratch that, not anymore—but even I knew that the morning afters were never easy. What were we supposed to do? Shake hands or kiss? Go for one more condomless round? Yeah, that was smart.

I heard the shower turn on and closed my eyes for a moment.

*No.*

A quick and clean break was best.

I shook my hair back and straightened my shoulders. *Big girl panties, Hannah.* I swung my weekender and my purse over my shoulder before my gaze settled on the small vase on the table by the door.

My secondhand tulips.

I plucked them out of the vase and tucked them carefully in my purse. They were mine now. Just as last night was forever mine, no matter how it had ended.

As soon as I stepped into the hall, I saw the champagne in a bucket beside the door. It was only then I glimpsed the *do not disturb* sign Asher must've hung when I wasn't paying attention.

I picked up the bottle of champagne and tucked that away too. Another reminder. I'd drink it and recall every detail of this perfect, unforgettable night.

Then I looked back one last time.

“Goodbye, Asher,” I said quietly to the room and closed the door behind me.

## FOUR



*Two months later*

A MEETING AT ELEVEN. ANOTHER MEETING AT NOON. THEN lunch, followed by another meeting.

Already my day was a shitstorm.

My sales manager had quit with no warning, leaving me to meet with several of our biggest customers. I had little time to get up to speed on their accounts and even less time to consider if my long-term, trusted employee had taken off with all his sales contacts in tow. If so, whatever company he landed at next would benefit from all the relationships he'd built while being paid by Wainwright Publishing Industries.

But I didn't have time to dwell on the possible misuse of company resources. Not when my grandmother was on the phone, upending my life in her sweet, chaotic way.

"When is this trip again?" I sorted through the piles of paper on my desk, desperately searching for my Day-Timer.

Lately, that brown ring-bound book was my life raft. If I put the task in a little box with a time and date, then I could check it off when it was completed. All those checkmarks were in my win column. Examples of things I'd managed to address and handle in a timely fashion.

Yes, my world might be spiraling out of control, but this was how I held everything together. I put it on the calendar and I dealt with each item at a time.

“March eleventh through the seventeenth. It’s already in your Day-Timer. I put it there last month.”

I stopped searching and smiled, amused as always at exactly how well she knew me. Then the dates finally sunk into my head.

“Mid-March? I have the Free Papers Expo that week. Who is going to watch Lily if I’m out of town? Most of it is local, with only one overnight but—”

“I’d suggest friends, but you’d have to stop working long enough to make some. I know it’s not the same for you since Billy died, but you have to stop hiding in work sometime, Snug.”

The old nickname smoothed away the tickle of irritation. “You know, most people see me as a formidable man. Yet you call me that.”

“You’ll always be my Snuggle Bunny even if you tower over me. Now stop stalling and tell me when you’re going to do something about this nanny situation.”

I sighed. “I interviewed two of them. What more do you want?”

“Did you hire either of them?”

“Of course not. They weren’t right. I can’t leave Lily with just anyone.” I straightened my tie. “I’ll muddle through. Maybe Vincent can cover for me at the expo.”

“Right, and then you’ll just take a week’s vacation because I’m traveling with my group of fuddy-duddies. We’re going south in August, so you better make time then too.”

“August is a long time from now.” And I wasn’t sure if I’d make it through this week, never mind five months away. “Let me handle the March vacation first, okay?”

“That’s how you deal with everything. Mark it down as something to handle. Tell me this, do you ever enjoy anything anymore? Ever take a day or a night for yourself? Not since New Year’s Eve—”

“Gran.” Her name was an admonition. I was not going there. I’d been doing my damn best to pretend that night had never existed.

Not because it hadn’t been good. Far from it. Somehow that night with Hannah had been the best one of my life. And it couldn’t—wouldn’t—be repeated, so there was no point in dwelling on it.

“I’m just saying. A healthy adult male needs certain activities to keep his equilibrium.”

“Seriously?” I was not blushing. Absolutely not. I ran my finger along the inside of my collar. It was just warm in here.

“Don’t play coy with me. I know you’re not making time for the important things in life. I was so happy you went out on New Year’s and came home with lipstick on your collar to boot. I was hoping we’d see more of that young lady around here, but I should’ve known you’d go right back to work as if nothing ever happened.”

“You know the situation with the paper. If I let up for even a minute, we could lose everything.”

“You’re not going to lose everything, but maybe you should.”

Stunned, hurt, I sat back in my desk chair and stared sightlessly at the rows of projections in Excel on my computer screen. One of the many reasons I loved my grandmother was because she didn’t have a whit of interest in the family business. She didn’t care about money, unlike my mother who considered financial worth before she spoke to a person.

Okay, she wasn’t quite that bad, but bad enough.

But for my grandmother to openly say she hoped I failed? I’d always counted on her support, even if she didn’t quite get why maintaining what I saw as the family legacy was so crucial.

“Snug,” she said a moment later, breaking the silence. “Don’t misunderstand me. I know how important the paper is to you. It does my heart good knowing how much you care

about making your grandfather proud. He's gone, but you'll never forget him, will you?"

"No," I murmured.

Sharing penny candies while sitting in my miniature rocker at his side when I was a boy. Laughing as we sat in a fishing boat in the early morning fog and waited for tugs on the line. Perching on his lap and pretending to drive his big old Oldsmobile in the driveway when I wasn't more than five.

No, I would not forget.

"But there's ways you can honor his memory other than working yourself to the bone. Times are changing, honey, and you can't reverse the clock. Much as you might want to. Much as I might want to, matter of fact." She laughed, but I could hear the sadness just beneath it. "He would want you to be happy most of all. In your early days of running the business, you were. Now? Not so much."

"I'm happy spending time with you and Lily. She makes me laugh every single day." That was sterling truth. "Even more now that she's starting to crawl. Heaven help me."

I still didn't have the faintest idea how to be a parent of a baby. A little girl, no less. But Lily was not listening to my pleas to stay small and safe in her crib. She was determined to walk, whether or not I was ready.

In the meantime, I was setting out quilts for her to crawl on and covering up every outlet I could find with safety covers.

Or at least I had managed that in the bachelor pad I currently lived in. But I'd decided shortly after the new year that Lily could not grow up in an apartment in the city. Well, she could, but I had plenty of money, so what was I saving it for if not to spoil my loved ones? She was my daughter now, and I didn't want her to lack for anything. She deserved a big backyard in the suburbs with a giant swing set and room to run.

Hell, perhaps someday I'd even get her a pony. Wasn't that every little girl's dream? I'd need acreage for that.

Someday. Maybe.

In the meantime, I'd recently closed on my dream home for now in Crescent Cove. It boasted five bedrooms—although I didn't quite know why I needed so many—along with a fireplace in several rooms, including the master bedroom. It also had four bathrooms, a huge backyard, and a Jacuzzi tub among other amenities.

It was a lot of house for one man and one baby. Unless I managed to convince my gran to move in, which was doubtful because she claimed to need privacy for her and her "boyfriend."

Yes, my sixty-seven year old grandmother was getting way more action than I was.

"All the more reason you need some help. I don't know why you see hiring a nanny as admitting failure. You simply can't be everywhere at once, Snug."

"I'm well aware of that fact. As I'm about to be late for a meeting with the advertising director of athletics at the university."

In truth, I wasn't late yet. I added in extra time before and after every appointment, just in case. I was the kind of guy who preferred my dates—back when I'd had some—to be on a form of birth control while I used a condom, because ample protection was best.

And birth control related to the current line of conversation, how? Jesus. My brain was everywhere at once lately.

I rubbed the knot in my forehead. I blamed Hannah for this. She was the reason I had sex in mind so often nowadays when I'd once relegated it to the shelf where it belonged.

Even thinking of her name made me shift in my chair.

Over the past two months, I'd worked fucking hard at erasing that word from my thoughts. Every time memories of that night we'd shared plagued me, I threw myself into work or into tending Lily. Eventually, the flashbacks disappeared, even if now and then, I had to use a scotch chaser to rid myself of them.

She'd had no use for more of me, and I didn't have time for a relationship, even a casual one. Not that anything between Hannah and myself would ever be casual.

It simply wasn't possible.

"Why don't you let me handle the next few nanny interviews? I know you met with a couple of women and they weren't quite right, but let's be real. I know more about what you need in a nanny than you do. Besides, I can help screen for any of those DILF hunters."

"Say what?" I let out a baffled laugh. "What is a DILF hunter?"

"A DILF is a dad I'd like to fuck."

"Gran!" There was no questioning my face being hot now. I was tempted to stick my head in the vase of fresh flowers my secretary had placed on the corner of my desk just to get some cool water on my flushed skin.

"Don't 'Gran' me. As I'm your grandmother, that means obviously I've had sex at least enough to produce your father. And I kept going after that, trying to get it right. Some was just for practice's sake."

Her bawdy laughter made me grin despite my embarrassment. "I don't get the dad thing. Aren't most of the men you meet dads?"

"Not me, silly. At my age, children are a liability, not an attractive feature. I'm not looking to score with any Tony Randall types. Have your kids at an appropriate age, for pity's sake."

I couldn't argue there.

"But yes, it's an actual thing in the dating world. Women are out there hunting down non-suspecting single dads like bucks on the first day of target season. Their camouflage clothing is miniskirts and push-up bras."

"What? Why would any woman get excited about a man with a child? Doesn't that mean less time for them?"



“In theory, but women are primed to find good protectors. It’s in our DNA, much as we may hate it. Plus, some find single fathers working hard on behalf of their children as sexy. You’re a double DILF.”

“Come again?”

“You’re working hard for a baby you didn’t even have yourself. So, during DILF open season, bagging you would be like getting a huge-racked buck. And they won’t use a tree stand to take you down. More like a burp cloth and some Ravish Me Red lipstick.”

“You aren’t making sense, but yes, fine. You can meet with the next nanny interviewee. Assuming there are any. No one has answered my ad recently.” No one suitable anyway.

“Maybe it’s time to look beyond ads. I’ll see what I can come up with.”

“No weirdos,” I admonished. My grandmother was a sweetheart, but she had a tendency to pick up stray humans just as she did with stray animals. “Keep in mind, this nanny will be influencing Lily, and it’s important that she—”

“Yeah, yeah, I’ll make sure to keep the felony convictions to a minimum. Have fun at your meeting. Ciao, Snug.” She hung up before I could do more than stare in exasperation at the phone.

I was truly afraid to find out who she would come up with.

But I couldn’t worry about that now. I was really almost late, thanks to our extended phone call.

I grabbed my jacket off the back of my chair and shrugged into it, cursing the latest snow warning to flash across the corner of my computer screen. The end of February meant they were pretty much constant nowadays.

And snow made me think of Hannah. How she’d touched the window as if she wanted to feel the cold flakes on her skin.

*Shut it down.*

I grabbed my Day-Timer on my way out the door. I had my meeting to concentrate on.

I'd also probably have to meet with a new nanny candidate sooner than later. Then there was everything I had to deal with when it came to moving Lily and me into our new house.

The one thing I didn't have time to think about?

Hannah.

I wasn't ever going to see her again. Just the way she wanted it.

Just the way *I* wanted it.

## FIVE



MARCH WAS COMING IN LIKE A LAMB. IT WAS DECEPTIVE, because storms were forecast for later in the week and into next. But for now, me and my cardigan were taking it.

I looked down and smiled at the tug on my charge's bright purple leash. Latte, a Yorkie with some other mixture in his bloodline, was the newest client in my recently hatched dog-walking business.

So, he was my *only* client. It still counted. I had a client. I had a business other than my fledgling food delivery operation. That was a bit more off the ground, but not by much.

Along with those two income streams, I also had a weekend job at Crescent Cove's coffee shop. That was new too. I could've had more hours if I wanted them, but I wasn't the best at working for someone else. Hence, my own tiny businesses.

In time, I hoped to be able to support myself entirely through my own efforts. I was good at budgeting, so I could make do on little. Until then, a couple of weekend shifts as a pastry maker helped fill in the gaps.

And walking little Latte while his people parents were at work—one of them at the same coffee shop where I worked—gave me a chance to get some exercise. Good thing too, since I'd noticed this morning my jeans were a little snug. I'd had to suck in a breath or two while I was tugging up the zipper.

Too much sampling my own goodies probably. Hey, being a cook-slash-baker had to have some perks, right?

Latte led me over to a patch of grass near the pizza shop. My mouth watered at the thought of a slice. I was about to dig in my pocket to see if I'd remembered to tuck a few dollars in there when Latte dragged me on to the next patch of lawn to sniff, this one in front of the real estate office.

I glanced up at the stately columns that framed the wide porch, smothering a sigh. It must be so fun to find a house that had everything you'd ever wanted. To figure out every detail and make sure every bit was to your liking.

Not quite the same as living in the too big cookie-cutter house that had belonged to my parents. It wasn't really that big, but it was a lot of house for just one woman living on her own. My sisters hardly ever spent time at home anymore, if they could help it. Even on breaks, they tended to be out with their friends or picking up a shift or two at the pizza shop for some extra spending money.

Finding new accommodations—a fresh start—as soon as my businesses started turning a profit was at the top of the list.

Latte walked over to the nearest bush and cocked his tiny leg. Whew. No need for the plastic bags tied to his leash yet. Then he made a liar out of me by walking over a few feet and squatting dangerously close to the sidewalk.

“No, no, Latte, not in this town. There'll be none of that.” Discreetly, I tried to nudge his brown rump toward the center of the lawn. He would not budge.

Let the poop commence.

I sighed again and closed my eyes for a second, focusing on the warmth of the sun on my back instead of the pile of steaming poo awaiting me. I turned my head and shielded my eyes to look across the lake, taking in the rays shimmering off the still icy water. Chunks had broken free near the shore, but out in the middle, Crescent Lake was still frozen solid, unexpected warmth or not.

A sudden yank on the leash had me reeling forward. I did a fancy two-step to avoid the present Latte had left me and nearly tipped over into the baby stroller wheeling up the block in our direction.

It wasn't operating under its own steam, thank God, but it took me a minute to realize that. All I could see was the cherubic little girl in the seat, clapping her chubby hands and reaching for the dog now straining to get into her buggy.

"Oh my God, I'm so sorry. He's friendly, as you can see. Latte, no."

I scooped him up and cradled him to my chest, hoping like hell the older woman manning the stroller wasn't the litigious sort. Latte hadn't bitten the little girl, but some people were far too eager to start trouble. Especially in prissy small towns. Crescent Cove seemed to contain a lot of kind, friendly people, but one could never be too sure.

"Oh, don't worry about it. Lily was enjoying him. As you can see." The woman laughed and slipped off her funky purple and pink sunglasses, then reached around the canopied top of the stroller to ruffle the baby's russet curls. She was still straining toward Latte, her little mouth screwed up in a pucker.

Latte was straining just as much in my arms. He'd definitely made a new friend. But I wasn't going to push it.

"Go ahead and set him down again." The other woman tucked a file folder under her arm bearing the words Hamilton Realty. Must've just come out of the real estate office, which was why she'd seemed to appear out of nowhere. "Go on now," she urged when I hesitated. "They're about the same size. They won't do each other any harm."

"If you're sure."

I set down Latte and he scrambled toward the baby, popping up on his hind legs for the little girl to awkwardly pat his head. The dog's tongue never stopped flicking out over her arm, which only made her laugh.

"This is the perfect day for a nice walk, isn't it?" The woman shielded her eyes and glanced across the street to the

lake. “Now that we have this business done, we’re headed over there. Maybe you too, with your handsome little gent?”

“Oh, he’s not mine. I’m a dog-sitter.” I bent to remind him I was close by, just in case he decided to get too frisky. “His name is Latte. And your little girl, she’s Lily? She’s a beauty.”

She let out a rich laugh. “*Mine?* Hardly. This shop’s been closed for years. This is my great-granddaughter, Lily Louise. Prettiest little girl you’ve ever seen, isn’t she?”

“Great-granddaughter? You can’t be serious.”

Upon closer inspection, the other woman did appear a bit older than I’d guessed from my first fast glance. Grandmother, all right, I suppose I could see it. But great-grandma? Wow. I needed to invest in her skin care regime. She looked fabulous.

“Oh, I’m very serious. Turning sixty-eight this year.” She tilted her head. “And you, you’re just a youngster.”

“Not that young.” I threw back my shoulders and drew myself up to my full height. Average all around, that was me. “I’m twenty-three.”

“Yes, definitely a youngster then.” But something in her smile grew sly.

I didn’t know why, so I leaned down and smiled as Lily stuck out her gummy hand to me. She’d just had it in her mouth, then Latte’s, but who was I to stand on ceremony? I pretended to shake and she giggled, her deep brown eyes dancing. “Hello there, Lily Louise. Pleased to meet you. I’m Hannah. You’ve already met Latte—and Latte’s tongue.”

Latte turned his head to give my wrist a lick in a show of solidarity.

“He’s quite the spiffy little guy. With surprisingly large gifts to leave behind.”

“Oh, God, I forgot. Sorry.” I stumbled up and turned around, wrinkling my nose.

“Here, let me help.” Before I could say a word, the chic older woman hustled around the stroller to take the leash from me. “Look at that, we match.” She held the leash up against

her purple sweater and motioned down to her purple suede boots.

“Oh, those are killer.” I stared down at them wistfully and hoped she didn’t check out my ratty tennis shoes. My budget didn’t extend to such hot boots. “Thanks—”

“Bess,” she filled in when I paused, holding out her hand for a quick shake. “Sorry I didn’t introduce myself sooner. Usually, the kid gets all the attention. As she should. Look at those cheeks.” She reached down to pinch the baby’s ruddy cheek and Lily giggled, clapping her hands.

“She’s gorgeous. And um, sorry, but I have to...just one second.” I shifted to scoop up Latte’s little present and tied off the bag. Then I glanced around for a place to dump it off. Discreetly.

Bess cleared her throat and nodded to a small green receptacle for just such items to the side of the pizza shop, right above a bowl of water on the ground for their “canine customers.”

“Thank you,” I mouthed, jogging over to dispose of the baggie. I’d have to remember that was here, especially if I expanded my dog-sitting business as I hoped to.

Multiple ways of making a living. That was the ticket. And a sure way to stave off boredom too.

As well as thinking too much about sexy men I’d slept with a mere block away from the spot where I was now standing.

Nope, I was definitely not thinking about *that*.

After spritzing my pocket bacterial spray on my hands, I hurried back to Bess, Lily, and Latte, the latter of whom was now leaning against Bess’s leg and gazing up at her adoringly.

Miniature con artist.

“Looks like you’ve found a new admirer.” I smiled and accepted his leash, although the furry beast was in no hurry to leave Bess’s side.

“I have. And so has she.” Bess chuckled as Latte pitched himself at Lily’s lap yet again. The baby giggled and slapped her hands, reaching for the dog over the stroller barrier that separated them. “She so would love a pet. Snug would too, if he’d let himself.”

“Snug?”

Bess grinned. “Oops. He would kill me if he knew I was using his nickname in front of strangers. Not that you’re a stranger. You’re a friend now. So, friend, feel like a stroll?”

Maybe I should’ve felt a little bowled over by her take charge attitude, but I didn’t. Friends were few and far between in my life, and ones who could spend some time walking with me and my canine companion in the middle of a weekday were even scarcer.

Besides, one of the things I loved most about Crescent Cove was the small town atmosphere. Everyone was so welcoming here. So, why not?

I smiled as she tucked her arm through mine and we started walking up the street in the direction I’d just come from. With her other hand, she pushed the stroller while I held onto Latte, who seemed equally excited to have added on to our walking party.

We crossed at the crosswalk to the lake, making small talk about the surprisingly nice March weather, our strides keeping pace despite the difference in our ages. Clearly, Bess was used to a walking regime and I so was not.

That needed to change. My slightly too tight jeans agreed.

We wandered up the sidewalk along the wide swath of still ice-encrusted grass. Stubborn pools of snow remained, seemingly impervious to the warm sun. But the sound of melting icicles grew near every building and everyone we passed on the walkway wore a smile.

Spring had sprung. Or at least that was what we were all pretending today, before the next storm arrived.

“So, if I may be so bold, along with walking little fellas like this guy,” Bess smiled down at Latte, who was trotting



along beside me, “what else do you do to keep yourself busy?”

“Do you mean like hobbies?”

“Sure. Work, hobbies, the whole shebang.”

“Well, actually, my main hobby is my work. I bake and cook. I work on weekends at the coffee shop up the street. Have you been there?”

“Brewed Awakening? Absolutely. I stop in for a cuppa every time I take out my Lily here. That Macy who runs the place, she’s a pip.”

“She sure is.”

“Surely a young lady like yourself does more than just walk sweet little dogs and serve coffee a couple of days a week. Oh!” She paused and slapped a hand to her chest as if she was surprised. “You must have a boyfriend, pretty girl like you. Or maybe a husband? Though really, if you haven’t taken the plunge yet, take it from someone who knows—you have a lifetime for marriage, so make sure you have your fun first.”

It felt as if she was fishing for something, but I couldn’t tell what. Maybe I was just so out of practice at making new friends that I didn’t know what counted as normal getting-to-know-you conversation anymore.

“Nope, no husband. No boyfriend either. I keep busy with my jobs. I also have a food delivery service for a few families in my neighborhood. You know, I prepare meals for busy working moms and dads and they pay me.”

“Well?”

“Excuse me?”

“Do they pay you well? Because I know of a job where you could make good money. No, make that *great* money. Assuming your references check out.”

I frowned. *Ah-ha*. No wonder my spidey senses had been activated. “I’m sorry, but I’m not interested in any of those MLM-type businesses. Aren’t they basically just fancy pyramid—”

Bess barked out a laugh. “No pyramid schemes here. Not even close. This job is on the up and up, I swear. As if Snug would let me break even one law. He’s a fuddy-duddy.”

“Snug is your grandson?” I tugged on Latte’s leash to get him to move past a questionable food wrapper on the snowy grass. There wasn’t much litter in a pristine town like Crescent Cove, but every now and then, something snuck through.

“Sure is.”

“Is he a lawyer or something?”

“God, no, bite your tongue. I wouldn’t allow one of my relatives to enter that vile profession.”

Okay, then.

“Why, it’s almost as bad as being a car salesman. No, he runs the newspaper in Syracuse, among other things.”

“Oh.”

“But see, he’s on his own with this sweetheart here,” she gave the stroller a light rattle, “and he practically refuses to ask for help. He claims every person he interviews isn’t right for the job. So, I figured I’d look around for someone myself.”

“Wait, you need a babysitter for Lily?” I could do that. I supposed. I’d had enough experience helping to take care of my sisters when they were little.

I wasn’t terribly excited about being thrust into a caretaker role again, I had to admit. Dog-sitting was one thing. Tiny humans—no matter how snuggly and cute—were quite another. I didn’t want a traditional office or desk job, but I also didn’t want to have to be responsible for anyone else right now.

Taking care of my sisters after my parents’ deaths had been a lot to handle. I loved them and wanted the best for them, so I’d done it despite my many misgivings. I hadn’t been ready to be a parent at that age. Or hell, this age. I’d barely lived myself. And yes, being a nanny was different, since I could return Lily at the end of the day, but I’d still be in the role of nursemaid.

However, Bess had mentioned great compensation, and she certainly didn't seem to have money issues from her attire. Assuming her grandson was the same, and if he ran the newspaper, he probably wasn't struggling financially, right? This job could push me along the path to financial independence that much faster.

Lily let out a gurgling laugh as Latte veered close to the stroller and stuck his furry face inside, tongue flicking everywhere.

Then there was adorable Lily herself, with her sweet giggles and her eager expression. God, she was so tiny. Would I be able to manage taking care of her?

"Not a babysitter per se. My grandson works a lot of hours. He needs a lot more help than just the occasional shift here or there." Bess pushed her sunglasses on top of her head and rolled her dark, perfectly made-up eyes. "Even if he doesn't know it yet."

This was sounding more complicated by the minute.

"I've never taken care of a newborn."

"Why, she's not a newborn. She's eight whole months now, aren't you, dandelion?" Bess reached down to tug on Lily's wiggling purple-socked feet. More purple. "She's not a fussy one either. Snug got damn lucky. She's basically an angel. Other than her diaper situation." She winked at me and I let out a weak laugh, lurching forward as Latte decided to chase a butterfly.

And I really thought I was capable of taking care of a baby? This dog was a handful.

"Are you an only child?" Bess asked before I had a chance to say anything.

If I even *had* a reply.

I was starting to feel like a mute, my few words retreating into the lockbox in my head. Bess was the kind of forceful person who made me reel back and evaluate. I knew how to stand my ground, but at first, I seemed like a pushover.

Wrong.

“No,” I said after a moment. “I have two younger sisters. Twins.”

Bess’s eyes gleamed. “How much younger?”

“They’re nineteen and away at college. Bess, I’m really not certain I—”

“Do you have a criminal past?”

“Huh? Of course not.”

“Are you apt to ignore a crawling baby? Because this one is starting to scoot around pretty good.”

Latte stopped dead on the sidewalk a few feet ahead of me and I came to a halt right behind him.

“Nope, you’re paying attention. So, I have no fear you’d let my great-granddaughter get into mischief.”

“Um, thanks. But I still don’t know if I want the job. I didn’t even interview for it.”

“What do you think this is?” she demanded, making me blink.

“You aren’t the one responsible for hiring for the position, are you?”

“Not officially, but if Snug can’t get things done, then someone else has to. He’ll drag his feet on this until Lily’s in college if I let him.”

“Isn’t she his baby? That’s up for him to decide, I’d say.”

Bess stopped pushing the stroller and cocked her hip, her gaze penetrating mine. For a second, I was sure I’d finally driven her back with the pointy tip of my verbal sword.

“You’ve got fire. I like you. A lot. What are your salary requirements? We’ll meet them.”

So much for driving her back. Looked like I’d need a cavalry for that.

“I don’t have salary requirements. I’m just walking this dog. Latte,” I called out in exasperation as he headed for a

small family coming toward us on the walkway, their young son in front. Then he leaped in the air just high enough to snag the string of the kid's balloon.

The kid was not amused. He started to bawl.

“Hang on just a second. I'll get your balloon back for you. Latte, come here.” I wrangled the dog into submission, gently prying his mouth open until I could fish out the balloon's string.

While I performed this operation, Lily banged her hands on the stroller behind us. Bess murmured soothing words, yet Lily would not be deterred. Soon, she started to cry too, just like the kid.

Yay.

She quieted the moment I freed the balloon from between Latte's teeth. Then she stuck out her hand and made a distressed sound that any woman could recognize—although we usually made that noise at the sight of hot shoes, not balloons, but same difference.

“Oh, dear,” Bess murmured while Lily wailed as I handed off the balloon to the kid. Who pushed it back at me with disgust, ignoring his parents' admonishments, due to the “dog slobber” all over the string.

What a lovely child. No wonder I didn't want to be anyone's nanny.

Spotting a temporary food vendor a few feet away near the gazebo, I offered the kid my brightest smile. “How about I buy you a hot dog to make up for what happened?”

The kid grinned, his tears drying in a flash. Dad wasn't as impressed as he gripped his son's shoulder. “Stafford doesn't eat processed meats.”

“How about a comic at the store?” Bess leaned in and gave Stafford a conspiratorial smile. “I'll trade you the balloon for a comic, how's that?”

Warily, the kid nodded, side-eyeing his father.

“He’s just fine. I’ll get you another balloon.” The father was about to pitch it in the nearest garbage can when I plucked it out of his hand and passed it to Lily.

Who beamed brighter than the sun.

Once Stafford and his stern-faced parents continued on, Bess flashed me a huge smile and nudged the stroller forward. Lily was quiet and content, bobbing the balloon. Any minute now, she’d shove the string in her mouth. “You’ve got a way about you, Hannah. What’s your last name, by the way?”

I was worn out enough by the last few minutes that I couldn’t do anything other than smile weakly. I needed to get a bottle of water or something. The relentless sunshine was actually making me feel dizzy. “Jacobs.”

“Are you all right, sweetheart?” She gripped my arm and towed me up the street. “Let’s get us some fro-yo. You look like you need some sugar.”

Maybe I did. I wasn’t sure what I needed right now.

“Just say you’ll think about the job,” she added as the silence stretched between us. “Sleep on it tonight, then we’ll talk tomorrow. How’s that?”

Saying anything other than *no* to her felt like a dangerous proposition, but I was weakening because of the revolving yogurt sign in the window of the shop just ahead of us. Right now, I’d say anything to put a pause on this conversation for a little while. “Yes, tomorrow.”

## SIX



“YOU DID WHAT NOW?”

“I pre-screened a nanny for you. There is no reason for you to even interview her. My instincts say she’s right on the money, and she has tons of work references.”

I pressed a fingertip to the muscle jumping in my temple. One of these days, I’d just name it after my grandmother and be done with it. “Tons of nanny references?”

My grandmother suddenly got busy straightening the magazines fanned out on her coffee table. “Tons of work references,” she repeated.

To give myself a moment, I walked down the hall to my grandmother’s homey blue-and-yellow kitchen to pour myself a glass of orange juice. That I didn’t add a shot of vodka was a miracle.

I’d taken a rare Saturday off to hopefully relax and spend time with Lily and my grandmother. I needed desperately to unwind after the endless meetings I’d endured all week.

All month.

All year, it seemed like.

Trying to fill in for the salesman who had split with our client list was a full-time job in itself, never mind doing my own job and dealing with dwindling circulation numbers and all the rest of the fires that needed handling on a daily basis.

To say I was fried was an understatement.

Now my grandmother was pulling the rug out from under me and hitting me in the head with it.

When I was reasonably certain I wouldn't snap at her, I returned to the living room. She was now dusting the mantel. The mantel she hadn't dusted in my presence in years.

Who was this woman she'd invited to her home?

"Look, I know you mean well," I began, sitting in the navy blue armchair that had once been my grandfather's.

"That trip is happening soon, Snug. I'm not leaving you on your own with an infant. If that's the case, I'll just cancel my trip."

Oh, she was pulling out the big guns now. She knew I would never allow that to stand.

"You can't."

"I surely can. You're overworked as it is. Do you think I can't see the lines under your eyes? How long has it been since you've slept well? Never mind had an active dating life."

"What does one have to do with the other?" I knew damn well where she was going with this, and if I'd been smart, I would've bitten my tongue.

"Have you ever heard of stress relief? A man has needs. God knows women do too, and you notice how much sunnier my personality is than yours? You're blocked up."

Yep. There we go. Back on that track again.

I drank my juice and said nothing. That she wasn't wrong was irrelevant.

Discussing my sex life—or lack thereof—with my grandmother was a non-starter. I had bigger problems. To be honest, it wasn't as if my libido was even making itself known lately. I'd been working so much that I was usually exhausted when I finally got home to tend to Lily.

Most of the time, I barely remembered I still had a dick. It just wasn't a factor in my life.



“Or friends. What about them? You used to have Billy to go out and blow off steam with. Do you even have any other male friends?”

I raked a hand through my hair. “Jesus, he’s been gone four months. Sorry if I didn’t immediately go out and find a new best friend.”

“Forget a new best friend. *Any* friends. It’s just like dating. You don’t need to put a ring on a woman’s finger to have some fun. Isn’t there anyone you can call up to go shoot some pool?” She pointed at me with her neon purple duster on a stick. “You need a few laughs. Maybe even to get good and soused.”

“Right. And who’s going to take care of—” She started to smile, widely, and it was my turn to point. “Do not go there. I have not met this woman yet.”

“Are you saying I’m not capable of hiring a competent nanny? There’s no one on this planet who loves that baby girl more than me and you know it.”

Regret tightened my chest. She was right. I was ashamed it was the truth, but there was no denying that it was.

Of course I cared about Lily. I’d been fond of her even before she had been put into my care. I had started off as her godfather after all, and Billy and I had been close since our college days at Syracuse University.

But that was different than being her father. I would give my life to protect her—and would certainly use all my resources to make sure she had everything she ever needed—but I hadn’t grown to feel the way a father should.

It bothered me a fucking lot too. She deserved that love.

Unfortunately, I just didn’t have it in me quite yet, although I kept hoping one day it would just appear, like flowers in the yard after a hard, cold winter. It would’ve been growing underneath all the time, seemingly dormant. And then one day, it would be just...be there.

I hoped.

“No, I’m just saying it’s my job. I need to make sure I find the right person. Don’t you see the horror stories in the news? If I pick the wrong person and something goes wrong—”

“You’d never forgive yourself. But you’re only one person. No matter how thin you spread yourself.”

The doorbell rang and I gripped my now empty glass, amazed it didn’t shatter from the pressure. My displeasure must have registered on my face because my grandmother let out a sigh. “Just give her a chance, all right? That’s all I’m asking. If it makes any difference, she didn’t want this job. I had to talk her into it.”

“Excuse me? You just hired someone off the street?”

“I went with gut instinct. You should try it sometime. Hannah’s the one, I’m sure of it.” Her confidence might’ve bolstered me if the name Hannah hadn’t streaked through me like lightning.

It couldn’t be.

Hannah was a common name, wasn’t it? Especially for those in her age group.

Her probably too-young-for-me age group. I wasn’t going to turn into one of those guys who tried to reclaim their lost youth by chasing younger women.

But I hadn’t cared about her age that night. She’d pulled me to her in a way I hadn’t been pulled since...well, ever. I had never reacted to another woman as strongly as I had to Hannah.

It was just wishful thinking hoping she’d shown up here. Seriously, what were the odds?

Besides, it wasn’t as if I wanted to see her again. We’d made an agreement. I didn’t have time in my life for anything or anyone else, regrettably not even her.

Not that she’d given me any indication she was looking for more than one night either. We had both understood the score.

Then afterward, she’d tried to duck out on me as if we’d shared absolutely nothing. If I hadn’t awakened when I had,

she would've been gone without a word.

*For the best*, I reminded myself as my grandmother finally stopped staring at me and went to open the door.

I could only imagine what she'd read on my face. Normally, I was good at keeping my expression blank. That was a valuable asset in business.

But not when it came to my grandmother. And evidently, not when it came to Hannah.

*Any* Hannah. If this woman wasn't my Hannah, she definitely wasn't getting the job. There was no way I could say that name every fucking day and not remember how Hannah's long, gorgeous hair had spilled out around her in front of the fire, and the sound of her moans as she neared orgasm. The way we'd laughed together under the covers before our hands had started wandering all over again.

I remembered far too much.

The low hum of voices in the foyer cut off abruptly. "Bess, I can't do this."

Fucking hell. I sat up straighter in my chair and stared at my glass unseeingly. Within the span of four words, I knew.

It was *her*.

"Just come in and meet my grandson."

I locked my jaw and moved my glass to the side table.

*Oh, she already has. Don't worry about that.*

"I don't think that's the best idea. Really, I shouldn't have even come."

I walked into the front hall to join them. "You're right about that, because you don't want this job, and I don't want to hire you."

My grandmother gasped.

Hannah did nothing.

She didn't so much as blink at my arrival. Of course not. Because I might've entertained the fact that there could be

more than one Hannah in town, but more than one Asher was much more unlikely. That meant she'd known exactly what she was walking into.

And she hadn't wanted to come.

That lack of goodbye on her part the morning after had conveyed her feelings quite succinctly. This was just adding a period to them.

My grandmother frowned. "This is Hannah Jacobs. Hannah, this is my currently impolite grandson. Do you two know each other?"

I cocked a brow and looked to Hannah for that one.

After a moment, she tucked her hair behind her ear and glanced at my grandmother with a weak smile. "I don't suppose you could leave us alone for a few minutes?"

"I certainly could, but why?"

Hannah cleared her throat. "I'm good at diffusing tricky situations. I just want to convey to Asher that perhaps he has the wrong opinion of me."

"But how could he if he doesn't know you?" My grandmother pursed her lips. "And how did you know his name was Asher?"

Hannah's forehead wrinkled in confusion, as I'm sure my own did. Actually, forget the wrinkles. I probably had furrows deep enough to swim in now to match the troughs under my eyes.

"That's his name, isn't it?"

"It is, but I never called him that to you."

"Oh, that's right. You called him Snug."

"Oh, for fuck's sake. Seriously?" I rubbed the side of my head and debated walking out on this whole conversation. If Lily hadn't been asleep upstairs, I would've just left them to deal with the fallout.

Seeing Hannah again had been like being doused. Not with water, but with flames. And my previously disinterested cock

agreed. Somehow being annoyed at her for not wanting to see me again—even if that had been our agreement—only made the fire burn hotter.

Except now I couldn't even be irrationally pissed at her, because she hadn't known I was the man my grandmother had called Snug.

Could I be any more emasculated?

Oh, yes, I could, by Hannah not wanting to see me again. She hadn't even been uncomfortable about the possibility, since she'd had no clue I was the man she would be meeting today.

Just an unlucky booby prize.

And on top of that? She didn't even have the dignity to look shocked or dismayed or *something* at the sight of me.

"I slipped, all right?" My grandmother stood up straighter. "Look, I'm not sure why there's so much tension right now, if you two truly don't know each other," her dubious expression indicated what she thought about *that*, "but I think we need to sit down and have some sweet tea and cookies and figure this shit out."

I opened my mouth to argue with her, but she'd already spun around to charge into the kitchen. So, I did what any man would've done in my situation.

I turned around and left Hannah standing alone in the goddamn hallway.

If she'd followed me, I would've at least had a target for my frustration. So, of course, she did not.

Hannah was hopping on all of my buttons with her beat-up tennis shoes.

Halfway back to my grandfather's armchair, I frowned. *Those* were the shoes she'd chosen to wear to a job interview?

Then again, why not? She didn't want the job.

Even in her battered shoes, jeans, and a T-shirt, with no makeup and her long hair in a ponytail, she was gorgeous.

Possibly even more gorgeous than she'd been on New Year's Eve when she was all dressed up. Not that I understood how that could be so, since she'd knocked me out then. And I obviously still hadn't gotten all the way back up.

Leaving out my dick. Suddenly, that part of me was having no trouble remaining engaged.

I sat in the chair I'd just vacated and debated taking Lily to my office. Even dealing with her while trying to get some work done was better than this.

My grandmother hurried into the room with a tray containing a glass pitcher of sweet tea and a platter of her frosted lemon cookies. They weren't bars at least, but even the lemon reminder from the night Hannah and I had spent together was too much.

With all that had gone on the last couple of months—*how* had it been two months already?—I couldn't believe I even remembered. But it seemed as every detail from that night was etched into my memory.

Especially the intimate ones.

Annoyed at my manners, or lack thereof, I got to my feet. "Here, let me help you."

Except I wasn't fast enough. Hannah rushed into the room to assist my grandmother. Then my grandmother mumbled something about getting the glasses and vanished.

Hannah busied herself with fussing with the plate of cookies, tucking one or two that nearly slid off back into the center.

"Wondering if they taste as good as yours? I can assure you, they do not."

I hadn't had her lemon cookies. My grandmother's *were* quite delicious. But I'd said the comment to be rude, although that wasn't my typical nature.

Hannah's lips trembled before she firmed them. She turned away as my grandmother entered the room with three glasses on yet another smaller tray.

“There we are. I have some lemonade if you’d rather—”

“No, no, Bess, thank you. The tea and cookies are perfect. But I’m sorry, I can’t stay long.”

Naturally not. Since the mere sight of me was obviously off-putting enough that she needed to flee.

Except she hadn’t wanted the job before she knew it was me.

Still, the impossibility of our situation was hard to ignore. Had blind luck pushed her my way? Or something else?

I waited until my grandmother and Hannah had taken seats on the sofa before I got right to business.

“So, how did you two meet?”

“Ordinarily, he’s a charmer, I swear,” Gran muttered.

Hannah simply dabbed her mouth with her napkin. I guess she didn’t want to weigh in on that score.

“I have a dog-sitting service. I was walking one of my customers’ dogs when Bess went out for a walk. Latte took a liking to Lily. Her great-grandchild,” she stressed, narrowing her eyes at me as if somehow I’d forgotten our familial relationship.

Or as if she was none too happy I’d left that detail out of our night together.

Why, I couldn’t fathom. Was no-strings sex different with a single father? She hadn’t seemed to mind.

It wasn’t as if she’d been completely forthcoming either. I didn’t know she was a dog-sitter. Did that even count as an actual job? It wasn’t my place to say how she made her money, but it was a far cry from my daily lifestyle, that was for sure.

And if I was more than a bit envious at the freedom that seemed synonymous with such work, I must be sleep deprived.

“Does your expertise at walking canines somehow grant you skill with human children?”

Hannah's jaw locked just before my grandmother slammed down her plate. "Asher Heathcliff Wainwright, you have no call to speak to a guest like that in my home. What is the matter with you today?"

Before I could reply, Hannah let out a laugh, but she quickly coughed into her hand to cover it. "Heathcliff? Such a romantic name."

My grandmother shook her head and picked up a cookie. I'd been given a momentary respite from her ire thanks to Hannah's comment. "His mother had her flights of fancy."

"Does it hold true, I wonder?" Hannah sipped her iced tea.

"Does what hold true?"

She still didn't look my way. "Heathcliff was a difficult sort. Sometimes we become our namesakes unintentionally. A sort of kismet."

"He's not real," I snapped.

This was not the first time someone had commented on my middle name, but it seemed particularly annoying coming from her. I was already pissed at her for wanting her so much.

Which was not her problem at all, yet I couldn't help holding her responsible.

That was added to the indignity of her not wanting to take my nanny position, even before she knew it was mine.

I wasn't above being ridiculous, and today proved it.

"No, but he's a staple of literature. He may as well be real. I can't begin to count the ways *Wuthering Heights* has influenced storytelling and movies and even culture—"

"Why don't you want the nanny job?" I demanded.

I expected her to deflect and deny. That was what most polite, uncomfortable people did. I was surely showing no tact whatsoever. But she met my frank question with an equally honest answer.

"Because I don't want to take care of anyone else right now but me."



For a moment, the truthfulness—and pain—in her statement reached down deep inside me to where I felt the same.

I hated myself for feeling that way. For the small moments of resentment that crept in when I became irritated at having to worry about Lily when I should be focusing on the newspaper. I was the only one who could pull it out of the hole we'd fallen into. I was the only one who cared enough.

And yet, I was all Lily had too.

Not entirely, of course. My grandmother adored her. She treated her as a true great-granddaughter, just as she had from the day Lily had been brought into our world on a permanent basis.

I was the one who was struggling to adapt to the new role that had been thrust upon me. Maybe if the newspaper had been thriving, maybe if *I* had been thriving, and not so exhausted and frustrated and worn thin, I would've been able to bounce back quicker.

Maybe I wouldn't have felt as if I was drowning.

Rather than my grandmother arguing with Hannah—God knows I couldn't have since I felt the same, much as I hated admitting it—she simply nodded and set her half-eaten cookie aside. “I understand. I hoped you would change your mind, because I truly feel in my gut you are the right one to help my Snug—”

“Jesus, can we not?”

She ignored me. Probably as she should have, since I was being a dick right now. “But my great-granddaughter is far too precious to foist on anyone.” She rose and dusted off the crumbs on her purple pants. “I apologize for wasting your time, Hannah, and I do hope we can still be friends.”

“Oh. Well, yes. Of course. My apologies for the trouble.” Obviously flustered, Hannah finished off her tea and cookie—palming the other fast enough she probably figured my eagle-eyed grandmother wouldn't see—and stood.

I did too despite the fact I was not ready to let her out of my sight again. But now thanks to my grandmother, I had her last name.

At least I had a route to finding her again. If I so chose.

“Thank you for coming.” My voice was stiff, but that couldn’t be helped. I couldn’t look away from her. Couldn’t miss another couple moments in her presence. “I’ll walk you out.”

Hannah picked up her purse with the hand not hiding the cookie and attempted to smile. “Thanks.”

I motioned for her to go ahead of me. She’d made it about three steps when a loud cry sounded from upstairs.

All three of us froze. Then I sprung into action.

I ran for the stairs, shocked at Hannah blocking my path. She was already heading up too.

“You don’t know where you’re going. Move.”

She kept right on heading up, her speed swift enough that I couldn’t fault her for slowing me down. As if she’d been here a million times before, she followed the baby’s cries into the nursery, and I burst into the room behind her with my grandmother on our heels.

Lily was half out of her crib, seemingly hanging, precariously close to falling.

“Lily.” My panicked shout spurred Hannah into action. She picked up my baby before I could, cradling her in her arms like a natural, murmuring to her while Lily cried.

Almost immediately, the baby’s tears began to slow.

With my heart still in my throat, I glanced at my grandmother. Although she was clearly still upset, her expression said one thing clearly.

*I told you so.*

## SEVEN



I CUDDLED LILY CLOSER TO MY CHEST, SHOCKED AT HOW right she felt in my arms. I wasn't sure when the last time was that I'd held a baby, but this one might as well have been meant for me.

That wasn't even considering that I might be holding her the wrong way. I was supporting her head, just as I was supposed to, but she was so long. Probably why she'd almost vaulted out of her crib, for heaven's sake.

She was a tiny little baby. Well, age-wise. Wasn't she?

"She's only eight months, right? Isn't that what you told me?" I asked once Lily's sobs had eased into hiccupping gasps. Poor thing.

"Yes." Bess hurried over to stroke Lily's head, murmuring softly to her great-grandchild.

Asher, I noticed, kept his distance. He'd certainly rushed in here fast enough. Was his worry so easily assuaged?

"She's just so long. And is she crawling?"

Asher tucked his hands into the pockets of his suit pants and said nothing.

"Yes, she's getting about pretty good. Not standing yet," Bess added, as if anticipating my next question. "I've been working with her, holding out some of her favorite toys and having her make her way to me if she wants them. She seems advanced to me. Definitely more advanced than my Danielle was at her age." Bess scooped her fingers through Lily's wispy

red curls before moving to the crib. “Guess that was what this was all about, huh? A bored, mischievous little girl.”

“Could’ve been the loud voices too.” I lifted my chin. “Unless she’s used to those.”

“What are you implying? That my—Lily is used to hearing arguments in her home?”

“I don’t know. You tell me.” Somehow I managed to keep my gaze squarely on his. “Do you argue a lot with her mother?”

It probably hadn’t been a strictly necessary question. I wasn’t taking the nanny job—was I?—and this situation wasn’t my business.

Too bad it was harder to convince my heart of that. Or my belly, which had been flip-flopping since the moment I’d laid eyes on Asher again this afternoon.

If I was being truthful, it probably hadn’t stopped since we’d met on New Year’s Eve. Every time thoughts of him entered my head, I was in trouble. No matter how I tried to keep them out, they were persistent. *He* was persistent.

Right now? He was pissed at me. Again.

I’d always thought I was a rather inoffensive person, but Asher seemed to have no trouble finding things to be irritated at me for.

So different from how he’d been that night. I supposed that made sense. What crazy woman would sleep with a stranger who wasn’t even friendly?

*Me.*

We were still strangers for all intents and purposes, but my skin was tingling and too tight and I couldn’t quite stop staring at his lips. And remembering what they’d done.

With relish.

“Her mother died during childbirth. So, no, I do not argue with her, nor would I if she was alive.” Asher’s flat hazel eyes pinned me in place as my breath stalled in my chest.

The silence that fell was so dense that even Lily stuck her little fist in her mouth, her inquisitive brown eyes now riveted on mine. It was so much easier to look down at her sweet, innocent face than to meet Asher's accusatory gaze.

"I'm sorry. I didn't know."

I hadn't known any of this. I couldn't even blame him for leaving me in the dark on so much, as we'd agreed to just one night. But I also couldn't help being envious of the nameless, faceless woman who had borne him this beautiful baby.

It wasn't my place. Wasn't my life.

*Tell your green heart that.*

"Gran, would you mind leaving Hannah and me alone for a few moments?" When Bess hesitated, he added, "Please."

She nodded and walked out without a glance back.

I clung to the baby.

*His* baby, whom I wasn't in any hurry to return. God knows why.

"The mattress is too high," I blurted as soon as Bess shut the door behind her and closed us inside.

Together.

Asher crossed his arms, straining the seams of his wrinkle-free white dress shirt. "Excuse me?"

"Lily's mattress is too high. That's why she was able to climb up. The height of the bed should be lowered. Or there are sleep snugglers, which help keep the baby secure in this little wrap-like thing. It's almost a sleeping bag, but they don't mind it. That way she can't just decide to climb whenever she wants."

Utter silence met my unsolicited advice. I couldn't say I was surprised.

"For someone who doesn't want to take care of anyone else, you're full of suggestions."

“It was an issue with one of my sisters too. That was a lifetime ago, but she was always trying to escape. My mom had to get creative.”

“Hmm.”

When it became clear he wasn't going to say anything else on the matter, I stepped forward to give him back his daughter. If it physically hurt to surrender her, I chalked it up to some kind of weird hormonal imbalance. Damn PMS.

Even if my period had been a no-show so far this month. It had to arrive eventually. Maybe that was why my symptoms were worse than usual.

But instead of accepting Lily graciously, he laid his hand on my arm. She looked back and forth between us, her tiny rosebud-pink lips pursed.

My heartbeat kicked into gear, and I had the most irrational urge to laugh.

*I don't know what's going on either, kid.*

“You really didn't know she was my grandmother.” Though his voice was so low I had to lean forward to hear it, his expression was fierce.

“No. How could I have? I didn't know you had...*this*.” I indicated the baby in my arms with my chin. “I also didn't know your last name. Wainwright.” My brain finally clicked into gear, and my eyes flew wide. “Not *the* Wainwrights. The mogul? Bess said you managed the newspaper—”

I stopped at his laughter and shook off his hand. “Why are you laughing at me?”

Bess *had* said that, hadn't she? Or some variation therein.

“I'm not laughing at you. Exactly. Just an ironic choice of words.” He nodded at his daughter, but he made no move to accept her. “You look good holding her. Far better than I do.”

I frowned. The vibes I was getting from him regarding Lily weren't exactly making me want to dump her off on him and run. Exactly the opposite.

He seemed uneasy around her. His own child. How could that be? I mean, Bess had made it clear that her “Snug”—a more unlikely nickname I’d never heard before—was in desperate need of a nanny, but she hadn’t indicated he was incapable.

But that seemed wrong too. Somehow Asher Wainwright didn’t seem like the sort of man who ever faltered.

Yet here he was, faltering.

Unless his behavior was due to something even more sinister. Maybe he wasn’t uncomfortable around Lily. Maybe he didn’t love her as a father should.

Surely he didn’t blame her for the loss of her mother?

Almost unconsciously, I drew her back against my chest to nuzzle the top of her head. She was so small and alone. So utterly helpless. She wasn’t responsible for anything, least of all something so tragic.

“See.” His voice sounded rough now, almost like sandpaper. “It’s as if she belongs in your arms.”

“Because I’m a female? That’s my job, right? To nurture and care and clean.” Even as I said the words, the leading edge of my irritation faded as I looked down into her face. She was smiling up at me, I would’ve sworn it.

It was probably due to gas or who knows what else. I didn’t care. Her smile warmed me with a soft, happy glow.

When Asher didn’t respond, I spoke to the baby instead.

“Guess you don’t mind me holding you, even if you probably don’t remember me from the other day. But we made fast friends then, didn’t we? Remember Latte?”

“Latte.” Asher’s voice didn’t sound any less gruff. In fact, it was even more so.

What kind of heartless man could be bothered by someone doting on his baby girl? A baby I was beginning to think desperately needed it. At least she had her great-grandmother.

Thank God for Bess.

“The dog you were walking,” Asher said into the silence. “When you coincidentally came across my grandmother.”

I didn’t know if he was intentionally sounding like a dick, but I wasn’t having it. I also wasn’t going to upset Lily, not when she finally seemed settled.

“Actually, *your daughter*,” I stressed those two words, “fell in love with Latte. Since even a fancy Wainwright like yourself doesn’t own the sidewalk, I figured we could walk on it. If you don’t approve, feel free to tell someone who cares.” I delivered this with a sunny smile, my voice as even as a ruler.

Lily blinked open her big brown eyes and made a face. There was no outwitting a baby. Especially one who was ready to climb before she even walked.

“It just seems so unlikely.” He shrugged and tucked his hands back in his pockets. Guess it was better to touch silky fabric than his own child. “Us meeting again.”

“Another chance meeting after our first chance meeting? Yeah, so strange. Especially since Crescent Cove is so huge. That under three-thousand population definitely makes it hard to run into someone more than once.” I rolled my eyes. “And I didn’t even run into you. I ran into Bess. If she hadn’t gotten it into her head that I would be perfect to help out with Lily, we wouldn’t even be having this conversation.”

“No clue where she would’ve gotten that idea.”

I didn’t have to look at him to know he was watching me cuddle Lily. “She didn’t see me hold her or anything,” I said through gritted teeth. Worse, I could feel my cheeks heating.

As if I was embarrassed I liked his little girl. More than he even seemed to.

“She said you needed help,” I continued. “I didn’t want to do it, but your grandmother is friendly and sweet and well, look at *her*.” I gave Lily a little impatient rock in my arms, and her lips rounded into an O. But she didn’t cry.

Small favors.

“She is adorable.”



“Say that as if you mean it, why don’t you?”

“I know why I’m irritated at you, but maybe you’d like to share why you’re annoyed at me?”

“You have no reason to be irritated at me. I came here to help you.”

“To help Bess,” he corrected. “You didn’t know you’d be helping *me*. Right?”

I narrowed my eyes. “Sure you aren’t a lawyer instead of a businessman? You’re suspicious enough for one.”

He shrugged.

“Is it that hard for you to believe I wasn’t interested in getting another shot at you?”

“Interesting turn of phrase.” He tilted his head, assessing me in a way that almost made me forget I was holding a baby. From the heat in his eyes as they swept over me, I might as well have been naked.

I definitely felt that way right now.

“You know what? What you think is not my concern.”

“Aren’t you even going to ask why I was irritated at you?”

“Irrationally irritated?” I kept my tone sweet despite my decidedly uncharitable thoughts.

This ass had taken my virginity. Could I get a refund? It was unfortunate the only receipt I had was the X-rated tape that kept wanting to play behind my eyes.

“I won’t dispute you that it’s irrational.” I was so shocked he was agreeing with me that I almost didn’t notice he’d stepped closer.

Until he cupped my chin and lifted my face to his.

“It’s irrational for a man to be mad at a woman who doesn’t want to see him, when that was the agreement all along. When he has no time for her in the first place.”

I tried to focus on what he was saying and not the insistent pressure of his fingers on my skin. Light and possessive, warm

and dominating. How it could be all of those things at once, I didn't know.

Maybe I was just too long deprived.

"I don't have time for you either, so don't trouble yourself."

His lips curved for an instant. "And she only hears the last part." His thumb brushed along the edge of my lower lip, barely skimming it, but a breath rushed out of me just the same. "That is what I've missed the most. So responsive. Is it to me, I wonder, or to any sensation at all?"

"Add it to your list of unanswerable questions. Now if you don't mind—"

"I *do* mind. I mind very much knowing you're on this planet, walking the streets of my town, and I can't have you."

A thrill went through me, causing my arms to involuntarily band more tightly around his child. She let out a soft whimper, and I glanced down to make sure she was still sleeping.

"And that," he murmured, his cinnamon-laced breath wafting over my mouth as physically as a kiss, "is just as arousing. You don't want this responsibility. Yet your first thought is for her."

"Your daughter," I reminded him, since he didn't seem to want to say the words.

Something unreadable passed over his face. Then he was moving even closer, his shiny wingtip shoes crowding my worn-flat sneakers. "My responsibility," he agreed, his Adam's apple bobbing up and down. "Which makes you off-limits, even if you were interested."

"I am not."

"The lady doth protest too much." His mercurial smile flitted away before I could enjoy it. "But in this case, I'll gladly go without if it means Lily won't. So, name your price."

"What?"

“You heard me. Name your price for agreeing to take care of her.” The pinch of his fingers on my chin tightened, then he let his hand drop. “Whatever it will take, it’s yours.”

“A few hours a week? How long?”

Right, that was what I should be asking. Instead of telling him no straight out.

How was I supposed to keep my professional boundaries with Asher when he was so...Asher? Especially when my feelings were already becoming far too unmanageable where he was concerned.

And clearly, he’d just recently lost his partner. His *wife*?

“Full-time.”

Okay, I could deal with that. Maybe. Depending on what his idea of full-time actually meant.

“Like thirty-five or forty hours a week? And we’ll need a trial period, to see if it works out. Because I really don’t think I’m the one for this job—”

“As Lily makes a liar out of you.” He touched her cheek for a heartbeat before slipping his hand into his pocket.

And my heart ached for his little girl even more than it currently ached for me.

“Asher, how long?”

“Full-time,” he repeated. “You’ll be my live-in nanny.”

## EIGHT



“SNUG, I’M LEAVING IN TWO DAYS.”

Halfway across the parking lot to my car after day one of the Free Papers Expo, I blew out a breath. I’d hoped to swing by the gym for some stress relief before I swung by my grandmother’s to pick up Lily, but my grandmother had called before I’d made it two feet past the door.

“I’m well aware.”

“Are you also aware that it’s customary to train someone before you leave them to handle a new job all on their own?”

“I’m handling it.”

“Oh, really. It didn’t sound that way when Hannah called to give me her contact info yesterday. She might not have been excited to take on the position—and I’m still not sure how you managed that feat—but even she’s starting to wonder who hires someone on the spot then vanishes.”

I opened the driver’s door to my Mercedes and tossed my briefcase on the passenger seat. “You’re speaking to me right now. Doesn’t seem like I vanished.”

“Have you spoken to her?”

“No.”

“When do you plan on it?”

I hadn’t.

All right, so that wasn’t entirely true. I knew I’d have to deal with her, but I had a lot going on. Besides, just lining up a

nanny—even if I wasn't enjoying the benefit of her services quite yet—had lifted a load from my shoulders.

Assuming we were right about her latent nanny capabilities.

It would've helped had I actually seen her references, even of a personal nature. I didn't think she was secretly a serial killer, but as of now, my only testimonials for her were my grandmother's gut feelings and my dick.

And my dick didn't know jack about how to take care of a baby.

"You know what today was. I was meeting with clients and investors and industry people all day."

"How did it go?"

"Fine." I knew she was just trying to help so I exhaled, long and slow. "I was going to spend an hour at the gym, so I'll just spend it stopping by Hannah's instead. What's her address?"

A phone call would've sufficed, but I told myself I was already in my car, and Lily was with Gran. Face to face was how I conducted as much of my business as possible.

That was all this was. Business.

Plain and simple.

"Before I give it to you, I have a question. Do you know Hannah?"

I reached up to loosen my tie. All of a sudden, my clothes felt too restrictive, despite the fact that my suits were practically a second skin. I worked in them, relaxed in them, fucked in them—

*No.* Not that I fucked period lately, but I'd never indulged in an afternoon quickie or dinner date bathroom romp. I wasn't that sort of man. Everything was separate. Defined. I didn't understand being ruled by passion. It just didn't compute.

Or it hadn't used to. Now I wasn't so sure.

"She's now my employee, is she not?"

“You know very well what I mean.”

“You mean before you introduced us.”

My grandmother waited.

“I don’t know Hannah Jacobs,” I said firmly, and it didn’t feel like a lie.

Not entirely.

The woman I’d met on New Year’s Eve had seemed different than the Hannah who had appeared in my grandmother’s living room. Halves of the same whole perhaps, or maybe her true nature had been hidden behind the facade she’d worn that night. I’d worn one as well.

So, no, I didn’t know her. Not nearly as much as I wanted to, and that was a goddamn problem.

“Sure about that?” But this time she didn’t wait for a response, just rattled off Hannah’s address.

“Thanks. And do me a favor? Don’t call to warn her I’m coming over.”

“Pray tell, why not?”

Which meant she’d intended to do just that.

“I don’t want her to change her mind about the job before I speak to her.”

Or refuse to see me, after deciding she’d rather not be alone with me after all.

“Didn’t I just tell you she was inquiring about the position herself? Not that she sounded overly enthusiastic, gotta say, but that she hasn’t backed out is a miracle. Especially since you haven’t exactly upheld your half of the bargain.”

“I will.” I started my car. “I’ll be home to relieve you in an hour, tops. Thank you.”

“You know I love this baby.”

“I do. Thank you for that too.”

“You don’t ever have to thank someone for giving love. It’s free.” With that perspective adjustment, she ended the call.

It took me longer than I expected to reach Hannah's. Somehow I'd forgotten that she'd made a passing comment about not living in the town proper.

Yeah, not even close. She was halfway to Syracuse, therefore requiring me to turn around and head back in the direction from which I'd just come.

That was my fault, however, since I hadn't reread the address my grandmother had given me until I was nearly back to Crescent Cove.

*Lost in your thoughts, hmm? Wonder why.*

I finally pulled up in front of Hannah's place, having passed a number of other houses much the same as hers tucked away in this cul-de-sac. More models were being built at the end of the lane. Most of them seemed like dull repetitions of each other. No distinguishing features, no children's bicycles laying haphazardly on the lawn—at least until the next snow came. Definitely no fun and whimsical touches to make each home individual.

My own new house wasn't much different. It was a bit larger and more child-friendly due to the enormous yard. I'd been happy with it until looking at these soulless replicas had made me realize that mine was much the same.

Not like my grandmother's home, one of the oldest on her block. She was forever having to repair this or that, but it had so much character. Her house also had a porch, just as my new place did. I wouldn't have purchased it otherwise. To me, porches meant family and friends.

There wasn't one of those in sight here. That seemed like the biggest insult of all.

I parked beside an older sedan with little pockets of rust over the wheel wells. It didn't match the house, but a quick look inside revealed it was tidy and well-kept.

And I was going to walk up to the front door before the neighbor peeking out between the lacy curtains next door labeled me as a creeper or a potential thief.

I ascended the two steps to the small stoop and rang the bell. No one answered. I pressed it again. And again.

Wasn't that Hannah's car? It certainly seemed as if it might be.

Unless it was a boyfriend's car. Maybe they were occupied upstairs.

Christ, I wasn't going to put those thoughts in my head. My mistake for not asking if she had someone in her life now. It didn't have a bearing in any case.

*Just business, remember? She's Lily's nanny.*

I hoped.

With that in mind, I rang the bell again. That was the only reason I was here. Perhaps she was taking a shower or was in a distant part of the house.

Perhaps she knew I was here and was ignoring me.

If that was the case, I was going to turn around and head home. She deserved the courtesy of a call before I showed up on such short notice.

Even if I didn't fully believe she'd stick around to speak to me without the buffer of my grandmother between us.

Then again, she'd agreed—sort of—to taking the full-time nanny position in my home. I hadn't specified she'd be living with me, but surely, she knew how this worked, right? I'd assumed she'd be in a small apartment, not *this*.

Wrong again.

Ring the bell one last time, I rocked back on my feet. If she didn't answer, I was leaving. Even I respected some boundaries.

Just as I was about to turn away, the inside door swung open.

Hannah appeared in the doorway, her brown hair flying out of its topknot thingy and falling across her face. Under one arm, she held a huge silver mixing bowl and a whisk.



“Oh.” Her throat visibly moved. “It’s you.”

Not the warmest welcome I’d ever received, that was for sure.

“Did I interrupt?” Knowing full well that I had.

She stared at me owlishly, then reached up to pull out one of her tiny earbuds. “Sorry, I couldn’t hear you. I try to get into the zone when I cook and these help.”

“Are you making dinner? My apologies.”

“Well, yes, but not for me, and not for today. I’m prepackaging meals for my clients. Do you want to come—”

“What clients? The ones you dog-sit for? What do you do, package up some doggy stew for them?”

“Hardly. Their owners handle their dietary needs just fine without me. Though, hmm, that’s an idea.” She moved to a side table, set down her mixing bowl, and tugged out a notepad from the drawer and scribbled on it with a stubby pencil.

A gust of wind from behind me nearly knocked me off my feet. She didn’t notice.

“Healthy stews and treats,” she mused. “Pre-portioned. That’s good. Cheaper price for higher quantities. I wonder if I should add cats too?”

I had not one clue what she meant. Obviously, my day at the expo had worn me out more than I’d realized. That gym visit obviously hadn’t been optional. My brain was sluggish.

“Listen, can I come in?” Before the wind blew me off the stoop.

I wasn’t certain she’d care.

“Sure, sure.” She gestured behind her and kept scribbling and muttering.

I stepped inside the wide, cheerful foyer and marveled at how tidy everything was. She was a capable homemaker. Unless...

“Do you live here alone?”

She turned to me with the pencil now stuck behind her ear and the mixing bowl back in her arms again. The notepad was tucked in the front pocket of her apron. “Yes.”

“All alone.”

“Yes,” she repeated.

I tucked my hands in my pockets and rocked back on my feet. “Hmm. Okay.”

“If you’re trying to ask if I can afford a place like this, the answer is no, not really. Which is why my schedule is fully booked. So, if you don’t mind if we chat while I continue my food prep, that would be awesome.”

She’d taken a step away when I reached out to cup her cheek. She halted, her big blue eyes widening so much it was almost comical. Until I saw her lower lip was trembling to match.

Was she afraid of me? Why?

“Flour on your cheek,” I said lightly, rubbing it away with my thumb.

“Oh. Thanks. Caught up.” She brushed the back of her hand over her cheek and hurried up the hallway, leaving me to follow.

The kitchen was huge and modern with all the latest appliances and plenty of workspace, which was good because she’d covered every surface with pots and pans and more gadgets than I could even identify.

This wasn’t some quickie operation. When she said she had clients, she hadn’t been lying.

“What exactly is it you do?”

She gestured impatiently at the mess. “I cook and bake for those with time crunches. Isn’t it obvious?”

I had no desire to show how little I understood what was happening here, so I just left that alone. “How many clients do you have?”

“Not all of them are consistent. Some take weeks off, and some are on the mini plan. That’s only one or two meals a week.”

“How many, Hannah?”

She didn’t even need a moment to count them up in her head. “Sixteen.”

“Sixteen clients you cook and bake for. How many dogs do you dog-sit for?”

“Mostly just walking now, until I expand my services. But I’m up to three. I have a fourth I’m talking to because of my Facebook ad, so I’m hopeful that may pan out.”

First, she was meeting men on Tinder, now it was random clients from Facebook. How was that safe?

I slipped my hands back in my pockets. I tended to reveal my thought process when I fisted one and tapped my thigh. A tell I hadn’t been able to ever quite shake. “That’s it? No other jobs?”

“Just the one at the café. But that’s only on weekends.” She shrugged it off and went back to mixing.

*No problemo.*

“Did you neglect to recall the one you’re supposed to be doing for me?”

It was only when she took a moment to answer that I realized she still had the other earbud in, and the tinny music had started playing again. I leaned forward and tugged it out, lifting it to my own ear as she scowled.

“What the hell is this?”

“Biggie Smalls.”

That name didn’t mean much to me. Unless it was something on the classic rock channel I could blast during the rare occasions I had an open road in front of me, I was clueless.

I handed the earbud back to her, and she reluctantly dropped the set into her apron pocket next to her notepad. “No,

I didn't forget the nanny job. I was beginning to think you had."

"I've been busy at work."

"Bess started filling me in on some basics. We can continue that way."

Was I mistaken, or was that hope in her voice?

"She can certainly help, and there's plenty of things she's more versed in when it comes to my—Lily than I am. But there are times you'll have to deal with me."

"I'm sure." She tucked away a wayward strand of hair. It was streaked with blond, like a few others flying around her face. "She was reluctant to tell me much since she hadn't been able to connect with you. If you're having second thoughts—"

"Like I said, I was working. It's a particularly intense time right now. As for having second thoughts, no, I'm definitely not. I came over here to ask when you'd be moving in."

It was probably cruel not to feel her out first, to make sure she understood the parameters of the position before I dropped that bomb on her. But really, it was standard for full-time nanny jobs, wasn't it? If she didn't know that, it was hardly my fault.

She didn't speak. I wasn't even sure she was still breathing. The color leached out of her already pale face until those big blue eyes were all I could see.

Yes, I was a right bastard. There was no denying it.

"If it's easier for you, you can live here for a while first."

"Are you serious? Why would you want to move me into your house? I've never even seen it. Shouldn't I see it first?" She turned away and pushed her hands through her already disordered hair, making my stomach tighten.

I was doing this all wrong.

"We can go see it, sure. It's not fully set up yet, but yes, whenever you'd like."

She made a sound that seemed perilously close to a sob. Inside my pockets, both hands fisted.

*Fuck.*

“Or not. We can ease into the living-in part of the nanny job, if you’d rather. You seem occupied here.” I looked around at the joyful chaos that surrounded us. “There’s just one problem.”

That sound again, deep in her chest.

*Oh, shit.*

My shoulders locked as she shifted toward me. She was *laughing*. A little maniacally, but still. It was so rare to even see mirth in her beautiful eyes or for her lips to curve.

Full-tilt laughter was unimaginable.

“Let me get this straight. We slept together, no-strings attached, and now you want to hurry up and move me in your house to be your full-time nanny, although you still haven’t seen fit to inform your sweet grandmother that you banged me?” She whisked tears off her cheeks with her thumbs. “Seriously, Asher, if you want to have sex with me again, you don’t have to work this hard.”

It was my turn to stare. I couldn’t even begin to unpack all of what she’d said.

Except that last part. And my traitorous cock had just taken notice of the tight pink T-shirt she wore under her apron, and her bare calves peeking out from under her cropped jeans.

Calves? Really? Since when were they an erogenous zone?

Since right now, apparently. My whole body had become one. Only activated by *her*.

Goddamn Hannah Jacobs.

Despite the fact that my dignity was lying in tatters on the floor—I was not moving her in so I could have easy access to sex, thank you—my baser nature was still intrigued by the last part of her statement.

If I didn’t have to work that hard, it meant that....

*No.*

No, Lily's well-being came first. If I was paying Hannah, I wasn't having sex with her.

I exhaled and pushed a hand through my hair. "I realize you don't know me well."

"Or at all, sexual congress aside."

"I haven't heard that term used in twenty years. Maybe not even then." It was oddly hot, in a puritanical sort of way. "Regardless, Lily comes first. I would never move you in to satisfy my urges. If I even have them." Which I wasn't admitting to.

"Really." She crossed her arms, regarding me with a tilt of her head. "This isn't some kind of Hallmark special move."

"What? God, no. What are they showing on the Hallmark channel now?"

She waved it off. "I'm just saying, this nanny scenario is like the foundation for half the tabloid affairs I read about. No, I don't read about tabloid affairs," she added, correctly guessing my next question. "I just hear stuff."

"I would never take advantage of my position that way." On that point, I wouldn't waver. "Lily deserves someone who is wholly committed to her. Like I—" I stopped and exhaled again.

*Like I should be.*

I was financially, as well as when it came to keeping her safe. It was the loving her like a parent should part of the deal I hadn't quite managed. It was early days yet. She was still Billy's in my head. Would always be Billy's. He deserved a space I didn't belong in.

So, where did I fit exactly?

Staying away was less complicated. And more cowardly.

"She had a rough start in life," I said into the silence. "I want to make up for it as much as I can."

Hannah frowned. “You know I had misgivings about taking the job. She’s a sweetheart, but the main reason I followed through was because I have mortgage payments to make. If I move in with you, what point is there to me keeping this house?”

Before I could reply, she moved to the window and gripped her throat. “I could sell it,” she whispered, almost to herself. “I could.”

“You don’t have to.” Her gaze whipped to me. “If you want to, sure. But I understand needing a backup plan if the job doesn’t work out.”

But it would. It had to. Hannah was literally Lily’s only hope.

Right now, she was mine too.

“I don’t know if I’ll be a good nanny. But I also know I don’t want to be trapped behind a desk either. I want to be in a kitchen, or outside in the sunshine.”

“Or the wind,” I said drily as crumpled winter leaves blew past the window in the breeze.

“Whatever. I want to see the seasons. *Be* in them. Good, bad, or otherwise. I don’t want to live inside a box. My mother did that, and it kills me that she never really got to see much of anything before she—” She stopped and swallowed. “Before she passed.”

There was no stopping myself from fisting my hands, not when her pain was so physically palpable. “I’m so sorry.”

Such inadequate words, when all I wanted to do was to take the hurt away. Whatever it took.

“It’s okay.” She didn’t smile to make the uneasy moment smoother. That wasn’t her way. She just let it stand as it was.

I respected the hell out of her for that, along with so much else. She wasn’t a pushover. But she had a giving heart. I’d seen it for myself when she interacted with my grandmother and Lily.

And even with me.

“I don’t want to force you into this job.”

She snorted.

“It might not have seemed that way. How you were with Lily changed everything for me. I didn’t want someone off the street to have the position, and I was dead-set on not hiring you—just like I didn’t hire the women I interviewed before you. Neither of them felt right. Neither of them rushed to hold Lily when she cried and held her as if she mattered.”

Hannah nodded.

“But I’m going to be frank with you. My grandmother is leaving town for a few days with her friends, and I have a big expo for the trade paper association. No one else can handle it for me. My right hand man, Vincent, would try, but he’s not me. I’m the face of the company, and I need to be there.”

Hannah waited, again not filling the gaps.

Damn, I liked this woman. It made things more complicated, but maybe it didn’t have to. I was an adult. I could ignore my needs.

I’d done it for so long now.

“I don’t know how I’m going to juggle both this week. Hell, I’m not sure how I’d juggle Lily period if I didn’t have my grandmother, but that’s a separate issue.”

When Hannah still didn’t speak, I swallowed hard and went for broke.

To hell with my pride. Lily was worth me losing every shred of it.

“Jesus, don’t make me beg. I need you, Hannah.”



## NINE



*“I NEED YOU, HANNAH.”*

Ironic words to replay in my head as I sat on the ice cold examination table in my doctor’s office.

I was swinging my legs like a kid’s. I couldn’t keep still. A bad habit of mine, especially when I was nervous.

Right now, I was about to hurl. And I wasn’t even certain it was solely from nerves.

It couldn’t be possible.

It just could *not* be.

I couldn’t be a high school health class warning statistic. I’d waited twenty-three years plus to have sex. Far longer than any of my friends or even my younger sisters. It just wouldn’t be fair.

Then again, what was? My flying-phobic mother had finally found the bravery to go up in my father’s plane only to lose her life on her very first flight.

I’d say that proved fairness was a fairytale.

But I had to be overdue for some good luck. I’d even added a few coins into my karmic bank account by agreeing to meet Asher at his house today once he left work. If I hadn’t had this appointment this afternoon, I could’ve made it easier on myself and spent the time with Bess instead, going over some of the particulars for Lily.

Instead, I'd had a very important test to take, where passing meant I'd have to take care of someone for the next eighteen years.

*You don't want to get stuck taking care of anyone else, huh? We'll just see about that.*

If Dr. Ellis didn't return soon, I was going to flip the hell out.

She'd had a situation with another patient, but she was adamant about speaking with me. I'd had the same doctor since I was a baby. In a small town, everyone knew everything about everyone else, and your doctor sometimes was more like a friend than a physician. Usually, I appreciated that personal touch.

Not right now.

I wished I'd just peed on a damn stick like everyone else. But I wanted to be sure. No chances. Better to deal with the situation head-on. Positive action. Positive thinking.

Positively about to lose it.

The door opened and Dr. Ellis stepped inside, looking a bit harried despite her gentle smile. Her snowy hair was in a neat updo and she looked perfect from her tidy white coat to her responsible navy pumps.

Me? I was a half-crazed hot—literally—mess who couldn't stop bouncing in place.

“Sorry about that, Hannah. It's a zoo in here today. You know how it is before a snowstorm. Worse in here than the grocery store.”

“What snowstorm?” Normally, I was a weather buff, but I hadn't been paying attention to much that didn't involve cooking for my clients or was period-related.

As in where was mine, because it definitely hadn't arrived on time.

“You haven't heard? This weekend, we're expecting two feet.” Dr. Ellis laughed and sat on the edge of her desk. Since she was a small-town doctor, her setup wasn't as fancy as I

imagined it might be in other larger facilities. “March weather can be fickle, can’t it? But that’s not why you’re here.”

For a second, thoughts of being shut in with Asher and his baby had overtaken even the possible occupancy of my uterus. I really did not want to deal with being alone with him right now. If I wasn’t pregnant, it would be hard enough, because he was right about a couple of things.

It wasn’t proper having a personal relationship while I was taking care of his daughter. Lily’s welfare needed to come first, not any pesky entanglements that could affect our working situation.

Definitely not any orgasms. I was certain those would affect far too much of my life, as they had already.

Case in point where I was currently sitting, jiggling my legs like a kid hyped on too much sugar.

Asher needed me. How he was so clueless at taking care of his own offspring, I had no idea. Didn’t having a child bring with it some natural wisdom about the role?

*You’re about to find out.*

“No, but thank you for the heads up.”

“You won’t need to stop at the store. Your kitchen is always well-stocked.” She smiled and shuffled paperwork. “Although perhaps you’ll have to add some new additions. You’re pregnant, Hannah. Congratulations.”

I didn’t blink. Didn’t swallow. The fingers I’d dug into my thighs as I swung my legs went numb, just like the rest of me.

Minus my whirling, chaotic brain.

“Hannah?”

“Yes. I’m sorry. Are you sure?”

“Very. There’s no mistaking it.”

“But I got my period last month. Maybe the test is wrong.”

*Dear God, please rethink this and make it wrong.*

It was probably far too late for prayers. That one crazy night had changed my life.

Changed *his* life.

How was I going to tell Asher? He barely had time for the daughter he already had.

I officially had a baby daddy now—and he already had another kid.

*Fuck me.*

“Sometimes that happens shortly after implantation occurs. Some women even bleed every month for part of their pregnancy. The process is as individual for every woman as a fingerprint.”

“That’s reassuring.” I tugged at my ragged thumbnail and hopped to my feet. I had some meals to deliver this afternoon and a new dog to take out for his nightly sabbatical before I met Asher at his house for a tour. “Well, thanks. If we’re finished now, I’ll just be going.”

“Hannah, wait.” Dr. Ellis rose and came around her desk to peer down at me through her round Lennon-style glasses. “Typically, I give some counseling at this stage. Just so a woman is aware of her options.”

“Options.” I rubbed my forehead. Already I knew those options weren’t for me. I might not have planned on a baby, but I would be having it. “You mean abortion.”

“And adoption,” she added gently, reaching for a few pamphlets on her desk. “If you’d like, you can read these over, and we can talk after you’ve done some thinking.”

I waved them off. “No, thank you. I’m keeping the baby.”

It was too soon for me to say *my* baby. None of this felt real. I was still wondering if I’d wake up in bed anytime now.

“Okay then. I’ll prescribe you some prenatal vitamins.”

“Prenatal. Right. Because it’s not just about me and my impending panic attack.”

She smiled kindly and I nearly bristled when she moved forward to touch my arm. My reaction turned her smile into a frown. “I take it this wasn’t news you were hoping for.”

Mutely, I shook my head. I felt guilty for admitting it. I had to be a heathen. What kind of woman didn’t jump for joy when she found out she was expecting?

So many women tried to have babies and could not, and here I was, easily pregnant—so freaking easily—and not tossing confetti.

I was just...numb. Shocked. Scared witless even through my paralysis.

“I was a virgin until New Year’s. It was only one night.” I swallowed hard, shoving down all the babbling I could barely contain.

*I don’t know how to be a mother. I don’t even fully know how to take care of myself.*

*How can I? I don’t have my own mother anymore.*

I had no one to go to. No one to counsel me. My sisters were more experienced than I was, but not when it came to this situation—and Lord, I hoped that remained true for a good long time.

My bestie Gabriela would definitely have no idea what to do about something like this. She was a good time girl who didn’t get slowed down by much. Clearly, she employed better birth control than I’d used.

Or else Asher had super active sperm to go along with his workaholic tendencies. Perhaps that was why he never spoke of Lily’s mom. Considering the situation with me, it was probably a little awkward, but even so. He’d made a baby with her, so you’d think he would find it hard not to mention her loss, even in passing.

Unless it was the same situation as it was with us. Maybe he’d driven by and implanted a baby in her without knowing much about her. If so, he really shouldn’t be going around with that weapon out of its holster.

Like...ever.

“What method of birth control did you use?”

I didn't flush, but it was a close thing. “Condoms. Multiple.”

Because we hadn't stopped at one time. Of course not. Had to make sure he hit the baby-shaped bull's eye.

Dr. Ellis's eyes widened. “Not at one time.”

I let out a quick laugh before panic strangled it in my chest. “No. I was a virgin, but I wasn't clueless. Anyway, Asher knew plenty.”

She tried to keep her expression emotionless, but she didn't succeed. She knew that name.

If you gotta get knocked up, might as well do it by a super rich dude who is known throughout the town, right?

I covered my face with my hands. “Look, don't tell anyone, okay? Please.”

“Hannah, you know whatever we discuss is confidential. You don't have to worry.”

“But you know him. That much is obvious. Or you know *of* him.”

She slipped her hands into the pockets of her white coat. “I apologize for not tempering my reaction. But yes, I know of Asher.” She sighed. “Such a hard situation.”

“Yes.” I didn't elaborate. I didn't feel right about discussing Asher's life with someone else. Not that I knew much. Dr. Ellis probably knew more than I did.

The whole town most likely did too.

My doctor's office wasn't in Crescent Cove itself, but it was just beyond the outskirts. Close enough for Dr. Ellis to hear scuttlebutt for sure. She probably knew the players in a way I did not, living in my own minuscule town nearby with my head buried in pots and pans and now cleaning up doggie poop. Even my jobs in Crescent Cove were new enough that I

wasn't yet familiar with many of the townspeople, although I was learning.

Just not fast enough.

“He really stepped up for Billy and Lily. So, forgive me for speaking out of turn here, but if one of your concerns is that Asher isn't father material, duty is his middle name.” She smiled and reached for the folder—*my* folder—behind her while my brain spun on hyper-speed. “Let me write you that vitamin script, and you can be on your way.”

“Dr. Ellis, who's Billy? I know Lily. Know of her, I mean, since I was actually just hired to be her nanny. Ironic, right?” I let out an uneasy little laugh. “I know her mother died in childbirth. But Asher never mentions her, and he's definitely never mentioned Billy. Who is he?”

Dr. Ellis stopped writing in mid-sentence and looked up at me. “It isn't my place to say. I shouldn't have even acknowledged being familiar with Asher's situation in the first place. But I've known you since you were knee-high to a grasshopper, Hannah, and you've dealt with so much recently on your own. But I don't think you'll be on your own in this.”

“Please tell me what you know. He hasn't told me anything.”

She frowned. “He hired you as his nanny and didn't tell you the particulars?”

“He told me about Lily's mother dying. That's it. And he didn't really hire me in the first place. It was his grandmother who wanted me to be Lily's nanny. We didn't realize at first who the other was.” I drove my hands through my hair, ripping apart my braid. “I just want to hide and make all of this go away, and I can't. I have to be an adult and God, I'm not ready. I still feel like a little girl myself, with no mother to hold me and tell me everything is going to be all right.” My voice cracked and I was horrified at the hot rush of tears burning behind my eyes.

I wasn't a crier. I *wasn't*.

Dr. Ellis studied me with compassionate eyes. “Billy died in a construction accident last fall. He was a single father to a baby girl. Asher was Lily’s godfather.” She released a long breath. “I’m friends with Billy’s neighbor. The whole neighborhood chipped in to start an education fund for that little girl, which turned out to be unnecessary considering, well, who Asher is. But we wanted to help somehow.” Dr. Ellis finished writing on her little pad and set down my folder before coming closer to wrap me in a brief hug.

I clung to her like I was drowning. Between what I’d just learned about Asher and Lily and my own baby—

God, how was I going to figure all of this out?

How were *we*?



## TEN



HANNAH WAS LATE.

First day of work, and she was a no-show. Great sign.

*Thanks, Gran.*

Technically, this wasn't her first day. My grandmother wasn't leaving until tomorrow, so that would be Hannah's official first day with Lily.

I'd been able to shuffle some of my meetings at the expo, and Vincent was stepping up so I could come home earlier and help out. I wasn't planning on monitoring Hannah, and God knows, I was no expert myself, but maybe between us, we could figure some of this out.

I wished I could bottle whatever innate kid smarts my grandmother possessed, but alas, no. It probably also had helped that she'd raised her own daughter then partially raised me when my own parents had been lackadaisical at best. Not neglectful exactly. They'd just found much more interesting things to do with their lives than being good parents.

My father was on the west coast now with his new wife and his stepchildren, whom he seemed to have a better rapport with than me. I truly wasn't bitter. Sometimes the fit wasn't right, even when the people in question were related. My father and I were opposites in every possible way.

As for my mother, she lived in Rhode Island, and I saw her now and then. We also weren't close. We weren't distant either exactly, just more like acquaintances who shared a last name than mother and son.

Thank God for Gran and my grandfather. Because of them and their influence, I'd once believed I had a chance of doing right by my own kids someday. Assuming I was blessed with any. I'd never thought much about the possibility.

That was for someday, along with considering marriage. Dating was one thing, at least occasionally. But serious relationships were on the distant horizon. Possibly after retirement once I wasn't working day and night.

Then there was Lily. My plans had flown out the highest window, and I was still trying to catch them before they hit the ground.

I couldn't expect my grandmother to give up her life for me and my responsibility. She'd already done so much. Hannah would be a huge help to fill in the gaps.

If she ever arrived.

As Lily started to cry, I crossed the living room to turn her swing on a higher setting. I'd had it on the lowest one, but she seemed to enjoy more motion. A flick of a button and a piped-in kiddie tune filled the room. She only cried harder.

This was going well so far.

I scratched the back of my neck before crouching to rummage through the baby bag my grandmother had packed for me in case we needed to go out. She'd put together several of them, as if I couldn't possibly assemble the needed items in a hurry without help.

She wasn't completely wrong.

After four months plus, I should've been better at all of this. If I hadn't immediately thrown myself even harder into the newspaper, I might have been.

But I understood how to balance profit and loss sheets. I grasped how to make up shortfalls in advertising revenue, even if I hadn't yet deciphered how to plug all the holes. I knew how to innovate when the tried and true no longer got the job done.

I did not know how to cuddle and soothe and sing lullabies.

For one, my singing voice sucked.

I also wasn't a cuddler. I wasn't even much of a hugger, despite what my grandmother insisted on calling me. What I'd done when I was seven didn't have a ton of bearing on my personality at thirty-two.

Christ, thirty-two with an eight-month old and I still didn't have one clue what I was doing. And worst of all? Those knowing brown eyes, so like my best friend's, didn't hesitate to accuse.

*Anyone else could do this right. Not you. You're just a glorified pencil pusher.*

Fine, she probably wasn't thinking that in those exact words. Billy wouldn't have been either. He just would've grinned and said he'd given me ample opportunities to hold her, but I'd always begged off.

No begging off now.

I glanced up at the ceiling.

*Bet you're laughing at me up there, buddy. I can practically hear it.*

Lily continued to cry, pumping her chubby bare feet. She wouldn't keep on socks or shoes, no matter how hard we tried. Almost as soon as we put them on her, she was wrestling them off.

Stubborn like her father.

Both of them.

I sighed and dug out a banana-flavored applesauce pouch. "How about this? You like this, don't you? Gran said you always grab for it right away."

Sure enough, her tears dried in a flash. She stuck out her hands, whining a little until I handed over the goods. She frowned at the twist top and tried to stick it in her mouth before I took it back, once again unleashing more tears.

Short-lived this time, thank God. They stopped as soon as I undid the top and pushed the applesauce pouch at her puckered mouth. She grabbed it and started to suck eagerly.

I exhaled. See, I could do this parenting thing.

Good thing, since Hannah was still MIA.

Rising, I pulled out my phone. Almost an hour late. She wasn't making the best impression, that was for damn sure.

I glanced back at Lily, blissfully sucking on her applesauce and swinging back and forth to some inane children's song. Then again, what options did I have? My grandmother was leaving for a few days, and I shouldn't lean on her so much anyway. It wasn't fair.

Today, I might have no choice.

I'd just tapped the speed dial button for my grandmother when the doorbell rang. A quick glance out the front window indicated Hannah had arrived.

Finally.

I tugged open the door. "You're late."

Hannah was facing away from the door, her long dark sweater pulled tight around her in deference to the clear cold day. Later, snow would come, but for now, everything was calm, and the sky was streaked with the faint colors of a growing sunset. Pinks and golds and blues that washed over her face as she shifted toward me and I locked in on her red-rimmed eyes.

My chest seized. "You've been crying? Why? What's wrong?"

She didn't bat a single dark eyelash. "Why didn't you tell me you lived in a mansion?"

"It's hardly a mansion, and even if it was, that isn't why you've been crying."

"You're right." She rubbed her thumb over the corner of her mouth. "Did you hear *Supernatural* is ending?"

"What's *Supernatural*?"

She rolled her eyes and brushed past me to enter my mansion—uh, house.

I'd barely had a chance to shut the door behind her and flip the locks before the excited squeals and giggling began. I stepped into the living room in time to see Lily fling her applesauce pouch like a projectile and thrust her arms out toward Hannah, who was already acting a hell of a lot happier to see the baby than she'd been to see me. Hannah wasn't smiling, not quite, but she was talking in that cooing voice that most seemed to employ when speaking to small humans.

She unstrapped Lily from her swing and scooped her up into her arms before bending to retrieve the applesauce pouch. At least it hadn't spilled. "Some aim you have on you, little girl. You gonna play baseball and put up your dad in a fancy nursing home someday?"

Lily laughed while I frowned. "I'm nowhere near needing a nursing home, thank you."

"Good to know." Hannah's gaze swept over me in a way that didn't match how she was cradling Lily.

What had gotten into her? I couldn't put my finger on it, but she was acting different. Weird. How I could tell that just from our few moments of interaction, I didn't know. It wasn't as if I knew her very well. Or at all, really.

Except biblically. I remembered every minute of that particular night.

"But if that's a crack about our age difference, I'll remind you I have no trouble telling time. You, on the other hand—"

"Why don't you have any furniture?"

I glanced around the room. I barely noticed how little it contained because I didn't spend much time here. I'd just moved in. As it were. I probably should hire some decorators.

Then again, why bother? Who did I have over besides my grandmother? Lily surely didn't mind.

Hannah, however, didn't seem too impressed.

"I just moved in."

“How just?”

“Recently,” I said through gritted teeth. “I’m sorry if the place isn’t to your liking.”

“It isn’t that. It’s just unexpected. You have this huge place—so much house for a man and his daughter. Then you come in here and it’s virtually empty.”

She walked around the perimeter of the room, pausing by the enormous fireplace that had been one of the selling points of the house. There were a few of them, but this one and the one in the master bedroom were the largest. Perfect for cozying up on a winter’s night.

Alone. As I did much else. But I liked my solitary existence. At least I had, not all that long ago.

“I’ve been working.” The excuse seemed flimsy even to me. “I suppose I should hire someone. Maybe a whole team, get it done faster.”

Hannah turned with Lily in her arms, who was looking up at her adoringly, and my heart clenched like a fist. Like *my* fists, currently tucked in my pockets. “You can’t do that. A house should reflect you. Your choices, your sweat and hard work. You can’t pay for someone else to pretend to be you.”

“You can pay others for just about anything.”

“Said like a rich, entitled man.” Her tone was light, but the jab still struck its intended mark.

She was already on the move, crossing through the dining room, lifting her brows at the long table with enough place settings for a crowd. It had belonged to my grandparents and my grandmother harbored no illusions about holding formal dinners “at that old thing” anymore. It was a priceless antique and a family relic to boot, so I’d kept it in storage until I found my house. There was also the huge ornate china cabinet that went with it, standing mostly empty except for a single set of fancy dishes that my grandmother had passed down to me.

“At least you have things to eat on.”

I didn't tell her I never ate on that china, because I was sure she would've deducted points. When it was just me, I ate on paper plates. Why make a mess for just one? I ate out a lot too, usually rushing between meetings or on my way home. Or I ate at my grandmother's, when the silence and shadows grew too deep.

In the old days, I'd caught a lot of my meals with Billy. We'd spent a lot of time together, both before and after he'd had Lily. I hadn't really had time for other friends with work, so I hadn't made them.

Now I didn't know what I'd do with a friend. I wasn't sure I even remembered how to be one.

I followed Hannah and Lily into the spacious, bright kitchen, watching silently as she opened the double oven before doing the same to almost all of the cupboards, above and below. The scarcity of food got a raised eyebrow, as it did when she opened the refrigerator and found it nearly empty minus sandwich makings, formula, and a few premixed snacks for Lily. She was still more interested in her bottle than actual food, but we kept trying.

"I didn't figure you for the usual bachelor with just a head of lettuce and beer in his refrigerator, but you're scarily close." She shut the refrigerator and turned to me, setting the baby on her hip. "You can't live like this with a child."

"Lily has everything she needs." There was no helping the defensive tone in my voice. "You haven't seen her nursery yet."

"I don't mean just what she needs. You hardly have the makings for a balanced diet in there. Where do you eat, if not here?"

"Out."

She sighed. "I'm assuming your grandmother makes sure you're fed now and then at least."

"I'm a grown man. I don't need anyone taking care of me."

"Oh, really? And where's your proof of that?" She gestured behind her and Lily reached out for Hannah's arm,

nearly toppling from her perch on Hannah's hip. Lily's little face reddened, a sure sign tears would follow, but Hannah just scooped her up securely again and continued on her house tour.

She clucked under her breath at the nearly empty basement-slash-family room, sniffed at the generic brand of detergent in the laundry area, and let out a long sigh at the pile of mail and magazines stacked in the foyer. But when she entered the den, she let out a soft sound of pure pleasure at the shelves of books. They extended all the way up the walls, high enough that there was a rolling stair ladder like in the bookstores to accommodate the uppermost rows. Plush cushioned seats stretched under the windows that framed the room, showing a view of the driveway and the big side yard.

Snow clung to the glass in fat flakes, the promised storm arriving on gusts of wind that rattled through the trees. Hannah didn't seem to notice. She was scanning titles, one arm securely around Lily while she talked softly to her, sharing her finds.

"Oh, Stephen King. He's scary. Too much for you. Same for Dean Koontz. Kylie Brant. Serial killer? Yeah, no. Where's the shelf for smart little girls?"

Feeling more than a little foolish, I pointed at the bottom shelf. "Those there."

Hannah marched over to me and held out Lily, who looked as panicked as I did.

I could hold her. I could. I did all the time.

Well, sometimes.

Occasionally.

Hannah's face softened. "Just for a second. I want to look at the books."

Swallowing hard, I lifted Lily into my arms. Her forehead wrinkled as she stared fixedly up at me, her gaze saying everything I was thinking.

*You suck at this.*



I adjusted her in my arms so she was more comfortable, then reached up with my free hand to sort of pat her head. Awkwardly. While Lily stuck her chubby fist in her mouth and started to self-soothe.

I couldn't blame her. I needed to self-soothe too.

"Oh, look at all these Little Golden Books! You have so many. Wow, seriously old." Hannah sat down cross-legged on the antique rug and paged through a couple of them.

"From my childhood."

"Super old," she said over her shoulder, although for a second I thought I saw a glow in her eyes.

So brief that it might've been a flick of a lighter in the darkness.

"Keep that kind of talk up and I'll begin to think you have some kind of older man fetish." I hoped Lily wasn't listening. Not that she cared much for what I had to say when she had her delicious hand to snack on.

Hannah continued flipping through the book. "Who's saying I don't?"

She was acting weird, all right. Not flirty exactly. But she definitely wasn't backing down if things went in that direction.

Maybe she was testing my resolve from the other day. Maybe this was all a game to her.

Maybe I was too fucking horny and it was highly inappropriate while holding a baby in my arms.

"*The Shy Little Kitten? Scuffy the Tugboat?* No way. Oh, these are so sweet. You kept all these?" She glanced at me. "For your own kids?"

She'd already looked away again by the time I managed to speak. The excitement on her face and in her voice was intoxicating, but it vanished far too fast. "I guess so. I'm not sure why we kept them. My grandmother was their steward though. She bought me almost all of them."

"Not your mother?"

“My mother didn’t worry overmuch about my reading habits.”

I carted Lily over to where Hannah sat and joined her on the rug. I made a cage out of my spread legs and set Lily on the floor, surprised that my arms were aching a bit. Not from being sore, but because they were now empty. Lily had felt right in them.

Hannah looked at where Lily was trying to push herself up using my legs for balance, her lips twitching. Still not a smile, but if anyone had been able to get one from her, it was Lily. “She’s ready to run.”

“Not yet, dear God. I have to finish babyproofing the house.”

“Easy enough to do when it’s empty.”

“That’s a good point. Maybe I’ll leave it this way.” Thoughtfully, I scratched my chin.

“This room isn’t empty.” Hannah craned her neck to take in the ornately carved desk that had been a holdover from my apartment. My laptop and my files were stacked on top. “There’s even seating that isn’t the floor.” She nodded to the chaise across from the desk, another piece from my apartment.

“This is where I spend most of my time. For you, it’d be the kitchen.” Almost as an afterthought, I reached out to tuck a stray strand of hair that had escaped from her braid behind her ear.

She sucked in a breath as if I’d held a lit match to her skin. Lily whipped her head around, searching for the cause, shifting toward Hannah as if she could help.

Instead of dropping my hand, I leaned forward to slip it under her braid, casually cupping the back of her neck.

Lily watched us with huge eyes, gnawing on her lower lip.

“Such an angel.”

“Are you talking about me or your daughter?” For some reason, she lingered on those last two words, and they hung heavily in the air between us.

She didn't know, did she?

I certainly hadn't told her. I didn't think my grandmother would have either. And Hannah definitely hadn't let on before that she knew Lily wasn't biologically mine.

But Crescent Cove wasn't a huge place. People talked. It wasn't a secret that I'd adopted Lily after Billy's death.

I had far too many single women approaching me in the grocery store for that very reason. I might not have ever heard the term DILF—or else I'd blocked it out—but my grandmother wasn't wrong that there was such a phenomenon. Its existence was the main reason I'd turned to grocery delivery services.

If I had to speak to one more woman meaningfully squeezing melons while she eyed me up and down...

“Lily. I'd call you something else.”

She wet her lips. Whether she knew that was a provocative move, I didn't know. She'd been a virgin.

Until that night.

Until me.

Until *us*.

Every possessive molecule of my body roared to life at the thought. I was the only man she'd been with. Ever. And perhaps I wasn't the only one remembering how it had been between us.

Focused on her mouth, I leaned in, my gaze lifting to her eyes. The panic trapped in those startlingly blue depths made me pause. “Hannah?”

She reared back and jumped to her feet, sending the pile of children's books tumbling to the rug. “Sorry, I have to pee.” She practically shouted it as she fled from the room.

“The bathroom is down the hall, second door beside the —” I trailed off as a door shut somewhere in the distance.

Either she'd already found the bathroom or she'd split. Rightly so.

Christ, I was an asshole. I'd promised not to make any moves on her because of Lily, and I hadn't even made it a full hour since she arrived.

Lily looked at me accusingly, then sank down onto my leg. Once I'd steadied her, I waited for her to drop her tiny head into her hands. She seemed as defeated as I felt.

So much for having my libido under control. It was as off the rails as the rest of my life.

I could only hope Hannah wouldn't file a suit against me for inappropriate workplace behavior. Or do something even worse.

Like leave.

# ELEVEN



I GRIPPED THE SIDES OF THE TOILET AND PRAYED TO DIE.

This could not be morning sickness. It was evening. Not to mention, I hadn't had a lick of it until I'd known I was actually pregnant. Unless Asher's child had decided to put on a show to let me know he or she was here.

*Got it, kid. You can stop anytime now.*

Wiping a hand over my sweaty forehead, I leaned up to hit the flusher, then another two times for good measure. Gross. The bowl had just stopped circling when once again, I felt that telltale feeling in my throat.

Seriously?

I stared up at the ceiling and tried counting backwards. Then times tables. Then a list of all the reasons I hated men and their penises, especially Asher's.

I'd just made it to needing a Tylenol for your achy jaw post BJ—and this reason was one I'd borrowed from Gabriela, because I'd never even given a blowjob—when the threat of puking again became a reality.

Once it was over, I wiped my mouth and rolled to my side on the floor.

*Dear God, make it stop.*

I laid there, clutching my belly, wondering if maybe this was actually a case of food poisoning. Not from my cooking. Absolutely not. But after my doctor's appointment, I'd stopped off for a sandwich at the café. Vee's chicken salad on

a croissant was delicious, and she was as skilled behind a cutting board as I was.

But maybe the chicken was bad. Maybe there was a salmonella outbreak.

*Oh, God, yes, please.*

Because if I was going to have to deal with this for months on end, I might as well off myself now.

Morning or evening sickness didn't last the whole pregnancy, did it? Unless my child was an alien.

An Asher alien.

A cry sounded from another part of the house and I tried to get up. It took two tries—Asher's bath mat was surprisingly comfy—but I gained my feet just as the door shook from the force of his knock.

"Hannah, you need to come out. Now. I'm sorry. I didn't mean to do that."

Still a little woozy, I held a hand to my head. "You didn't?"

"No." A pause. "Okay, yes, I did. You probably can tell I'm very attracted to you."

The irony made me shake my head as I gazed down at my belly. So much for thinking my cooking had been the culprit for my tight jeans. More like Asher's swimmers.

"Other than the fact we've already..." I cleared my throat. "Not particularly. But thank you."

"Thank you?" he echoed. "Did you miss the part where I just tried to kiss you?"

"Huh. No kidding. Seriously?"

I wasn't a complete moron. I'd been aware of his hair tucking and leaning in routine, but the kiss warning hadn't gone off in my brain. Probably due to the more pressing concern in my stomach. And throat.

I wiped the sweat off the back of my neck. And all over.

“Hannah, you don’t sound like yourself. Please, come out here and we’ll talk.”

Rather than respond, I moved to the sink. I’d rinsed out my mouth half a dozen times, plus washed my hands a time or twenty with his spruce-scented bar soap, when I chanced a look at the mirror. Offhandedly. Just to make sure I didn’t look as bad as I felt.

There was no stopping my moan.

Dear God, did he need an eye exam? How could he be attracted to me right now? I looked hideous. Blotchy face. Red-rimmed eyes. My face even seemed puffy. Too much salt?

Too much *baby*?

“Hannah? I’m coming in.” He didn’t give me a chance to say no before he flung the door open. Because I hadn’t locked it. I’d been more focused on getting to know his toilet than worrying about potential interruptions.

Though now that I was thinking about it, I did need to pee. Badly.

Asher stepped inside and halted, his expression conveying everything I’d feared. Hot mess was an apt description for the look I was currently sporting.

“Are you okay? You groaned.”

I nodded weakly. “Sorry. Just a little bit ill.”

*Hi, understatement. Nice to meet you.*

“Oh, shit, really? Like a bug or something?” He was already sliding past me to open the medicine cabinet. He emerged with a first aid kit.

I couldn’t help laughing. “What are you going to do with that?”

He frowned. “You’re laughing?”

“I’ve been known to now and then, yes.” He was the oddest man sometimes.

“Not around me, you don’t. Your laugh is beautiful.” He reached up to tuck my hair back again, and I let him because he had a way of charming me that I didn’t have any defenses against.

He was just so...Asher.

“I haven’t had a lot of reasons to laugh for a while now.” I cleared my throat and made myself focus on the kit in his other hand rather than the warmth of his fingers still tucked behind my ear. As if he couldn’t bear to move back.

He must be seriously sex-starved. How long had it been for him anyway? Surely, it couldn’t have been since we...

*Hmm.* Could it?

“I understand that. I do,” he said, although I hadn’t argued. He finally let his hand fall away from my face, then tucked it in his pocket. “My best friend died last fall.”

It was hard to keep my face composed. I felt so guilty for not letting on that I knew. But if I did, then we’d probably have to discuss Lily. And I didn’t know if I had the mental fortitude for that right now. Just remaining upright was difficult enough.

“I’m so sorry. What happened?”

*Ugh.* I’d just had to ask that, hadn’t I? Might as well compound the guilt over not admitting that I already knew.

“Construction accident. Freak thing. He had a ton of years on the job, but he was up on a roof and—” He broke off as I swallowed hard. “You don’t need to hear all that. But losing him was tough. The hardest thing I’ve ever been through, other than losing my grandfather.”

Since I already knew Lily’s mother hadn’t been his partner, I didn’t bother with that line of questioning. Not even for the sake of pretending not to know anything. I’d tell him that I knew soon enough.

Probably as soon as the room stopped spinning.

“I’m so sorry,” I said again, brushing my hand over his arm. “A best friend can be as close as family. Sometimes



closer.”

“Yes.” He nodded and shut his eyes. “Like a brother to me.” He released a breath and opened his eyes again, looking down at my hand on his arm before he met my gaze. “Let’s get you into your room.”

“My room? I didn’t plan on staying today, Asher. I didn’t bring a bag. I thought this was just an exploratory visit.”

That was one word for it.

“Yes, well, I’d like you to stay here on a more permanent basis, as we discussed. But nothing is set in stone. Besides, I don’t think you’ll be leaving anytime soon anyway.”

“Why?”

Instead of answering, he opened the first aid box and pried out what looked like two small candies. “These were my grandfather’s special elixir.” His voice was somber as he placed them in my palm and closed my fingers around them. “They’ll help settle your stomach, guaranteed.”

“Is it that obvious what kind of ill I meant?” I frowned. “How old are these things? And what’s in them?” I couldn’t take just anything, now that I was having a baby.

God, would that idea ever become more normal? The word *baby* blazed through me like fire every time I even thought it.

“There’s no expiration date on them. Made out of natural stuff. Honey, ginger, mint. A few other ingredients. I’d take one now and save one for an emergency. They’ll fix whatever ails you. He used to swear they were magic.”

I eyed them dubiously in their wax paper wrapping. “I don’t want to take your last few.”

“I have a few more in here. Go on, I insist.” He smiled down at me and for a second, I got dizzy for a whole new reason. God, he was gorgeous. “I won’t poison you, Hannah. I need you too much.”

How I longed to hear him say those words in another situation. When we were naked and in bed, wrapped up together. Nothing between us but skin and sweat.

Oh, and that bean-sized baby growing in my belly that would change everything.

*More changes.*

But if Dr. Ellis had been right, at least I wouldn't be alone to figure them all out. That wasn't even what I was most frightened about. Asher had already begun to prove himself as a stand-up man who handled his responsibilities. Not that I relished being another one of those for him.

I was scared *I* wasn't up to the task of being a parent. That I couldn't give to a child when I still felt so hollowed out and empty inside after the loss of my parents. I had barely lived myself, and now there would be a new life.

And what about Asher? He'd been thrust into a role he'd never anticipated. To saddle him with another child when he clearly didn't know what to do with the first almost seemed cruel.

As if fate was laughing at us.

Two incompetent strangers, thrown together to raise a baby.

*Two babies.*

Except we didn't feel like strangers anymore. And my feelings in his direction were already overwhelming. I wanted to know more about him. I wanted to spend time with him and Lily. I wanted to make him smile and to watch his serious hazel eyes soften as he looked at me, just as they were right now.

I wanted far too much, and telling him about this baby might kill my chance at all of it. It would change me from the woman he was attracted to into one more responsibility.

One more task on his list.

"Why can't I leave?" I whispered, far too aware of how much I wanted to stay.

In this mostly empty house with its magical library and comfy bath mat and baby laughter.

With *Asher*.

He put the first aid kit back in the medicine cabinet and nudged me out the still open door. Without saying anything, he took my hand and led me down the hall and up the stairs.

I should've shaken him off. We weren't a couple. But I liked his big hand enclosing mine far too much.

At the top of the stairs, he turned and headed down the hall past several doors. He opened one slowly, and I swallowed a sigh as the nursery came into view.

The fully outfitted nursery, where so much of the rest of the house had still been in transition.

Soft butter yellow walls were decorated with zoo animals that matched the brightly colored rug on the hardwood floor. A tall white rocker piled with pillows stood between the windows, and I gasped as I glimpsed all the snow outside.

Holy crap, when had *that* happened? Exactly how long had I been tossing my cookies?

Asher stepped behind me and cupped my shoulders. When he spoke, it was near my ear, fluttering my messy braid. "Told you."

"Guess the forecasters were right."

"Guess so." A shiver went through me as I tucked the candies into my jeans pocket. Was I imagining things or had he pressed his lips against my earlobe, just for a second? "I hope you don't have anywhere you need to be tonight."

## TWELVE



*YES, I DO. RIGHT HERE.*

But in lieu of answering, I moved to the crib. The railings on this one were much higher and the mattress was lower. Either he'd had the setup at this house correct the first time or he'd listened to my advice.

I grinned as I took in Lily's little face pressed against the bars of her crib. "Aww, you're in jail, huh, honey? You're being so quiet. So good."

Somehow the praise sprung Lily into action. She lurched to her feet and banged her fists on the bars, then lifted her arms toward me as I leaned over to free her from her pretty white prison.

"You're definitely her favorite," Asher observed as I picked her up and cuddled her close. I was beginning to get used to the feeling of a baby in my arms.

*Good thing.*

I nuzzled her soft red curls. She smelled like powder and soap and...eww, dirty diaper.

On cue, Lily let out an inhuman wail.

"That time again, hmm?" With a resigned exhale, Asher came forward to pluck her out of my arms.

Shocked into silence, I watched him lay her efficiently on the little changing table beside the crib. He swapped off her old diaper with a minimum of fuss, pausing for a second to tickle her chubby belly. Baby giggles filled the room.

Such a wonderful sound.

He put the clean diaper on her, then struggled to get her back into her green striped onesie. I hurried forward to help, but he muttered, "I've got it. This is the one part I can do."

I stepped back and let him show off his skills.

When she was dressed again, he passed her back to me like a sweet-smelling, slightly squirmy football. She snuggled into my embrace like she never wanted me to let her go.

My chest ached as I turned with her to the window. "She should go out and play in this kind of weather. It's probably the last storm of the season."

"You're sick."

I remained quiet. I wasn't going to tell him that my sickness had already abated.

Not yet anyway.

Soon enough, I would have no choice but to reveal all. For today, for him, I could pretend our lives hadn't irrevocably changed.

And for me.

"I'm feeling better." It wasn't a lie.

"Yes, but going outside in the cold with a baby might wear you out. Although if you try that candy, you might be protected." He raised his eyebrows at me as I glanced over my shoulder at him.

"You're relentless, Wainwright." I shifted the baby so I could thumb one of the candies out of my pocket. "Humoring you," I added, unwrapping it and popping it into my mouth.

It didn't taste particularly good, but the honey eased the lingering irritation in my throat and the mint was pleasing enough. Within a few minutes, I couldn't deny I felt a little better. My touchy stomach had been given enough time to settle, of course, but I could give Asher this small win.

"You're right. It's magic."

Asher nodded as if he'd expected nothing less. Then he went to the closet and withdrew a pair of bright purple boots and a pair of mittens, along with a navy blue snowsuit.

Lily stirred in my arms, her legs already pumping.

"She's excited?" I guessed.

"No. She hates this thing." He shook the snowsuit, and Lily made a face. "But she loves snow, and she knows what this means."

Yet again, he plucked Lily out of my arms. I waited for him to dress her to go outside as capably as he'd changed her, but he glanced at me expectantly.

"Some help, please. We don't have long before she messes up her diaper again. Or wants to eat. Or both at the same time."

I helped him bundle her into her snowsuit before we got her into her mittens and boots. She immediately started trying to get the boots off, banging her feet and making faces.

With a sigh, Asher tipped back his head as if he was used to this routine.

"Not a fan of footwear, I'm guessing?"

"No. She hates shoes and socks. Sometimes she hates clothes, period."

"Oh, naked baby, huh? Are you a naked baby?" I pulled down Lily's hood to make her laugh. She fought it off and I did it again, playing peekaboo with her while Asher went down the hall to get his own gear.

He returned wearing a leather coat and a long blue scarf that seemed handmade.

"A present from an old girlfriend?"

Why had I said that? Probably to keep from flinging myself at him like a horny chick who had no fear of getting pregnant.

Too late there.

“Hardly. I’ve never dated a woman who knits.” He angled his head. “Do you?”

I snorted. “Do I look like the crafty sort?”

“You look like you could do anything you put your mind to.”

“So do you. Hold your daughter.” I passed Lily to him. He fumbled her for a few seconds before settling her on his hip as he’d seen me do.

I nearly smiled. Progress.

It wasn’t until we stepped outside onto the wide porch with its twin rockers and copper wind chimes, now circling madly in the breeze, that Asher’s voice snapped out again. “Where’s your coat?”

I was wondering the same. Actually, I knew right where it was—hanging on its peg in my coat closet. I just hadn’t expected the weather to turn this cold this fast. “Didn’t realize I’d be playing in the snow this afternoon.”

“Here. Hold your...Lily.” He handed the baby to me and quickly shucked off his jacket. I started to protest, but he wrapped it around my shoulders before taking Lily back into his arms. “Much better.”

Since my teeth were a moment away from chattering, I shoved my arms into the sleeves and basked in the warmth. In the glorious smell of leather and Asher’s woodsy cologne. “Thank you. But you’ll freeze.”

“I’m hot-blooded.” Jauntily, he flipped his scarf over his shoulder. Lily grabbed for it and shoved the end into her mouth, causing him to laugh.

“I can vouch for that.” I’d made it halfway down the stairs when a perfectly packed snowball hit me in the back. I pretended to ignore it, but as soon as my foot hit the snowy walkway, I scooped up snow and flung it over my shoulder at them, giggling as most of it blew back in my face.

“Great job packing the snow.” Asher shook his head in mock disappointment and turned to set Lily on a little pile near

the steps. She immediately began whipping her arms through the snow on either side of her as she laughed and laughed.

Lily's giggles were the sweetest thing I'd ever heard.

I was so distracted by her antics that I wasn't paying attention as Asher crouched to pack another snowball, which he then winged at me. I screeched as cold streaked down my back.

His response? He laughed so hard he almost fell on his ass.

"Would've served you right," I said while he scrambled to right himself.

I turned to pack some snow of my own, taking my time to shape the ball. It was coming down so hard that I had to keep blinking it out of my eyes. I would probably get a chill soon, thanks to Asher's sneak attack, but I was pretty toasty in his jacket.

I shifted back with my arsenal of three snowballs and nearly swooned at Asher helping Lily smash the snow between her palms. He was leaning over her and she was pounding the snow with delight. Her cheeks were already ruddy from the cold. I hurried over to pull forward the sides of her hood—and realized far too late that Asher had laid a trap.

A snowball came flying right at my face. I ducked and slipped, falling backward onto the sidewalk.

All at once, fear rushed into me.

Genuine fear.

Not, *oh, yeah, I'm pregnant, hope I'm okay*, but actual cold-blooded terror at the thought of something...well, dislodging my baby.

*My baby.*

Thank God. I wasn't a worthless mother after all. Maybe I really could do this.

"Are you okay?" Asher's voice was thick with worry.

I struggled to sit up and nodded, casting my gaze down at my lap.



*You okay in there, bean?*

Pea was probably more accurate at this point. I didn't know all the stages, but he or she had to be minuscule right now.

So easy to harm.

“Hey, hey, look at me. Did you get hurt? I'm sorry. I should've been more careful. Let me carry you inside.” Asher tipped up my chin, his beautiful hazel eyes narrowed on my face. They were the greenest I'd ever seen them.

Sneakily, I pulled a snowball from my pocket and nailed him dead in the nose.

Mashing it in for good measure while he sputtered and laughed and called me names not befitting a parent.

He grabbed my hand, now red and nearly numb from playing in the snow with no gloves, and kissed every one of my fingertips. When he finished with that hand, he picked up the other and did the same, then tucked them between his palms to rub some warmth back into them. Snow dripped from his face, clung to his eyebrows, and his hands were as red or redder than mine, but he didn't seem to notice. All his attention was centered on me.

Suddenly, I wasn't that cold anymore.

“Deserved it.” The rumble of his voice tweaked something low in my belly. “My penance is to carry you inside.”

I nudged him back and looked up at the cloudy sky, currently a slate gray tinged with the orangish-pink hues that came with a storm. His house had so many security lights that the lawn was well-lit. Beyond that glow, the world was freezing and dark.

Being here with him and Lily made me feel safe and warm. Even if my ass was parked on an icy sidewalk and snow was falling so very fast.

“I'm too heavy to carry.”

“Even a guy like me who doesn't date much knows that the only acceptable reply is you're as light as a feather.”

He started to rise but I stopped him with a hand on his cheek. “You don’t date much?”

“No.”

“Define much.”

He took a few seconds to answer. “You’re the only woman I’ve slept with since... I don’t know. It’s been a damn long time.” He took a quick, deep breath. “What about you?”

“I’ve never slept with a woman. Should I try it?”

I waited for him to suggest a threesome or something else that fit the typical crude male response. Instead, he somberly shook his head. “I don’t recommend it. It’s terrible.”

“Oh, is that so? Is that why you found me arousing even after I’d been draped over your toilet?”

His smile almost made me smile, and that never happened. But I’d laughed so much in the last half hour. Being with him and his baby girl made me happy.

Scarily so.

“I’d find you arousing in any and all states.” His gaze dropped to my mouth and lingered. “Problem for me, since now I’m paying your paycheck.”

“One of them,” I reminded him. “And it’s only a problem if we make it one.”

“Is that so?” His gaze still hadn’t left my lips.

And I liked it. A freaking lot.

Rather than answer, I glanced over my shoulder to where Lily was happily bouncing her legs and throwing snow on herself. “Your daughter seems to enjoy this weather.”

“Told you. She’d stay out here all night if we let her.”

It was such a small, stupid thing, but that he included me in the decision-making process for Lily made warmth spread inside me. “I’d love to play out here with her some more, but next time, I better bring some gloves.”

Asher frowned and grabbed my hands again, bringing them to his mouth to blow lightly on them. The heat from his breath tingled over my skin. “None in your car?” When I shook my head, he frowned again. “You should have a kit in case of breakdowns. Spare gloves, jumper cables, tire iron, donut, an extra coat, a spare—”

“Asher, I can’t use those things, minus the coat and gloves. So, why have them?”

“I’ll teach you. Do you have AAA?”

I didn’t, but I would sign up for it right away now that I had a baby on board. But I decided it would be better not to answer that question.

“Hey, Lily,” I called, not expecting the baby to look up guiltily. She’d been shoving snow into her mouth. “You’re going to spoil your dinner if you keep eating that.”

She kept right on gnawing on her snowy hand.

“You already have Mom Eyes.” Asher sounded impressed. “Didn’t even have to look her way to know what she was doing.”

Little did he know.

I got to my feet with his help, and we went to join Lily. Well, I did. Asher went in the house and returned with two pairs of men’s size gloves, one set for each of us.

We played in the snow with Lily until my nose was frozen and running and the promised chill had sunk deeply into my bones.

Asher wasn’t much better. He’d sneezed about half a dozen times, which shouldn’t have been as cute as it was. Even Lily had had enough.

Bright side? As soon as we brought her in and gave her a bottle, she was ready for bed. I’d barely finished the lullaby I was singing to her before she conked out.

I rose from the rocking chair in the nursery and carefully placed her in her crib. Asher checked to make sure the baby monitor was working, then drew me out of the room.

“Hungry?”

“I could eat.” I couldn’t hold back a shiver.

Preferably while huddling under a dozen thick blankets.

“I’ll fix us something.”

At my dubious expression, he laughed. “You didn’t look in the freezer. I have stuff I can heat up. Made by my grandmother.”

“Oh. Okay. Whew. I thought you were going to cook.”

“And you assume I can’t?”

“It’s the usual way with most bachelors. Are you going to prove me wrong?”

Sheepishly, he scratched the side of his neck. “Alas, no.”

“Thought so.”

“While I’m heating up dinner, you should take a hot bath. Warm up. I’ll start a fire.”

“In the living room?” He’d indicated in passing earlier that the place had a few of them.

“I could,” he said carefully. “But there’s also one in the master bedroom. We could eat in there.”

“On the floor?”

“Or in bed.”

When I didn’t answer, he stepped back. Both figuratively and literally.

“There’s a room made up for you too. You can just go to bed on your own if you prefer. It’s not fancy,” he added as if he figured I expected to sleep on 1000-thread count sheets. “I assumed you’d want to have a hand in designing it, so I just made sure it had the basics.”

“All I need is a bed.” I pushed a hand through my hair, afraid to imagine how it must look after our time outside. Oddly, I didn’t much care.

The way Asher gazed at me this evening had never changed. He always looked at me as if I was a goddess. It was addicting.

Intoxicating.

Frightening as hell, especially considering everything I wasn't telling him.

"We have those." Asher smiled and turned away, but I laid a hand on his arm to make him face me.

"I want to sleep with you. I do."

He frowned. "Sounds like there is a *but* coming. Message received. I know the job thing makes it awkward. I can't decide if I'm grateful to Gran for bringing you back into my life or mad at her for making it so I can't be with you." His frown eased into a smile, as his expressions so often did. That his smile made the worry lines around his eyes turn into sexy crinkles was just a bonus. "Nah, that's a lie. I'm grateful. I'd given up hope of ever finding you again."

My heart started beating way too fast. "Did you try?"

"No." His eyes darkened until I couldn't see where his pupils ended and his irises began. "We made an agreement. I'm in no place for a relationship. As you indicated you weren't."

"Did I say that?"

If I had, I was a moron.

I was so used to being alone now that I was too wary to risk caring about someone, only to lose them again. As much as I claimed I wanted freedom, the biggest box I'd ever been trapped in had no sides.

Loneliness was endless and vast, with no date of reprieve.

Asher chuckled. "More or less."

"You said it first."

Maybe. I wasn't even sure. I'd been in hardcore defense mode.

So determined to lose my virginity and learn all the secrets of the world. But I wouldn't fall in love and get my heart broken. I would leave before that happened.

So much for that.

He chuckled again. "I don't remember that part."

"Me either. My memories are centered on other things that happened that night."

"Me too." He was back staring at my mouth again, and the wild heartbeat in my chest was now also beating between my thighs. "That was the other reason I never looked for you. I knew if I found you, I wouldn't be able to let you go this time."

I had to tell him. It wasn't fair to keep such important things secret.

*Two* important things. My guilty conscience was about to explode.

"I know Lily isn't your daughter," I blurted, shutting my eyes while the words echoed in my head.

*That* was how I told him? Really?

He didn't move back. Nor did he look away once I dared to open my eyes again. "I wondered if you might know. Or had figured it out."

"Why?"

"It's common enough knowledge. Billy's accident was big news for a while." He dipped his hands in his pockets. "I'm sure you figured something was up when you saw how fucking clueless I am when it comes to taking care of her."

"No. I assumed you were the typical workaholic rich guy who couldn't wait to pass her off on someone."

His jaw locked. "And now?"

"Now I see you're trying the best you can. No one hands out manuals on how to be a parent, even if the kid is biological. Never mind if you fall unexpectedly into the role."

“I’ve made mistakes. If it hadn’t been for my grandmother —”

I reached up to cup his face, waiting until he had no choice but to meet my eyes. “You’re doing everything you can for that little girl. If I didn’t believe that, I wouldn’t be here.”

“She deserves more.” His voice was raw. “I don’t feel how I should feel.”

“Love grows, no matter who it’s for. Her father chose you because he thought you could handle the job. I may not know you well, but I can tell you don’t just deal with things. You do your very best. Always.”

“What if my best isn’t good enough?”

“Not possible.”

“You don’t know me, Hannah. You just said it yourself.” He focused on me far too intently. “Perhaps you’re just seeing what you want to.”

“Not possible,” I repeated, finally releasing him.

I didn’t want to. Which was exactly why I had to.

The silence stretched between us. I couldn’t stand it anymore.

Couldn’t bear to let him hurt alone when maybe I could help alleviate some of it.

“Just in case you didn’t know, there’s something about grief no one tells you. Sometimes when you’re grieving, you don’t have any love left to give anyone. Not even yourself. Even if you want to. Even if you’re desperate to.” I paused to ensure my voice wouldn’t wobble. Taking breath after breath while my chest fought to close in on itself. “Grief shuts everything down. You can’t think around it. Can’t feel through it. Your emotions are locked away behind it. But they’re there, I swear it.”

Maybe I was making the same promise to myself. Absolving myself as well for not instantly bonding with the baby inside me.

Although maybe, just maybe, I was. At least I was starting to. I'd only known for a few hours. And Asher didn't have a clue yet.

But at least I'd told him what I knew about Lily. The rest would come soon. I'd find the words to tell him the unexplainable. The absolutely crazy.

God, I hoped.



## THIRTEEN



I WAS ASKING FOR TROUBLE, BUT I COULDN'T MAKE MYSELF back away.

Not now.

Hannah understood. What she'd said about grief proved she'd been there. The loss of her mom had clearly changed her life forever.

Just as my life had been changed.

Sure, it was different. But Billy had been as close as family to me, and on top of that, I'd been tasked with taking care of his precious little girl.

She was all I had left of him. And every single day he'd been gone, I was sure I was failing him. Dishonoring his memory and invalidating his trust by bungling all of this so badly.

But I wasn't alone. I had my grandmother and now I had Hannah. They were helping me figure all of this out. One minute at a time.

"Billy and Lily," Hannah mused. "Did he do that intentionally?"

"Huh?" I scraped my fork over my plate, getting every last bit of the chicken, cheese, and corn casserole my saint of a grandmother had left in my freezer. She'd even stocked waffles and frozen fruit for her precious Snug for the morning, complete with a sweet note.

It would be a long while before I bugged her for calling me that again. My stomach was too grateful.

That wasn't the only part of me feeling gratitude. I was also glad that Hannah and I were sitting with our knees touching on a quilt in front of the fire, eating and talking and laughing.

The laughter mostly came from me, a miracle of its own. But she'd almost smiled a few times now. I was beginning to fully understand why she couldn't. That didn't mean I wouldn't keep trying to make her feel the way she so effortlessly did with me.

Happy.

"Their names rhyme."

I set down my fork and frowned. "Yeah. They do. Weird I never noticed."

She shook her head. "You're so observant in some ways and so clueless male in others."

I shrugged. "He just loved the name Lily. So did Solange, his girlfriend."

"She died in childbirth, right?" Hannah bit her lip. "Why is that still happening? Childbirth should be safe."

"I don't know. Some weird medical thing. They didn't catch it until it was too late." I rubbed my eyes.

Remembering what my best friend went through when his daughter was born just stirred up everything about Billy's death. They were so linked in my mind. Lily had lost so much at such a young age.

I'd spend the rest of my life trying to give back even a fraction of what she'd lost.

"Oh." Hannah set aside her food.

"You didn't eat enough." I nodded at her still half-full plate. "Want me to feed you?"

"What, am I Lily now?" Her lips twitched, but her eyes were far too heavy. The blue was like storm clouds, dark and

turbulent.

“They were so in love when they made Lily.” I leaned back on my hands and gave up trying to shove the memories away. They were rooted far too deep.

*I’ve got news, man. Big news.*

*Oh, yeah? Like what? Did Solange finally agree to move in with you?*

*Better. Well, she did that too. She’s moving in. Know why?*

*Because you told her you’d finally get a better place, one with actual windows?*

*No, asshole, because we’re having a baby.*

“Had they been together long?”

I stared at Hannah, dragging myself back. “No, actually. They met and it was instant chemistry.” There was no denying the roughness of my voice. I couldn’t help it. There were too many parallels between my buddy’s relationship and what had happened between Hannah and I. “He told me he fell in love with her that night.”

I didn’t even know what that felt like. But I wanted to spend more time with her. I loved seeing her eyes sparkle with hidden amusement, even if it was at me. Especially when it was at me.

And every time she picked up Lily, something moved in my chest. Cracks opening up along a predetermined fault line. Then like plates of the Earth, locking into place.

Hannah toyed with a frayed thread on her sweater. Despite my admonishments, she hadn’t taken that warm bath yet or changed out of her wet clothes. At least she was seated close to the roaring fire. “Do you think that matters?”

“What?”

“Do you think it makes a difference for a baby, if their parents are in love or not?” She huffed out a breath. “I don’t mean later, while the child is growing up. I mean at the moment of conception.”

“I don’t know.”

“Me either.” She drew her knees up to her chest and pulled her long sweater around her, almost as if she was hiding.

I didn’t know what she was getting at, but maybe this was her way of us getting to know each other.

“My parents probably weren’t, but I can’t say it made any difference in my life. I gravitated to my grandparents early on anyway. I think kids figure out how to get what they need.”

“Yeah, but that doesn’t mean the child still doesn’t feel unworthy, deep down.” She rested her head on her upturned knees and peered at me through the tumble of her golden brown hair. “My parents were madly in love. At least in the beginning. In later years, my father got bored. Turned into a bit of a daredevil.”

“And your mother?”

“She turned into a people pleaser. All she wanted to do was make him happy. Sometimes she didn’t pay as much attention to us because she was all about him.”

“You have sisters, right?”

“Twins. Huge brats, both of them, but I adore them. They’re whip-smart and beautiful and so much trouble.”

I had to laugh as I moved her hair out of her face. She startled, but she didn’t shift away. “Beautiful, huh? I don’t believe it.” I made my tone light so she knew I was teasing.

Hannah was simply stunning. It didn’t surprise me an iota that her sisters were too.

“I grew up taking care of them when my dad was off doing crazy stuff. My mom spent her life chasing after him. They liked to travel and he flew private planes and surfed and went on safari or whatever else caught his fancy. She agreed to anything he suggested. Well, except flying. She wouldn’t get into his little prop plane. Not until that last day.” Her eyes filled and my gut twisted.

“Hannah.” I wrapped my arms around her and she burrowed into my chest, tucking her head under mine. She

pressed her cheek to my chest, and I knew she could hear the rapid thundering of my heart.

“I’ve never had this,” she whispered. “Not since my mom died. I never had anyone to hold me.”

“Well, you’re in luck.” I stroked her hair. “Free hugs given here.”

She looked up at me, her dark lashes starred with tears, and I would’ve given her the world if I could have. “Promise?”

I wasn’t even sure what I was agreeing to. Free hugs forever? That seemed innocuous enough. I would’ve promised her so much more.

Right then, perhaps anything.

“I promise.”

She shivered and I tipped up her chin. “Your clothes are still damp. You were already sick today. You need that warm bath. Or warm shower. Dealer’s choice.”

“I’m feeling okay right now.” The little purr she made in her throat went straight to my cock.

Sure enough, she noticed.

She licked her lips and shifted against me, her eyes twinkling in the low light from the fire. “You’re feeling pretty good too.”

“Can’t blame me for reacting to a gorgeous woman.” She shivered again and I wrapped the messy end of her braid around my hand. “Who needs a hot bath.”

“So bossy. Is this how you are at work?”

“If it gets the job done.” I gave her hair a tug. “What would get the job done with you, blue eyes?”

“Did you just give me a nickname?”

“Not the most creative one, but yes, I guess so.”

“I like it.”

She slid away from me. I was still missing the feel of her in my arms when she pulled off her sweater and let it fall

around her. Beneath, she wore a thin V-necked top and well-worn jeans. Without hesitation, she took off her shirt and undid the button and zipper, wiggling the denim over her hips.

Her simple white cotton bra and panty set had little roses between the cups. Sweet, almost chaste. She reached up to undo what was left of her disordered braid, setting all that glorious thick hair free, and my mouth went dry.

“I’d say we both could use a nice warm bath, don’t you agree? That Jacuzzi tub in there looks big enough for five.”

“Three.”

My choked response made her lips curve for barely an instant. Didn’t matter. I’d seen her smile just for me.

“Think we are just fine then. Why don’t I get the tub ready while you check on Lily?”

“Why don’t you,” I echoed as she rose.

She tugged off her socks. “You mean you’d rather I go see to Lily?”

“Yes. No. Christ.” I rubbed my hands over my face. “Sorry, all blood in my head rerouted south. You’re fucking gorgeous.”

“Sure you don’t need glasses? I’ve seen my hair tonight.”

“Perfect 20/20. And don’t say that again.” I grabbed her calf when she stepped out of her jeans. “Can’t you tell how crazy you make me?”

“I can. I’m just waiting for it to change.”

“It’s been more than two months. It’s not changing.”

She tossed her jeans at me and headed into the en suite bathroom, her heart-shaped ass bouncing in the very best ways. “Then get a move on, Wainwright. I’ve never soaked in a Jacuzzi.”

“Shit. I don’t have any condoms.”

That stopped her dead momentarily. “You still didn’t buy any?”

“To use with who? I told you there’s been no one else. And it’s unethical to do...this.”

“That again.” I tried not to watch her perfect ass sway, but it was pretty much a lost cause. “Come find me when you forget your supposed rules.”

A moment later, she leaned around the doorway, dipping forward enough that her tits nearly spilled out of her low-cut bra. “Don’t forget you’re far too old for me too.”

“Hannah, you’re pushing your luck.” Just as my dick was pushing against the confines of my pants.

“And you should never deflower an innocent virgin in a one-night stand—”

I threw her sweater toward the bathroom door, and she backed away, laughing. Then the water turned on in the tub.

Fuck. I stood and started gathering our plates. I was not standing on ceremony and missing a second of this.

We could make our own rules.

## FOURTEEN



THE SOUND I MADE AS I SLIPPED INTO THE JACUZZI BORDERED on orgasmic.

Could someone climax just from a few well-placed jet sprays and hot water? And I didn't even mean on my clit or anywhere interesting. Right now, my sore legs and aching hips were getting lots of play.

Either I'd jarred myself on the cold sidewalk more than I realized or pregnancy was already kicking my ass.

Along with feeling like heaven, the tub also allowed me to hide my belly. I'd been more nervous about revealing that part of myself to Asher than my breasts or between my legs. He'd seen them already in any case. But my stomach was a big old baby neon sign.

Or so it was in my head. As if he would be able to tell I'd gained five pounds.

Could he?

Probably not until the pre-sex haze cleared anyway. Afterward, maybe. He was fairly observant when he wanted to be.

He was also ridiculously sweet. But that whole lack of condoms thing wasn't keeping me from, as Gabriela called it, a thorough dicking.

Especially since condoms were not a factor in our lives right now.



I was so clean I was squeaky. I was pretty sure Asher was too, judging from his overall level of preparation and nonexistent list of current lovers.

Just me. And wasn't that the most wonderful thing ever?

*Wait until he finds out you're knocked up.*

A shadow crossed the doorway. I sat up straighter before remembering angles and my stomach situation. I slumped back down and swallowed hard. "Could I trouble you for a loofah?"

"A what?"

"A loofah. It's a mesh spongy thing to wash with." I swallowed as my gaze dropped to Asher's bare chest. The surprising amount of muscles and tattoos he mostly hid under his business suits—other than the wrist and hand ones—were as much of a surprise now as they were the first time I saw him naked. "Never mind."

He bent to open a cabinet beneath the spacious double sink, emerging with a few stubby candles and a washcloth. "Suitable?"

"Yes, thank you. Are you going to light those with the power of your mind?"

He tossed me the washcloth and it splashed in the water. "You have a very smart mouth. I didn't fully realize the night we met."

"About all you realized then was how tasty my lemon bars were."

They hadn't even been mine, but I'd shared them with him. Perhaps someday he'd get to try the ones I made.

Maybe. Everything felt so tenuous right now. I had to try to live in the moment.

*Tomorrow? What tomorrow?*

"Wrong. I also noticed you were a screamer." He disappeared into the other room.

I caught myself smiling as I lathered up the washcloth with some of the citrusy cedar-scented bodywash in the tub.

*Mmm.* No wonder Asher smelled so good.

I lathered my neck and shoulders before moving to my belly, deliberately avoiding my breasts. I had a feeling they would be far too sensitive, and I was already skating along a thin edge.

Had I really screamed? Moaned loudly for sure.

The door creaked open again and Asher returned with a small tray that contained the lit candles. A portable baby monitor poked out of his trouser pocket.

My heart gave a hard tug.

He flicked off the overhead lights and set the candles near the tub. The baby monitor crackled as he set it on the countertop and he muttered under his breath, fiddling with dials and buttons.

As sexy as I found the lean muscles shifting in his back, and his perfect peach of an ass snugly displayed in his well-cut pants, the hottest thing about him was his concern for his daughter.

When he shifted toward me and tugged at his zipper, the bulge in his boxers came in a close second.

“May I join you?” The slight hesitation in the question had me leaning forward, completely oblivious to my bare breasts bobbing out of the water.

Until his jaw locked and his eyes glazed.

I rubbed the soapy loofah over my thighs before it slipped away in the water. “It’s your tub.”

“May I join you?” he repeated.

Every part of me buzzed and hummed with anticipation. Even Asher’s impeccable manners excited me. I knew he had a more commanding side and waiting for it to come out was yet another turn-on.

“Please do.” I hadn’t meant for my voice to sound husky.

He inhaled as he shed his trousers and boxers, his gaze not meeting mine until he was fully nude. The thick curve of him

drew my focus. And how.

When he spoke again, all I heard was white noise.

Damn, he was built. No wonder I was pregnant. I was amazed I hadn't gotten inseminated just from seeing him naked.

Maybe I had.

"Hannah." He tried again. "Hannah?"

I just licked my lips. He let out a low groan and slipped into the Jacuzzi across from me. "Never mind."

"Where did you get all the ink?" I asked when I recovered my voice. "It's so not like you."

"A few have special meaning. Others were dares when I was with my—with Billy." He exhaled. "Besides, are you sure you know exactly what I'm like yet?"

His voice was low, barely audible over the bubbling water. Or else I was fixated on studying his body again, partially disguised as it was by the foam.

"No, I'm not sure. But I want to know everything."

The heavy-lidded look he gave me didn't register surprise, but I could feel it in the tension in his body. His legs were braced on either side of mine, not touching. So close I could feel his heat and how rigidly he was holding himself still.

Two strangers, naked in a tub. Who'd made a baby, even if one of them didn't realize that yet. Yet we didn't want to get too much into each other's personal space.

I started to laugh.

He nudged me with his calf and that made me laugh harder.

"Not sure if you're up on hot tub protocol, but when a guy gets in with you, maybe cool it on the chuckles?"

I wiped my streaming eyes. "Just we're a little ridiculous. So careful and polite, and it's so past time for all of that."

"Is it now?"

I sucked in a breath and inched forward, stretching my legs over his thighs. He didn't move. Didn't even seem to breathe as I dragged myself toward him. It took everything I possessed to reach out and touch his face. The sharp lines of his cheekbones, the curve of his temples where sweat beaded on his skin, his granite jaw. I explored him, watching his wary eyes shift in the weak candlelight from hazel to a blazing green. My thumb slid along his lower lip and he nipped it so gently I could only gasp.

The sound seemed to set him off. He pulled me against him, hauling me right into his lap. My bare center met the hard length of his cock and I gasped again, shocked at the arc of pleasure that shot through me.

Then his mouth was on mine, and the pleasure grew like a wildfire.

His hands moved up my back to my shoulders as he angled me right where he wanted me. He kissed me hungrily, desperately, drawing me closer until my breasts mashed to his chest. I cried out from the surprise jolt, and he immediately reared back.

"Too fast? I'm sorry." He panted between the words, but his concerned gaze never left mine.

"No. Sorry." I tried again, pressing myself against him with less force. This time, my breasts didn't hurt. Just twinged in the sweetest way.

As if he knew exactly what I needed, he touched my breast with infinite care. I bit my lip, fairly certain I might shriek if he twisted my nipples right now. Instead, he touched me so tenderly that my eyes grew damp and my breathing stuttered.

"Better?"

"Much. Sorry. Just—"

*A little bit pregnant here. Touchy boobs. Who knew?*

Only the rest of the world.

"It's okay. I'm obviously overeager. We should've done this in a bed." He blew out a breath. "Or maybe in one of those

snowbanks outside. That might've worked to keep me in check." His gaze dropped to my cleavage. "Then again, probably not."

Knowing I made him so crazed was freeing in the very best way. Only one thing was still making me hesitate. Make that two.

One was the pea-sized child growing inside me. The other was the one sleeping down the hall.

They both came first. They had to.

"Are you sure you're all right with this?" He continued to caress me. Never rushing. Offering just enough pressure that the need between my legs climbed and I couldn't help rubbing against his cock.

His nostrils flared. "I'll take that as a yes?"

"Yes," I whispered, wrapping my arms around him. He was so solid and muscled, so strong and hot in my embrace. Capable of withstanding anything.

Unlike me right now. I felt so fragile. So easy to break.

I looked up into his eyes and the worry there nearly shattered me. Fuck my wants. This man deserved to know who he was sleeping with. I wasn't just his one-time hookup. Not anymore.

Now I was the mother of his baby.

But I was also a coward. And when he kissed me again, framing my face in his big hands, I dismissed the reality pressing in around us. He was everything I yearned for. Such certainty and warmth and passion.

Full of life, when I'd spent so much time looking back at what I'd lost.

His mouth slipped down my neck, his teeth leaving little points of pain that tugged at my clit. He moved lower and drew my nipple between his lips, our gazes connecting. I didn't know if it was because I couldn't possibly hurt when we were linked that way, or if I was used to the feeling, but nothing hurt now. That low stirring in my belly grew, and I

arched into his erotic kisses, dipping my head back. My hair bobbed along the surface of the bubbling water while he kissed and touched me, his mouth relentless.

I was so primed by the time he slid a hand between my thighs that I nearly came. I was so close. There was no building period, no need for rocking into his strokes to get myself there. I was already on the verge, breathing hard, the tips of my breasts taut and aching and wet from his kisses.

“I want to put my mouth here too,” he growled against my throat, his fingers sliding into me so deeply that darkness shimmered at the edges of my vision.

“I must advocate for water safety—oh, God.” He drew his fingers back then pushed them in again, so deep that I simply forgot what I was saying.

And his thumb brushed over my clit, just right...

“Asher.” I stared at him as my body quaked around his fingers. I gripped his upper arms, holding on for dear life when he didn’t stop. Just kept demanding more from me while the steady flame of green in his eyes burned.

I came again. Or still. It didn’t seem to have an end. His mouth touched mine and he answered with a groan of his own as I trembled.

“I need another ten of those.” His kisses turned rough. “Another twenty.”

“You haven’t had any yet. Whoa.” Still holding on to him, I eased back to breathe. I was still shaking. “I think I’m dehydrated now.”

His raw chuckle against my cheek made me smile. “I should’ve brought in the bottle of wine I have on hand for emergencies.”

“No.”

“Don’t like wine? You liked champagne well enough at the bed and breakfast.”

All at once, the warm haze faded, leaving me far too clear-headed.

This wasn't right. Wasn't even slightly fair to him, a man who'd been nothing but decent to me.

He was decent, period. He'd been dealt a shitty hand by life with the loss of his best friend, but he'd manned up like a goddamn champ.

*Now you're about to suckerpunch him again.*

"It's not that." I slouched down deeper into the froth as if I could disappear. Static crackled on the baby monitor, and I cast it a quick look before it fell silent again. "Those condoms? We don't need them."

"No?" His face was friendly. Curious. Open. Lines of strain fanned out from his eyes, and his jaw was still tight, but I suspected that stemmed from his heavy erection.

*Give the guy a damn BJ first. At least let him get off.*

I would have. I wanted to, God knows. My nipples tightened just from staring at his cock. But even that felt wrong. My mistake had been pretending for even a few minutes that I could do this.

It was bad enough spending the day with him while hiding how our lives had changed. Being intimate with the guy and keeping this to myself? A hundred times worse.

Yes, he would be shocked. Overwhelmed. As I was shocked and overwhelmed.

Maybe between us we could figure this out. Make some kind of plan. He was good at those. And he had a kid already. The role of father didn't sit easy on his shoulders yet, but perhaps it was kind of like having cats. Having two was barely more work than having one.

God, we were so fucked.

"Hannah? What is it?" He glanced at the baby monitor again. No more crackling, but there were definite whimpers emanating from the speaker. They seemed soft, the humming water nearly drowning them out.

Too bad it couldn't disguise the thud of my heartbeat in my ears. It was like a ticking time bomb.

“We should see to Lily.” I was already rising to grab one of the fresh towels on the bar.

“Wait.” He touched my thigh, reddened now from the steamy water. “You’re sure we’re okay? That what happened here was okay?”

The only way I could hold back the tears was by turning my head to the side. “Everything we did here was perfect. I’m just sorry that you—” I forced myself to look at him, blinking so fast he probably thought I had an eyelash stuck in my eye. “That you didn’t get to finish.”

“Hopefully, we aren’t through here?” He glanced at the monitor as Lily’s whimpers turned into full-blown tears. He dropped back his head and drew in a long breath. “Get back in the tub. Let me handle this.”

I was already wrapping the towel around me. It wasn’t even just to escape. I felt pulled to that baby, just as I had from the first time I’d seen her.

“Hannah.” He motioned for me to pass him a towel, then climbed out and quickly dried himself off. His erection tented the cotton, but he ignored it as if it didn’t exist. “I’ll be right back. Relax. Seriously. She probably just had a scary dream and she’ll be back to sleep in no time.”

From the sounds coming from the monitor, that wasn’t the case. But I humored him by nodding and shedding my towel. His jaw locked again before he left the room.

I slipped back into the hot tub. There was no orgasmic sigh as I sank into the water this time. I just buried my head in my hands.

He didn’t come back right away. No, he stayed in the other room, singing to Lily.

*Singing* to her, for God’s sake. And his voice was terrible, which somehow only made it sweeter and more poignant.

Tears rolled unchecked down my cheeks. There was no stopping them. Hormones be damned.



Everything I'd bottled up for months came rushing out, because a man I barely knew was singing to a baby I'd just met and was already growing to love.

I didn't know how long I sat there. The hot tub bubbled endlessly. Eventually, the singing stopped. I leaned against the back of the Jacuzzi, wondering how I'd missed the little built-in headrest. Leaning against it and closing my eyes was a no-brainer.

I was worn out. Raw in every possible way. Maybe I'd just take a quick catnap.

Footsteps sounded nearby. I tried to raise my head, but it was as heavy as a boulder. Instead, I let myself be lifted, lulled by the strong arms holding me close.

All I'd ever wanted was someone to hold me.

"So tired," I mumbled.

"*Shh*. I know, baby."

His voice rumbled through me, soothing me without effort. I didn't move when he laid me on the bed. I had my arms around his neck, but I didn't want to let go. His laughter felt like forgiveness.

He didn't leave me. His body curled tight to mine, a protector in the night.

I slept.

It was still dark when I opened my eyes and startled in the unfamiliar place. I threw back the covers, momentarily confused by the heavy arm across my midsection. Then it all came back to me and my face flooded with warmth.

I glanced over my shoulder and swallowed deeply at the sight of Asher's face cast in moonlight. He was stupidly beautiful for a man. His features were rugged, yet his eyelashes were long and his mouth was soft in sleep. Vulnerable.

As vulnerable as I felt right now.

Which was why the boldness growing inside me didn't make sense. Nothing had changed. I touched my stomach.

*My bare stomach.*

I'd slept naked with him, which seemed like one more intimacy. He wore a T-shirt and flannel bottoms, his version of keeping me safe from him. Clearly, he hadn't wanted me to wake up and think any expectations existed.

Except my own.

My pulse racing, I curled back into bed. I tugged the covers up again and stared at him in the silvery darkness.

His eyes opened and the words were right there.

*I'm pregnant.*

He smiled with his eyes still cloudy with sleep and I reached for him, drawing his mouth to mine. One unhurried kiss led to a dozen more. I pushed my hands under his T-shirt, touching his hair-roughened skin, learning him in all the ways I hadn't before. The waistband of his bottoms slipped down and I slid my hand lower, cupping him where he was already so hard.

I wanted to take my time. To bring him to the same pinnacle he'd brought me. But I was impatient, and he didn't hesitate to oblige me. He shoved his pajama pants down and buried his hand in my hair as I dipped my head to kiss my way along his groin. He smelled like that citrus bodywash I'd used in the tub, and I wondered if he'd showered in the glass stall in the corner of the bathroom after he put me to bed.

He'd taken care of me, just as he did with Lily. Even if he was convinced he sucked at it.

God, he was so wrong.

I turned my head and tasted him, just one long lick. I didn't have a clue what I was doing, and I wasn't brave enough to look at him to see if I was on the right path. So, I followed the cues from his body. How his thighs tensed and his shaft subtly swelled when I gripped him to lift him to my

mouth. I licked him there too, shifting against the bed and pressing my thighs together as he rubbed my back.

Pleasuring him was giving me something too. My nipples hurt in the most delicious way. And my clit pounded, needing stimulation too.

For right now, the anticipation was plenty.

His hand wound into my hair, drawing my head up so I had no choice but to meet his eyes as I sucked lightly on the crown of him. His thumb traced over my cheek and I drew on him harder, every part of me clenching when he rolled his hips and flexed upward. Pushing him slightly deeper, matching the careful pull of his hand in my hair.

Always so gentle. Loving me without words.

I reached down to stroke his soft sac, unprepared for him to haul my head up off him. I gasped and he crushed his mouth to mine, tasting every bit of himself on my tongue. “Can’t. Hold. On.” Each word was punctuated with a kiss.

My heart slammed against my ribs as he gripped my hips and yanked me on top of him. I started to say something—what, I didn’t know—but he was beyond his limit. He parted my sticky thighs and groaned at how wet he found me.

“Yes. Fuck, yes. Let me have you.”

I nodded, although I didn’t know if he’d uttered a question or a prayer.

His thumb skated over my clit and I shuddered, closing my eyes. He nudged against my entrance, carefully inching inside. I didn’t want that right now. I needed something more. A way to smooth over the jagged parts of myself that only seemed to settle when I was with him.

I braced my hands on his stomach, rolling my hips until he was fully seated. Following instinct, I drew myself upward. Every drag of his flesh against mine set off nerve endings I hadn’t even known existed. Then I sank back down, biting my lip around the moan I couldn’t contain.

“Christ, you’re beautiful.” He pushed his hands through the hanging ropes of my hair and framed my face, kissing me wildly as my body took over, lifting and lowering again and again. Chasing that elusive feeling I’d only ever found with him.

Not just an orgasm. I could have those on my own. Less spectacular ones, sure. But he wasn’t the keeper of the climax.

He made me feel...safe. Wanted. Appreciated.

Needed for *me*, not what I could offer. Stripped down to nothing, I was enough.

He grasped my hip and shifted me underneath him, his mouth like a fever against my breasts as he drove into me. He tugged my leg up over his shoulder and I arched, reaching behind me for the pillows to anchor myself.

There was no holding back now. No waiting. No hesitation.

I quivered beneath him, around him, bowing my back at the pleasure that sang through me with his every thrust. It didn’t stop. His teeth skimmed my nipple and I cried out, caught between pain and ecstasy. He pumped into me, wringing more from me than I’d known I was capable of. I bit down on the pillow, trying to smother my sounds when he timed touching my clit with his endless strokes.

“Come,” he whispered, before he kissed me and gave me no other option.

I clutched his shoulders, needing to hold on while he so thoroughly destroyed me. I kept right on holding him when he buried his face in my hair and let out a shout. He plowed into me one more time, prolonging the moment until we were both sweaty and gasping.

No beginning. No end.

Finally, he lifted his head and pushed the tangle of hair out of my face. He kissed me so softly that my heart ached as much as the rest of me. “Okay?”

I smiled weakly. “So much better than okay.”

He smiled back before his gaze drifted to the monitor beside the bed. It was blissfully quiet. “I should probably check—” He broke off and frowned, his troubled expression barely visible in the silvery moonlight. “We forgot a condom. I mean, I didn’t have any, so—” He blew out a breath. “What was that about you saying earlier we didn’t need them? Did you go on the Pill?”

I’d hoped to have a few more minutes to bask in the afterglow. Not long, because my conscience wouldn’t let this go on any longer. I’d wanted to tell him earlier, but apparently, I’d needed to check out for a while. And sleep in a cloud-like, huge bed that dwarfed my own at home, with Asher’s muscled arm cuddling me close.

But the time had come. No more delays.

“No, I’m not on the Pill. I don’t need to be.” I faced him squarely. “I’m pregnant.”

## FIFTEEN



IN TIMES OF CRISIS, SOME PEOPLE CLAIM TO SEE THEIR LIVES flash before their eyes. You know, right before a bullet rips into them, or an attacker swings out with a knife.

In my case, I saw the rest of my life flash before my eyes after Hannah spoke, not the past.

I saw late night feedings.

Changing endless diapers. Picking up one baby, slapping on some Pampers, then passing it to my grandmother as I moved to the next one in the assembly line.

Singing “Baby Shark” until my eardrums exploded.

Balancing one baby per hip while I dealt with colleagues and scheduled meetings and tried to maintain a shred of sanity.

And sex? Sex would not be a factor in my life ever again, obviously. There would be no time for such frivolity. Not to mention it had landed me in this situation.

“Asher?”

I rolled out of bed and went straight into the bathroom. Where I stared at myself in the mirror and wondered if I was too old to run away from home.

Hannah did not follow. I didn’t blame her.

*You’re being an asshole. She’s dealing with this too, you know.*

I still couldn’t believe it. I was sure I’d wake up in bed alone any minute. Hannah wouldn’t even be there, because she

would've refused to spend the night. We needed to think about what was best for Lily.

For this new baby.

*A new baby.*

Good Christ. I hadn't even gotten a handle on parenting the last one.

I splashed ice cold water on my face and took care of business, then eyed the bathroom window and debated if I could fit through it. Probably not. Besides, I'd have to face this eventually.

That was what I did. Dealt with things straight on. Without even an ounce of immaturity.

I stepped into the bedroom. Hannah was curled up on the bed, her honeyed hair tumbled over her face. "You should've disclosed your...condition before taking the nanny job."

Once the words were out, I had no idea what on earth had possessed me to say them.

She should have told me right away, but it was hardly a deterrent to her employment.

I mean, how could it be? The kid was mine.

*Mine.*

I sank to the floor right where I stood and dropped my head into my hands.

If she thought this behavior was odd, she did not say. Instead, she swung her long legs over the side of the mattress and tugged the sheet around her. "I would have disclosed it before accepting the nanny job had I known." Her voice was cool. Practically dripping with ice. "Actually, I don't recall ever saying yes so much as being badgered into it."

"Sure. Right. Blame me. I made you take the nanny job. I suppose I made you sleep with me too. Both times."

"You didn't make me have sex with you either time. I quite enjoyed it."

Although I suspected that frost in her tone was a defense mechanism, I had a few of my own, and they were all just as detestable. “Enough that you didn’t think you should tell me about this new development before you sucked—”

“Asher.” My name was a whip that shut me the hell up.

Why was I being such a dick to her? She hadn’t caused this. It took two. But she was so goddamn calm, and inside me, it felt as if a hurricane was raging.

“You’ve never been in my situation. You have no right to question why I do anything.”

I scrubbed my face. My eyes were burning as if I hadn’t slept at all. Between watching over her and Lily, I hadn’t gotten much. “You’re right.”

There was no point in asking if she was sure. She had to be. She was supremely competent and wouldn’t just take one test and assume. Although how often was even one test wrong? Probably not that often.

“Did you see a doctor?”

She rolled right on. “Furthermore, I tried to tell you earlier, before Lily had her bad dream. I didn’t want to fall asleep.” She rose, yanking on the sheet when the bedding got tangled. “Carrying a whole other life inside you is exhausting. Surprise.”

The knot in my throat made me swallow hard. “Hannah, I’m sorry.”

But she wasn’t listening to me. “Do you think I wanted to tell you this? I knew you’d freak out. I’ve watched how you struggle with Lily. You’re so much better with her than you give yourself credit for, but you don’t see it. It’ll take time. I know that. I *know* that,” she repeated, drawing the sheet around her so tightly I wondered how it didn’t cut off her circulation. “But I don’t have that time. I’m carrying this child now. And we have to deal with reality, not start blaming each other like children.”

She was right. Of course, she was. Except I’d never once acted like a child. At least before tonight. I’d always



shouldered my responsibilities stoically. Never asking for assistance from anyone.

Until now.

“You were supposed to be the one to help me,” I muttered. “Funny how that worked out, huh?”

She didn’t look at me before marching out of the room and slamming the door.

Almost on cue, Lily started to wail down the hall.

I buried my head in my hands again. She wasn’t wrong to be pissed at me. I’d said some doozies in the span of just a few minutes. But she claimed to understand my position. She didn’t have a clue, as evidenced by that slamming door. Doing that with a kid around was basically a recipe for making the rest of your night hell.

But naturally, she didn’t get that, because she’d never been a mother before. Not until now.

Now that she was having my baby.

Jesus Christ.

I pushed myself to my feet. Without any conscious intention, I went to the dresser and started pulling out fresh clothes. Jeans, boxers, sweater. I pulled them on, then opened the door and went down the hall to find my boots, jacket, and wallet.

The baby was still crying. Every whimper she made tore a hole inside me, but I wasn’t thinking straight. Wasn’t thinking at all.

I had to get away from here.

I grabbed my keys. It was okay, because Hannah was with Lily. Even as pissed as I was—at myself, most of all—I knew she’d take care of my little girl.

It wasn’t fair of me to put her in that position. And it wasn’t because she would be collecting a paycheck either. She already cared so much about Lily.

Cared about—

I shut it down as I yanked on my jacket. Lily would be fine. Hannah would be fine. I was just taking a time-out.

*Oh, yeah? Then tell her you're leaving. Don't be the bastard who finds out she's carrying your child and leaves her to handle it alone.*

The problem was I had never once been a bastard. Ever. I must've been overdue, because I couldn't seem to stop myself.

This time, I was the one who slammed the door behind me.

Some sick asshole part of me wanted Hannah to worry. To fret that I'd done something so out of character and split. She thought she had me pegged.

Everyone thought they knew me. Even my grandmother. I was about as predictable as a sandwich.

Until tonight.

I stopped dead on the porch at the sight of all the snow. My car was blocked in. The plow service hadn't come by yet. It wasn't much past midnight. We'd barely slept for an hour or two before she'd awakened and blown my mind.

In more ways than one.

I didn't even know where I intended to go. Normally, I'd head into the office and pour my frustrations into paperwork and whatever else I needed to deal with to get ahead for the rest of the week. But that was what dutiful Asher did. I didn't want to fucking work. I wanted to get blistering drunk and act like an idiot.

I wanted to not be me for a while.

*The only reason you can be a jackass is because you know she's here. Just dump and run, why don't you?*

I yanked on the gloves I found in my pocket and rushed down the steps. Fuck it. I'd walk it off.

Last call was two a.m., wasn't it? Just enough time for me to pour some libations into me and make all of this disappear for a while.

Just as well that I wasn't taking my car. I couldn't drink if I had. This way, I could take an Uber back. Or stumble home.

*Or faceplant in a snowbank and see if anyone ever comes looking for me.*

Why would she? She already had this situation under control. Oh, she'd said I didn't understand where she was coming from, but she certainly hadn't seemed eager for *my* input. She'd basically said she knew I would freak out.

And look at that, here I was, freaking out.

Sandwiches were probably actually more unpredictable than I was.

I made my way down the sidewalk. Nothing was shoveled, because I hadn't done it yet and neither had either of my neighbors, spread out as they were. So, I walked in the equally unplowed streets, hunching my shoulders against the cold. It hadn't seemed so frigid when I was out here before. Playing with Hannah and Lily had taken my attention, I supposed.

Hannah always had, from the very first moment I'd laid eyes on her.

The night we'd made a baby.

Snow fell and blinded me as I walked. I fumbled for my phone, then realized I'd forgotten it.

For the first time, panic surged through me and stalled my breath. I was completely out of touch. What if something happened?

I nearly turned back. But the little devil on my shoulder pushed me forward, and I stumbled on the snowy street as if I'd already had too much.

I didn't even know where I was going. This neighborhood was essentially new to me. Crescent Cove wasn't very big, but there were so many small pockets of neighborhoods and side streets.

On one of them I came upon a small bar that looked as if it had been forgotten by time. It wasn't that far from Main

Street, at least geographically. Otherwise, it might as well have been on the moon.

The place looked practically deserted. Not shocking on a night this stormy, but I suspected it might be a regular situation. Most smart people stayed home on nights like these.

Whoever had called me smart?

A car and a Jeep sat in the lot. Only one of them appeared to have been running in this century.

A blinking neon sign above the weathered door read Sharkey's. Did he own the beater car? Or was he the owner of the Jeep? I couldn't imagine anyone picking that name for a watering hole if it wasn't their own.

Tentatively, I turned the door handle.

*Devil, don't desert me now.*

I stepped inside the murky darkness of a rather ordinary drinking establishment. Tinny oldies music piped from unseen speakers, and the lone TV high on the wall was tuned to the sports highlights.

Only one patron sat at the bar. He wore a ball cap and a heavy down vest with a flannel shirt beneath. He didn't look away from the TV as I grabbed a stool.

"Hey."

He finally turned my way. "Hey. You lost too?"

The guy seemed around my age, give or take half a decade. I'd expected him to be some wizened old fisherman, judging from the way he was hunched over his frosty beer mug.

His mostly empty beer mug.

"You could say that. Is there a bartender in this joint?"

"Quit yer bitching." A bubblegum-chomping redhead strolled out of the back on high enough platform heels that I hoped she never encountered spills. "Whatcha want?"

This was definitely not my usual sort of place.

"An old-fashioned, please."

She looked back at the wall of bottles behind her, selected one, and plunked it down in front of me. “Here you go.” Then she disappeared in the back.

“She’s not the usual bartender,” the guy beside me offered. “She’s just filling in. Doesn’t give a shit about this job.”

I pried off my gloves. “You could’ve fooled me.”

The bottle wasn’t even opened. It definitely wasn’t a high-end whiskey either. But who was I to judge? I just wanted to get fucking drunk.

When I struggled to get the bottle open with the opener on my keychain, the guy beside me grabbed it and did the honors. “Not much of a drinker?”

“What makes you say that?”

His gaze dropped to my legs. “Your jeans look starched. Not part of the usual uniform.”

The guy’s jeans seemed pretty tidy themselves, but I couldn’t argue. “I don’t think I’ve gotten properly drunk since college.”

“Twenty years ago?”

Affronted, I tossed back the whiskey. And nearly choked until my eyes bled. “Try ten.”

He cocked his head, drank a little more, and nodded. “Yeah, I can see it. Sorry. The snow made your hair look grayer.”

“Grayer?” I leaned forward and tried to see my reflection in the mirror backing the bottles on the wall behind the bar. “I don’t have any gray. At least I didn’t before today. Now? Very possible.”

“What happened today?”

“I knocked up my New Year’s Eve date.” I sank back on the stool and braced my palms on the sticky bar top. Sightlessly, I stared straight ahead. “I can’t believe I just told you that.”

I also couldn't believe I'd referred to Hannah that way. Although it had been technically accurate until a few hours ago when we crossed that line again, it wasn't the truth. Hannah had never just been a hookup to me.

She couldn't be. Even if we had never met up again after New Year's, I would've always seen her as the one who got away.

The one I let leave.

I tossed back more of the whiskey and savored the fiery aftertaste as it worked its way down. Tonight, I'd been the one to walk away.

The regret inside me burned almost as much as the cheap alcohol.

"And you can't even blame getting toasted yet." The guy beside me set down his empty mug. He looked around as if he wanted another beer, but good luck there. "One and done situation?"

"No. I mean, we thought so, but she's my daughter's nanny now, and we just slept together again tonight, and Christ, I need to drink faster." I took another few swallows and wiped the back of my hand over my chin. "What is happening to my mouth?"

"Can't answer that, as I don't know you from Adam." He stuck out a hand to me. "I'm Austin Lancaster, by the way. I'm new to the area."

"Me too. Well, kind of. I'm from Syracuse. Recent Crescent Cove transplant." I shook his extended hand. "Nice to meet you."

"Name?"

"Huh?" Then I laughed. It was probably good I rarely drank. Clearly, I was not a natural. "Asher Wainwright."

Austin's dark brows climbed toward his equally dark hair. "The newspaper Wainwright people? Fancy building with your name splashed over it?"

I considered lying, although I'd never denied my legacy to anyone. On the contrary, I'd let fighting to maintain it define me for so long that I wasn't sure who I was outside the realm of business.

"Yes. That's me. Well, I didn't start the paper, but I inherited the publishing company."

Austin whistled. "Wow. You gotta have much more top shelf stuff at home." He nodded at the whiskey I hadn't stopped steadily sipping.

I'd probably singe off the lining of my throat before the night was through, but the buzz in my blood was nice. Even my chaotic thoughts were settling. I hadn't had that kind of reprieve since...

*Hannah.* Hannah gave me that same sort of break from the weight of my responsibilities.

Yet somehow in our escape, we'd created another one.

Together.

Not just me, not just her. It was a joint project, and I'd left her to handle her end alone.

I rubbed my fist over my suddenly aching forehead. Christ, I was a right bastard.

"You have any idea how a guy who hasn't had sex in years impregnates someone on their first try?"

Austin coughed and wrapped both his hands around his mug. His chunky gold insignia ring caught the dim light. "I don't know. Luck?"

I frowned. "You think it's lucky? I already have one. And I didn't even make that one myself."

Austin's mouth quirked. I couldn't say I blamed him. I knew I sounded like some kind of crazy right now, but I couldn't seem to shut my trap. "Depends on how you look at it, I guess." He scratched his scruffy chin. "As to your question, if not luck, maybe you...stored up?"

It took me a moment to follow. When I got there, I started to laugh. “Probably true. My grandmother says it isn’t healthy. Jesus, my grandmother. I didn’t even think about what she’d say.” I shut my eyes and shook my head. “See what happens when she goes away? Everything goes all to hell.”

“What she would say about what? The knocking up part? From my experience with grandmas, they’re usually overjoyed at the prospect of babies.”

I opened my eyes. “You’re supposed to be on my side.”

“Am I? So, you want me to agree you getting some hookup pregnant who is the nanny to the baby you didn’t make—yet you call your daughter—is a calamity. Do I have that right?”

“Yes. No. I don’t know.”

“You don’t know if I have the facts right?”

“No. The calamity part. I mean, it should be. Am I father material?” I jerked my thumb at my chest and jabbed myself hard enough to bruise.

“You look like it.”

“Hmm.” Was that a good thing? Why had Hannah wanted to nail someone who looked like a daddy?

Different kind of daddy. The other kind I doubted had any trouble getting action.

“That’s not an insult. Just saying you look stable. Mature. God knows you have the financials covered.” He nudged my shoulder with a grin. “Don’t suppose I can hit you up for a loan sometime?”

“Wait until I save my company first, okay?”

Austin’s eyes narrowed.

I cleared my throat. “Good job on keeping up with my fucked-up life, by the way. I have trouble following it myself, and you grasped it all like a pro.” I lifted the whiskey to my mouth and wondered why the distance seemed to have grown.



Of course, the bottle was a third empty now. I was probably reaching my limit.

Did I have a limit?

I knocked back some more. Maybe not.

“Thanks. My boss always praises my linear thinking.” Austin’s dimples flashed.

“That ring? Police? I couldn’t quite make out the insignia.”

He shuddered. “Bite your numb tongue.”

I tapped it against the roof of my mouth. He wasn’t far off. “Fire Department?”

He saluted me with his empty mug before banging it three times on the bar. Miss Sunshine shot out of the back, gave him a refill, and split with a scowl for me.

I probably wasn’t drinking the whiskey fast enough. Then again, consuming this whole bottle might literally kill me.

“Yes. New York’s Bravest, except some miles away from the city.”

“It’s an honor to meet you,” I said solemnly. “I’m also glad you can’t arrest me if I end up forgetting to pay and stiffing the bartender for this bottle.”

“I heard that,” she called from the back.

“It’s an honor to meet you too. I’ve never met someone actually made of cash money. Although you mentioned something about saving—”

I waved it off. “Hello, I’m working on being drunk. Don’t listen to me. You live near here?”

“Yeah, Morningstar Lane. Renting a place, with an option to buy. Assuming I come up with the money. I’m in line for a promotion, but it means longer hours and it’s hard with Joey.”

“Wife?” I rethought the name. “Husband?”

Austin shook his head. “Kid sister, but I’m basically her dad now. Our parents passed on last year.”

“Oh, I’m so sorry.”

“Thanks. Me too. It’s a rough situation.” Austin took a long drink.

“I don’t suppose she’s under two? Lily could use a playmate.” Then again, Hannah and I would be providing her with one soon enough.

My head swam and I started to push back my stool. I might actually need to put my head between my knees so I didn’t pass out.

Austin clapped my back. “You okay, man? You don’t look good.”

“Yeah. Sorry. Just gonna lie on this floor for a day or two. Don’t mind me.”

“Seriously, not *this* floor. My boots stuck to it the whole way in.” He pulled me more upright on the stool and kind of shoved me against the bar so I would have some support. The guy was way more athletically built than I’d realized upon first glance. Made sense though, since he was a firefighter.

All I pushed around all day was pencils and Pampers.

Luckily, I was still reasonably physically fit due to all the hours I spent in the gym to compensate for all the sex I wasn’t having.

Probably a good thing, or who knows how large a family I’d have now. Evidently, it wasn’t safe for me to recreationally knock boots.

What had Hannah worn that first night anyway? Pumps?

*Welcome to the Brady Bunch part deux.*

When I didn’t reply, Austin smiled. I had a feeling he could tell my thoughts were spinning like a Tilt-a-Whirl. “Oh, and sorry, Joey’s almost eleven. She’s at her first sleepover tonight, and I was going stir-crazy at home, so here I am. She has trouble making friends, and if this one doesn’t work out...” He rubbed his hand over his scruff and exhaled heavily. “Anyway, think you’re out of luck with the playmate situation. But, hey, with your new baby on the way, at least your kids will always have a friend, right?”

Right. Bright side.

Dots encroached on my field of vision. Many, many dots. “I don’t suppose you have a spare oxygen tank in your vehicle?”

“Dude, you are bad off. You probably shouldn’t be drinking. How about I get you home?”

“I should go home. You’re right. I’m not this guy. I’m decent. Honorable.” I shoved away the whiskey bottle. I’d drank far more of it than I should have. “I wore a condom the first night. Responsibly. Not tonight though. But she was already pregnant. So, doesn’t count.” I grabbed his shirtfront as I stumbled to my feet. “Right?”

“Sure thing, pal, whatever you say.” He patted my back and turned me toward the bar again. “Hate to ruin this *Oprah* moment, but you have the money for that whiskey, right? My card’s maxed beyond my tab.”

“Oh, sure. Right. Of course.” I took out my wallet and thumbed out a credit card. I was about to call for the bartender when she swept out and grabbed it off the bar. “His too,” I called.

Austin shook his head. “Nah, man, thanks, but I’m not that bad off. Just a little squeezed from trying to buy a house for us and getting situated in a new town. For fuck’s sake, she’s gonna be a teenager soon. Her clothes are never right, and kids are so damn mean.” He cracked his knuckles. “Anyway, thanks.”

Somehow I smiled. “You’re welcome. You remind me of —” My smile fell away.

He wasn’t Billy. Billy was dead. Just because I’d spent a few minutes drinking with this guy didn’t make us buddies. And he definitely didn’t replace my dead best friend.

Nothing could bring Billy back. Eventually, I’d come to terms with that.

Lily was mine now. No one would come and spirit her away to her real family. Just as Hannah was pregnant. That baby was a reality too.

Wasn't it? She intended to have the child, right?

She had to. I mean, she had all the choices in the world, but we'd made that child and so what if I wasn't ready? Life didn't follow a schedule.

Too bad I only grasped that when my blood was humming and I wasn't quite stable on my feet.

"Remind you of who?" Austin asked.

I shook my head and it nearly rolled off my shoulders and across the bar. "Just someone I lost. A friend. The best friend I ever had."

"Ah, Christ, I'm so sorry. I shouldn't have asked."

"It's okay. It's been five months give or take." As if that made it all right.

It didn't. Nothing ever would be again.

"Hey, I've got an idea," Austin said as I signed the slip the bartender presented to me. She snatched it and returned my card and was gone again in a flash.

She had an unusual style of bartending, I had to give her that.

"Going home and sleeping it off?"

"Yeah, that too in a few minutes. But how do you feel about some foosball first?"

I followed the direction of his gaze toward the row of tables in the back. There was a pool table, a couple of dart boards, some video game machines, and the aforementioned foosball table.

"Closing time is in twenty," Miss Personality called.

I pushed away from the bar. I debated slipping the whiskey bottle in my jacket pocket but decided against it. My quota of bad decisions had already been reached. "Sure. Maybe I can win one out of two."

"I wouldn't count on it. I was foosball champion two years running at Syracuse."

“You went to SU too?”

Austin nodded and removed his ball cap, revealing a disordered mop of short brown hair. “Dropped out two years in. I wanted to party, and it was expensive to get a degree in that particular occupation.” He laughed and moved to one side of the foosball table. “Might go back though, if it’ll help me move up. Or maybe just for personal enrichment.”

I took my side and gripped the edge of the table. My buzz had faltered briefly, but it was back now. I was going to hang on to that fleeting feeling of bliss for as long as I could. “Party for as long as you can. Adulthood lasts the rest of your damn life.”

“Ain’t that the truth, brother.” Austin flipped a few rows of his foosball dudes and flashed me a wolfish smile. “Let’s play.”

## SIXTEEN



“*SHH, SHH*, THAT’S A GOOD GIRL.”

I rocked Lily as she whimpered softly and wondered how I’d gone from being painfully solitary to a mother of two in a matter of months.

Two-word answer: Asher Wainwright.

I wasn’t Lily’s mother, just the nanny. Her mother was gone, and now she had a father who was afraid to love her and a great-grandmother who loved her enough for half a dozen people.

Maybe I wouldn’t be Lily’s nanny anymore. It wasn’t as if I’d gotten used to the job yet. But before I’d told Asher I was pregnant, I had never really considered the possibility he might not take part in the kid’s life.

Might not want *me* to be part of Lily’s life either, once he knew.

I smoothed a kiss over Lily’s sweaty brow and smiled as she clutched my shirt in her chubby fist. I hadn’t wanted to put on any of Asher’s clothes, and I didn’t have any of my own there except what I’d worn that day.

A quiet rage simmered inside me, layered under the hurt and fear. I’d worked so hard to build a sense of stability for myself, both financially and emotionally. That had meant pulling away a bit from the world, as I grieved and tried to figure out what I wanted to do for the rest of my life.

Now everything was in flux.

The only thing I knew for certain was I wanted my child. Wrong timing or not, we'd make a way for ourselves.

If that was without Asher, then it just was. I wasn't going to beg. I also wasn't going to tolerate being an emotional punching bag while he processed his own shit.

I swallowed deeply as I gazed down at a now sleeping Lily in the light from the moon. I didn't want to lose her from my life. It was nuts I could've become this attached this soon, but somehow we'd bonded.

As I'd thought I had bonded with her asshole of a father. The man who was currently running the streets doing God knows what.

I wasn't looking at the clock. Wasn't fretting at all.

*Liar.*

I didn't know where he was. If he was okay. I did know this behavior was not like the Asher I'd come to know. Whether this fit of pique would last or just be a passing moment, I wasn't sure.

Either way, I'd have to shore up my defenses. He had a way of sneaking under them.

Down the hall, a door closed. Softly this time, not with all the bluster of a couple of hours ago. I sat up straighter in the chair, drawing Lily close. She didn't stir beyond nuzzling her drooly little chin underneath my neck.

I stared at the open doorway, waiting. Barely breathing. Even so, I wasn't prepared when Asher appeared in it, looking so big and rumped and...male.

So very male.

Something inside me twinged, and it definitely wasn't annoyance. There was some lust in there too, but not only that. When he leaned against the doorjamb, his hair all messy and dark and wet from the snow, his clothes wrinkled, his eyes heavy with a combination of fatigue and things I didn't want to think too much about...

I wanted to hold him. And yes, get naked and climb in his lap, but also be the one to comfort him and rub those lines away from his eyes.

Even if coming clean about our situation had inadvertently helped put them there.

My first inclination was to rise and go to him, despite what had happened. I'd been the first one to slam out of that room, and that had been wrong too. But the instant I moved, I smelled the alcohol on him. It wafted out of his pores, or off his jacket.

Ugh, I didn't even know.

I cupped the baby's head in my hand and pressed my back against the chair. I could only imagine my expression.

But I didn't have to imagine his. He was staring at us in a way that tangled up everything inside me in complicated knots. His gaze was hot, but tender too. He never looked away.

"I'm sorry." His voice was rough, as abrasive as uneven concrete. "I'm still pretty drunk."

"I can smell you."

"Really?" He lifted his sleeve and sniffed. "Think you smell the bar on me. I didn't have that much."

"No? Then why is your voice slurred?" I didn't add that it was also sexy, which was ridiculous. But it was as if normally hyper speed, ultra-focused Asher had dialed himself back a few notches. Leaving him a little slower, a little softer, a little more unguarded.

One hundred and twenty percent dangerous as he walked toward us with long, unhurried steps. The nursery wasn't that big, but it felt as if our eyes locked forever while he crossed the room.

"I had some whiskey. Got drunk. It helps me to not think so much. Not in a rush to have it end." He licked his lips. "Are you going to kill my buzz, Hannah?"

Asher saying my name should be a criminal offense. "I'm just sitting here, minding my business."



“You’re sitting there, rocking my baby.” He leaned over and braced his hands on the arms of the rocking chair, and my heart went into overdrive. I would’ve sworn I heard it knocking against my ribs. “Both my babies. Isn’t that right?”

I didn’t say anything. What could I say? He’d admitted he was drunk. I could smell the alcohol on his breath. It wasn’t repulsive. If anything, that hint of the forbidden pulled at me. As if I could ride his high with him.

A high I couldn’t have on my own any longer. Not for quite some time.

“Your lips are trembling.” He touched my lower lip with his thumb, and it was a damn miracle I didn’t crush Lily in reaction. Every part of me braced.

He sensed it, because he backed off and tucked his hands in his pockets. “I’m sorry,” he said again after a moment.

“For what? For coming home drunk?” Only after the word was out did I realize how foolish I was being. This wasn’t my home. Even if he’d invited me to stay there, it was just for Lily.

I was getting all tangled up in something that wasn’t meant for me.

“Yeah.”

“What about for leaving in the first place? For getting mad at me because we made a baby *together*?”

He fisted his hands in his pockets, making them bulge. “I’m not mad at you,” he said quietly. “I never was. I regret causing you to think that. It was a fucking dream you walked back into my life.”

Before I could reply, he touched the top of Lily’s head, just a brush of his fingers, and strode out of the room.

*He’s drunk.*

*He doesn’t know what he’s saying.*

*It may not even be true.*

*A fucking dream? Really?*

Then again, our day together had been pretty unreal before I'd spilled the baby crackers. Dream was actually a pretty apt description.

Except he'd claimed to have a buzz—and his voice had definitely indicated that—but he seemed entirely too lucid for someone who'd spent a couple of hours drinking.

Unless Asher even got drunk differently than other people.

I rolled my achy shoulders. He did *everything* differently than other men. Was that why I couldn't keep my distance?

But I didn't run after him. No, I took my sweet ass time. Once I was sure Lily was still asleep, I tucked her in her crib and turned on the little music mobile that seemed to bring her comfort. She didn't move. Hopefully, she'd get some rest now that she had a full belly again, thanks to the bottle of formula I'd given her earlier.

After a quick stop in the bathroom to freshen up—and give myself about fifteen pep talks—I went down the hall to the master bedroom. Clothes and shoes were all over the floor, as if Asher had let them fly.

On the bed, Asher was sprawled out, completely nude.

Completely hard.

It was insanely stupid that I didn't turn around. Clearly, he wasn't in a talking mood. From the state of his erection, there was a good chance he'd, uh, primed the pump since he'd left the nursery.

But I didn't want to talk either. I definitely didn't want to fight. He'd apologized, and God, I wanted to believe he meant it.

In the middle of the night, nothing seemed wrong.

What felt wrong was standing on the opposite side of this doorway another minute, watching him watch me.

I took off my shirt and let it drop onto the floor with Asher's clothes. He leaned up on his elbows, staring at me intently. Memorizing every detail as I undid my braid and snapped the band around my wrist. I didn't take off my

panties. I didn't know why. Maybe so I'd have one last barrier if my common sense returned.

Or maybe I just wanted to watch him fuck me while I still wore my chaste white cotton.

I crawled across the bed to him on my hands and knees. I was still self-conscious about my body, more so as I knew it was already starting to change, but it was hard to feel anything less than beautiful when Asher's gaze was drinking me down. He held out a hand and drew me toward his chest, groaning as my breasts pressed against his skin.

"I like coming home to you," he whispered before our mouths met with just as much hunger as earlier. And just as much as that very first night, when we'd chosen to get naked by firelight rather than talk.

This was a much easier language for us to share.

I slipped my hands into his hair and nibbled on his lips, bearing down harder as he cupped my ass. He squeezed hard before delving between my thighs to toy with my panties. Rubbing me through them, and then under them, his fingers finding the heart of me unerringly and slipping inside.

"Wet for me."

I bit his lower lip. "That's the state you left me in."

His groan blazed through me, a sound I echoed at the deep press of his fingers. He pushed all the way into me before drawing out in a slow, slippery slide. He did it another time, harder. My clit throbbed and I ground against him, fumbling for his cock. The damp tip slid over my nipple, and I wasn't sure which of us moaned louder.

He rolled me beneath him and spent his share of time sucking on my nipples. Both of them, including the one that had to taste like him. His pupils blew wide in the moonlight as he carefully tended to me, his teeth sharp, his tongue so erotic. But he was gentle with my breasts. He knew I was pregnant now, and he must've remembered my reaction in the hot tub earlier, even through the alcohol. His gaze remained on my

face, minutely gauging my reaction to every movement he made.

All the while, his heavy cock slid up and down my cleft, making me squirm and bite my lip.

He inched down my body, dropping kisses as he went, hovering over my belly. I didn't know how he'd react, but he stared at it for the longest time until I had to touch him. I brushed my hand through his hair, and then he rested his cheek on my palm.

There weren't words, so I didn't try to fill the silence with them.

The momentary sweetness made me warm all over, but in no time, he was slipping downward again. He kissed my navel and continued on, nudging aside my panties to lick me where I was already so soaked. My clit pulsed under his attention, and I strained toward his mouth, spreading my legs wider while he lapped at me. He didn't rip my panties or remove them, just enjoyed me despite them.

God, he enjoyed me.

As I enjoyed him. I relished every push of his fingers inside me, every swipe of his tongue, every heated glance meant to ensure I was with him each step of the way.

The orgasm rolled through me, swift and merciless. I smothered my cries in the pillow beside me, digging my nails into the back of his neck when he turned into an overachiever and decided to give me another. He didn't even pause long enough to let me catch my breath.

My only option was to come. And come again.

I still hadn't fully stopped quivering when he rose onto his knees and gripped his cock. He moved my panties out of the way and circled his shaft over my still overstimulated clit before he leaned down to kiss me, so sweetly the backs of my eyes burned. I tasted the alcohol mixed with me on his tongue, the combination hotter than it had any right to be.

“Hold on to me.”

I wrapped my arms around his neck as he adjusted my legs around his hips and drove inside me. I wasn't even sure if my panties were still intact.

I so didn't care.

He swallowed my moans, extending our kiss while he withdrew and buried himself inside me once more. He did it again and again, his movements deep and decisive, his arm like steel where he braced it beside me on the pillows.

So much for drinking too much affecting a man's ability to fuck. It certainly wasn't affecting Asher.

But it was time to make him just as crazy as he'd made me.

Scraping my nails down his back, I flexed around his cock inside me and licked my lips, nice and slow. I slid my hand into my still semi-intact panties to strum my clit, testing both of us. I had never done this before in front of a man. Had never touched myself just to feel good, not for the express purpose of a climax.

He ate me up with his eyes, his thrusts coming even faster. Deeper. Harder. Bumping that delicious spot inside me that made my legs shake and my breaths turn to pants.

I rubbed myself just that much more quickly, loving the pressure from his fullness inside me. He grabbed my wrist and brought it to his mouth, sucking on my fingers. Then he dropped my hand to shove over my underwear even more as he redoubled his strokes.

Every time he bottomed out inside me, I gasped. And clutched him that much tighter.

He finally let out a low groan and went off inside me, those warm pulsations going on for so long that my body had no defense. I came again with a whimper against his shoulder, clinging to him through the waves of pleasure and the aftermath that always arrived too fast.

"I love giving you your firsts." He rolled onto his back and took me with him.

We'd made a bit of a mess, but obviously, neither of us was inclined to tidy up right now. Instead, we stretched out like starfish and hoped we could breathe again without wheezing sometime soon.

"Which first now? Drunk sex?"

"You're not drunk." The concern in his tone had me lifting my head. I didn't particularly appreciate him going paternalistic on me, but at least it proved he cared about the baby.

"No. I haven't drank since New Year's." I tapped his sulky mouth. "I meant you."

"Oh. Could you tell I was drunk?" He glanced down at his body as if he was ascertaining certain parts of him were still attached.

"You told me you were, remember?"

"Hmm. I'm not sure I am anymore. I think the last of it drained out of me when I saw you rocking Lily."

"I fed her again too. She was unsettled tonight. Wonder why." I propped my chin on my stacked arms. "Which first?"

He brushed my hair out of my face. "Earlier tonight, that was the first time you sucked a man's cock."

I winced. And tried not to shift my thighs together from the thrill those words gave me. "That obvious?"

"No. You were incredible. I could just tell."

"Mmm-hmm. Speaking of firsts, I doubt you get drunk that often."

"It wasn't my first time, but it's been a very long time. Billy and I used to go out most Friday nights. That changed, of course, when he met Solange and they had Lily. The Fridays were few and farther between."

"And you got wasted every time you went out?"

His chuckle was like smooth, expensive silk against my skin. "Hardly. But I tested my limits sometimes. I met someone tonight who reminded me of those days."

Involuntarily, I stiffened. “Oh, yeah? Was she pretty?”

“Try a he.” His smirk was entirely too smug. “I guess he was kind of pretty though, in a manly way. I’m sure he has no trouble meeting women.”

I snorted. “Unlike you. Too bad you’re so ugly.”

“I didn’t have time for women.”

My pulse quickened. *Didn’t*. Definitely in the past. Did that mean that he did now? He certainly didn’t seem to have cleared his schedule.

“Does he?”

“I don’t know, but he’s a single dad too, to his kid sister. He’s had a rough go of it.” Asher pinched the bridge of his nose. “Christ, he made me laugh. It was like it was with Billy, except it wasn’t. It couldn’t be.”

His pain was a palpable thing. I wanted to pull him close, to hold him while he poured out his feelings.

But he wouldn’t, and I’d just regret trying to encourage him to. So, I tried a different tack.

“Where did you go? And don’t just tell me the bar.”

“I did go to the bar.”

“Elaborate.”

He folded one arm beneath his head and stared up at the ceiling. His other hand still rested possessively on my ass. “There’s a place called Sharkey’s not far from here. I ended up there. Basically, it’s a dive. The bartender gave me an entire bottle of whiskey.”

Horrified, I narrowed my eyes. “You did not drink a whole bottle of whiskey. There’s no way in hell you could’ve gotten it up if you had. Not with your lack of tolerance.”

“Gee, who’s the expert here?”

I didn’t want to say it. I almost didn’t. “Try the girl who watched her dad get pissed-face drunk more than once and knows well enough the effects. He couldn’t even stand up

when he drank a whole bottle of hard liquor, never mind aim with your precision.”

He was silent for too long. Enough time that I knew he was pitying me. “Hannah, I’m sorry.”

I eased away from him and drew my knees up to my chest. All of a sudden, I was so cold. “You can stop saying that anytime now.”

“But it’s true. I hurt you, and I didn’t mean to. The reasons I left tonight didn’t have to do with you nearly as much as me.”

“They had to do with you feeling responsible for a kid you never intended to make.”

“You’re right. I didn’t intend to make a child. Maybe ever. I didn’t know if it would happen. I also didn’t intend for Billy to fall off that fucking roof, or for his little girl to end up with my last name. I didn’t intend to have to rock her to sleep from nightmares. I wonder if she knows, if she senses her real daddy is gone and is never coming back. If she even remembers him. If she compares us.” He sat up beside me and raked his hands through his hair. “I didn’t intend for life to be so fucking complicated.”

On that point, we could agree.

After a moment, he reached out to rub my back. “I like having you here. I know it’s new. You took this job with Lily, and maybe you figured you’d tell me once the dust settled.”

“I found out yesterday. Remember when you asked me why I was late?” I tightened my grip around my knees. “That would be why.”

“Yesterday,” he echoed dully.

“Yeah. So, I’m no more ‘settled’ with this idea than you are. My doctor ran through the options with me and—”

“What options?”

“The usual ones. Anyway, she told—”

“You’re not having an abortion.”



“No, I’m not, but not because you insisted on it. Your opinion didn’t really factor into my choice.”

His mouth curled into a sneer. “Nice to know where I rank.”

“Don’t give me that. You’re not my husband. We aren’t a couple.”

Some part of me was screaming out for him to deny that. To say something like, *hey, we screwed around a few times, maybe that makes us in some kind of relationship*. It wasn’t much, but I’d take any bone I could get right now.

But softening the blow wasn’t Asher’s style.

“No, but until we decide otherwise, I’m your employer. And I’m that child’s father, whether or not you like it.”

“Nice to see which title you put first. I’m going to take a shower and go to bed.” I didn’t want to repeat what had happened earlier, but I also didn’t want to share his air at that particular moment.

I was too hurt, and I wasn’t even sure I had any right to be. But I wasn’t sure what rights he had either.

We were both too gun-shy and too new at all of this to be able to have a rational conversation. At least right now. Maybe after we got some sleep—or perhaps within the span of the next six and a half months—we could get through a discussion about this topic.

Asher looked pointedly at the mattress we were sitting on. “This qualifies as a bed.”

“It does.” One I’d been eager to sleep with him in, until he’d made sure I remembered I was the hired help. “I also have one you made up for me down the hall.”

He exhaled. “Whichever you prefer.”

*I’d prefer to stay in your arms.*

But I didn’t dare do that, in case I was setting myself up for a very large fall. One that would affect more than me. More than Lily.

And I'd be wise to remember that the next time I wanted to let my hormones take over.

I made myself get out of his bed and walk to the door, gathering my shirt as I went. My panties were far too damp and stretched all to hell, thanks to his strong hands yanking them out of the way.

Another fantasy checked off the list at least. I'd have to be happy with that.

“Goodnight, Asher.”

This time, when I closed the door behind me, I didn't slam it.

Sometimes softness was far more powerful.

## SEVENTEEN



I SLEPT FOR FOUR HOURS AND GOT UP FOR WORK.

That was all I knew how to do. Force myself to keep going, one foot in front of the other. But today, I'd had to down three Tylenol and a strong cup of coffee before my feet would work.

Damn hangover. I hadn't even been drunk all that long.

That was life. You played, you paid. I was lucky if I even got to play first.

I grabbed the first suit that came to hand in my row of practically identical ones and dressed in the muted morning light. It was still early, and I didn't expect Hannah to be up yet. We'd gone to bed late, and she'd been sick yesterday—

I shut my eyes.

*Sick from a baby, you asshole. Not food poisoning or the flu. And you gave her ginger candies. No wonder she wouldn't consult you for any-damn-thing.*

I hadn't known. Hadn't even guessed. Because we'd used condoms, and it had only been one night.

It had only taken one fall to kill Billy. He'd been young, capable, strong. The two situations weren't at all related, except that *just once* was plenty.

Before I left, I wrote down a list of numbers where I could be reached in case of emergency, plus a few extra notes regarding Lily's preferences. Hannah and I hadn't discussed anything such as hours, or if she'd be staying here at least for

this week while my grandmother was away, or hell, even salary requirements.

That would need to be taken care of this week, as awkward as it was considering the situation. But she'd agreed to take on a job and I'd agree to compensate her, so we needed to get it handled. And this way she would be protected if our personal relationship soured—any more than it had already—and she would be on the books as Lily's official caretaker.

Assuming she still wanted to be.

That she hadn't split showed how much she already cared about my little girl. I wouldn't take advantage of her financially on top of everything else.

We just needed to actually *talk* to each other.

We'd made a baby, and we'd fucked, and we'd fought. Then we'd fucked and fought again. There hadn't been much time for any sort of conversation that didn't involve our loins, or the fruits of them.

I rubbed my forehead and tacked on a quick note at the bottom of the paper.

*I'm assuming you're still working for me. If I'm wrong, you know where to find me.*

Great, defensive with touch of dickishness. The exact tone I needed to convey after last night's colossal mess.

*I hope we can figure this out.*

I took a deep breath and studied my hurried scrawl. *One more step. You can do it.*

*Hannah, I'm sorry.*

A text came in from Vincent. He was already on the way to the trade show. Did I want to take the afternoon shift?

No. I wanted to be anywhere but here right now, as horrible of a person as that probably made me.

I set down the stubby pencil. The words I'd written seemed so inadequate. She deserved a face to face apology, but I didn't know what to say. How to explain. I couldn't puzzle out my own thought process right now.

Work was what I knew. What I was good at. Or I'd been good at it once. I just had to see my way through this period. Emerging on the other side would be Wainwright Industries' greatest triumph.

And mine, other than mastering the art of the perfect diaper.

I tucked a bottle of water in my soft-sided briefcase and stepped outside into a frosty morning. The barren trees glistened with snow and ice and the lawn was covered with a pristine layer of fluffy snow. The driveway had been plowed, as had the road itself. I would have no trouble getting out.

Halfway down the steps, I stopped and puffed out a breath. I hadn't said goodbye to Lily, as was my habit. Already I was conceding that space to Hannah. Far too eagerly, if I was being honest. She seemed to have the whole baby thing under much better control than I did.

Not even just because she was carrying one.

*Mine.*

At the sharp twist in my chest, I gripped my briefcase and turned back. I wasn't going to run out of my own home. Not again. If I happened to see Hannah while I was saying goodbye to Lily, so be it.

I headed upstairs and stopped in the doorway to Lily's room. Her mobile was spinning merrily, playing some sweet tune. Lily was staring up at it with her fist in her mouth.

“Hi there, sweetheart,” I murmured as I set down my briefcase.

Her gaze swung to me and she let out a giggly gurgle before sticking out her arms. I looked over my shoulder, sure Hannah was probably behind me.

Nope. Lily wanted me to pick her up.

Carefully, I lifted her into my arms. She grabbed a fistful of my hair and tried to drag it into her mouth, her big brown eyes fastened to mine with a plea I wasn't strong enough to resist.

So what if she sucked on my hair? It would dry.

We moved to the window and I spoke in a soft voice to her as I narrated what I saw. The smoke pluming out of chimneys, the snow-covered cars rumbling down the street, the kids charging down the mostly shoveled sidewalks with their brightly colored backpacks. Lily gnawed on my hair and listened for a good moment or two before she screwed up her pretty face and started to cry.

Not five seconds later, I also screwed up mine.

“That time again, huh?” I took her to the changing table and after shedding my jacket, made quick work of her very dirty diaper. “One good thing, at least you can't spray my suit,” I told her.

She looked up at me unblinkingly.

*She* couldn't, but maybe the new baby would.

Swallowing hard, I tugged out a new snuggly outfit for her in soft green. On the front it said *my grandma loves me mostest*, which I knew to be true.

I smiled. Hopefully, Gran was having fun on her trip. With her boyfriend.

Oddly, the thought of her actively dating didn't cause an immediate pulse-pounding headache. Probably because I was in no place to judge. She always had a good time and picked her dates well. She also didn't have to worry about pregnancy

or sticking her giant foot in her mouth so many times it got stuck there.

“She’s the smart one, right, Lily Patch?” I tugged the outfit into place and set her on her feet, laughing a little as she tried to step forward.

Then she did it again.

“Holy sh—crap, Lily, are you walking?”

Unsurprisingly, she didn’t answer, just jammed her hand in her mouth.

She’d tried a few times, but she’d never gotten very far. A blessing for sure. A walking baby was a lot more work than a crawling and climbing one.

Before I could try to get her to walk to me again, she fell back on her butt and chewed on her fingers, her cheeks reddening. She let out a sob and I rubbed the back of my neck.

Now what did she need? Could it be time for another bottle? Hadn’t Hannah mentioned feeding her before bed? That hadn’t been all that long ago in the scheme of things, as evidenced by my dry, gritty eyes.

“Hang on, kiddo.” I set her back in her crib and went to the kitchen to warm up a bottle of formula. Hannah’s door was still closed.

Maybe she’d left. I couldn’t quite blame her if she had. But no, I knew she wouldn’t do that. To me? Maybe. Just never to Lily.

Hell, she probably figured Lily needed her influence. She wasn’t wrong.

I brought the bottle back to the nursery. Lily was still crying, knuckling her streaming eyes with one hand while she sucked on the other.

“Come here, sweetheart.” I tried to pick her up and she kicked out at me, sending the bottle rolling away. I sighed and retrieved it before picking up Lily and propping her on my hip.

My gaze landed on the rocking chair where Hannah had sat with her the evening before.

I didn't think I'd ever forget that moment. Knowing she not only cradled Lily but that she had my child inside her...

Even if I had not one clue what to do with said child, I couldn't deny the feelings he or she aroused in me. More and more with each passing hour.

I lowered myself into the rocker and attempted to give Lily the bottle, but she kicked out again. Only my nimble reflexes saved it from going flying again.

"Not hungry, hmm? Diaper is clean. What's left? Do you miss Hannah?" My voice dipped on her name as if I could conjure her that easily.

Worst of all, I was pretty sure I missed her too, although it had been mere hours since I'd seen her last.

But she needed her rest. They both did.

Christ.

Lily kicked out again and shoved her other hand in her mouth to join the first. Her face was getting redder and redder despite her cries lowering to rather pathetic whimpers.

If she kept that up, we'd wake Hannah whether or not we meant to.

I set Lily higher up on my lap and fumbled out my phone from my trouser pocket. I did a quick one-handed search for possible explanations for crying babies, which ranged from diaper rash—her bum had seemed fine to me—to allergies—I had no idea to what—to teething.

Since Lily was currently rubbing her mouth against her hand and drooling all over the place, I decided that was a good guess.

"You growing some teeth in there? Let's see." I reached toward her face and she turned it away, her tears ratcheting up again.

So, that wasn't happening.



My next step was to do a search to find out how to help. Popsicles, Orajel, and a visit to the pediatrician were some of the top suggestions.

My phone buzzed in my hand. Another text from Vincent, this time saying he'd had something come up and he would appreciate me handling the morning sessions after all. We were also still a go for the overnight Friday night. Saturday would bring a full slate of meetings and social gatherings at the conference space in the Catskills, our free paper organization's official wrap-up to the week's activities.

I stared down at Lily. Fuck, how had I let that slip my mind?

Oh, that's right. Spending the day with Hannah and Lily. Sleeping with Hannah. Finding out she was pregnant. Getting drunk. Sleeping with her again.

All of that was enough to make anyone forget, I'd say.

And Lily was still crying.

"I'll pick up some Orajel for you tonight, honey. Or Hannah will."

Lily's tears slowed and she blinked at me.

"Hannah?" I tried again, just to see her reaction.

She burped.

Close enough to a smile.

I smiled at her, about to rise to transfer her back to her crib, when she burped again and spit up on my shirt.

Glancing down, I sighed. It wasn't as much spit up as usual, which made sense since she hadn't eaten recently. Maybe this was related to teething?

Who the hell knows?

Why wasn't there a comprehensive handbook for being a father? I didn't mean one of those that glossed over the basics. I wanted one that dealt with every possibility in detail and with pictures.

Unless the pictures would scar me for life.

I picked her up and set her back in her bed, speaking soothingly to her all the while. Then I took off my suit coat and undid the buttons on my shirt before removing it and stepping into the hall. I was just tugging my undershirt up from behind my head—she'd soaked me clear through both—when Hannah's door opened down the hall. She stepped out just as I yanked it off the rest of the way.

I gripped my shirts in my fist, taking in the sight of her in the top from yesterday that barely skimmed her thighs. Her hair was wild around her shoulders and her eyes were sleepy and soft, rousing me in unspeakable ways. Especially when her gaze dropped to my bare chest and lingered there before she looked up again and licked her lips.

“Must you do that?” I said under my breath.

Without giving her time to answer, I turned to head into the master suite with its connecting bathroom.

She followed.

“Do what exactly? Breathe your air? Exist on your planet? Complicate your tidy little world?”

“That's a good one.” I tossed the soiled shirts in the hamper and grabbed a handful of tissue to wipe my chest with soapy water.

“Why are you naked?”

“I'm not naked. I have trousers on.” Ones that were becoming more uncomfortable by the second.

Did her voice always sound that seductively low in the morning?

“Lily?” she guessed.

“Yes. I think she's teething. Can you get her some Orajel today? If you're able to,” I added in an attempt to be conciliatory.

It was the least I could do since I wasn't so much as glancing her way. A smart man knew when he was

outmatched.

“Sure. I can do that if you tell me what you meant in the hall.” While she spoke, she pulled down a hand towel and passed it to me. Apparently, she wasn’t impressed with my tissue clean-up job.

Considering the tissue was hanging off my fingers in sopping clumps, I couldn’t fault her logic.

I dumped it in the trash and dried off my chest with the towel instead. “Pardon?”

“Don’t ‘pardon’ me, Asher Wainwright. Tell me what you were referring to.”

I opened the drawer under the counter and withdrew the spare pair of glasses I kept in there for mornings such as this one. I slipped them on and turned toward her, frowning at her sound of distress. “What?”

“Nothing.” She fled, calling out a response over her shoulder. “I’ll get the Orajel.”

“Hannah—”

She shut the bedroom door just as I reached it. This woman was going to be the death of me.

Even so, I couldn’t deny how knowing she was taking care of Lily helped to ease the relentless knot in my chest. The new one in my groin, however, wasn’t as easily placated.

A few minutes later, I was dressed in a new shirt and undershirt and on my way out the door with my jacket and briefcase. More calls came in as I drove to the trade show location, but I ignored them.

My head was full of Hannah.

Always Hannah.

Was she taking a shower now? No, she’d mentioned taking one before bed. That explained why her hair had seemed a little damp in that stolen glance I’d taken of her before her casual move had nearly killed me.

As soon as I arrived at the trade show venue, I pulled into a space and grabbed my phone. But not to return the work calls that had come in.

Nope, I had more pressing business.

**You wanted to know what I was referring to? Your mouth. How it drives me crazy when you lick your lips. Yet you do it all. The. Damn. Time.**

I didn't know if she'd reply. It was probably better if she didn't due to the long day of work I had ahead of me. But I sat there waiting like a chump just the same.

When her text came through a moment later, I swallowed deeply before reading it.

**Yeah, well, I'd feel bad except glasses. GLASSES.**

I frowned as I flipped down the car mirror to look at myself. They were standard specs. What did she mean?

**Do you have a glasses fetish or something?**

Her response was a row of flesh-toned middle finger emojis.

I was grinning when I headed inside. Maybe this day wouldn't be so tiresome to get through after all.

When I emerged late that afternoon after a full slate of meetings and panels and a long, tedious business lunch, I was exhausted. Add in a couple of hours manning the newspaper's "information booth" and dealing with questions from prospective advertisers, and fried was my middle name. It wasn't that long ago I'd become energized at talking with colleagues and strategizing. Now I just felt like none of the tired old ways of handling increased competition from social media could possibly make up for our losses.

The whispers were growing that the newspaper business was a dying breed, especially in print. Forget whispers. They were growing closer to a roar.

And here we were, still arranging deck chairs on the Titanic. Offering sales on advertising and slashing revenue when the whole medium itself was on a downward spiral.

I'd just reached my car when my phone went off again. It seemed as if people had been contacting me all day. I stuck it in the holder and accepted call.

“Wainwright.”

“Asher, it's Daly. I just wanted to say I think it's a brilliant idea. I never thought you'd do it, man, but if now's the time, then just go for it. What are you tackling next?”

I blinked. Daly was a sort of friend, the kind you made through work and treated congenially when you saw them then never thought of them otherwise. I knew I was tired, but I couldn't make sense of what he was saying.

“Next?”

“Don't be coy with me. The word was all over the place today. Vincent's certainly stepping up, isn't he? I have to say, it's a bold move to drop the weekly and turn your focus to a monthly newsmagazine with more in depth pieces on local business and agriculture. Pairing it with an online version is \_\_\_”

“What the hell are you talking about?”

Silence fell across the line. “Oh.” He coughed. “You really don't know what I'm talking about?”

The vise around my vocal cords was barely allowing me to speak. At the same time, my shoulders felt suspiciously light. I was defensive, of course. This was my company. My baby—until I'd begun to understand the difference between a child made of figures and facts and a very live breathing one with a heartbeat and gummy smiles.

“No, I don't. But obviously, I'm missing some vital details about my company. Thanks for the heads up.”

“Wainwright, wait.”

I didn't wait. I ended that call and immediately FaceTimed Vincent, who answered from the conference room he was still in at the trade show venue. “Asher? What's up?”

In the old days—just a few months ago—he'd called me “Boss”. I'd waved it off, since I had always considered us to

be friends. We'd been working together for years. Maybe that was my problem. I hadn't exerted enough of an iron rule in the office. How often did I even see Jason? Not often, and he was Wainwright's CFO. Oh, he showed up to weekly meetings, but otherwise, good luck catching him at his desk.

I hadn't pressured him. Nor did I ride Vincent's ass for coming and going pretty much as he pleased as well, including weeklong trips to Saint Tropez on a damn near whim. They did their jobs and the company had been doing well—better than well—so I'd had no complaints.

Now I was scrambling to keep a foothold in a social media world that no longer had much room for a weekly print paper, and Vincent was using his free time to figure out how to steal my grandfather's legacy out from underneath me.

“Hello? You FaceTimed me—weird, by the way, but I'm rolling with it—and now you're not saying anything?”

“I wanted to see your eyes when I ask you if you're trying to take over my company.”

Vincent didn't blink. “No. But maybe I should be.”

“Excuse me?”

“Let's be real, Asher. Your mind hasn't been fully involved in the business since—well, you know quite well since when.”

“Oh, is that so?”

“You know it's so, man. I'm not trying to make it harder on you, but in this climate, there's no room for distractions. Your life has been a giant one for a while now. It certainly doesn't seem like that will be changing either.”

Vincent could say that again. He didn't even know about the latest thing that had rocked my world. No one did, except Hannah and I.

Unless she'd told someone, and if so, they were probably judging me right now too.

“What would you have me do? Ignore my responsibilities at home so I can work here twenty-four seven? You haven't seen me jetting off to Saint Tropez recently.”

“No, but perhaps you should. The reason I needed that vacation is because I’ve been busting my ass securing funding despite our shortfalls and trying to convince our advertisers and business partners that we still have something to offer them. Why don’t you ask Jason what he’s been doing night after night when you’ve had to run home to deal with feedings? He’s been crunching numbers, trying to balance books that can’t be balanced.” He eased a hip on the conference table he was standing next to. Files and papers were scattered over it in all directions. “Our business model doesn’t work any longer, Asher. It just does not.”

“The commercial printing side is still quite liquid.” Even I could hear the defensiveness in my tone.

“Yes, it is, but the weekly paper is dragging it down. We need to cut that ball and chain loose before it sinks the entire operation.”

“That’s not your call to make.”

“No, you’re right. Your name is the one on the building, right?” His mouth twisted into the remnant of a smile. “I’m just the street kid who worked his way up and won’t stop until your company makes it through to the other side. So, no, I’m not trying to stage a hostile takeover. More like I have some ideas of what could be. I still have the passion you used to have, Boss.”

I wanted to argue with him. How dare he question my passion when he was spreading rumors or whatever the hell he was doing about my company?

Except what if he was right? I hadn’t enjoyed work for a while. I couldn’t say exactly how long. It had become something to handle. To conquer. I wanted to be able to look back and say I’d brought the business through its roughest period. I’d righted the damn ship, against all odds.

Then I could be certain my grandfather would be proud of me.

Right now? He would not. I wasn’t doing a good enough job for the business, and I certainly wasn’t nailing my personal

life. I had two children now—for all intents and purposes—and their mother didn't think much of me at the moment. Not that I entirely faulted her there.

Wait, she was our baby's mother. Not *theirs*. I was paying her for a service. We weren't some happy little family. How could we be, when all it seemed we knew how to do was hurt each other?

"I didn't spread rumors all over town," Vincent continued, as if he didn't realize the barrage of thoughts he'd caused. "I just talked to Daly. My mistake. I thought he was trustworthy."

"No one is trustworthy," I said before clicking off. Then I just stared at the phone in my hand.

Vincent and I were supposed to do the overnight trip together in a couple of days. That gave me enough time to ready a response—either to take his suggestions under advisement, truly hear them out and give them a chance, or to cut my losses.

And let my right hand man go.



# EIGHTEEN



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*I found a double-padded play mat for our little Houdini. I left it just outside my office. Maybe we can put it together when I get back. Lily is determined to give me gray hair, I'm sure of it. I swear, I checked on the video app nine times last night.*

*I left money for groceries and whatever else you need since it's shopping day. You have my numbers if you need anything while I'm out of town.*

*Maybe a cooking lesson when I get back tomorrow. You can show me how you make vegetables actually taste delicious.*

ASHER

---

I PROPPED MY CHIN ON MY HAND AND READ OUR LITTLE community notebook again. He'd been so damn distracted the last few days. Gruff and almost curt, but here, on paper, we worked so well. I got to see some of the real Asher I remembered from our first night together.

Sometimes they were bullet points about some parenting article he read, sometimes it was a funny thing Lily did during the night.

I flipped back a few pages and smoothed my hand down his neat, slushy handwriting that was a mix of block letters and cursive. Here, there was the softness I remembered.

*Dangerous thoughts, girl.*

I wasn't even sure which Asher was the real one. We just didn't know each other enough. Obviously, we had done well enough that we'd made a human, but other than that, not so much.

Not to mention the fan of actual hundred-dollar bills he'd left me.

Plural.

Like he'd leave for his mistress.

Okay, not mistress. There would need to be sex still going on for that to be a factor, but still. It seemed a little excessive for the three of us for food for a week. It wasn't as if I cooked with truffle oil, for God's sake. And didn't he know me? I was the original budget girl. I could make a dollar stretch.

Well, ten dollars. Hello inflation.

Then again, my salary was enough to buy groceries and rent a house. Weekly.

I hadn't even wanted to discuss money with him because of the pregnancy, but I had to be able to take Lily to any doctor's appointments that came up.

I barely read the agreement we'd finally signed, salary included. Everything was just so damn overwhelming. Cooking was easier to deal with.

I pulled over my iPad and flicked through the series of recipes I'd been putting together. So far, I'd come up with twenty-seven recipes for the winter season for my new company. In fact, I had four slow cookers simmering as well as two brand new Instant Pots I'd bought with my first paycheck.

I'd put extra money on each of my sisters' food accounts at college and I still had a tidy stack of money sitting in my bank. More money than I'd seen in a damn long time. I should feel a little guilty for how much, but seeing how much he flashed around for groceries...

Well, the guilt thing was definitely not a factor anymore.

I was in the middle of updating my website for *Hannah's Helping Hand Boxes* when a text popped up on my screen.

"Finally, an adult conversation," I muttered aloud.

I was doing that a lot lately.

I quickly replied to my best friend's text and rushed to the front of the house to meet her. Lily was down for her mid-morning nap and I was in hardcore work mode during the two hours she slept. Especially since Asher's note was very accurate. Lily was definitely a Houdini these days.

Speaking of Houdini, I checked my phone app for the crib monitor just before I got to the front door. The little girl was still in angel form—aka sleeping. Though that wouldn't last for very much longer. I did a quick check through the peephole on the front door—couldn't be too careful—and swung it open.

"Hi." I rushed toward my bestie and gathered her into a fierce hug.

"Hey. Did someone die?" She patted my back weakly.

A quick prick of tears hit me sideways at the familiar vanilla and orange blossom scent of my best friend in all the world. "No. It's just been a damn long couple of weeks." I got a hold of myself and stepped back. "Wow, you look great." I tipped my head. "Did you cut your hair?"

Gabby—Gabriela Ramos, to be exact—pushed her way into the house and unfurled her miles long scarf from her neck. I was pretty sure she'd made it. If it was an Instagram fad, my bestie usually tried it. Knitting had been all the craze last year and I had two scarves to show for it in my closet.

"I did. Thank you for noticing." She spun around in the foyer before dumping her overnight bag and coat on the little bench. "This is quite the gig, girl."

"I know. Asher is insanely rich, obviously." I hung up her coat and gave her the wiggle fingers to pass over her scarf.

"Asher, huh?"

Hmm. I suppose most nannies would go with Mr. Wainwright. *Oops.*

Gabby peeked down the hallway that ended in the huge formal dining room we never used. Her huge brown eyes were a little shell-shocked. I knew how she felt. The house was very luxe, but somehow not cold. "Well, those Wainwrights sure

knew how to embed themselves into Central New York. I'm pretty sure they singlehandedly covered the cost of the rebuild on the gazebo in the park in Syracuse after that big storm took out the roof."

"How do you know these things?"

She shrugged. "I don't know. Stupid trivia sticks in my head. You know, like recipes stick in yours."

"How's John?" I hung up her coat and scarf in the main closet.

"Who?"

"The guy you were seeing around New Year's?"

"Oh, I got rid of him already. Okay, so technically he ghosted me first, but I totally was going to do the same. He was boring with a capital and italicized B."

I shook my head. Gabby went through men like she went through her Instagram fads. But she was sweet, so men flocked to her like lemonade on a hot day. She could charge a damn ten spot for a glass of her lemonade and they'd keep coming back for more. There was something about her that made men want to take care of her.

Unfortunately, she loved to let them. And the ones she chose didn't have a long-term plan about anything, including her.

I'd lost count of how many times she'd gotten her heart broken, but somehow she always got up and tried again. She was convinced Prince Charming was out there.

"I started seeing another guy, Frank, but then he kissed me, and the spark died a tragic death bathed in halitosis."

I scrunched my nose. "Yeah, that won't work."

"No way. I like kissing and the duck and cover should only be used for fires or hiding from Mami during the holidays when she asks me why I'm not married already."

"She does realize we're in our mid-twenties, right?"

Gabby shot a look over her shoulder as she sailed through the living room to the large archway that led to the kitchen. The open floor plan of this house meant there were many different ways to explore it. “As far as Mami’s concerned, I should be spitting out a second kid by now. If it was good enough for her, it’s good enough for all her girls.”

I instinctively put my hand over my still flat belly. Well, mostly flat, since I’d enjoyed my cooking a little too much since my sisters had gone away to school.

Eating my feelings? I chose to look at it like I was making sure my recipes worked.

Even if things with Asher didn’t work out, I had the Ramos family to lean on. Bonnie always treated me like one of her daughters. She had four of them by blood, so what was one more? At least that was what she always told me.

Maybe I’d have to believe her someday.

Especially since Asher and I couldn’t be in the same room without tense silence or child-rearing conversations wedging between us. And none of them were about the baby I was carrying. We both kept avoiding that one.

It was all about Lily right now.

Safe in all ways. It was as if she was an actual mutual wall we spoke over every day like neighbors. Until the nighttime. Then we went to our separate corners. After we cleaned up from dinner and put Lily to bed, Asher would close himself into his home office and do...whatever it was moguls of large companies did. I wasn’t sure because he never shared anything with me.

Except the hot, heavy looks across the hallway in the middle of the night when we fought over who would take care of Lily when she awakened with one of a half-dozen needs. The last few nights had been teething in the extreme. Everything was fair game for her mouth lately.

I was pretty sure her drool was going to be part of my DNA soon.

“Girl, I’m never going to keep those five pounds off my ass if you keep cooking things with biscuits.”

I caught up to Gabby and met her at the huge kitchen island. “Keep those paws off my dough. It’s not done resting yet.”

“Speaking of, how many deliveries do I have to make today?”

“Seven.”

“Hey, that’s pretty good.”

I shrugged. “It’s growing slowly. Better than the three it was last week.”

“Word of mouth. My mom talks you up all the time. Of course, she calls your website the Facebook, but small steps.” She put air quotes around the word Facebook.

I laughed. “Are you sure I’m not keeping you from anything tonight?”

She pulled the top off one of the slow cookers and moaned. “Bathing suit season? What’s in there?”

“Beef stew.”

Before she could reach into the bubbling food and burn herself, I smacked her hand. “Sit, I’ll make you a bowl.”

She made a face at me but followed direction. “What time does the kiddo go to bed?”

“It’s only ten-thirty in the morning.”

She rolled her eyes. “I know, but I’m thinking about tonight already. I even brought a bottle of wine.” She glanced at her watch. “And it’s eleven, thank you.”

That wine was going to be a party for one. God, I had to tell her everything and I so didn’t know how. “I haven’t even made the gravy for this yet.” But I ladled out a bit of vegetables and meat because I knew she’d eat it regardless of the biscuits and gravy. “I can make you a sandwich.”

“Nope. I’m ready for whatever that is.”

I shook my head and added a little broth. “Thanks for coming over to help.”

“Sure. It’s easier for me to do the deliveries around the transcription work I do than for you to put Lily in a carseat. Not that a cute kid doesn’t help sell stuff. They’d probably think you were a single mom and double their order.”

I swallowed. That would be a true statement in a few months. “Yes, well, if things get a little bigger, we’ll both be making deliveries. At least that’s the hope.” I pushed aside the panic of telling my best friend all my news. “Anyway, that handy bilingual thing keeps you busy all the time, so it’s still a big ask.”

She waved me off and gave me heart eyes as I set down the food in front of her. “All good. It gets me away from the screen. Ugh. I love my mother’s food, but you do the best comfort food in the damn state.”

“Even if it doesn’t have Spanish spices?”

She hovered her nose over the bowl. “Rosemary is just as good.”

I floured the marble countertop and used my steel cutter to make little piles. “I added another half-dozen recipes to the site. Hopefully, that will make people want to try me out.”

“How many do you have cooking today?” She waved her spoon.

“Six and three different kinds of cookies prepped in the fridge.”

“You’re crazy. That’s six different full meals for one client each.”

“It’s a good way to try out the recipes. And whatever is left I freeze in man-sized portions for Asher. His hours are crazy.”

“So, how is that going? That’s a lot of man flesh to have to work around. Not sure I could do it without trying to pounce on him. Especially since I looked up Mr. Asher Wainwright on the internet just to get a look see of how gorgeous this new daddy was—and girl, that’s some wrong.”

I dumped the biscuit dough out of the bowl. “Fine. Not a big deal.”

*Just got very pregnant and then decided to have sex with him a couple more times like an idiot. No big deal.*

Was I supposed to just blurt it out?

Oh, God. How was I going to tell my sisters?

Everything was such a cluster. Except cooking. That I could do. And focus on so that I didn't lose my mind completely.

“Somehow I do not believe you. He's hot with like five fire emojis.”

More like ten. Even more so when he was naked. In my limited scope, it was a rare man who looked just as good in a suit as out of one.

“He's attractive, but that's not a big deal.”

*Except that he follows me into dreams almost every night.*

I kept reliving the night of the New Year's Eve snowstorm. How he touched me and never stopped. How he was wild for me and made me just as wild for him.

“Tell that to your flushed cheeks, chica.” Gabby leaned forward, her spoon dripping on the counter.

I picked up my spray bottle and towel to clean up after her.

She only rolled her eyes and lifted the bowl, scooping up another piece of carrot before putting it back down. “I don't blame you. It's like a Hallmark movie come to life. Sweet single dad who needs you desperately. Talk about fantasy. I mean, I don't know if he's sweet, but I'm assuming he's not a monster. Though I've watched the ones with the grumpy guy who's inept, and those are equally hot.”

When I didn't say anything, she put the spoon down with a snap.

“What?”

She squinted at me.



“What?”

“How could you?”

“How could I what?”

“Are you flirty with this dude?”

“Can we stop talking about Asher?”

“I don’t know, can we? Seems like he’s an interesting topic.”

“Not really. We barely speak.”

*We just like to use our tongues and other body parts.*

God, so many other ways to use our mouths.

“Okay, so what’s the problem? You can have the hots for your boss. We’re heading for 2020. It’s not that big of a deal.”

“I’m pregnant.”

“Whoa. What? When did that happen? Weren’t you a virgin like a second ago?”

I studied my floured fingers, picking the sticky dough off with painstaking slowness. “Not exactly. Not since the new year.”

“Wait. You actually finally got a dicking, and you didn’t tell me? First of all, that’s not cool. But baby? Who? How?”

“I don’t know!”

I was pretty sure her jaw was heading for the floor. “You don’t know the dude’s name? Who are you?”

“No, I know his name. I mean, I don’t know how it happened. We used a condom, dammit. I finally got up the courage to go for it with a man who made me feel something and I got pregnant right away.”

“*Madre di dios.* My worst nightmare. Then again, I was more like seventeen when I let Paul Carson pop my cherry. But we’re *not* talking about that.”

“Or the fact that you let Paul do the popping. What were you thinking?”

“There were extenuating circumstances and an unfortunate amount of Fireball in my system. He was a really good kisser, but don’t distract me. This is not about my virginity.”

It was remarkably easy to distract her, but of course, this had to be one of those rare times she didn’t go off on a tangent.

“So, you had a one-night stand that ended up with...” She looked down at my middle. “How far along?”

“New Year’s.”

“And you didn’t tell me?”

“I just found out. I’m one of those weird women who almost has her period even after she’s pregnant, which seems excessively cruel since that should be a perk. At least it’s not an ongoing thing. Just tricked me into believing I was in the clear.”

“That is weird, but why didn’t you tell me? Was it that bad? Was he a vagrant or something?”

“No. He was amazing. It was amazing,” I sniffed as the tears sprang out of nowhere.

After that incredible night, now I had this little bean growing inside me. And I couldn’t be mad about it, even if I didn’t know how to work things out with Asher right now.

She rushed around the kitchen island to me. “Oh, no. Don’t you cry, then I’ll start crying.” She threw her arms around me. “It’s okay. We’ll do this together just like we do everything. I just wish you’d told me. You know you don’t have to do everything alone, right?”

“I know.” I rested my cheek on her shoulder, her soft sweater soothing me just as much as her familiar scent. I didn’t stay there long though, or I’d be a bawling mess. It was my default just to deal with things and move on.

“So, flirting with the hot rich dude is definitely a bit weird. I get it.”

“Yeah, about that.”

“Oh my God. You already slept with Asher too? When you get going, you really get going.”

I had to laugh, because what else could I do? “Not exactly. I mean, yes, I slept with Asher, but—”

“But what? Wow, by the state of your cheeks, I’m going to say you have the keys to orgasm city, but again, you didn’t tell me.” She shook my shoulders.

“I couldn’t. I didn’t want to even own up to it myself, especially since we ruin things as soon as we get naked. It’s like he puts his size-twelve foot in his damn mouth directly after.”

She tilted her head. “Size twelve? Wow, so he’s rich and hung? That seems unfair.”

“Why? Because he has big feet?”

She gave me bland look.

“How am I supposed to know?”

“Well, you’ve been with two guys.”

“Uh, no. It’s Asher’s baby.”

“Wait.” Gabby pushed her hair back from her face, exasperation lighting her eyes. “You’ve only worked for him for a week.”

“Yeah, it’s complicated.”

“I need more food to understand this whole thing. Like a lot more food. And you need to explain. Pronto.”

I looked back down at my unevenly cut biscuit dough with a sigh. Even talking about Asher made chaos take over my life. How many times had I divided up biscuit dough this week? Oh, only every day.

She went to the large crockpot and fixed herself another bowl. Then spotted the cheese biscuits I’d put aside for my clients.

“Hey.”

She took one with a shrug. “Your penance for not telling me about all the good-goods, woman. Now spill.”

And I did. I told her about the snowstorm and how wonderful it had been for a first time. At least I only had my experience to go by. Of course, then there was the fact that I split the morning after as if it had been a dirty little secret. Then about Bess and how I ended up working for him and just how insane my life had become.

Gabby’s huge brown eyes were saucers by the time I was finished. And another bowl of stew was gone.

“Wow.”

“Yeah. So, you can see it’s been a tense few weeks.”

“Yes, but it didn’t have to be. You could have come to me.”

“I didn’t know how.” I dumped my overworked biscuit dough into the trash. Crap. That would set me back, and Lily could wake up any minute. “I was trying to put it behind me and to get my business going. Hello, I just sent my sisters off to college. I really wasn’t interested in doing this all over again.” I pointed to the baby bottles in the drying rack.

“Your sisters weren’t babies when you took over.”

“No, but I helped raise them. I’m well-versed in this whole thing. But Lily is so sweet, and Bess is a force. And God, the money seemed like it would be good. Then I walk into this crazy mansion and find Asher.”

“Hello, one hot night dude.”

“I figured I would do this until *Hannah’s Helping Hand Boxes* got off the ground. I didn’t even know I was pregnant when I took the job. Well, he sort of strong-armed me into it, although I already adored Lily. Then...” I sighed.

“Then you have a baby daddy and a boss. You really are a Hallmark movie. A dirty one, but whoa.”

“Shut up.”

She waggled her eyebrows. “Seriously. You got way lucky with the good nookie thing. That doesn’t usually happen the first time.”

“Orgasms are the least of my problems. I have a half-going business, yes, but...”

“But what? You have a rent-free situation here and an adorable baby to babysit while you get things going. Hell, you can finally sell your folks’ house. You never loved being back there anyway.”

“Except I might need that house, after all.”

“The girls are super happy at college. They don’t even come home for vacations anymore.”

“Yeah, well, I might need it for *my* baby.”

“You told Asher, right?”

“Of course, I did. It’s so damn awkward we don’t even talk about it. I can’t count on him sticking around.”

“Fuck that.”

“Gabriela Maria!”

She flushed. “Don’t use that mom voice on me. It’s a good one though. You’re a natural.”

I lowered my forehead to the cool marble countertop. I needed a time out. “I hate you.”

She continued to eat. Loudly. At least from her slurps I could tell my food was good. “Nah, you love me. Now that I’ve completely killed my diet, let’s start packing these badboys up, huh?”

I straightened up. “That’s a good plan.”

As if she was waiting for me to get ready to work, Lily’s cries came crackling out of the baby monitor. “Hold that thought.”

“Want me to start?”

My hands itched to do it. I had a particular way I wanted things packed up. But honestly, something had to give. I

needed help if my business was going to continue to grow. “Thanks. That would be great. The boxes are in the cupboard right by you.”

She bent down and started rummaging around. “These are so cute.”

I grabbed my phone. “I’ll be back in a few minutes.”

She waved me off. “I’ve got this. No worries.”

Maybe things were looking up a little. I climbed the stairs to the nursery and wished to God I’d checked the video sooner. “Oh, Lily.”

Evidently, Houdini now knew how to get herself out of her diaper as well. And it definitely wasn’t a happy diaper.

It was time to try one of those sleep sacks I’d talked about with Asher. They would limit her mobility just enough so she couldn’t scale any cribs. Or fling any poo.

I scooped her up and headed right for the bathroom. It was going to be a long day.

*Welcome to your new life, Hannah.*



hot mess.” I started with her hand and picked noodles out of her fist with the first wipe. “My goodness. What would your dad say?”

“He’d say, what the hell happened to my kitchen?”

I spun around, the smashed pasta smearing across my apron. “Asher, hi.” My heart picked up speed as I quickly turned back to Lily. “Oh, this is nothing. You should see what she did with peas yesterday.” I moved to the side. “Say hi, Lily Patch.”

Her delighted squeal filled me with joy. She was truly the cutest baby.

When I glanced back at Asher, instead of the soft smile I usually found on his face, he was frowning. Exhaustion dug brackets along both sides of his distractible mouth. He was still wearing his aviator sunglasses and his scarlet tie was askew.

“How was your trip?”

“Fine.”

My spine tingled. His voice was tight. “You caught us right in the middle of crazy lunchtime. She’s discovering the glory of—”

“Processed food? Is that what you’re feeding her? What you’ll be feeding our baby?”

“Excuse me?” I dropped the baby wipe I was using. Lily immediately picked it up off the tray and stuck it in her mouth. Her sweet laughter turned to instant tears at the taste of the light soap in the material. “Dammit,” I muttered as I unlocked the tray to unbuckle her.

“What happened to my kitchen?”

“I was working on my meals for my business. I was just about to clean up when your daughter decided to fling her food. So, yeah, I was a little backed up on the dishes.”

“Your sole job should be taking care of Lily. That’s what I pay you for.”



I hugged Lily tighter to me. I knew he wasn't *this* guy deep down. He was too good with Lily—and with me when he let himself relax—but right now, he was the rigid Asher who made me want to pack my stuff and run.

“This agreement only works as long as we both are happy with it. What am I supposed to do when that is no longer the case?”

His jaw locked. “You're truly that unhappy?”

*There.* The flash of fear made me want to hug both of them to me and never let go. But I was still me. I'd pushed aside everything I needed before to be the rock for someone. Two someones—and it was happening all over again.

Guilt swamped me, even as my spine stiffened. I couldn't let him railroad me. Lily was the most important person in all of this.

And our child.

“I'm not just a mom, Asher. I'm not even totally a mom yet and I know that. I want more. I'm always going to want more. It's okay for you to have a career and not me?”

“I never said that.” He raked his fingers through his hair. “You're the most capable woman I know.”

Lily tucked her face into my neck, her cries subsiding as I swayed with her. “Then don't come in here with that attitude and take out your crappy day on me.”

His face closed off. “Don't claim to know what's going on with my day.”

“Why would I? You just come in here with a scowl instead of coming to see her. She missed you last night.”

He tipped back his head.

I knew it was a direct hit. I also knew it was a shitty thing to say when he was exhausted, but I just didn't care. I was tired of his crap.

I was pretty much tired of everything.

“I have to get her cleaned up.” Lily reached out a hand for him as we walked by. I couldn’t hold her away from him. It wasn’t fair. To his credit, he didn’t shrink away from her sticky fingers. He leaned down and kissed her chubby little hand, and his scent made me want to lean into him to let him hug me. To make me feel a little bit better. And that was far too dangerous.

I couldn’t count on anyone but me. Watching everyone walk away from me reminded me of that every damn day.

“I’m sorry, Hannah. I would never belittle your work. I just don’t want you to think you *have* to work. You, Lily, and our baby are all that’s important to me.”

“You have a funny way of showing it.” My voice was raspy with emotion. I knew he meant it, but he sucked at showing it unless I cornered him.

Before he could say anything else, I escaped the kitchen and headed upstairs. Lily’s lower lip trembled, but she didn’t make a sound. She only clutched me tighter. “I’m sorry, little one. He just makes me crazy.”

By the end of her bath, she was laughing once more. I took a little extra time to play with her with the tub soap I’d picked up. The foam was colored and stuck to the tiles until I rinsed it away. Keeping her in the tub seat was growing more difficult. Independence was her middle name. I used the low flow setting and rinsed her off as well as the walls.

We were both giggling by the time I bundled her up in her turtle hoodie towel, then we played on the new mat that Asher had bought for her. I couldn’t wait to put it down until he got back. Not with her level of acrobatics and urge to climb.

I was forever worried I’d come in too late and she’d break an arm or her freaking neck.

But this time with her? The afternoons where we sat and read half a dozen books? This was our favorite time. Her fluffy reddish-brown hair was getting curlier by the day, and her eyes were so often wide with fascination.

She’d burrowed inside my heart so quickly. The place she’d made would be hers forever, I was sure.

She curled in close, her thumb in her mouth. She wasn't a thumbsucker by nature, but when she was tired, it seemed to be the first thing she looked for. I read *Winnie the Pooh* to her for the third time and didn't make it through the story before both of us were asleep.

I woke to Asher slipping the baby out of my hold. I was so exhausted I'd fallen asleep sitting up. His soft singsong voice almost immediately soothed Lily back to sleep.

If I was smart, I would've told him to wake her. When she napped too much in the afternoon, it was impossible to get her to go to bed, but they were so sweet together that I couldn't pull the trigger on sense.

He set her down and leaned over the crib rail, his large hand stroking her back with such gentleness that my chest tightened. When he backed away and turned to me, it was almost as if he was embarrassed to be caught tending to her. But then he reached his hand out to me and helped me to my feet.

Instead of letting me go, he drew me closer, touching his forehead to mine. He always seemed to smell of leather and ink, a soothing combination of old and new.

As his large hand smoothed over my back, there was a distinctly different flavor to the emotions rolling through me.

Sweet Asher was something I didn't quite know how to deal with. That he did such a quick and distinct turn into the physical man I still dreamed about left me breathless. He didn't ask for anything more than closeness. The air was charged between us and I didn't think I would have said no if he'd leaned down and kissed me.

The indecision swirled in his hazel eyes, but then he brushed a soft kiss over my temple and slipped away from me.

I was about to chase after him to ask what the hell I was supposed to do with these feelings when Lily stirred. Asher paused in the doorway, but I waved him off and scooped her up. We'd slept most of the afternoon away.

And my schedule was now a hot mess.

I got her dressed and we went into the hall. I shook my head at the closed door to Asher's office. "Come on, little girl. Time to pack up dinners for Gabby to pick up."

After we went downstairs to the kitchen, instead of finding a mess, I discovered Asher had done all the dishes. He'd even put them away. Frankly, I was shocked he knew where they went. Then again, I'd find out just how little he knew when I went looking for pots and pans.

But it was the thought that counted. And he'd saved me about thirty minutes of cleanup.

I dragged in the pack and play from the living room and set Lily up with her favorite toys as was our routine. She was an avid fan of Harry Styles and Taylor Swift, which was the brunt of my current favorite playlist. Sometimes a woman just needed some angst and happily ever afters mixed together.

The rest of the day was a blur. Gabby didn't have enough time for a visit, so it was just the two of us for the duration of the day. Asher didn't even come down for dinner. Then again, I didn't go up and invite him down.

But we had a schedule and he knew it. At least that was what I kept telling myself when I was cleaning strained carrots off of Lily's face.

Maybe it was just as well he'd stayed locked away. It was probably for the best we stayed to our own spaces for a bit.

I left a wrapped plate on the counter for Asher and went upstairs to do our nighttime routine. For once, Lily went down without any issue.

At a loss with what to do with myself, I tried to curl into the chair in my bedroom with my journal. It had become more of a work and recipes catch-all these days, but it wasn't holding my interest as it usually did. I was restless in the extreme. Part of me wanted to march down to Asher's office and ask him what the hell was going on between us, but the other half of me didn't really want to know.

Answers meant I'd have to face all this...stuff. Raising a baby with a man I barely knew but ached for. A traitorous

body that was growing a human but didn't really feel that different.

In all of the baby books I was reading, they talked about changes and hormones and so many different aspects of pregnancy. Me? I just wanted to strip down to nothing at night. Spring fever or pregnancy? Who was to say?

I hadn't had nausea since the first day. For all I knew, that could've been nerves.

Sore boobs and increased sex drive were the only signs I could really identify with. I didn't even know if that was because of being pregnant or having good sex that I hadn't realized I'd been missing.

I couldn't settle all evening. In the end, the only thing that sounded good to me was ice cream.

I peered down the hallway. Both Asher's bedroom and office doors were shut. Well, his upstairs office. He also had a library downstairs, a room I tended to love to hide out in. I didn't want to analyze if he was working more upstairs to leave me to the library.

Some things were better left alone.

I slipped out, my robe swishing around me as I sneaked down the stairs. The lights were off, so I knew Asher had finally gone down for something to eat sometime between Lily's bedtime and mine.

I went right for the freezer. "Where are you?" I whispered as I dug deeper into the bottom freezer drawer of the fridge. I knew I'd stashed a half gallon of peanut butter fudge.

"Looking for this, perhaps?"

I screeched and whirled around. My heart skipped as I shoved the drawer closed. "Are you trying to give me a heart attack?"

The quick flash of white in the moonlight told me he was more amused than contrite.

"Why are you eating ice cream in the dark?"

“Could ask you the same.”

“Well, do you have another spoon?”

“No, but you can share mine.”

I crossed my arms to disguise my very braless state. I could get my own spoon, of course, but something told me to go sit with him at the little bench seating in the corner of the kitchen. The slats from the shutters left him in shadow, but there was enough light to tell me he was sitting there without a shirt.

*Go back upstairs, Hannah.*

Ignoring that voice was always bad for my panties. Hell, it was the reason I was in this whole situation. Yet I found myself crossing the room to sit across from him at the little table where we occasionally shared a meal. Only this felt far more intimate.

Still, I didn't turn on the light. I liked the dark. Liked the softness between us.

Maybe we needed the cover of night to actually be civil toward one another.

“I see you were feeling a little heated tonight too?”

He glanced down at his chest. “I've been stuck in a suit for days. I didn't even want to wear a damn T-shirt tonight.”

“Can't say I mind.” I glanced down at my chipped nails. The last vestiges of my girls' night were already fading since I did so much with my hands during the day.

God, my palms were itching to reach across the table to see if his chest was as warm as I remembered.

“Good to know you like at least part of me.”

“Feeling sorry for yourself again?”

He scraped a spoonful of ice cream out of the carton. “Never let me get away with anything, do you?”

“Well, you know you're attractive. All hot men know they are.”

He looked up from the carton. “Excuse me?”

“Oh, so you don’t know you’re rocking a six-pack or eight-pack or whatever is going on over there?”

“Would you like a better look?”

“No. I remember.”

He didn’t say anything, but that smile was back.

“Are you going to share?”

His lips twitched, but then he held out the spoon. I’m not sure what possessed me to lean in and accept it, but he watched me very carefully slide the creamy perfection off the spoon. I may have licked my lips a little more than necessary. Maybe.

The groan that left him made me smile back. It felt good to regain a more even footing with him.

At least we were both equally crazy.

“What are you doing down here in the dark?” I asked.

His smile faded. Dammit, I couldn’t just let it be us sitting here enjoying a treat. Nope.

“Couldn’t sleep.” He scraped off another spoonful for me.

“Me neither.” I took it and the cool sweetness melted on my tongue.

“Why?”

I shrugged. “Restless. Hot. Bored. Take your pick.”

“D, all of the above?”

Another spoonful and an ice cream headache would be heading my way. When I shook my head, he ate the next one.

“What about you?”

“I have some decisions to make that I’m not all that happy about.”

“Is that why you’ve been so grumpy?”

He gave me a mercurial half-smile. “Some of it.”

“And the rest?”

His dark eyes shone in the semi-darkness. Sometimes the hazel edged toward the deepest brown shade. “Takes a lot of work to stop myself from crossing the hall every night and slipping into your bed.”

“Oh.” My heart hammered as I twisted my fingers under the table.

“I know I don’t deserve that privilege.”

I didn’t know how to react to that confessional. Not when I had a similar problem following me around. “We never had a problem with the bedroom, Asher.”

“No, we sure didn’t.”

I wasn’t exactly sure how to avoid that landmine. If we talked about naked time, there would be ice cream pooling on the table. Probably under my butt when he put me up on the table. You know, for instance.

Lord, I didn’t need to be thinking about that. I was already hot and bothered with his oh-so-male scent in the air between us. Especially mixed with my favorite ice cream of late.

“What decisions do you need to make?” I asked instead of going that road.

“Just going to ignore the hallway thing?”

“Right now? Yes.”

His stupidly long lashes swept over his cheeks, and the shadows of the moonlight carved his angular face into even more fascinating lines. All of it mixed together to draw me closer to him—and not just for his sweet treats. His salty ones were just as alluring.

And that line of thinking was definitely going to melt the ice cream.

Instinct pushed me to take a chance. I stood and nudged him over on his side of the table. I pushed the ice cream away and took his hand. “What’s weighing on you so much?”

He swallowed but didn’t say anything.



I cupped his cheek. “Saying things in the dark makes it easier. That’s how my sisters would tell me the scariest problems they ever faced. Then again, theirs were more about how to break up with a boy.”

“Well, this is sort of a breakup.”

I braced. Was that what this was all about? He didn’t know how to let me down easy? To walk away?

“I’m thinking about stepping down from my company. At least the day to day operations.”

“What?”

That was not the angle I was expecting.

“I won’t bore you with the specifics of the publishing business, but needless to say, things are changing in a big way. I’ve been holding on to try to maintain the legacy my grandfather built. The newspaper that he loved with everything inside him. It was the most important thing to the Wainwrights and...”

“And it’s not to you?”

He bowed his head. “No.” His voice was little more than a sandpapery whisper. “I used to live for the paper, and now the only thing I love about the paper is—”

“Memories,” I finished for him.

His shoulders sagged as if my understanding helped to unburden him. “Yes.”

“Are you thinking about selling it?”

“No. No, I’d never do that. There’s far too much history there.”

“But...”

“But this is the thing I used to share with my grandfather. The paper was everything to him. It used to be the same for me.”

“What changed?”

“I don’t know. Maybe it’s the enormity of running everything. All the endless administration. I don’t know how he did it all.”

“Well, I’m sure he had a team. A good business is about more than who is on the masthead. I’m sure he taught you that.”

“He did, but he also never let me forget about the importance of leaving the Wainwright name behind when I’m gone.”

“But if you’re leaving it behind to no one, how does that work?”

“That’s the problem. I’m drowning in the business part without any of the love. All I remember is how my grandfather would beam when he talked about the newspaper. When he brought me to the printing room to show me how it all worked. Ink forever stained his fingers, even when he wasn’t actually a newspaper man any longer. He loved being part of the stories.”

I tipped my head against his shoulder. “When’s the last time you read the newspaper?”

“Every issue.”

“I mean, really read it.”

He raked a hand through his hair.

I pulled down his hand and laced our fingers under the table. “A long time?”

“I honestly can’t remember when I’ve read more than the headlines I approved. I’m not the editor. We have one of those, and even he’s been going to Vincent more than to me.”

“If you love it and want to get into the creation side again, that’s not a bad thing.”

His hand tightened around mine. “I don’t.”

“You know Bess only wants you to be happy. She’s not exactly the most traditional person, Asher.”

“I know, but I feel like I’m letting everyone down. The more time I’m at work, the less time I’m here with Lily. The

less time I'm here with you." His voice was rough and low. "But then I'm here and I know I'm dropping the ball at work. Vincent has been taking on more duties and has so many ideas. Good ones that I've been ignoring."

I let him keep talking. It all came out in a rush. The plans Vincent had for expanding the brand into a monthly magazine instead of a weekly newspaper. Possibly moving from only paper media into podcasts and maybe even a news show, although that was farther in the future.

I could hear the thrum of excitement under the guilt.

I couldn't disagree with Vincent's ideas because that was the way I got world and entertainment updates. Various podcasts were the only reason I was remotely informed. It was the easiest way to consume information while I was cooking.

Finally, Asher ran out of gas. "I can't disappoint Gran. She's done so much for me."

It wasn't my place to tell him what to do. But knowing how much was on his shoulders made everything make so much more sense.

"It guts me to think about telling her that I hate it. And I hate that I hate it. How can so much change in a few years?"

I pulled his hand over to my middle. "Things can change in just a few months."

He gripped the still mostly flat expanse of my stomach, and I cupped both of mine over his. "It's not selfish to want more than work. To want a legacy that includes a flesh and blood family. Talk to Bess. Talk to Vincent."

I turned into him and he curled his arms around my shoulders as if it was the most natural thing in the world. He held me so very tight. Almost too tightly, but I didn't pull back.

I needed some of his strength too. And while our little baby was coming freaking fast, I felt like I wasn't alone for the first time.

As if maybe we were building a legacy too.

## TWENTY



AFTER A LONG MONDAY, I WASN'T ANY CLOSER TO A DECISION about Vincent.

We hadn't discussed anything other than the usual work things last week. Our overnight away at the trade show wrap-up had been more of the same. Somehow we'd come to an unspoken agreement not to speak about anything but that day's agenda.

Coming home to Hannah on Saturday had been both a blessing and a curse. I'd stopped at the gym on the way back because I'd been too full of anger and frustration. I didn't want to bring any of that home to her and the baby. They didn't deserve that.

Yet I'd still snapped at her about stupid canned pasta.

Over the past week, I'd probably let on more than I wanted to. She was an intuitive woman. And I wasn't nearly as good at hiding my thoughts as I'd once believed.

My poker face must have vanished right along with my supposed passion.

I knew one thing. I had no problem feeling passionate toward Hannah, as our ice cream middle of the night date had proven quite well.

Resisting that woman was proving to be hell on my libido. And my heart.

Other niggles of interest were starting to take hold too. I didn't know if opening up to her—or trying to, despite the

freaking walls upon walls we both had around us—had unlocked some of the other juggernauts inside me, but I was becoming curious about things that had never fascinated me before.

Like podcasts.

Vincent had mentioned that word in passing the other day, and it had been stuck in my head ever since. I'd done some research over the weekend when I'd been closed into my study at home, communicating with Hannah with notes and iPad videos because it was easier. Less sticky.

Less likely to end up with us naked. We were both understandably wary about that.

Perhaps Vincent was righter than I'd given him credit for. I'd felt more flickers of excitement from looking into what equipment doing a news podcast would require than I did about selling advertising and plotting media campaigns. By far.

I hit replay on the video on my computer screen one more time. Before the picture came into focus, baby laughter filled my office. Despite the headache brewing behind my eyes, I couldn't help smiling. Hannah clapped her hands and the laughter grew louder as Lily pumped her legs and smashed her hands gleefully in the bowl of applesauce Hannah had placed before her. A dollop landed on Hannah's forehead and she sighed, still smiling. Her adoration for the baby was evident in every line of her face.

As soon as it ended, I played it again. With every viewing, the tension in my shoulders and behind my eyes bled away.

She'd started doing the videos by accident, I think. She'd tried to take a photo and had accidentally recorded a clip instead. Once she sent it to me, I'd asked for more. I liked seeing the record of their days together. There was no pressure for me, since I wasn't there to mess things up.

No, I was at work, messing things up here instead.

My phone rang and I grabbed it without looking. "Wainwright."

“Snug, your favorite person is home.”

I grinned. “All in one piece?”

“Yes. How’s my Lily girl?”

“She’s good. Teething we think, and on the verge of walking.” Another of Hannah’s video clips had shown Lily attempting another step. That one I’d received while running as if a serial killer was chasing me on the treadmill Sunday morning.

My life might be fucked up, but I was in excellent cardiovascular shape.

“And I have a surprise for you.”

“Funny that.” I glanced back at the screen where I’d paused the video on a still of Hannah leaning over Lily’s high chair. Her sweater draped just right so that I could imagine what she would look like with a swollen belly.

Soon enough, I’d know for real.

I cleared my throat. “I have a surprise for you too, Gran.”

“Oh, do you now? Is your surprise that you’re finally getting along with that sweet girl? She doesn’t know you only strike out like a bear when you have a burr in your paw.”

With effort, I dragged my gaze away from Hannah. Her honey-colored hair had tumbled into her face and she was caught in a laugh, her dancing blue eyes alight. I loved seeing her happy. Moments like that had been far too rare between us. Other than the snowy afternoon we’d spent with Lily, I’d barely even seen her smile. I needed to change that.

Just as soon as I broke the news to my grandmother that she was going to be that title twice over in a matter of months.

“My paws are just fine. How was your trip?”

“Don’t try to change the subject. I hope you’re doing better with Hannah. She’s a lovely woman, and she stepped up when we needed her most despite your bad attitude.”

“Yeah, about that—”

“Hang on a second. Chris, can you grab that bag for me? Thank you, sweetness.”

I frowned. “Chris? What happened to...Harry? Was that his name?”

I hadn't paid all that much attention once I'd ascertained that her last boyfriend seemed to be a decent guy. She never dated anyone questionable, so I dealt with most of her relationships the same way I did with the ones I wasn't having—I buried myself in work.

And now work wasn't a refuge any longer. At least not for me.

“Oh, Harry met someone in Virginia actually. Nice woman. Killer poker player. Do you know he won over a grand on our last hand the final night of the trip? I still think he cheated.” She laughed, her voice lacking rancor.

“Wait a second. Harry left you for another woman and then took one thousand from you in cards? And you're laughing? Also, since when do you bet that kind of money?”

“We were on vacation,” she said as if that explained everything.

“And that's where you met Chris?”

“Yes. He lost his wife last year and this was his first trip. He nearly aged out of the group, but they let him in, thank goodness.”

I frowned. “Aged out? How can you be too old for a seniors' group?”

How old was this guy, anyway? Did he even still have teeth?

“Not too old, too young. Let me talk to you later, Snug.” She turned the phone into her shoulder and had a hushed conversation with her younger man, ending it with a laugh before returning to the phone. “We'll talk tonight, all right?”

Gran hung up and I decided I'd dealt with enough insanity for one day. I didn't have any more meetings, thank fuck, and I had gone to the gym this morning before heading in. The only

thing left to do was for me to go home and help Hannah with Lily. She was probably overworking herself as usual, juggling far too much.

As if cooking a vast menu for humans wasn't enough, I'd seen scribblings in the margins of the Lily-related notebook we passed back and forth with recipes for dogs and cats.

So much for her dropping that idea.

So, if she wouldn't ease off voluntarily, I would help her. It was a distraction from my own tangled business at the very least. And if I had ideas for her to scale up while economizing her efforts, well, she could take it as free advice. I tugged on my suit jacket and reached for my overcoat with a grin. Or set the kitchen on fire, which was just as likely when it came to Hannah Jacobs.

On my way out the door, my phone buzzed with Vincent's ringtone. I didn't pick it up.

Bitter? Nah. I was an expert at compartmentalism. I didn't know how I wanted to deal with him yet, so I wasn't.

What I wasn't doing was letting him go. The more I turned the situation around in my mind, pulling at corners and shoving them back into the puzzle, the more I wondered if the one who needed to go was me.

I just didn't know what that meant yet. What that would look like. And if I'd still be the man I thought I was on the other side.

Blasting music on the drive home evened me out even more. I roared into my driveway with "Lola" by the Kinks screaming out the windows. I was singing along—badly—but I was enjoying it just the same.

"Fuck." I stopped the car, remembering that Lily was inside, possibly sleeping. I couldn't remember the last time I'd played music that loudly, so it normally wasn't a factor.

I'd just stepped out of the car when Hannah burst out on the porch, her hair in a messy pile on her head. "What's going on?"



I looked around. I'd parked the car in my usual spot, and nothing appeared amiss in the glow from the motion sensor lights over the garage. At a loss, I checked my watch. It was past six-thirty, which wasn't bad for me lately. I usually stayed at work far later than that.

"I don't know?"

"You were playing music?" She rushed down the steps. "I heard it all the way up the block. Your windows were down in this weather?"

Again, I glanced around. It was a clear, cool night with a scattering of stars just beginning to pop. The days were getting longer, but the nights still begun early around here. "It's nice out."

"Nice? It can't be more than forty."

I shrugged. I'd shed my overcoat in the car and was just in my suit jacket. "Feels nice to me. What are you doing?" She was crossing the driveway to me, her forehead pinched with worry.

She didn't reply, just leaned in close to sniff at my clothes. Then she pressed a cool hand to my suddenly warm forehead. It wasn't only my face that was hot. All of me was on fire, just from her touch.

Her eyes narrowed. "Are you feverish?"

She didn't follow it up with another question, but I heard it just the same. "Am I drunk?"

She didn't deny it, merely stepped back and crossed her arms over her chest. "Fine, if you want to put it out there. Are you?"

"No. I haven't had a drop. I'm not your father, Hannah."

The shutters came down over her eyes and I instantly regretted what I'd said. But what did she expect? I'd been drunk once in our acquaintance. So, just because I was singing and happy for one moment, she assumed the worst?

*She's obviously dealt with plenty of worst in her life.*

She started to turn away until my fingers gently closed around her forearm. I drew her back against me, sliding my hand down to bracelet her wrist so I could feel the wild thud of her pulse. I brushed my mouth over her hair as I spoke, wanting the words to reach her where she'd already retreated. "I shouldn't have said that. But you shouldn't assume I was drinking because I did it once. One time, Hannah. I hadn't had any alcohol in the better part of a year. Not even when Billy —"

She shifted to gaze up at me, her eyes heavy and troubled in the thin shaft of light from the garage. "You were singing. Blaring music. What was I supposed to think?"

"That maybe, just maybe, I was happy."

Her expression of puzzlement tore a laugh from my chest. I understood that look in my soul. "I don't fully understand it either. A hell of a lot is messed up or in flux right now. But I left work today and I was in a good goddamn mood, even so." I touched my thumb to the corner of her mouth. "I have to think that's because of you."

Panic flared in her eyes before she glanced over her shoulder. "I have something on the stove. And Lily is—"

I cupped her cheek and turned her face back to mine. "This will just take a second."

Slowly, so slowly, I drew her up on her tiptoes as my mouth touched hers. As gently as the wind ruffling the still bare branches of the trees, as carefully as I might've coaxed out a skittish deer. Pouring everything into the easy slide of my mouth over hers.

Waiting forever to see if she'd respond in kind or shove me away.

She made a frustrated noise in her throat and fisted her hand around my tie, choking me when she dragged me closer. I laughed and wrapped my arms around her, lifting her against me while the kiss went on and on.

Dimly, I heard the sound of tires rolling over the pavement. Didn't care. I nibbled Hannah's lower lip and

debated just carrying her inside to finish this on that sturdy bench in the front hall. Or I could just back into the car—

“Asher.” Hannah pulled her mouth from mine with a ragged hiss of breath that made me swear. “Open your eyes.”

I didn’t want to. I wanted to stay in this capsule of pure bliss. No worries, no thoughts, no pressure. Just this smart, beautiful, challenging woman in my arms and her warm mouth pressed to mine.

“Asher.” Hannah’s voice edged with nerves as she shoved at my shoulder.

“Dammit.” No matter how I tried to ignore reality, it always came back and knocked me on my ass.

Or dug half-moons into my shoulder.

Reluctantly, I dropped Hannah back to her feet and forced myself to turn toward the source of our disruption. They better have a damn good explanation—

And found my grandmother hanging out of her driver’s side window, positively cackling with glee.

“Too late, I saw you. I saw you! About time too.” She whipped around my parked car and zoomed up the drive, nearly clipping the potted petunia I’d seen Hannah fussing with the other morning.

“I think I better move that planter. It’s too close to the driveway for certain motorists.”

“Asher,” Hannah hissed. “She saw us. She knows.”

“That I can’t stay away from your mouth?” I shrugged and wiped my hand over my lips, already craving her cinnamon taste again.

My preoccupation could be why I wasn’t flipping out my grandmother had witnessed a private moment I had not been ready for her to see.

Better answer was that I was fucking glad she’d seen it. That at least one of the things I was holding back was now out in the open.

No more pretending.

No more denying.

I glanced back at Hannah and noted that she was peering at me strangely again. “You swear you haven’t been drinking?”

I moved closer to her and caressed her cheek with the tip of my finger. “Did you taste it on me?”

Hannah flushed to the roots of her hair.

I chuckled as I turned toward my grandmother as she hustled up the driveway with a large tote bag overflowing with packages. “Need some help?”

She waved me off before dropping the bag at my feet to wrap me in a giant hug. When I hugged her back, she whispered, “You did good, Snug.”

I started to argue that I hadn’t done anything—God knows Hannah and I were dancing around each other enough to wear out the carpet—but she’d already moved on to embrace Hannah. Hannah hugged her back and they spoke softly to each other for long enough that I frowned.

Were they talking about me?

I dipped my hands in my pockets and fisted them. Of course, they were.

“I have to say that I’m relieved.” Gran stepped back and reached for her tote bag, frowning as I snatched it before she could.

I grimaced. Jesus, this thing was heavy.

“Glad to be home again?” Hannah asked. “How was your trip?”

“Oh, it was lovely. Met a fine young man. We’re moving in together.”

“Excuse me?” A sharp breeze moved through the trees and it suddenly occurred to me that we were having this discussion in the driveway. I motioned toward the house. “Can we take this inside?”

“Oh my God, my roast.”

“And my granddaughter.”

They both took off, chattering all the while. The door slapped shut behind them and I stopped on the porch, digging into the bag of presents.

“Snug, get in here with that bag,” my grandmother called.

Busted again.

I followed them into the kitchen, depositing the bag in the foyer on the way. Hannah pulled out the roast pan from the oven, and the fragrant scent of the meat was nearly enough to make a man kneel down and beg. My grandmother had Lily on her hip, who was trying to pull off her dangling earring.

The quiet scene of domesticity nearly rocked me off my feet.

Hannah making dinner, my grandmother quietly chatting about her trip, my daughter bouncing and babbling to herself.

“So, I figured, why not move him in? I’m not getting any younger, you know. A woman has needs. I’d prefer not to place phone calls in the middle of the night when rolling over is just as easy.”

I shut my eyes. Pretty domestic picture shattered.

With a mallet.

Hannah nodded and stuck her long-handled fork into the roast a little too vigorously.

“I imagine the same happened here. You put two attractive adults in the same space and boom, sparks.” Gran shifted to use Lily’s hand to smack against her stomach when she said “boom” and Lily giggled as if it was the funniest joke ever. Her cheeks were smeared with something orange. More Spaghetti-Os? I wasn’t sure I wanted to know.

I moved to the sink and wet a paper towel before moving back to clean Lily’s cheeks. She swatted at the paper towel, batting it away every time I tried to clean her up.

“Be still, Lily. I know you’ve been eating that pasta in a can crap again.” I kept my voice even as I tidied her up, but from my grandmother’s sigh, she didn’t find me amusing.

Hannah didn’t respond at all.

Then Lily fisted the towel and started chewing on it.

Well aware when I was outgunned, I stepped back. “Moving a man in you just met is rather sudden.”

“Uh-huh. It is.”

“Are you sure you shouldn’t take some time?”

Gran pried the towel away from Lily and deftly wiped the baby’s cheeks. “I’m not getting younger,” she repeated. “I know what I want right now, so what, exactly, am I waiting for? Some prescribed time when proper society says it’s okay for me to move forward? Screw that.”

“Gran,” I snapped. “Language.”

My grandmother blew out a breath and passed the baby to Hannah, who had to drop her fork to take her. “I don’t know how you deal with him. I love him like the dickens, but sometimes I don’t like him very much.”

She stormed out of the kitchen and I stared after her, stunned into silence. I was even more shocked when Hannah walked over and passed Lily to me. “You look like you need a hug,” she said as Lily reached up with her chubby little arms.

Swallowing hard, I hugged her, holding on even as she started to fuss. She felt so good. Solid and warm and smelling of processed foods and powder and baby.

All the things that soothed me immeasurably right now.

“Should I be eating Spaghetti-Os too?” I wondered aloud.

Hannah snorted. “Let’s not go that far. But I think your grandmother might like to see some of that Asher who was badly singing ‘Lola’ in the car. Really badly.”

“I wasn’t singing badly. Just not well.” I wrinkled my nose at Lily. When she patted my cheeks and made the same face

back at me, I would've sworn my heart squeezed. "Okay, badly. So, why would she want to hear it?"

"Because she'd know you weren't perfect. That you know you aren't perfect. That you're human just like the rest of us and you're okay with it."

"But I'm not."

Hannah gifted me with one of her rare half smiles. "Not what? Not human? I've had cause to question that myself a time or seven."

"I'm not okay with being not perfect. Which is ridiculous. No one is. No one."

"He's learning." Hannah tugged on one of Lily's reddish-brown curls. "Slow but sure."

I gripped Hannah's hand and drew her down the hall as I shifted Lily to my other hip. My grandmother was peering into the unlit fire, her lovely face marred with worry lines I didn't like seeing. Ones I'd put on her face, not for the first time. Definitely not the last either.

When she looked over at us, I let it rip.

"Hannah's pregnant."

## TWENTY-ONE



YET AGAIN, HANNAH STARED AT ME AS IF I WAS INSANE.

Perhaps I was.

My hold on her hand tightened as she tried to yank it free. “So, if you think I’m perfect, or trying to be, you’re wrong. I mess up timing all the time. I mess up fucking everything.”

Too late, I glanced at Lily. She was occupied with trying to dangle forward far enough to pull off her sock, so I probably hadn’t scarred her too much with my language.

Hannah covered her face with her other hand. “Remind me not to try to give you advice again, okay? Like...ever.”

Gran moved forward to pluck the baby from my hip and plunked her down in the playpen across the room. Then she turned back with narrowed eyes. “Okay, I’m no expert, but I do have a child of my own. I know it usually takes a period of time for such things to reveal themselves. I’ve been gone a week. Even if you pounced on Hannah the first day she came here for the interview—and thank you, Lord, because I had serious concerns about you, Asher—you must be like Superman.”

“That’s not exactly what happened,” Hannah began.

“What concerns?” Although I knew otherwise, it didn’t stop me from preening. I could use some Superman mojo right now.

“You live like a monk.” My grandmother shook her head and glanced at Hannah. “He was practically born again.”



“Christian?”

“Hardly,” I snapped. “Just because I don’t share information about my conquests with my grandmother doesn’t mean I don’t have them.”

She rolled right over that as if I hadn’t spoken. Probably everyone in the room knew that was bullshit. Even I did. Not that I told my grandmother about my love life, but I would’ve had to have one for that to be an issue.

Before Hannah, the most enduring affair I’d had in years was with my work.

“No, the other kind of born again. We both know when Billy died, part of you did too. You’ve been a corpse since, just walking around here hollow-eyed.”

I dipped my hands in my pockets and moved to the window. What could I say? It was a truth bomb of the same kind Vincent had laid upon me last week. More and more kept coming at me, and a guy could only duck and weave so much.

“Bess, I got pregnant on New Year’s Eve. Not this month.”

“What?” My grandmother’s voice lowered. “New Year’s Eve. The night Asher didn’t come home. The only night he’d been away from that baby since she was turned over to his care.”

Lily let out a squeal and flung out a squishy block that hit Hannah in the leg. She retrieved it and brought it back to the baby, who flung it right back at her again. Hannah knelt with a smile and bounced the block into Lily’s playpen. Lily plopped on her butt and brought the block to her mouth, gnawing on it with a contented gurgle.

I caught myself smiling and glanced at my grandmother to find she was smiling too, her eyes softer than I’d seen in a while.

“So, I’m going to have another grandbaby,” she said quietly.

Hannah rose and brushed off her apron. “Yes, one is definitely cooking in there.” She glanced down at herself. “It

better only be one.”

“Is there a chance there’s more?”

“No,” Hannah and I said in unison.

“One is perfect.” My grandmother beamed, all earlier traces of concern gone from her expression.

Grandbabies trumped everything. Especially for my grandmother, who clearly had assumed I would never even date again, never mind have a kid.

I was still working my way around to grasping that concept myself.

Throat tight, I nodded. “Yeah, looks like the corpse can procreate. Quite a trick, huh?” At Hannah’s pointed glance, I reached up to loosen my tie. “Hannah did some of the work too.”

When my grandmother started to laugh and Hannah covered her face again, I rushed ahead. “I mean, her eggs. Jesus. Must you always live in the gutter?”

Smiling, my grandmother walked over to Hannah and cupped her cheeks. “You’ve accomplished an amazing feat, my girl. You’ve made him smile again. Whether or not he realizes it yet.”

Before Hannah could deny that fact—something I knew she would do—I stepped up behind her and laid my hands on her shoulders. She braced, but she didn’t move away. Little victories. “She also makes me sing off-key and eat ice cream in the middle of the night. Pretty sure canned pasta is our next frontier.” I kissed the top of her head. “I’m going to talk to Gran for a few minutes if that’s okay.”

“Sure. Of course. Absolutely. I’ll just wrap up the roast for later. Maybe we can do sandwiches. I made fresh bread...” She trailed off and fiddled with her updo. “C’mon, Lily, let’s get lost.”

“Hang on.”

She glanced back at me and I framed her face in my hands, much as my grandmother just had. The difference was I

covered her mouth with mine, kissing her gently. Her breath shuddered out. “Don’t go too far,” I murmured, squeezing her fingers.

“Right. Okay. Yes. What was I doing?”

Lily lifted her leg and tried to scale the playpen wall, propelling Hannah forward. “Oh, no, you don’t. C’mere, Houdini.” Deftly, she snagged Lily and turned her upside down, making her laugh so hard that her face turned red. Then she righted her and gave her a smacking kiss. “Let’s go eat some mashed carrots so your daddy won’t complain about you enjoying canned carbs.”

With an arch look over her shoulder, Hannah flounced out of the room, baby in tow.

“I feel like I’m watching a soap opera, but somehow it’s Friday and I’m just about to get to the cliffhanger without seeing all the days of lead up beforehand.” My grandmother marched forward and poked me in the chest. “Do not cliffhanger that girl. Even more important? Don’t tease her and kiss her and confuse her then go all Asher on her and freeze her out while you process your feelings.”

I bristled. “I’m a man. We don’t process our feelings, we ignore them.”

“Maybe that’s your problem then, you big adorable dummy.” She grabbed my arm and tugged me toward the couch. “When are you going to get more furniture in this place?”

“I’ve been adding pieces as I go. When it was just me and an infant, I didn’t have a need for—”

At her look, I locked my fingers behind my neck and leaned back. “It’s not like that yet, Gran. We aren’t playing house. She’s Lily’s nanny.”

“And the mother of your child. Did you forget that part?”

“No.” I slid a hand down the sleeve of my jacket before tugging it off altogether. Was the room heating up or was it just me?

Oh, right, it was the weight of my multiple...situations.

“It’s just complicated,” I added into the silence.

“You care about her. I see it all over your face. And her face too. From the first moment you two ‘met,’” Gran pretended to cough, “you were sparking all over the place. At least now I understand why. She should have explained to me she knew you before I extended the job offer to her.”

“Yeah, well, remember that the next time you call me Snug all over town. She didn’t realize the position she was interviewing for was as my nanny.”

“You didn’t exchange contact information before you got biblical?”

“There was no praying involved, I assure you. But no, we didn’t exchange anything. It was a hookup, Gran. You know, like the ones you have on vacation that lead to you moving the guy into your house.”

“Hmm, seems like you did the exact same thing with yours.”

I frowned. “This situation is entirely different.”

“That’s true. I didn’t impregnate my young man.” She patted my arm. “You win, Snug.”

I couldn’t help laughing. “You’re incorrigible.”

“What’s your point?”

“Hell if I know. I don’t know what the future is going to look like.” I smoothed my jacket over my lap. “I’m trying to be okay with that when every part of me is used to controlling things down to the most minute detail. But lately, that’s not an option.”

“It’s also not an option when you’re dealing with a smart, capable young woman who has a pretty good head on her shoulders and isn’t about to be herded.”

“Tell me about it. But I love that about her. She stands up to me every time.” Hearing myself, I frowned. “I like it. A lot.”

“Mmm-hmm. So, you moved her in here solely to help with Lily, not because you can’t keep your hands off her and want to see every moment of that baby’s development.”

“We aren’t—it’s not like that between us right now. Those kisses you saw are the bulk of what’s happening.”

“No, it isn’t. Anyone with eyes could see plenty more is happening than that.”

I rubbed my hands over my bleary eyes. “I don’t know how to be a father to one baby, never mind two. But I’ve got to figure it out. Lily and Hannah deserve it.”

“As does your new baby.”

“Yeah.”

“No one knows how to be a parent. Some people never learn, but that doesn’t keep them from having kids. Sometimes a baker’s dozen of them. They just don’t put the mountains of pressure on themselves to do it all perfectly like you do.” She scooped a hand through my hair. “I still remember when you were a little boy, Snug. Your father was teaching you to ride a bicycle. Then he went in the house, but you wouldn’t stop. You kept trying over and over again, that grim determination on your face.”

“I finally learned.”

“You did and got a boatload of scrapes and bruises for your trouble.”

“I did. And I kept coming back for more.”

“As you will with this. You’ll probably have six kids by the time you’re forty.”

“Bite your tongue.”

Shaking her head, she smiled. “Stop looking for the handbook on how to do it right and enjoy the little moments. And always, always do everything with love.”

I swallowed deeply. She couldn’t have given me a better segue if I’d asked for one. “Do you think that applies to work as well?”

“It applies to every-damn-thing, Snug. Are you going to tell your mother?”

“Well, I’ll have to eventually, won’t I?”

“Not necessarily. How many times has she stopped by to see Lily?”

I didn’t reply, because I didn’t want to think about anyone else who had let Lily down. My mother had never given two whits about parenting me, so why would she care about Lily?

“Christ, am I like her? Is that what this is?” I jerked to my feet and flung my jacket on the couch. It was a good thing I didn’t have a much larger object to toss. I just might have. “I should warn Hannah not to expect anything more from me. I’m a decent provider, but anything else is off the table. Even the provider part is in question.”

“Shut up and sit down.” My grandmother patted the cushion beside her.

I sat. For once, I absolutely did not want to be right.

“You are the exact opposite of your mother and when you’re lucid, you know that quite well. The reason you get so tied up about doing the right thing is because you don’t want to let anyone down. Like she let you down, over and over again. Like your father did.”

I said nothing.

“You can try to do well without driving yourself crazy that you make mistakes. No one gets it right the first time or even most times. Especially not when it comes to children and family. How many family events end up with someone in handcuffs?”

“Have you been watching those cop shows again?”

“You’re scared witless to fail Lily. Instead of looking around and seeing that you’re the one who stepped up for her. You have turned your whole life inside out to be that little girl’s father. So what if you screwed up now and then? You didn’t have any warning you were going to be a dad. One day you weren’t, then the next you were.”

That summed up what had happened in a nutshell, that was for sure.

“And in the meantime, you were also grieving your best friend. The only person who ever helped you to live for yourself and not just for your responsibilities.” Her voice gentled. “Billy squeezed every drop out of every day. Maybe he knew something we didn’t. He didn’t have that long, so he was going to make the most of it.”

My eyes prickled and I would’ve jerked to my feet again if her hand didn’t come down on my upper arm to clamp me in place.

“You deserve to have love in your life. To love and be loved. To adore the hell out of that little girl and know that any screwups you make won’t matter compared to how much love you have in your heart for her.”

I knew she wasn’t just talking about Lily. She was referring to Hannah and our baby too.

“We started everything backward.”

“So, you begin where you are right now and take the steps you missed. Maybe find some creative new ones.” She winked and I found myself laughing despite the constriction in my throat.

“I just don’t want to let them down. Billy. Grandad. Hannah. Lily. The baby. A thoughtless moment that became so much more.”

“Was it really thoughtless? I doubt that. She wouldn’t be looking at you the way she does if you two hadn’t made some magic that night, even if you’ve tried to extinguish it since.”

“I don’t want to extinguish it. I was singing tonight, Gran. Even in the midst of everything, with all that’s so fucked up, I knew I was coming home to Hannah and Lily and it made the day bearable. So much more than bearable. Just thinking of them made me happy.” I let out a long breath. “And I couldn’t tell you the last time I truly was.”

“You need to quit.”

I blinked, sure I'd misheard her. "Excuse me?"

"You need to quit the business and figure out what makes your soul sing. You have one in there, I swear, under the Hugo Boss and wingtips."

I stared at her as if she was a stranger. "Have you turned into a mind-reader?"

"No." She smiled, and for a second, the lines on her face struck a punch right to my heart. She was still beautiful, but she wore the battle scars of a lifetime well lived on her face.

But that was the crux of it—she'd *lived*. And me? I'd done a whole lot of existing.

A whole lot of waiting for a tomorrow that was the same as all the days that had come before.

"Vincent has ideas. So many of them. They're good. Innovative. Ways to keep Wainwright from dying on the vine. Which is what it's doing with me at the helm."

She took my hand and squeezed. "You can't hang on and fight change forever, Snug. Life marches on. If you don't move with it, you'll get trampled."

"I want to try something different."

I told her the ideas I had for a news-focused podcast with a slant toward local trendsetters and movers and shakers. Not always the ones who got the press elsewhere, but the ones who were affecting change right at home.

No stagnation allowed.

"We have so many other holdings and things we're involved in, charities and foundations, that even if I step back, managing our portfolio will be an undertaking. But Vincent could handle more of the day to day, and I could function as a high-level consultant. I'm also going to do this podcast." It was the first time I'd stated it as a *I'm going to* versus *I want to*—even in my own head. "I'm going to help Hannah with her meal delivery service too, if she wants the help." I took a deep breath. "And I'm going to raise my children."



“Aww, Snug.” She let out a laugh, waving me off as she rubbed at her suddenly watery eyes. “You’re such a beautifully direct arrow.”

“Thanks?”

“It’s a compliment. Your moral compass will never lead you astray.” She cupped my cheek. “I’m so proud of you.”

“Even if you don’t always like me very much?”

“Spaghetti-Os are one of this life’s most perfect foods, especially with a little grated cheese on top.”

I grinned and drew her into my arms. “I don’t know what I would do without you.”

“Luckily, you’ll never have to find out. My two grandbabies will keep me young forever.” She gave me a misty smile. “Two,” she whispered, and the backs of my eyes grew hot.

“Two,” I echoed, letting the truth really sink into me for perhaps the first time.

I’d known it before, but I hadn’t let myself truly believe it. Hannah still looked the same. Life hadn’t changed yet.

But it would. Soon. And I wasn’t going to run from those crazy, wonderful changes ever again.

I was going to face them.

Fucking finally.

Gran and I talked for a little longer, and I grilled her a bit about her new companion. She assured me he was a decent guy, and even suggested we go on a double date, which was a lot for me to consider even with my new progressive outlook. But I said I’d think about it.

I was probably going to say yes. Assuming Hannah was willing to give it a go.

Once Gran left, I went to look for Hannah and Lily. I found them curled up together on the bed in Hannah’s room, sleeping peacefully. Hannah was curled around Lily and Lily gripped Hannah’s shirt even in her sleep.

The sweetness of the scene before me made me grip the doorframe to stop myself from interrupting them.

*Let them sleep. They both need their rest.*

As if she could sense the weight of my thoughts, Hannah stirred and lifted her head. And without saying a word, she extended her arm to me as if it was the most natural thing in the world.

I joined her on the bed, wrapping myself around them both. I brushed a kiss over her temple, and Hannah fell back to sleep almost immediately.

I stretched my hand across Hannah's belly. For a moment, I could do nothing but trace the contours of her stomach, searching for any sign.

Soon.

So soon.

Then I reached for Lily too, curving my fingers around her hip.

Closing my eyes, I started to drift. No worries. No thoughts. I didn't nap as a rule, but I'd never had my family in bed with me.

I'd never had my own family before.

## TWENTY-TWO



**I'm taking my favorite girls on a picnic. I'll be home soon.**

I SWAYED WITH LILY ON MY HIP AS WE LOOKED OUT THE BIG picture in the living room. Sheets of rain were bashing the window and whipping the trees around. I was pretty sure Asher's big plans for a spring picnic were under around an inch of rain at the moment.

Possibly two.

I tucked my phone into my back pocket and set Lily down on her blanket with some Legos. Immediately a large red block went into her drooly mouth.

“Someday that tooth is going to come in, pumpkin pie.”

Lily whipped the Lego at my head. Well-versed in dealing with her future pitcher arm, I ducked to the side and it sailed over my shoulder. She picked up a blue and yellow one and smashed them together with a giggle.

I went back to folding the endless piles of baby clothes that seemed to multiply overnight. Between the drool and learning how to eat with her own fingers, Lily was keeping me busy. Laundry was always on my to-do list.

Just as I was about to put on my favorite true crime podcast, the video screen for the home Alexa unit made its watery tones.

*“Emma calling.”*

My chest tightened as it always did when one of them called me, but her smiling face filled the screen.

“Hey, Hannah Banana, how’s it going in New York?”

“Spring in central New York, you know how it goes.”

“Raining buckets?”

“You got it.” I sat down on the hassock in front of the end table with the video-chat unit tucked in the corner. I pulled it forward so I could see my little sister better. “You are a sight for sore eyes. And God, you’re so tan.”

“Well, a week in Cancun will do that.” Rachel, my other sister and Emma’s twin, peeked from behind her. “Hey!”

My eyes welled up. “Oh, you’re both calling me?”

“Yeah, we just wanted to call and tell you thanks for the extra money in our accounts. We can’t believe you did that.” Rachel tried to crane her neck. “What’s up with this new job?”

“I’m a nanny for a very sweet girl.” I twisted the video camera so they could see Lily. “The little girl’s father is...” What was a good way to say loaded and not make it sound cold and calculating?

I never really thought about Asher’s money in the day to day. This house was just his and Lily was more my...

*Daughter.*

Ugh, I couldn’t look at it that way, but some days I forgot she wasn’t mine. And I forgot all of this was a job, especially with the little bean growing inside of me.

Everything was so hard to define. The edges were growing hazier every day.

“Rich?” Emma moved her out of the way. “Dude, that place is swank.”

I sat back down. “Asher comes from quite the line of wealth. He’s a Wainwright—which might not mean much to you two. His family owns a lot of businesses, but the one you might know is the newspaper.”

“Ohhh.” They glanced at one another with wide eyes. “That’s quite the job you landed.”

“Don’t get too excited. I’m not sure how permanent it is.”

Emma rolled her eyes. “You always say that. How’s the boxed dinners deal?”

We spent a few minutes catching up about their classes and my business. I carefully avoided the big subject that I really needed to discuss with them. I wasn’t sure how to tell them. I mean, I could blurt it out like Asher had with his grandmother, but *eeep*.

“You seem like you’re a million miles away.”

“What? No. I’m right here.”

Emma and Rachel were squeezed into the screen, both peering closely at me. “Something’s different.”

“No.”

“There is.” Emma tipped her head. “Did you get laid?”

“Oh my God. We are not discussing that.”

“Is that scruff burn on your neck?”

“What?” My hand went right to where Asher had kissed me last night. He kept surprising me with sneak attacks.

“Ohhh.” Both girls made huge eyes at me. “Who is it?”

“It’s none of—”

“Hannah. Who ordered this monsoon? Didn’t they realize we had plans?”

Emma’s eyes, so much like mine, widened. “Plans?”

“Okay, gotta go.”

“Oh, no, you don’t.” Emma’s nose was practically in the lens.

“Of course, I didn’t bring an umbrella.” Asher bustled in, whipping his suit jacket off and dumping his laptop bag on the bench just inside the door. And he had to be wearing his glasses today. I was so weak against them. “Hannah?”

I tried to hit the end button, but suddenly forgot how to work anything, including my mouth to tell Alexa to end the call. Asher's white dress shirt was stuck to his body. Evidently, today he hadn't worn one of his white T-shirts under it either.

Dear God, he was positively soaked through.

"Oh, I'm sorry. I didn't realize you were on a vid call." He leaned down and kissed Lily on the head. "Can't pick you up, sweetheart. I need to change."

"Hello!" Emma, who had no chill, shouted.

Asher came up behind me. "Oh, hello." He leaned down and kissed me as well. Not on the lips, thank God, but he was behaving far too familiarly when my sisters were watching.

Boy, were they watching.

What the hell was up with him? First singing in the car, then singing in his office to a Matt Nathanson song last night. I hadn't even known Asher listened to music that wasn't classical.

I was so confused.

"I'm Asher. Can't wait for you guys to visit. We'd love for you to stay for part of the summer."

"We would?" I asked.

"Yeah, with the baby coming, I'm thinking you girls will want to enjoy the summer as much as you can."

"Baby!" My sisters shrieked in unison, and the video went black. "Sorry!" Emma righted her unit. "Baby? What baby?"

"Oh, shi—Skittles." Asher frowned and pushed his glasses up. "You didn't tell them?" he asked me out of the corner of his mouth.

"I was getting to it."

"Oh my God, what?" Emma looked downward, but of course, I was too close to the camera to see much.

I scooted back. "Not showing yet. I was going to tell you."

"Talk about burying the lead," Asher muttered.

“What? Now you start talking like a newspaper guy?”

He held up his hands. “I see you need to talk. I’m going to go change.”

“Don’t have to change on our account.” Rachel smiled dreamily. “Nice job, sis. Rich and hot.”

“Oh, God.”

“I mean I’m assuming this is your boss. Man, I think I watched this on the Hallmark channel. Or was it read the book?” Rachel’s eyes were dancing.

“Shut up.” I was mortified. And I didn’t want my sisters, or Asher for that matter, thinking that I was in this for the money.

“Actually, I knocked her up before she worked for me.”

“You are not helping,” I growled.

“Obviously not. And you definitely need to talk. I’ll take Lily upstairs with me since she’s face-planted into her Legos.”

I twisted and sure enough, Lily was out for the count. It seemed as if she did her best sleeping in the middle of chaos. Which was a very good thing considering the insanity our lives had become.

“Bye, girls. And that invitation is open-ended.” He gave me a long look, followed by a panty-incinerating smile. He stripped off his wet shirt without even looking at me.

My sisters were swooning behind me. Quickly, I moved the camera so he was out of view.

“Dammit, what’s with denying me my Magic Mike moment, Hannah?”

I ignored Rachel, but I sneaked another peek or eleven of my own.

Damn, he was gorgeous.

He scooped up a sleeping Lily, then he looked over his shoulder with an arched brow. At this point, things were so far

out of control that I went with impulse and gave him a wolf whistle.

The quick flash of his smile made my belly flip. I frowned a little when he went the long way around to go up the stairs. He probably wanted to take up his wet suit jacket too.

Or give us another chance at a peep show, the exhibitionist.

I turned back to my sisters.

“Now explain.” Rachel pointed at me, so much like our mom used to do when she was looking for juicy gossip.

I sighed. “This is going to take a while.”

“Let’s start at the beginning.” Rachel propped her chin on her hands. “Don’t leave anything out.”

Emma elbowed Rachel over. “I want to hear too.”

“It all started on a snowy New Year’s Eve.”

Rachel gave an exaggerated sigh. “Yeah, this is going to be good.”

I indulged my sisters for a little while. Knowing Asher would be taking care of Lily let me have some much-needed sister time. Even if a lot of the teasing was at my expense. I might have given a little more detail than I should have for impressionable nineteen-year olds, but I fell into telling them about Asher.

About Lily.

About the crazy life we were making by accident.

We discussed absurd baby names and that I might end up with an October baby depending on how the pregnancy went. How dates for actual pregnancy didn’t make sense at all. Not to mention that the two of them needed to be way more careful about protection than I had been.

“You don’t have to tell me, but just please be careful.”

“Ugh, don’t pull on your Aunt Hannah suit. Stay in the sister role, please.” Rachel buried her face in her hands.



“I’ll tell you one thing. Do not hook up with guys from Crescent Cove. There’s now a bumper sticker circulating that there’s something in the water here. Literally.”

“Really?” Emma’s eyes got huge.

“There’s a ridiculous baby boom going on here. Each time I make a delivery for *Hannah’s Helping Hands*, I hear another report of someone having a baby.”

“So, the boom-chicka-wow-wow is going viral in Crescent Cove? This I gotta see.”

I lifted the camera to my face. “No, you will not.”

Emma’s peal of laughter was so nice to hear. It had been a long time since we were able to talk. Some of it was my own fault. I didn’t want to be a burdensome older sister when they were just finding themselves.

“We need weekly check-ins,” I said impulsively.

“Now that you are growing a human, I think that’s a certainty. But we really do miss you, Hannah Banana.” Rachel smushed her cheek against her sister’s and they both made guppy faces. “We miss you. And we’re definitely coming to visit this summer. I did get an internship, so it won’t be the whole summer.”

“That’s wonderful. I’m so happy for you.”

“I’m actually going to work on a cruise ship for two months out of the three.” Emma made a face. “I know it’s probably going to be terrible, but I think it’s the only way I’ll get to see some of the world until school is over. I thought about taking a year off—”

At my stern expression, she laughed.

“But I don’t want to lose a whole year. A few months of being locked in a sardine can should be enough.”

I’d heard horror stories about cruise liners, but I knew that had to be more of an outlier kind of thing than the norm. I had to trust that Emma knew how to take care of herself.

“Look at you biting your tongue.” Emma’s laughter was addictive.

I couldn’t help but smile back at her. “Just promise me you’ll be careful, and that there’s a way to get out of working there if it’s awful. I don’t care what it costs, I’ll get you home if need be.”

“That’s because you’re the best.”

“All right. Let me go check on Asher and Lily. It’s far too quiet up there.”

“I’m really happy for you, Han. He seems pretty awesome. Even if you are sleeping with your boss. So scandalous.”

“Thanks, Rachel.” I shook my head. “I don’t know what’s going to happen with him. We’re taking it a day at a time.”

“Well, don’t take too long. That man is super fine, and some other girl will be ready to swoop in. He’s hot with all caps.”

“Thanks, I think.” I was still afraid to label anything about us. Even if I did find myself looking forward to his arrival each afternoon. Lately, he was often coming home with a smile and jumping in to help in the kitchen.

How many times had he shooed me out of the room to play with Lily, just so he could give me a break? He wasn’t avoiding her anymore. Sometimes when I was trying to figure out a recipe, he’d even take Lily to his office for some time together. I’d found them curled in his reading chair on more than one evening after dinner.

So much was changing, most of it in good ways.

I swallowed hard and focused in on my sisters. “I love you.”

Rachel’s eyes misted. “We love you too.”

Emma looped her arm around her sister’s neck. “We miss you and expect reports in between calls. And we’ll be sending you more names.”

I laughed. “I can’t wait.”

They waved and then they were gone. I blinked away the wash of tears. I missed them so much, but I was so proud of the women they were becoming. Both of them overachievers. Emma was still waffling about what major she wanted to stick with, but Rachel had a plan in place. She was going to be an architect, creating sustainable energy housing.

Our parents would be so proud of them, especially our mother.

I dashed away the wetness and finished folding the baby clothes in peace and quiet. I'd have to figure out what we were going to eat now that a picnic was not part of the game plan. Maybe the three of us could go get a pizza in town. I was a little sick of my own cooking at the moment.

I tucked the basket of clothes under my arm and headed upstairs. A soft, pleasant male voice came in clearer the closer I got to the top of the stairs. It was a country singer, but I couldn't name which one. I was more of a rock and pop kind of girl.

Asher's office door was open. Lily's was closed. I quietly went to check on her. She was sleeping with her arms splayed over her head. Totally out for the count. That was her exhausted sleep stance. Considering she'd been fighting her morning naps lately, I wasn't unhappy to see it. That meant she'd be out for a little bit.

Maybe we could call Bess over for a date night. No picnic, but perhaps we could salvage the day.

I set the basket of clothes on her changing table and backed out of the room, then followed the music. I found Asher setting grapes and brie on a plate. Sort of. The grapes kept rolling away, but I had to give him an A for effort. Especially since he had a bottle of sparkling grape juice in an ice bucket set up on a huge gingham blanket spread in the middle of his office floor.

He'd pushed his desk back and stacked the boxes of equipment that kept showing up every few days. Two pitchers were overflowing with spring flowers. Crayola-colored gerberas and daisies, even a handful of soft yellow and pink

tulips. There was an honest to God picnic basket sitting at the edge of the blanket. White linen napkins and silverware were set next to the plates.

I even saw an apple juice box peeking out of the cooler he'd tucked behind the basket. He'd thought of everything.

"There you are." Asher stood with an easy smile. No pinched lips or frown lines now. Thank God. "How was your talk with your sisters?"

"Good."

I tried to reel in my reaction to all of his hard work. I didn't want to make him feel self-conscious about it, but at the same time, I was so afraid to make it too big of a deal. Instead, I went with my instincts and smiled back at him.

Pleasure unfurled in my belly, along with a warmth that I hadn't felt this deeply since that very first night.

That night had included the floor and a fireplace as well.

Instead of a suit, Asher wore a pair of jeans with a button-down white shirt. Not the kind he wore to the office every day, but one that looked like it had been with him for a long time if the frayed tails were anything to go by. The sleeves were rolled back on his forearms and he was barefoot. Such a domestic look, at least for his temperament.

Right then, I felt a little frumpy in my old college hoodie and yoga pants. I'd meant to change for our picnic, but with the rain—well, it just didn't seem important.

Now? I really wished I'd taken the extra steps.

He crossed to me and curled his arm around my waist. "Had a bit of a rain delay, but I thought we could maybe do a carpet picnic. Seemed stupid to waste all the food."

"As I was just thinking downstairs that we should go out for pizza."

His smile slipped a little.

I went up on my toes and kissed him. "This is so much better."

His hold tightened and the kiss lengthened, his ink and leather scent seeping into my bones with each sweep of his tongue. The muscles that flexed and rolled under my fingers urged me closer. Each little touch the last few weeks had been leaving me starving for more.

Maybe that had been his plan all along. Right now, I didn't care.

His fingers slid away from me, coming up to cup my face. The kiss was sweeter now. The undertow of emotion and raw passion that rose up between us was more like frothy lace. The kind that tickled and teased.

I felt his smile in the kiss before I opened my eyes.

“What?”

“I've missed touching you like this.” His voice was thick and gentle. “Feeling like I should touch you like this.”

“Things are complicated.”

“They don't have to be.”

I leaned my cheek into his touch. “Easy for you to say. I'm not your baby daddy and technically your employer.”

He winced. “That's patently impossible, but yes, when you put it like that...”

“Yeah.”

“But that's not what it is about for me.” I tried to pull back, but he held me tighter. “It's more that I don't deserve you.”

“Asher—” I twisted my fingers into his shirttails.

“No, it's true. You came into my life when I couldn't see my way clear to find any kind of happiness. I didn't even think I should be happy. Not after what had happened with Billy. He died, and here I was, living the life he hoped to have with his baby girl.”

“You've done right by her. So right.”

“Now I want to do right by you.” His Adam's apple rose and fell. “I still can't believe you're here. That someone as

strong and amazing as you would stick around and give me a second chance. Or hell, fifth chance by now.” He lowered a hand to my middle. “And that there’s a piece of us growing right here no matter how many times I fuck things up.”

I opened my mouth to answer him, but he kissed me again.

All I could do was hold on. He was like a wild storm. He blew into my life with snow, and now with rain, he was asking for so much more. One season and we were speeding toward something bigger than both of us.

It wasn’t just me I had to worry about.

Finally, I tore my mouth away from him. “Just be careful with me, Asher.” I hated the weakness in my voice. Hated that I needed to voice it.

“Let me in. Give me a chance.”

I looked down at his chest. The wide expanse of it urged me to lean in. To let him shoulder some of the weight. But what if I leaned? Wouldn’t it be even harder to stand on my own if he got tired of the novelty of us?

He kissed my forehead. “You’re thinking so hard. I know I have work to do, but I’m not afraid of us. Not anymore.”

I lifted my gaze to his. I didn’t have the words. But I could show him. I lifted onto my toes and slipped my fingers through his hair. He lowered his mouth to mine. We were a pressure cooker that finally let the release valve free.

I breathed him in as my shoulders relaxed. I could feel his heart beating against my chest, knew it was echoing in the wild beat in my ears. His warm fingers slipped under my hoodie to find my belly. He trailed his fingertips over my stomach and up to my bra.

He watched me as I attacked his buttons with shaking fingers.

I felt more reassured when his hand trembled lightly against my breast. This was just as big for him as it was for me. This man had been the only one to touch me like this. Part of me knew he’d be the last one to touch me too.

Even if we didn't work, I wasn't sure I'd be able to let anyone learn my body and get to know me as Asher had.

I pushed off his shirt and trailed the pads of my fingers over the swirling ink of his many tattoos. So traditional in so many ways, and wild in others.

I knew that firsthand. I was carrying the proof of it right now.

Even when we'd tried to be safe. When we'd tried to take a slice of a lonely night between us, we'd created a tether that would never be broken. As if the universe had ideas we couldn't fathom.

He lifted my sweatshirt off and then crouched in front of me to remove my yoga pants and simple cotton underwear. "You are so beautiful."

I looked down at him, sifting my fingers through his untamable hair. Here too, he couldn't quite stay in the aristocrat box he believed he belonged in. There was so much more to Asher Wainwright.

More than even I knew.

"Let me take you to bed, Hannah."

"No. Show me here on the blanket you set up for us for our springtime picnic." I smiled faintly. "Rain be damned."

He drew me down with him, stretching me out on the soft blanket. "You deserve more than this cotton quilt."

"Pretend it's just us and the sunshine. That we have that afternoon free to be just us. That we're two people who can take the day off just to have fun and get naked."

"Every time I've touched you, it's been more than just sex." He drew his fingers between my breasts up to my neck.

I stretched into his touch, my eyes fluttering shut as he lightly scored over the column of my neck and back down. "Yes."

His lips followed the same trail as he deftly curled me closer so he could unsnap my bra. He slid the lace down and

drew a lazy trail over the tops of my breasts before finally taking a nipple into his mouth. He groaned around the tight tip and I arched to give him more access. I rolled him, so I could get my leg over his hip.

“Why are you still wearing your jeans?”

“Because if I take them off, I’ll be more worried about getting into your sweet heat than what you need.”

“What if that’s exactly what I need?”

He rolled me onto my back, taking my nipple into his mouth again as he cupped and rubbed my other breast. “Let me worship you first.”

“What if a certain little girl wakes up?”

He moved lower. “Guess I’ll just have to make my way downtown a little faster.” He inched farther down the blanket and hooked my knee over his shoulder. “I miss this, Hannah. I miss tasting you on my lips.”

I hissed out a moan and arched as he nibbled his way over my belly to my inner thigh. “It feels like you haven’t been there in so long.”

“I haven’t. And I’m going to rectify that mistreatment.”

I laughed. I didn’t realize I had laughter in me right now, but there it was. I tightened my knee against his head as he licked every inch of me then found some specialized map to all the places that made me wild.

I was a shuddering mess and he was just calmly working his way around me with a tongue that should be bronzed.

“Let go,” he said against my thigh. He nipped me, then laved his tongue over the little hurt. “Don’t fight this.”

“I’m not.”

He looked up from between my legs. “You are.”

I twisted my fingers into his hair. This disheveled and purposeful version of Asher made me want him even more. “Maybe I want it to be us, not you giving all the time.”



He crawled back up to meet me, his mouth harder and surer this time. The Asher I dreamed about and wished for when I couldn't push away the longing.

I scraped my foot down his jean-clad leg. "Off," I said against his mouth. "Inside me. Make me come again. Just us."

He groaned against my neck. "I was trying."

"And succeeding. But I just want you. If you want to spend the rest of the evening going for gold medals and lightning rounds, I'm good with that. But right now, lose the damn jeans. I need you."

The rasp of his zipper made me sigh in relief. I reached between us and fumbled with the boxer briefs keeping him from me.

"Hannah," he said in a strangled voice.

I didn't want to wait anymore. The hot length of him fit my hand perfectly. Then with his slow push into me, there was the fullness I could never seem to get enough of. I curled my legs around his hips and held him deep inside me. "There. God, yes there."

"Jesus." He raced kisses up my neck and found my mouth. He fisted my hair with one hand and braced himself over me with the other.

I didn't even care that his jeans were chafing against my thighs. I raked my nails down his back and into the back of his jeans to grip his ass. The flex of his muscles pushed me closer to the bliss I was chasing. The one I only seemed to find with him.

I wrapped myself around him and embraced the storm we were together. Even as I let it take me under, I trusted that he'd have me. That breaking under him wouldn't splinter me apart. That he'd put me back together when it passed.

He chanted my name against my mouth, my neck, even my shoulder as his teeth scraped over my flesh. I didn't think he could get any deeper inside of me, but I was so wrong. That he lost control with me and trusted I'd catch him too was so humbling.

And as powerful as anything I'd ever known.

I cried out his name, and his intense eyes snapped to mine as he slowed. There was nothing but him and me. The rough, almost frenetic pace slipped into the dreamy in-between. Where I didn't know where he ended and I began. The kisses slowed and the friction between our bodies started a slow burn.

I wasn't even aware the end was coming. I wanted to bask in the closeness we'd been too afraid to ask the other for. But he knew my body too well.

God, he fit me as if he was the missing puzzle piece the universe had created just for me.

"Hannah," he said against my neck.

I couldn't control the sob. The almost unbearable twisting release that was pleasure and pain and the sort of drowning that stole breath and sense. When I surfaced again, it was his hazel eyes searching mine.

His wet eyes mirroring every emotion I'd dared to wish for.

I cupped his face. I didn't have words for what we were yet, but I was so glad I wasn't alone anymore.

## TWENTY-THREE



“YOU WANTED TO SEE ME?” VINCENT APPEARED IN MY doorway, appearing more disheveled than I’d ever seen him.

I leaned back in my chair and closed out of the spreadsheet I’d had open detailing the rest of the year’s marketing plans. I had a feeling a lot of them would be changing at the very least, if not being cancelled altogether.

That bothered me less than I ever would’ve guessed.

“I did, but unfortunately, I have an appointment I can’t miss.”

That was an understatement. In a little while, I’d be picking up Hannah for our first real baby doctor’s appointment. Well, other than the one where she’d originally gotten the news. She was three and a half months along now, and from my reading—I shifted to make sure my leg was firmly covering the pregnancy book I’d been perusing on breaks—she was behind on her required visits.

Not that I would tell her this, of course. I had no desire to be disinvented from my own child’s doctor’s visit.

We’d been doing well lately, but a smart man knew when not to push his luck. I was also enjoying the perk of regular sex. It had only been a week or so since our carpet picnic, so early days yet on that score, but I wasn’t about to count how long it had been since I’d had even that much regularity in my life.

“Sorry. I know I was supposed to meet up with you earlier, but Connie had an issue with one of the photos in the weekly

and all hell broke loose. One of the new guys thought it would be funny to sub a picture of the mayor for a dude dressed up as a hot dog and the caption called him head wiener.” Vincent raked a hand through his unusually shaggy dark hair. He was usually clean-shaven with perfectly coiffed hair, but then again, I used to be that way too.

I rubbed the scruff I hadn’t had time to deal with this morning, due to lingering over coffee with Hannah and Lily. And before that, lingering with Hannah in bed until the baby’s cries had drawn us down the hall.

We had a lot more of that in our future. We were getting the hang of it—well, starting to anyway.

So much new. So many fresh starts.

And I wasn’t responding to Vincent, although to be honest, I found the hot dog thing pretty fucking funny.

I cleared my throat. “That’s unfortunate.”

“It’s ridiculous is what it is, and Connie is going to fire that idiot.” Vincent tucked his hands under his arms. “I figured that’s why you want to meet with me too. So, if you want to fire me, just tell me straight. I don’t need you to soften the blow. What I did was insubordination, plain and simple.”

“You didn’t intend for Daly to run to me and squeal like a little piggy.” At Vincent’s shifty expression, I checked my watch. I had a feeling we would be cutting it close for the appointment. “Or did you?”

“Deep down, yeah, I probably hoped he would. If I thought you would listen to my ideas, I would have approached you. Hell, I should have anyway. It’s none of Daly’s business, and we’re friends.”

“Are we?”

“I thought so.”

“So did I until Daly’s call. While I understand your motivations, I really wish you’d chosen another route.”

“In retrospect, so do I.” He exhaled. “If you intend to let me go, let’s do it and get it over with.”

“Why, so you can run to the Rochester Daily and share your ideas with them instead?” I shook my head. “Sorry, can’t let that happen. I want Wainwright to be a force into the next generation, and you’re the man to take us there.”

Vincent’s brow furrowed. “I am?”

“You are. I want to discuss in depth exactly what that means, and how your role will be changing—and mine, for that matter—but the appointment I can’t miss is my baby’s first doctor’s visit. Well, in utero.”

“In—what?” Vincent looked over his shoulder as if he expected said baby to appear behind him. “Where did you get another baby?”

“It sure wasn’t off eBay.” I stood and grabbed my suit jacket off the back of my chair.

“Wait, now you’re cracking jokes?” He rubbed the side of his face. “Was it really you singing ‘The Gambler’ in the john yesterday? I thought it was you, but then I decided it couldn’t be. You don’t sing.”

“I do now.” My voice was remarkably cheerful considering I was pretty sure my ears were fire-engine red. “I sing not particularly well, I make not funny jokes, and I step back in a company when someone else has all the drive and ambition that I no longer possess. But I have some interesting leads on new things to occupy myself with.” I pulled on my jacket. “What do you know about podcasts?”

“A little bit. You’re actually going to step back? You live and breathe this business, Asher.” Before I could respond, he scraped a hand through his hair. “Look, what I said probably came from a little bitterness. Not your fault, and you’ve never done anything to deserve it. You’ve been the best fucking boss a guy could ask for.” He cleared his throat. “Pardon my French.”

I laughed and bent to pick up my briefcase. “To pay me back, tell me what you know about podcasts while you walk me out.”

“Sure. And uh, Boss, you left that behind.” He pointed at my chair.

“It’ll give the cleaning staff a thrill.” I rounded the desk. “They should especially enjoy the underlined parts.”

Vincent glanced back as I tried to nudge him out the door. “What’s underlined? Is that really a preggo handbook?”

“More of a primer, let’s say. And don’t even think about looking at it. You do realize where my new home is, don’t you? Apparently, the whole town is under a baby spell.” I shut my office door behind me.

“What the hell are you talking about?”

Vincent’s reaction was similar to my own when I’d discovered Crescent Cove was well-known for something more than quaint lakeside views and charming shops. “If you’re curious, stop into Brewed Awakening in the Cove. Ask for Macy, the owner. She’ll give you an earful.”

She’d surely given me one when I stopped in for a cup of java the other morning. I’d mentioned that Hannah was Vee’s dog-walker for little Latte. Hannah had met Vee during her brief time working at the café—a job she’d quit shortly after she’d taken on the nanny job. Vee had a passel of children, thanks to an ad searching for a baby daddy in the Cove. And also, due to drinking too much of Crescent Cove’s water.

The last part was just speculation.

Vincent yanked on his tie. “I’m not sure I’m man enough to.”

“Me either, but I survived.” We crossed the newsroom and passed the fleet of offices that surrounded the main hive to emerge in the hallway that led to the exit. “I’m pretty sure Hannah and I got caught up in forces bigger than ourselves. Sage may be a baby pusher too, for all I know.”

“Who’s Hannah?” Vincent cocked his head. “Oh, your baby mama?”

I frowned. “Don’t call her that.”

“What should I call her then?”

I didn't know. We didn't have any labels for each other. We were just existing in this free space where we made the rules and figured out the path forward. "The answer," I said softly before I caught Vincent's strange look and realized what I'd said.

But it felt true, so I didn't correct my statement. Just kind of...lived with it for a moment.

That she could be my answer when I hadn't even realized I was still full of questions seemed like an unspeakable miracle.

The topic shifted to Vincent's knowledge of podcasts, which I think he appreciated. I understood the desire to relegate the subject of settling down and babies to a box at the back of the closet. God knows I hadn't been looking to expand my family on New Year's Eve.

Luckily, some unseen hands had guided us together. Or... Sage.

I was still sure she had something to do with it. Or my grandmother. Maybe both of them. Every town had a matchmaker, didn't they?

Perhaps Crescent Cove had two in the making.

Vincent and I parted with an agreement to discuss the transition on Friday, including the specifics of what exactly that would mean. But I made sure he understood that while my overall role would be smaller, I would still be keeping my hand in. I would also be working some longer hours in the weeks leading up to officially handing him the reins, just to ensure the change would be a success.

We ended the conversation with a handshake—and a hug, which I appreciated much more now that I was becoming the sort of man who sang Kenny Rogers' songs in the men's room at nine am.

The old austere Asher probably would've sprayed his hand with sanitizer and forgotten the whole thing had ever occurred. Good thing I'd sent him packing.

He was sort of an asshole.

I texted Hannah on the way to let her know I was running late.

**Oh, don't rush. I just went into labor.**

Despite that impossibility, I nearly swerved off the road.

**You nearly made me drive into a ditch.**

**You shouldn't be texting and driving anyway. What kind of example are you setting for the children?**

The word *children* sent a chill through me as it always did. At least it wasn't nearly as paralyzing anymore.

**The children can't see what I'm doing right now and I'm using text-to-speech anyway. Did you miss me?**

**Who is this again?**

Laughter rolled through me, filling the car. That was me laughing like that. Not just a polite chuckle at parties, but actually fucking *laughing*.

I swallowed hard. Billy would be proud of me. And he'd tell me it was about time.

He was right. It was past time.

When I pulled up at home, I made sure the radio was cranked up and that I was singing John Mayer's "Your Body is a Wonderland" at top volume. Hannah came out laughing, carrying Lily in her little yellow rain slicker, and I forgot how to breathe.

"You didn't finish," Hannah said breathlessly as she bent down to lean in my window.

"Finish what?"

"The song?"

"What song?"

"Asher." Hannah grinned as she pushed her finger into my forehead. "What's your damage today?"

Lily babbled a word that sounded an awful lot like "Asher" and tilted precariously forward to grab for my face. Then she gave me a sloppy kiss that smelled of grape jelly.



“Daddy,” I corrected her without thinking, my gaze connecting with Hannah’s over Lily’s reddish-brown hair.

Hannah’s throat moved as we both waited for something that didn’t come. But I couldn’t claim to be disappointed, because I’d never come so close to wanting that before.

Had never figured it was in the cards for me.

Hannah came around the car and got Lily into her carseat before joining me in the front. I turned down the radio and backed out of the driveway, my thoughts so loud she probably was getting a headache.

“You can be her Daddy too, you know.” She touched my thigh. “It’s not an either/or situation. Her father will always be her father.”

“Yeah.” I tightened my hands around the wheel. “You’re right.”

“You’ve earned that name and then some, which is why she’ll be calling you that sooner than you think. Right now, she’s pretty obsessed with sounding out *jelly*, but I bet that will be the next word on her list.”

Smiling, I slid her a sidelong glance. “Or maybe Mommy.”

She held my gaze until I reached over to grip her hand. She tangled her fingers with mine and I pressed them to her belly, needing her to know I wasn’t only talking about Lily. Our family of four was new and special and scary as hell, but I was all in.

Now I just had to convince Hannah.

We arrived at her doctor’s office a short while later. I grabbed my glasses out of the visor on the way in, raising my eyebrows innocently as Hannah shot me a look.

“I’m sure we’ll be looking at paperwork.”

“Right. You’re sure you want to make me all hot and bothered.”

I tugged her against my side as we reached the door. “Side benefit. Right, Lily Patch?”

Lily screwed up her mouth. “Asher.”

I sighed. “I’m going to be the only one at parent-teacher nights whose kid calls them by their first name, aren’t I?”

Hannah’s lips twitched. “No. Because she’ll probably call me by mine too.”

The acknowledgement that Hannah intended to stick around for the long haul made my grip around her shoulders tighten. I brushed a kiss over her hair and Lily leaned between us from her perch in Hannah’s arms, offering her face up to me for a kiss.

Hannah chuckled. “See, she thinks you’re handsome in your glasses too.”

I kissed Lily’s forehead and steered them to the desk in the waiting room. We filled out some paperwork, then took our seats.

I was only hyperventilating a little about the purpose of this visit. Baby steps sometimes felt fucking huge.

We weren’t waiting long, shockingly enough, although it seemed as if half the people waiting were entranced by Lily. Lily, however, only cared about the big foam blocks on the floor.

When Dr. Ellis’s nurse ushered us into her office, Lily was still clutching a block with the letter F that she refused to release. I’d tried to pry it away twice, only for her to howl as if I was trying to murder her.

Kids were cute. And terrifying.

“Hi, Hannah. Good to see you. And Asher Wainwright, it’s a pleasure to finally formally meet you. I’ve heard so much about you.” Dr. Ellis smiled as she and Hannah exchanged a look that I didn’t understand.

“You have?” We shook hands and I glanced at Hannah. “What has she been saying about me?”

“Just that you double bagged the night you knocked me up.”

“What? I did not.” I frowned, thinking back. “No. I didn’t. It had been a while, but not quite long enough for me to forget everything I know.”

“If that was you after forgetting...” Hannah trailed off and set down Lily on the children’s mat on the floor to play with her block.

Dr. Ellis laughed and leaned against her desk. “Happy accidents happen all the time in my line of work.” She cocked her head at Hannah. “Your mood has changed since our last appointment.”

Hannah rose from her crouch beside Lily. “I’ve had some time to sit with the idea.”

“Yes, you have. And you seem to have a supportive partner. Am I correct, Asher?”

I didn’t know if all doctors got this personal, but I had a feeling Hannah and Dr. Ellis had a different dynamic than the usual doctor/patient relationship.

“Yes. Since we’ve kicked things off with a bang already, I’ve brought some questions. I have a book, but I haven’t covered everything yet.” I pulled the folded piece of paper I’d ripped out of my Day-Timer from my jacket pocket. “How long can we safely have intercourse?”

“You did not just ask that,” Hannah muttered. “And I can answer that for her—that time has already passed. The door is locked on you now.”

“I didn’t mean how late, although that’s a good question too. I meant actual duration.”

Hannah shook her head and took the seat beside me. “If you weren’t wearing those glasses, there’s a good chance I might walk right out of this office.”

Dr. Ellis laughed. “It’s a good question to ask. As far as how late, some women find sexual intercourse to be helpful in stimulating a natural birth, especially if it ends in an orgasm. As long as the woman is comfortable and healthy in other ways, we don’t really put a date on when to stop. As for the

other,” she winked and Hannah shut her eyes, “that’s entirely up to personal preference.”

Hannah didn’t say a lot through the whole visit, although she did ask a few pertinent questions about what she should be eating and not eating and different milestones. But I was far more vocal, especially when I learned she’d actually lost three pounds since her last visit instead of gaining.

“We’re getting a steak dinner after we leave here,” I informed her. “One you didn’t make, no matter how delicious your cooking is.”

Hannah sighed and slipped her shoes back on. “I think stress burns calories, because I’m definitely eating plenty.”

“Eating for two is a different animal, but some women don’t gain much at all. I wouldn’t worry. You’re doing everything right.” Dr. Ellis smiled at Hannah. “You’re in great health, Hannah, and once we do the sonogram in about five weeks or so, you’ll be able to see your baby.”

“Including the gender?”

Hannah immediately shook her head. “I want to wait. It should be a surprise.”

“For the whole nine months? That’s a long time.”

“You’ve already covered the first three,” Dr. Ellis reminded me.

I released a slow breath. “Good point. That’s still far too long.”

“We’ll discuss it.” But Hannah sounded about as flexible as she did when I gave her business ideas. Although she was getting a bit more open-minded there.

As for the gender reveal timing, we’d just see about that. I had an ace up my sleeve.

On the way home, I made an unexpected detour. Lily was fussing in the back, so I decided to show my own flexibility by stopping at the McDonald’s drive thru and getting a soft serve vanilla cone for Lily and a Big Mac for Hannah. She rolled her

eyes, but she ate it, licking the special sauce off her fingers in a way that was far hotter than it should have been.

“Is this your first time through a drive-thru?” she asked.

“Why, just because I asked where the silverware was?”

“You have a burger and fries. You don’t *get* silverware, Mr. Silver Spoon.” She reached over to wipe salt off my chin. “I like when you don’t shave,” she added, licking the salt off her fingertip.

“Like glasses, check. Like scruff, check. Like to make me uncomfortable when there’s a baby sitting nearby, check.” I glanced over my shoulder at Lily, whose face was covered with vanilla ice cream. I couldn’t keep from laughing. “You enjoying that cone, Lily Patch?”

Hannah looked back too and laughed with me. “Lily Patch is such a cute nickname for her.”

“It was Billy’s. He always joked he found her in the cabbage patch. She was the red-headed doll, although now she’s getting more brown. Aren’t you?”

Lily tossed the remnants of the cone on the floor.

Hannah sighed, unbuckling herself. “I’ll just—”

“No, I’ve got her. Eat your lunch. The baby is hungry even if you aren’t.” I unclicked my seat belt, stopping when I realized Hannah was staring. “What?”

“You really want this baby.” She cleared her throat. “Our baby.”

I didn’t have to think. “Yes, I do. And I really want you too.” I gripped her hand. “Not as an incubator. Because you’re Hannah Jacobs, and I haven’t been able to take my eyes off of you since I saw you scribbling secrets in a diary.”

Her cheeks pinkened. “It’s more of a business planner now.”

“Did you tell it about us having sex?”

“It? You realized it’s a bound book?”

“Yes. Did you?”

She licked her lips, nice and slow. “Maybe. Maybe not.”

I shook my head. “You have an evil side, and I’m not sure what it says about me that I find it sexy.”

She gave me a rare full smile. “Me either.”

We finished our lunches and got back on the road. I had a surprise destination, one I didn’t clue Hannah in on.

“Where are we going?”

“You’ll see.” I tossed her a grin.

“Are you kidnapping me?”

“Maybe. I wouldn’t mind tying you up and having my way with you. Probably not with the baby present though.”

“Asher Wainwright, you’re a kinky sort. I never would’ve guessed.”

My grin widened. “Imagine that.”

I pulled into the parking lot of Tattoo You and Hannah whipped her head toward me. “I’m not getting a tattoo. I don’t like needles. Especially big needles. No, I hate them all.”

“We aren’t here for you.”

“Then?” Her gaze dropped to my chest, although it obviously wasn’t visible through my shirt. “You don’t have that much real estate left to get inked, at least on your torso. Which still doesn’t fit with any of the rest of you.”

“See what happens when you have a crazy buddy who encourages you to do wild stuff?” I flicked my thumb along the corner of her mouth. “Or your crazy boyfriend?”

Saying it made my pulse pound in my ears so I quickly unbuckled and got out of the car. “You and Lily can stay here. I’m just going in for a quick consultation with my regular guy. He doesn’t know if he can get the outline started today or not.”

“Okay.”

“Or you can come in if you want—”

She'd already pulled out her phone. "I'll be fine. I may come in if I need the ladies' room. Joy of pregnancy, peeing every five minutes."

On that note, I headed in.

Lance, my longtime tattoo artist, came out to greet me with a grin and a clap on the back. "I thought you were done with tats for a while." His expression clouded. "After Billy—"

"Yeah. This is for him though. And for my girl and my kids." More things that sounded weird on my tongue, but I forced them out because I couldn't wait around for the magical time when my life didn't scare the holy shit out of me.

Maybe being scared meant I was finally living again.

"Oh, yeah? You told me a little on the phone, but lay it on me. I'll do some sketches while we talk. If you like any of them, we can start laying down the outline today. Can do some more filling in in a couple weeks. We're jammed in here nowadays, man."

"That's great." I glanced out the big glass windows and noticed Hannah was now leaning into the backseat to fuss with Lily. "Let's work on those sketches and by then, Hannah should need the bathroom. I'll see if she can wait while we get it started."

Lance laughed. "Is that how it is?" He turned and craned his neck. "She's the pretty brunette in the front seat?"

"Yeah."

"You did good. She's gorgeous."

"She is."

"You said kids?" Lance waggled his brows as we moved toward his station in back. "It hasn't been that long since I've seen you. You've been busy."

"Well, Lily—"

"Yeah, Lily." Lance scraped a hand over the top of his head, skimming down over his stubby ponytail. The back of

his neck was tattooed with intricate Chinese characters. “How is she?”

“Good. Growing like a weed. She’s already at the top of her percentile.” The pride in my voice made my steps falter.

Was it odd that I was proud of something I’d had no hand in?

No. I didn’t have to take ownership in her accomplishments and milestones to appreciate them. And thank God for that.

“Not surprising. Billy was a damn string bean.” Lance pulled out a chair for me and grabbed his sketch pad. “Okay, let’s talk turkey.”

I told him what I had in mind, giving him the freedom to sketch whatever he thought would work. As I talked, he nodded and sketched and erased and added more shading.

“I was thinking a vine.”

“Where do you want it?”

I rolled up my right sleeve. “I was thinking my forearm. Not too far down, because of work—” Hearing myself, I shook my head. “Nah, I’m going to be working more out of my house for a while. I can have the fucking ink on my hand if I want it there.”

Lance grinned. “You sure can. You can have it come right down like this.” He sketched out his drawing with a fingertip on the back of my hand. He had the ink climbing toward my fingers, which was definitely more than I’d planned on. But I didn’t want to hide the design. If anything, I wanted to be able to look down and see it anytime I needed the visual reaffirmation.

I had a family now, one that was anchored in the past and growing stronger by the day.

“Not a vine though. I’m seeing a tree. Lots of gnarled branches, thick roots. And the names can be woven in between the gaps.” He turned his sketch pad toward me. “Like that.”



“Oh, that’s awesome. Can you start it today?” I rolled my shirt up even higher. “You can do it mostly black, with the names maybe in—”

“Colors like leaves I’m thinking?”

“Yes. That’s good. Autumn.” I looked up again just as the bell jingled over the door. Hannah walked inside, holding Lily on her hip, her sunglasses propping back her long fall of hair. “Hey, babe, come look at this.”

I didn’t know why I called her *babe*. I also didn’t expect her eyes to widen at the sight of me as if she’d forgotten entirely who I was. Then she pressed her lips together and rushed off with Lily in the direction of the restrooms. Somehow she knew where to find them.

Women were geniuses.

“Yeah, she’s smokin’. Got some curves on her too.” At my narrow-eyed look, Lance cleared his throat. “Just saying. I could see tattooing her name on my branch too.”

I choked out a laugh. “Jesus. But yeah, let’s get it started today. If she won’t look at the sketch, she can at least see the outline.”

“She has a problem with ink?”

“Some needle phobia. Since she’s pregnant, hope she gets over it.”

“Oh.” Lance nodded knowingly. “Kids, huh? Don’t blame you. I’d want to get that one on lockdown too.”

I frowned. “It wasn’t like that. It was just a…” Dr. Ellis’s phrase came back to mind. “Happy accident.”

“Good for you, man. Let’s get this ink started then before we get swamped.”

I tried to shift to see Hannah and Lily emerge from the bathroom, but I was positioned wrong. In no time, Lance had a good bit of the main trunk done, with the climbing branches extending up my hand. Some of them were knottier, the ink dense and dark in spots. Other spots had room for the names.

He put them down in thin black ink for now, with the idea to add highlights and color shading during the next visit.

Billy.

Gran.

Lily.

Hannah.

And the word Happy.

Just...happy.

“Oh my God. That’s—” I turned my head and glimpsed Hannah standing a few feet away, her hands up to her mouth. “Holy shit, that’s hot.”

Lance looked up from his work with a smirk. “Somebody’s getting lucky tonight.”

With effort, I tried to keep my face sober as I spoke over the noise of the tattoo gun. “You like it? Come closer. There’s —”

“I see.” She pointed at the sketch book that had fallen off the table and landed face up on the floor. “You have all of our names. And...happy?”

“Yeah, since we don’t know the gender yet, and we won’t for a while, we can’t pick a name. So, happy accident seems to fit, right?”

Hannah moved forward and cupped my cheek, leaning down to give me a hard kiss. “Yes, we can find out next month. No, you didn’t outwit me. Yes, I know you’re conning me. No, I don’t care.” She stepped back as my head revolved off my shoulders—not from the effect of the tattoo either—and smiled at the receptionist, currently carrying a giggling Lily. “Thanks for watching her for a minute.”

“Oh, no problem. Your baby is an angel.”

Hannah’s gaze met mine as she answered softly, “Yes, she is.”

## TWENTY-FOUR



“I HATE WHEN HE’S RIGHT.” I JUGGLED MY PHONE WITH MY iPad as I tried to keep my video call going with Gabby.

“No, you don’t.”

“I so do.”

I brought the phone up to meet her gaze. “Especially when I wasn’t prepared for the influx of orders.”

I tucked my phone into the stand I’d found in the pantry. No idea why it was in there, but then again, I often found weird things in the house. It was as if Asher had bought the house as is and forgot to finish filling all the rooms.

But the last owner had to have been a cook because the stand was the best thing on the planet. I was forever snatching my phone out of some puddle of sauce or pile of flour. With this thing? Well, it was official, I might actually marry it.

I quickly checked my site on my iPad and found seven more orders for this afternoon. I sent them to my label printer and for the first time since I’d opened Hannah’s Helping Hand Box, I had to turn off the delivery option.

“Don’t worry, we’ll get them all delivered.”

Since things had been going so well between myself and Asher, he’d felt comfortable enough to tell me what I was doing wrong in my business.

Looking at his gorgeous new tattoo had helped soothe my annoyance at his suggestions, I had to admit.

It had taken a few trips to the tattoo parlor, but now it was all done. Perhaps I spent a little more time than necessary making sure it was properly moisturized. Mostly because it was ridiculously thoughtful and hot in some crazy way I didn't know how to explain. Ink had never been my thing, until my traditional, workaholic lover had gone ahead and done something so over the top and special.

Something for just us and our growing family.

That was Asher. He was so linear with certain things like business. Almost rigid enough to make me want to smack the crap out of him. Then he tossed me a sweet curve ball that left me confused and nursing a mushy heart that felt almost too full.

As my menu had been too full. I honestly hadn't believed cutting it in half would help. In fact, Asher had told me to cut it down to five items.

I did it, simply to prove him wrong. And now—chaos.

Damn him.

“Thanks for helping me deliver. It's going to be crazy, but I think if we both do it, we'll be fine.”

The video shook a little and the sound of a slamming car door flooded me with relief. She was already on her way over, thank God. The vid righted itself. “I'll be there in ten.”

“Bless you.”

Gabby gave me a thumbs up. “We're good, mamacita.” Then the video went off.

I scooped up Lily and deposited her in the pack and play. She screeched her displeasure, and I gave in and gave her the puffed treats she loved. As well as her new favorite toys, a plastic bake set.

I couldn't say I minded that she was taking after me in some regard, even if I wasn't her mom. Though I felt like she was mine more every day. Asher too.

At least until lately.

Of course, he wasn't around to help today. I probably should have called Bess, but if I was going to make this business a success, I needed to find my own balance. Then again if Asher had been around, I would have been happy to let him pitch in. I'd gotten way too used to him being home in the evenings, and that was on me. I only had myself to lean on—and Gabby. She never let me down.

Already, I was thinking about asking Gabby to become my partner, not just my helper with deliveries. That was if things kept on the same trajectory. I'd thought Asher might be interested in making my company a bit of a family business, but lately, he'd been distant again. Working late hours like he had when I first started taking care of Lily.

Only this time, he continued to crawl into bed with me at night. No matter how exhausted we both were, there was no true sleep until he was curled around behind me in the deepest part of the night. It was the only thing I could hang onto at the moment.

Luckily, I was usually too busy to think about it most of the time.

Lily was walking now—not well, but just enough to get into trouble all the time. Between chasing after her and my slowly increasing customer base, I was in bed at almost the same time as Lily. Even if I wanted to stay up to have some adult conversations—or playtime—it just wasn't happening.

“All right, baby girl. Let's get this party started.” I flicked through the settings on my phone and found my packing playlist. It started with “Lay Your Hands on Me” by Bon Jovi and instantly clicked my brain into gear. By the time Gabby arrived, I'd packed up my beef stroganoff, spicy lemon shrimp, and half of the grilled veggie pasta.

She knocked on the back door to the mudroom and I let her in. “Hey.”

She swooped in and hugged me. “I can't believe you ended up with that many orders in one day.”

“I’m convinced the universe likes to mess with me. I only changed the menu to show Asher he didn’t know what he was talking about.”

“We’ll give him the win since it tripled your sales.”

I laughed. “He’ll end up all strutting peacock with the knowledge.”

“You know how to bring him back down to human male levels.”

“All I have to do is read aloud from the baby book. Usually does the trick.”

“Would work for me. Between Mami’s labor stories and yours, I’m never having a kid.”

“You say that, but then your whole world changes.”

“If you say so.” She followed me in and took an appreciative deep breath. “Girl, it smells amazing in here.”

“Thank God, I’d made enough of the stroganoff that I could extend the recipe. Serves Asher right that he won’t get to have any.”

“You are a cruel woman.”

“Damn straight.”

As usual, we worked well together. Within thirty minutes, we had everything packed up, including Lily Patch, and we were both loading every soft-sided cooler I had into our cars. We double-checked the addresses and ensured that our GPS units could actually find them before splitting up.

“I have to head to my parents’ house after deliveries.”

“That’s fine. Tell Bonnie I said hello and that I want a cooking lesson. I’d love to add some of her Spanish Italian fusion recipes to my repertoire.”

“God, her head will be swollen, but I’ll tell her.” Gabby slammed the door and rolled down the window. “I’m so proud of you for making this happen, chica.”

I grinned at her. “Thanks. Couldn’t do it without you, babe.” I waved as she headed down the drive then turned to my little charge. “You ready to go for a ride?”

Lily blew kisses, her new favorite trick. “I’ll take that as a yes.”

“Asher!”

I shook my head. “Nope, just Hannah Banana today, kiddo.”

“Bnnaaa.”

Delighted, I blew raspberries into her neck. “Close!”

When she was a giggling ball of happiness, I locked her into her crazy harness. The baby seats were no joke. I turned on some more Bon Jovi for her, since the rockers were her favorite band as of late. I was a little more partial to current music, but nineties’ rock would do for this sunny afternoon.

The first six drop-offs were perfection. I even managed to get an applesauce squeeze pack into Lily without too much fanfare. Eating in the car was a trick sometimes. I ate one too for a little sugar boost.

I plugged the next three drop-offs into the GPS, and we sang our way through the *Have a Nice Day* album. At least we were finally heading into the 2000s with that album. We were clapping along to the songs so loud that I didn’t hear the grinding noise at first.

When the song changed over to the slower “Bells of Freedom”, I heard it.

It got even louder as I stepped on the brakes. I turned down the music and winced. It had been awhile since I had driven my car, but I’d definitely never heard that sound before. Suddenly, the grinding became a screech and Lily put her hands over her ears.

“Nahh.”

“Yeah, I know, kiddo. Hang on.” I pulled over to the side of the road. “Shit.” We were just outside of town on a country road.

I grabbed my phone out of my bag and quickly went for my contacts. My thumb hovered over Asher's name. He was in meetings all day, according to our family Google calendar. This definitely wasn't an emergency.

I was an independent woman with a roadside assistance subscription. I glanced at the time with a wince. I still had a half dozen deliveries to do, and it was already after four in the afternoon. Checking the rearview mirror to make sure Lily was still happy, I dialed the tow company.

A pleasant woman picked up. I explained where I was and that my car wasn't drivable.

"Unfortunately, it's rush hour, and I can't get anyone out there for at least ninety minutes."

"Ninety? I have a child with me."

"Are you in immediate danger?" Her voice became clipped.

"No."

"Can you turn the car on to keep it heated?"

"Well, yes." Obviously, she had a checklist of some sort, and I had a feeling I was not getting any of the good checkmarks.

"Are you on the side of the road with high speed traffic?"

"Look, I get it. We're not a priority, but ninety minutes? That seems excessive."

"You are in a low tow area, ma'am."

I rolled my eyes. "I have food in the car that will spoil."

"I'm sorry. I'll have a tow truck there as soon as possible."

"Never mind."

"Are you sure?"

"I can't sit here for ninety minutes. I'll find an alternative."

The voice paused and the background noise went silent. Damn mute button. I hated when customer service people used that. Like we didn't know they were doing it. She came back



on the line. “We’ll leave the service call in. If you find an alternative, just try to call us back.”

“Fine, fine.”

I rummaged in my bag when Lily started to fuss. I took out one of her favorite teething rings and passed it back to her before I hung up.

Crap. Crap. Crap.

Again, my finger hovered over Asher’s number and I thumbed down to Gabby’s number instead. “Hey.”

“What’s up?” The air was whooshing in the background. Hands-free on a pretty spring day was no joke.

“How many deliveries do you have left?”

“I’m on the last one.”

“Great. Where are you?”

Gabby rattled off a street that was at least fifteen minutes away. I sighed. “I ran into a little trouble.”

Suddenly, the air noise lessened. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah, we’re fine. Something sounded off with my brakes, so I pulled over.”

“Oh my God. Where are you?”

“The old country road near the Leonard house.”

“I’ll be right there.” Then the line went dead.

I sighed and bounced my head against my headrest. “Seriously, how is this my life?” I turned to check on Lily. She was gnawing on the ring, drool glistening from her chin and chubby hand. One tooth had finally come in, but she was already cutting another one. “You’re going to have a full set of chompers before you turn one, kiddo.”

She squeaked out a barrage of babble followed by a giggle. I couldn’t help but smile back at her. Even at our worst moments, this kid had a smile at all times.

I did a search for tow companies in the area, then remembered Kramer & Burns from Main Street in Crescent

Cove. They did more detailing and design work than mechanics, but maybe he'd take pity on me since we were officially town residents.

"Yo." Came a female voice. "Shit, I mean, Kramer and Burns Auto, how may I help you?"

"Hi, this is Hannah Jacobs. My car broke down, and I was wondering if you were available for a tow?"

"Call Triple A, sweetheart. We only do customs."

"Wait! I live in Crescent Cove. I've heard that Dare will help out people in town."

"You heard wrong."

"Dammit, Tish." I heard the muffled voice in the background, then the phone being fumbled. "This is Dare, how can I help you?"

Lily tossed the rings at me and suddenly started to wail. Perfect.

"Hi. This is Hannah Jacobs. I tried to call Triple A, but they can't get to me for ninety—"

"Don't give it a thought. We don't leave moms stranded. Even if you weren't a mom—besides, Kels would skin me. Sorry about Tish. God, I'm turning into my wife. Let's start this again. Where are you?"

I laughed and turned in my seat to give Lily another applesauce pouch. That might buy me five minutes. "Thank you. I'm so sorry to bother you."

"Not a bother. Just let's get you situated."

I sagged against my seat. "That would be wonderful. I'm on the old county road. Just not sure exactly where."

"Can you see a marker?" I looked out my front window and saw one. Thank God, something going my way. I rattled off the number.

"Perfect. I'll be there in less than twenty."

"Thank you."

I looked at my screen again. Maybe I should text Asher. But then I'd worry him for no reason. We'd be home and in bed before he got home anyway.

I huffed out a breath and plugged it into my car charger. At least I wouldn't have a dead phone on top of all of this. I slapped my hazards on and got out to sit in the back with a whimpering Lily. By the third round of "Born to Be My Baby", Gabby was pulling up behind me.

She got out. "Okay, let me get you and the baby into my car. We can get the baby seat going. Maybe we can even get it installed before dark."

"It's not going to be dark for at least an hour."

"Yeah, but it's you and me doing the car seat." Gabby blew a lock of dark hair out of her eyes.

I laughed because if I didn't, I'd cry. "That's true. Can you help me grab the food first?"

"Yup, got it."

I leaned into the front of the car and hit rewind on the song one more time then got out to help her. When we were loading the last of the coolers into her backseat, a monster tow truck pulled in front of my car.

A rangy, blond man hopped out in a chambray shirt with the sleeves rolled back over massive forearms. "Hannah?"

"Yes!" I peeked around from the trunk. I stopped and waved to Lily in the backseat, who was doing a good job of eating her hand. "Thank goodness. I have orders that need to be delivered."

Dare scratched the back of his neck. "Well, we'll get your car all hooked up and see what's what. Your friend have the deliveries?"

"Yes. They're loaded. Kinda took up the whole of her car."

"Well, I've got a baby seat in the truck. Always seems to come in handy since my son, Sean, is forever wanting to ride with me. Think we've got you covered if you want to send your friend off."

“Oh, thank God. That would be amazing.”

“Go on and get your little one. We’ll get you taken care of.”

He ran back to his rig and backed it up to my car. I hurried over to the backseat and unbuckled Lily, then hooked the diaper bag over my arm as I slipped the baby out of her straps. Gabby came over and I handed Lily over. “Can you hold her for a sec?”

“Are we getting the baby seat?” Gabby’s eyes widened as she awkwardly took Lily. “Hey, little girl.”

Lily slapped a drooly hand against her cheek. “Asher!”

“Got that one down, kiddo,” I muttered and opened the front door to get my purse. I unhooked my phone and swallowed down a string of curse words. My charger didn’t work. Wonderful. My battery was at ten percent.

I turned it off to keep whatever I had left available and grabbed my purse.

“Dare has a carseat in his tow truck. I’m going to go into town with him.”

“Are you sure?” Gabby’s voice lowered. “I don’t want to leave you alone with some dude.”

“And I don’t want my customers to not get their dinners. It’s fine, truly.”

Gabby bit her lower lip.

“Honestly. His wife is a first-grade teacher. Or she was. Might be on maternity leave like half the town if any of the stories are true. Whatever. He’s a stand-up guy.” I took back Lily and settled her on my hip with a smile then did the bounce-sway thing she liked. Her head thunked onto my shoulder.

“If you’re sure. Keep your phone on you.”

“It’s dead. My car charger isn’t working.”

“Girl, I told you to get one of those extra battery things.”

“I know, but I was rushing around and didn’t take it off the charging station. Whatever, it’s fine. I turned off my phone, but I have a little juice left. If I get into trouble, I’ll call you.”

“I’ll be back to pick you up after I’m done.”

“No, you said you had a thing at the house for your parents.”

“It’s fine. They’ll understand.”

“I’ll call Asher if I have to. I just know he’s wrapped up in meetings until later tonight.”

“I’m coming to get you.” Gabby’s voice firmed. “Then I’ll take you to the house.”

“No, you’re going to go home and take care of whatever it is you had plans to do.”

She gave a dramatic sigh. “Gina has birthdays every year.”

“Oh, geez. No. You will go to your sister’s birthday dinner right after the last delivery.” When she opened her mouth to argue, I pointed at her. “That’s an order.”

“You’re the worst.”

“No, I’m the best. And I want us to seriously talk about doing this thing together. For real.”

“What?” Gabby’s dark eyes went wide.

“We do all the things together, don’t we? This should be included.”

“I don’t know what to say.”

“Say you’ll think about it. Then we’ll crunch some numbers and see what we can come up with. Especially if we’re going to keep getting orders like this.”

“Yeah. I mean, I have a lot of ideas if you’re really serious.”

My throat closed up a little and I swallowed down the lump. “Yes. I should have asked you sooner.” I patted my slight bump. “Things are going to get hairy soon.”

“And not because you can’t see your cooch to shave.” She impulsively hugged me and even kissed Lily’s forehead without being coaxed to do it.

“You’re terrible.” I laughed and patted her arm. “Okay. Go before the deliveries are even later.”

“Going.” She dabbed at her eyes. “Okay.” She blew out a breath with a laugh. “I’ll find you tomorrow. But text me to let me know you’re home.”

“I will.”

She ran back to her car and took off with a wave.

I turned to find Dare already hooking my tires up to whatever winch thing he had going on. He gave Lily a half smile and she buried her face into my neck.

“Sorry. She definitely missed her nap.”

“She’s not screaming the world down. It works for me. Ready?”

I nodded and followed him to the truck. We got Lily in the seat and I sat in the back with her. It was cramped, but she was happy to have me sitting beside her. She wouldn’t let go of my finger at first. Until she looked out the window and realized she had a very different vantage point than my little car.

I relaxed against the seat and dug into my purse. I hadn’t checked in with him all day. And he usually texted me a few times to make sure there was nothing amiss.

Then Dare asked me a few questions about what I’d heard when I pulled over. When I made the sound, Lily laughed. Dare gave a small laugh and made a phone call to the shop. I was just about to ask Dare if he had a charger when we hit Main Street.

By then we were getting into the shop, and the noise was intense. Lily’s eyes grew huge as she took in all the big machines.

“Tell you what. I’m pretty sure it’s your rotors. You probably were driving on the last slivers of your brake pads. It’s not a huge deal. Will probably take me about an hour to

get them fixed. So, if you want to head over to the café we'll have you on your way."

"Are you serious? It sounded so much worse."

"Nothing quite like metal grinding on metal to scare the crap out of you. If it's worse than that, I'll come down and have a talk with you."

"Thank you so much."

"Happy to help."

I unbuckled Lily and let Dare help me get out of the huge truck. A stunning redhead came out with a welding mask in her hand.

"So, this is the mom you helped. I swear you people are so mush with the kids and moms."

"It's called being a human, Tish." Dare shook his head. "Don't mind her. She forgets how to talk to people. Why we usually keep a welding tool in her hand."

Tish shrugged and put the shield on. She threw up a peace sign and sauntered away.

I glanced around at the custom motorcycle getting worked on in the corner, and the very posh vintage Mustang on a lift. I really didn't want to think about how much this was going to cost me. This was no quickie mechanic place.

Luckily, I had quite a bit of money socked away these days.

"My phone is almost dead, so I'll just come back in an hour or so?"

Dare shook his head. "No. I'll come to you. Or I'll send Rylee a message to let you know to come down. I think she's working at the café today. She's my brother's wife."

"Oh, okay. Sounds good. I really can't thank you enough for helping me."

"Anything for a Cove resident. Even if you're pretty new."

“Good to know. We’re not going anywhere.” At least I was pretty sure we weren’t. I stuffed my purse into the diaper bag and headed out into the near dark. The days were getting longer, but I’d definitely been pushing my luck with everything today.

Brewed Awakening was busy as usual, but not quite as bad as the lunch rush. I was running on empty on a number of levels, so I ordered a mom-to-be friendly cappuccino for me, juice box for Lily and decadent piece of chocolate cake for me.

I freaking deserved it.

I found a table by the window and set Lily in one of the high chairs. Lily shoved her fist into her eye and rubbed hard. “I know how you feel. Just a little bit longer.”

At least I hoped so.



## TWENTY-FIVE



THIS WAS IT. THE DAY I'D BEEN WORKING TOWARD FOR WEEKS. Months really, even without fully knowing it. On a number of levels. And as a reward, we'd even finished our final meeting before the reveal a couple of hours early.

I shuffled files into my briefcase, already looking forward to ceremonially dumping the bulk of them into my filing cabinet once I was home. No longer would I be tethered to my office on the go. "Tomorrow's the big day. Are you ready?"

Vincent took a breath, flashing me a grin. "Yeah, Boss, I really think I am."

"You can stop calling me Boss anytime now. You'll officially be fulfilling that role yourself in," I glanced at my watch, "under six hours."

"God. Intense. But you'll still be the boss for all intents and purposes."

"Yes, just less seen and heard from unless you need me. Which you won't. I have every confidence in you."

Vincent got to his feet and gripped the back of the padded chair. "You're really sure you want to do this? I gotta say, I never saw you as the house husband type. Even when the thing happened with your friend, you continued on for the longest time as nothing had fazed you."

"When Billy died, you mean. Not a thing. And if I acted unfazed, it was because I was trying like fucking hell to keep everything together for a little girl who didn't deserve the hand she was dealt."

“Yeah.” Vincent pinched the bridge of his nose. “My apologies. I don’t mean to diminish it. I give you all the respect in the world for stepping in. I don’t think I could’ve done that. I mean, kids? Yeah, no, not ready yet.”

“I thought the same. But luckily, life wouldn’t wait for my balls to drop so I had to figure it all out.” I gripped the handle of my briefcase, imprinting the feel of it on my hand. Hopefully, I wouldn’t be carrying it again anytime soon. “You’d be surprised what you can do when you have no choice.”

“But to step back from a successful career—”

“I’m just changing my career. Going in a different direction. I’m hoping to launch the podcast by summertime, so don’t think you’ve seen the last of me. The goal is to pair it with *In Focus* as a tool to go deeper on those news stories.”

Vincent nodded. “It’s a great angle. I’m looking forward to kicking everything off.”

“Tomorrow we make the announcement and do the ribbon cutting for the inaugural issue of the magazine, and then we go from there.” I moved around the table to clap him on the back. “Congrats, Boss.”

Vincent laughed. “Not true, but it still sounds nice. Thank you for this opportunity. I won’t let you down.”

“No, and more importantly, you won’t let yourself down. Every day is a chance to start the rest of your life. Make it a good one.” I glanced at my watch again. “On that note, I’m going home to hopefully do the same.”

“Oh, big plans tonight? I’ll walk you out.”

“Yes, need to pick up some sparkling grape juice and maybe some flowers.” I smiled, remembering. “Tulips, I think.”

“Romantic night on tap then?”

“Among other things. I’ve been keeping this all under wraps to surprise Hannah. Figured she might want to be at the

big cover reveal tomorrow. Depends, of course, if she can take time off from her meal delivery service—”

“Oh, she does that? That’s good to know. I’ve been looking into those delivery services myself. Good when there’s not much time to cook.” Vincent and I reached the exit and headed out into the parking lot. “Unless my ordering from your girlfriend’s business would be weird.”

“No. She doesn’t do all the deliveries herself. Gabby does some, and I will be helping out too. So, just be prepared for me to deliver your pork loin some night.”

“There’s a trick. How exactly do you tip a millionaire?”

“Generously.”

Vincent laughed. “Of course now I’m getting hungry. If I ever settle down—which is unlikely—I need to find myself a chef. You got lucky.”

I grinned as we reached my car and I opened the door. “I sure am. Get a good night’s sleep. I’ll see you bright and early.”

He blew out a breath. “Will do. You too. Enjoy your night. Thanks again.”

“I will.”

As was now my tradition, I sang all the way home. Tonight’s song on repeat was “Natural” by Imagine Dragons. On the way, I stopped off at the grocery store for a few essentials. The aforementioned sparkling grape juice, a pint of vanilla ice cream, some fresh strawberries, and a rather ostentatious rainbow bouquet of tulips, although I probably lost points for where I was buying them. On impulse, I grabbed some of the bath bomb thingies I knew Hannah enjoyed. Maybe we could enjoy some hot tub time after Lily was asleep.

If Hannah wasn’t too tired. And if hot tubs were okay for pregnant women. I’d have to look it up. Or she could take a regular bath, even without me. I wasn’t fussy. I just wanted her to enjoy the celebration too.

I was becoming a house husband. Kind of. I mean, not really. I would be outfitting my office to do the podcast in a professional manner, and I intended to keep my hand in at work so I wasn't a stranger. Wainwright had a number of different interests, and just keeping up with them would occupy a chunk of my time.

Plus, there was Hannah's delivery service. I intended to help out there too in whatever way she needed me. Or if she didn't, I'd just keep myself busy elsewhere.

When I rolled into the driveway, I was singing a song from the Black Keys. Then I realized the house was dark.

There wasn't a single light burning anywhere. Even the porch light was off. I hadn't realized how I'd become so used to coming home to a well-lit house. Stepping inside to delicious scents with the music blaring and Lily's giggles while she whaled on whatever toy she was torturing that day. Some days there was an added bonus of Hannah's creative swearing under her breath at whatever she was cooking.

Noise and lights and life. A happy home.

Getting there anyway.

Seeing the place so dark and still made me swallow hard. It was like a flashback of my life pre-Hannah. No one to greet me, no waiting warmth. Just an empty shell of a space waiting in silence until even my footsteps sounded like echoes.

My eyes narrowed on the empty spot where Hannah usually parked. Her car was gone. Not a surprise, but still, the proof she wasn't home struck me low in the gut.

I turned off the radio and pulled out my phone to doublecheck she hadn't left me a message. Nothing. I checked the Google calendar we shared, just in case she'd added an appointment I'd forgotten, but that was blank too. The only thing there were my last few meetings with Vincent and some of our advertisers, advising them of the transition. That part was over now, but she didn't know that. I'd expected them to run later. Maybe that was why she hadn't contacted me to let me know she'd be late.

Maybe.

Quickly, I called her. My racing heart said it wasn't the time for a text. The call went straight to voicemail.

"She's probably just running errands," I said aloud. "No big deal."

I tried her phone again, knowing she wouldn't answer. Needing to do it anyway. I got her voicemail again and told her to call as soon as she got my message. Then I called Gran.

"Hannah isn't with you, is she?"

"No, why?"

"She's not home and I don't know where she is. Is Lily there?"

"No. Neither of them. I haven't talked to Hannah since yesterday."

"Let me know if you hear from her, okay?"

"Why would I hear from her? Snug, what's going on?"

I shut my eyes and leaned back in my seat. "Nothing. Nothing's going on, but tell that to my head. Tell me that this isn't like when no one heard from Billy, and he was lying dead behind a house for hours without anyone knowing. Tell me that. Please."

"Oh, Snug, it's not like that. She's a busy woman. You know she's probably out doing a million things. Maybe even delivering those meals of hers. She didn't answer when you called?"

"No."

"Why don't you come here and we'll go look for her? Just drive around and see if we can track her down. That's what family does."

I wanted to take her up on the offer. God knows I didn't want to be alone. As it was, my hand would've shook if I hadn't gripped the phone with all my might. But I had to do this myself.

“Thank you. I’m going to do that, but if I need you—”

“If you need me, I’m there. In a heartbeat.”

“Thank you,” I repeated, voice thick. “I love you, Gran.”

“Just as I love you, my Snug.”

I didn’t want to end the call, but I did. I backed out of the driveway and drove in circles around town, passing by all our usual haunts and Hannah’s typical stops. The grocery store I’d just left, the tailor, the pizza shop we frequented on the few nights Hannah didn’t feel like cooking, the post office—long since closed—and the playground where we took Lily to swing. Then I just cruised up and down the streets, aimlessly searching for her car. It was an older model. Not big enough, not safe enough. Why hadn’t I replaced it? Even if she argued. Even if she fought me. I didn’t care. Her safety was the most important thing.

Her and Lily and the baby.

Twisting my hands around the wheel, I hit the gas when the stoplight on Main Street in town finally changed. I didn’t know the baby’s sex. We were waiting just as she wanted. But just like that, I knew she was having a girl. It was clearly meant to be so I’d be thoroughly outnumbered.

I couldn’t wait.

My shoulders were so tense that pain radiated through my back the longer I sat behind the wheel. But I kept driving, hope against hope I’d see her familiar vehicle at one of our usual spots. I even checked home once more, just in case. Maybe I’d missed a note—

No, I had not. She’d left nothing for me on the refrigerator, or in the notebook we used to scribble notes about Lily, or anywhere else.

So, I dropped off the sodden container of ice cream along with the other groceries, keeping just the probably wilting tulips. But I needed to find her to give them to her as soon as possible.

This time, the flowers were meant for her and her alone.

On my next circuit through town, a suspiciously similar car to Hannah's rolled out of the bay of the custom car shop next to Macy's café. I brought my car to a stop at the curb with a squeal, blocking the exit. Grabbing the tulips, I climbed out of the car, only to see the person driving Hannah's car—or a damn near double for it, right down to her recent addition of fuzzy pink dice that doubled in a pinch as a toy for Lily—was *not* Hannah.

As the tall, scruffy dude unfolded himself from the front seat, I fisted my hands, probably crushing the damn flowers. “Where is my woman?”

The guy cocked an eyebrow. “This ain't the Desperate Singles app.”

I stared at the guy, not amused. “You're driving Hannah Jacobs' vehicle. I demand to know her location.”

“Depends.” He scratched his cheek, looking me up and down. “Are you some kind of criminal element? You look pretty sketchy.”

I looked down at myself. My suit was a little wrinkled, but it was a custom Hugo Boss, like many of my suits. Meanwhile, this individual had on a worn chambray shirt with a hole near the hem and jeans that looked like they'd been purchased in 1982. “I'm Asher Wainwright.” I hated the cold note in my tone, but it couldn't be helped right now. “And you are?”

“Oh, fa-la-de-da. Should I genuflect now or later?”

I would've responded in kind except I'd happened to turn my head and glimpsed a honey-colored updo on a woman in the window of the café next door. I forgot all about pissing matches with grumpy mechanics—at least that was a reasonable guess, although serial killer was my second thought—and crossed the parking lot to the front door of the café at record speed.

“Hey, wait, Wainwright—”

The guy's voice disappeared with the thunk of the coffee shop's door behind me. Instantly, I heard the theme music of

some horror movie, playing on a small screen in the reading nook. A bunch of people were clustered close, eating popcorn and squealing at the bloodthirsty maniac on screen.

Speaking of serial killers...

My gaze swung to Hannah and my fingers flexed around the already tortured stems of my flowers. I stalked toward Hannah's table just as the door opened behind me and mechanic-serial killer dude lurched forward to seize my arm.

"Hey, wait a second—"

At his voice, Hannah spun around in her chair, her blue eyes widening comically. "Asher? Dare?" Then she frowned. "Why are you accosting him?"

"Good question." I shook him off and straightened my tie. "He stole your car." I knew good and well he probably had not done any such thing, but consider me pissed off.

She let out a giggle. An actual honest-to-goodness giggle. I didn't think I'd ever heard her do that before. She still didn't even smile all that often, never mind have to wipe the mirth out of her eyes. "Dare didn't steal anything. He's the part owner of the shop next door. My car started acting up and—" She stopped and zeroed in on the mangled tulips. "What are those?"

"For you." I shoved them at her and took a quick glance at Lily in her high chair. She was sucking on a juice box and watching me owlishly, her mouth smeared with what looked like chocolate. "Asher," she said distinctly.

That was a fight for another day.

I glanced at Hannah. I had no idea if Dare and the rest of the patrons of Brewed Awakening were still watching us, but at that moment, I did not care. "You didn't leave me a note. You didn't call or text or hell, send up a goddamn smoke signal."

*Sorry, Lily.* Sometimes swearing was necessary.

"I know. I'm sorry. I think you need this. It works magically to make you feel better, I've heard." She passed me



a wrapped candy, and I blinked, not understanding until I realized it was ginger.

Just like my grandfather's magical elixir.

I grinned. Everything really would be okay.

"I really am sorry. I thought you'd be working and that I'd be back before you were. Then the car was acting up and the stupid charger wasn't working and—" She broke off and finally took the flowers from me, sniffing them experimentally. "What's the occasion?"

"I'm turning over the day to day operation of the business to Vincent. Tomorrow we're revealing the news magazine he's launching and officially announcing his new role. And I'm going to work from home from now on."

"Oh, man," Dare muttered behind me, but I didn't stop to see the facial expression that went with it. I did shoot him a mental middle finger though.

How dare he intrude on my romantic fucking moment?

Hannah gave the flowers an experimental sniff as she watched me as warily as a ticking time bomb. "Are you sure that's what you want to do?"

"Yes, I'm sure. I've been sure since we talked that night over ice cream. Well, it set me down the path anyway, and speaking to Gran helped to get me the rest of the way there. Vincent is excited about the business. He wants to take over, and I'm going to let him."

Hannah gave me a tentative smile. "I'm happy for you. And what are you going to do?"

"I'm going to do what I'm excited about, including the news podcast and helping you with your business. We make a good team, don't you think?"

Hannah sat down with a heavy thud, still clutching her flowers.

"And don't ask me if I've been drinking—"

“Fine, I’ll ask,” Dare said from behind me, answering that question.

“No.” I gritted my teeth. “I’m just resolute. I want the picture in my head. You and our girls and time spent building a life, not making money. I have enough of that. Hell, I don’t even have to work again if I don’t want to. Neither do you.”

“Hey, Mister Moneybags, what about springing for our tab?”

I ignored the voice from the peanut gallery.

“Now I realize who you look like. Sure you aren’t related to the Hamilton brothers? They like to brag about how they’re made of coin too.”

“Who?” I looked at Hannah, who shrugged.

“No clue. I’m still new in town myself.”

“No,” I said over my shoulder to Dare. “Also, go interrupt someone else’s Hallmark moment.”

Instead of listening, he planted his legs wide and crossed his arms.

Okay, then. Maybe he could get some tips.

He probably needed them.

I focused on Hannah. “You can still work if you want. As long as you want. I’m still going to as well. But the difference is that I’ll be doing it for the right reasons, not just to fulfill a legacy that will do just fine with Vincent at the helm.”

Her chin wobbled. “You said our girls. Did you somehow pay off some tech and find out what the baby is?”

“No, I just know. It came to me all of a sudden tonight when I was driving around looking for you, hoping like hell God or whomever is up there wasn’t vengeful enough to take you and my girls from me just like Billy was taken.” I fell to my knees in front of her and cupped her belly. “I can’t lose you. Only forever will be long enough.”

Hannah sniffled and scooped her hand through my hair. “I’m sorry. I was so thoughtless. It just all spiraled out of

control. But I never imagined you'd think the worst." She leaned forward, laughing a little as her range of motion was a bit less than it had once been. Her belly was barely anything at this point, but it was enough to make her pause. And me pause as she gripped my jaw. "I want to share my business with you, but I already have a partner."

"Who?" Indignation filled my voice.

"Gabby. I just asked her tonight. She took over the rest of my deliveries when my car broke down." She covered my hands on her belly with her own. "But we have our own collaboration going right now."

I swallowed hard. "Yes, we do." I leaned up until our noses were an inch apart. "You're going to have to marry me. There's simply no other solution."

"What?"

"You heard me. I'm on my knees. I'm asking you to marry me. Be my wife. Commit to the lifetime of insanity that is guaranteed to be ours—"

Lily banged her juice box before pitching it right between us, managing to splash little purple droplets all over Hannah's white shirt. I don't know who laughed louder, the baby or me.

Or Hannah.

"You're not—" She pressed her lips together at my raised eyebrows. "I wasn't going to ask about alcohol, I swear. This time, I was saying you're not going to change your mind."

"Not a fucking chance. Sorry, Lily," I said without looking her way. "I love you. I love you so much."

Hannah's eyes went bright and she blinked over and over. It still didn't keep the tears from sneaking free. "I love you too. I think I always have from the first night. For sure from the time I came to your house for the nanny job and you acted like a jackass."

"Shocker."

Dare's reaction barely registered. Right now, I had more important considerations.

“Good thing you love assholes.” I rubbed her cheek, blotting up her tears.

“You aren’t an asshole underneath. But you do a very good impression of one. Just like I do a good impression of wanting to be alone. I thought I didn’t want to have to take care of anyone, when I’ve never been happier than these days I’ve spent with you and Lily.” She sniffled. “I just never wanted the ones I love to leave.”

“I’m not going anywhere,” I said roughly, catching her tears as fast as they fell. “This is all I want for the rest of my days.” With my other hand, I reached for Lily. “No matter how many there are, there will never be enough.”

Hannah’s smile was like the sun emerging after the darkest of days. She shifted on her chair, clutching the juice box in one hand and the flowers in the other as she pressed her forehead to mine. “Let’s get married, Asher Wainwright.”

The café erupted in applause as we kissed. Even Dare joined in.

When I eased back, he clapped me on the back. “Congratulations.” Then he tucked something in my pocket—Hannah’s service bill.

I pried it out, expecting a reason to grouse. Hey, I was ridiculously happy right now, but I was still me.

Instead, a big fat zero with a smiley face had been written on the bill. “You’re not charging?”

“Nope. On the house. Consider it a wedding present.” Dare smiled at Hannah. “Congratulations.”

“Thank you. Aww, that’s so sweet of you.”

“Welcome to the Cove. You too, Money Bags.”

“Thanks.”

“Dare is a sweetheart, isn’t he?” Macy swept forward and planted a bill on Hannah’s table. “But I’m not. Although if he messes up, call me, Hannah. I’ll help you bury the body.”

We all laughed. Even me.

Mostly.

—

# EPILOGUE

**Asher**

*September*

THERE WAS A POINT OF WAITING TO THE VERY LAST MINUTE TO do something, and I'd reached it.

I wasn't a procrastinator by nature. Until my life had become so full that even escaping for an hour to visit a jeweler—in secret—was a feat.

“You told your girl that you were going out drinking, but you're really getting her ring?” From the driver's seat of his truck, Austin shook his head. “You're supposed to lie about drinking, not use it as an excuse, dude.”

“It's a thing with us,” I muttered. “Can this thing go any faster?”

“Not unless you're going to pay my speeding ticket.”

“No time for speeding tickets. Besides, don't you get special dispensation or something?”

“I work for the fire department, not the police. Who are also not above the law, thank you very much.”

I rolled my eyes at Austin's indignation. “Fine, just step on it.”

“I'm stepping. I thought you were already engaged. Why do you need another ring?”

“I never gave her one.”

“Wow, lame.” Austin coughed into his fist. “Oh, I see.”

“It was a spur of the moment thing. I wasn’t prepared.”

“You didn’t ask her parents first?”

“Her parents are dead, unfortunately.”

“What about her priest?”

“I don’t think she has a priest. Is that a thing?”

He jerked a shoulder. “Seems like a good idea to ask a man of the cloth. He’d probably give you some of that premarital counseling. I could too, but mine would be short.” He flipped on his turn signal to veer down the street where the jeweler’s was located. “Run. Fast.”

“You’re just jealous.”

“Of regular sex? Yes. The rest?” He shuddered. “I might be ready for that when I’m like sixty-eight.”

“Such a precise age.”

“Well, I have the better part of a decade until my kid sister is old enough to move out, and I’m not going to confuse her with relationships that might not last.”

“Marrying kind of ensures they’ll last.”

“Are you a hippie?”

“No?”

Austin shook his head. “Just saying, I don’t want to mess with Joey’s head. So, by then I’ll be pressing forty, and I figure with Viagra, I’m probably good to go for another thirty years. By sixty-eight, I’ll be ready for canasta tournaments and a pair of lounge chairs in Florida.”

It was my turn to shudder as he stopped the car in front of Zagan’s Jewelers. “Your idea of the future is horrifying.”

“Least my expectations leave room for improvement.” He shrugged and got out of the truck. We walked inside and I informed the woman behind the counter I was picking up a special order that I’d already paid for. She emerged a few



moments later with a small green box. Without prompting, she popped open the lid.

Inside, nestled on fabric the same green, was Gran's vintage engagement solitaire ring with two important additions—a small canary yellow diamond on one side for Lily and a small green diamond on the other side for our daughter. Or son, if my spidey sense turned out to be wrong.

I smiled at the jeweler. "It's perfect, thank you—" I broke off as my phone buzzed in my pocket with Hannah's ring tone. And she was calling, not texting. "One moment, please."

I stepped away to take her call. "Hey, you. I'm almost done—"

"It's probably good you have a drink in you. I think this baby is impatient."

"What? What? What?"

At my clear distress, Austin came over to me. "You need oxygen again? I kept it in the truck from the last time you nearly fainted when we were together."

I had to assume he was kidding, but part of me hoped he wasn't.

"Just a few contractions is all," Hannah said soothingly. "I already called Gran to sit with Lily and I doublechecked my bag is ready to go."

"Go? Go where?"

"Asher, if the baby's coming, we have to go to the hospital. Remember? We practiced this."

"Yes, but you weren't actually in labor." I sucked in a breath. "Nothing we practiced included hyperventilating."

"Holy shitballs. She's squeezing it out now?" Austin winked at me. "Better hurry up and get that ring on her finger. If it'll fit."

"What ring?" Hannah asked.

I sighed and tipped back my head. Oh, look, I could see stars. That probably wasn't a good thing, considering I was

inside on a cloudy day. “I’m not actually drinking. I went to pick up your engagement ring.”

“My—oh my.”

“You didn’t freak at possibly being in labor, but now I hear you breathing fast because I got you a ring?”

“Yes. And I’m freaking a little at the labor thing too, because ow.” She hissed out a breath. “Can you come home? Like...soon. So your buddy Austin doesn’t have to deliver this baby in the driveway?”

Since Austin was right beside me and Hannah was speaking more loudly than usual due to impending birth, he heard every word. He backed up so fast he nearly stumbled and held up his hands. “I’ll just get you home.” He raced out the door like his...well, like his ass was on fire.

Appropriate.

Nodding to the jeweler, I grabbed the ring box and backed out of the door. “I’m on my way. Don’t have the kid for about twenty minutes, all right? Promise me.”

She wheezed out a laugh. “I’ll do my best.”

It took three hours and forty-eight minutes for me to officially become a father for the second time. Rose Elizabeth—for Bess—Wainwright was born in a hospital, not a driveway, thank God, but Austin had insisted on driving us in my car.

Even so, Austin had needed the oxygen this time, not me.

I was too busy cuddling my perfectly beautiful baby girl and holding my wife-to-be’s hand, her triple diamond ring nestled between our fingers like a wish.

The best one we’d ever made.

Gran hadn’t met our little girl yet, because she was watching Lily. But she’d bring her here soon to meet our little one. Gran had broken up with her live-in guy, but she wasn’t upset. She knew love came along when you least expected it.

I smiled at Hannah. So did we.



## EPILOGUE PART TWO

### **Hannah**

I tied the belt of my robe and shuffled down the hallway. I was sure I'd get used to these 2 AM feedings someday. Probably just around the time our little girl didn't need them anymore.

But for now?

Yeah, the boobs didn't lie and our daughter would soon be looking for me. Instead of waiting for her to cry and wake up her sister—who refused to sleep in any other room—well, it was just easier if I reached her before she screamed.

I glanced at Asher's office door. The light was on and the door cracked open. He'd been up late doing an interview for his podcast with someone in Hawaii.

I sighed. Hawaii sounded really good right about now. Maybe for our honeymoon.

I got to the door and paused at the unfortunately flat singing voice of my fiancé. But what he didn't have in talent, Asher definitely made up for in sweetness. Each of our girls had a different song.

He said he wanted them to always think they were special.

Dammit, he was always stealing my breath by saying stuff like that when I least expected it.

I leaned on the doorjamb, unwilling to disturb them just yet.

Our new baby daughter, Rose, was nestled in the crook of his arm. The thimble-sized nursing bottle looked like a toy in his hand, but he was so gentle with her. There was no fear in how he handled a baby now. Only a huge love that seemed to only get bigger with each day we were together.

He turned as his whispery and rumbly voice hit a high note that sounded just about perfect. He spotted me and smiled.

I went over to meet him and kissed our daughter's cap of feathery dark hair.

"She's finally asleep," he whispered. "I wanted to let you get some rest. And I couldn't resist coming in here."

"And here I was trying to let you work," I said softly. A little discomfort on my end was totally worth the wonderment in his voice.

He pulled me in a little closer and we both swayed for a few minutes. The little baby squeaks and grunts were only here for a short time. I wanted to remember them all.

But we were asking for trouble if we didn't put her back in her crib. We had so few hours to sleep between feedings. He settled Rose back into her bassinet as I checked on Lily, whose crib was right next to hers.

Originally, I wanted Rose's crib in our room for the first few weeks, but her older sister was quite insistent on getting her way when it came to sleeping arrangements.

Asher's hand slipped up my back and tangled in my hair. I straightened up and cupped his face. In the dark, with our two girls sleeping, all my emotions bubbled up. "I love you."

He curled his arm around me gently. My body still felt like one huge swollen bruise from giving birth a little over ten days ago. "I love you too, Hannah. I love you and our family so much. I can't believe how lucky I am to have found you."

I rested my head on his chest and glanced down at the daughter of my heart with her arms up over her head. "We both lucked out that stormy night."

I was pretty sure I'd have this little snapshot in my memory banks forever. And that was a very nice word that I was more than happy to have in my vocabulary these days.

Especially when it came to my little family. Something I never thought I'd truly have—or want—again. Yet here I was with not one, but two little girls in my life again and a husband-to-be.

And I wanted the three of them with a ferociousness I never expected.

All because of a winter storm that had originally made me feel so alone and hopeless. Now I had Asher and our two daughters that filled my life with laughter and happiness again.

I'd even given up the last bit of my past by selling my old house to Gabby, who was thrilled to have a space of her own for the first time.

As for me? I had everything I ever wanted right here.

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# MISTLETOE BABY

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## A CRESCENT COVE BITE



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Mistletoe Baby

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# MISTLETOE BABY

Braking too fast when it's snowing? Bad.

Crashing your new sports car? Worse.

Kissing a beautiful stranger with lips that taste like vanilla who flees without sharing her digits...or even her name?  
Worst of all.

But I was determined not to leave small town Crescent Cove before Christmas without finding my gorgeous mysterious woman.

And I succeeded.

I just didn't expect our night of cider-scented passion—hey, we visited the holiday festival first—to lead to a gift that will keep on giving forever.

Now I have to convince her to take a chance on me, no matter the odds...and prove to her that our holiday romance won't burn out before next Christmas.

***Author's note:** Mistletoe Baby is a standalone accidental pregnancy romantic comedy set in our small town Crescent Cove. It has a happily-ever-after ending and no cliffhanger.*

# PLAYLIST

**Billie Eilish:** everything i wanted

**David Cook:** I'm About to Come Alive

**Michael Bublé:** Christmas(Baby Please Come Home)

**Bishop Briggs:** Hi-Lo (Hollow)

**Hozier:** As It Was

**Alexander Jean:** Dreams

[FULL PLAYLIST ON SPOTIFY](#)

*To mistletoe magic.*

# ONE



BLASTING MICHAEL BUBLÉ'S VERSION OF "SILENT NIGHT" AS I sped down the street in an icy winter wonderland probably seemed incongruous, but I was in an exceptionally good mood.

Who wouldn't be when classes at the community college were officially finished for the semester? Finals were done. Grades submitted. Endless infernal staff meetings in the bag.

I was finally free—for a month or so, give or take some faculty enrichment days.

I'd cracked the windows on my wholly-inappropriate-for-this-climate Toyota Supra sports car to let in the cool late afternoon breeze, and I'd put the heat on low to offset the chill. I was driving a little too fast for the fat flakes streaming down from the sky and accumulating in frosty slush along the side of the roadway. Playing my music a bit too loud for the quaint small town I was headed toward full bore.

Crescent Cove, was it? I'd never been here before. Oh, I'd heard of it, considering I lived fifty-plus miles away. But this place was postcard bucolic, a speck on the map, and I tended to like to hit the highways where I could go faster.

Thirty miles an hour was not fast. Nor was my risky thirty-six.

I didn't even know why I'd driven this far out today. I was all too used to Central New York's changeable weather. Snowstorms didn't usually slow me down, but the sleet gray clouds warned we might be in for a prolonged event.

So much for enjoying my freedom in my sweet impractical beauty. I'd just do a U-turn and head back—

Suddenly, a truck backed out of a driveway, and I hit the brakes far too hard. My tires shrieked as I aimed right for the curb—and the ditch hidden by the thick layer of white layered on top of it.

My horn rang out as did my particularly colorful stream of curses. Wheels spun. My knee jabbed hard into something, and for a second, my vision wavered.

Had I hit my head? Or had the belt tightened just enough to send my ribcage upward into my skull?

Could've been either one.

Michael kept singing as I shut my eyes against the pain in my leg. I could probably walk it off. All in all, I'd gotten off easy. My poor baby though. I didn't want to see the damage.

Actually, I didn't want to deal with any of the crap that was now in my immediate future.

Next time? I'd circle my own block when I wanted to get my jollies in my almost-new car during the winter.

A sharp rap on my window had me opening my eyes and biting off a sigh. A guy wearing one of those hats with buffalo plaid flaps over his ears pressed his face up against the glass as I turned down the volume on the music and then lowered the window halfway. "You okay, fella? I didn't see you there as I was coming out."

I cocked a brow. Considering the non-neutral color of my car, I completely believed that. "I'm okay, thanks. You?"

I didn't know why I asked that. He hadn't driven off the road, I had. Because of him. And also because I'd recklessly been doing thirty-six.

This was why I so rarely colored outside the lines. It never ended well.

"Fine, fine. You got yourself some trouble here." He edged back to look at my crumpled fender, nose down in the ditch.

“Want me to call Dare at Kramer and Burns Custom? He’ll get you fixed right up in a jif.”

This far out, my towing company would charge me a mint to come to my assistance. “Sure. I can call him.” I tugged out my cell. “Kramer and Burns Custom, you said?”

“Have to turn down that loud music if you’re going to call.”

I ignored him as I searched Google and called. If he considered “Holly Jolly Christmas” set on low to be too loud, I couldn’t help him.

And surprise, my good mood had fled at the same moment I’d crashed my freaking car.

“Good evening, Kramer speaking.”

“Is this Dare?”

“No, this is his brother, Gage. Whatcha need?”

“Are all of you named like romance heroes?” Shockingly, he didn’t respond. I cleared my throat. “I need a tow. I was referred by—”

I glanced at the window. The man and his ridiculous hat had disappeared. However, a cop was doing a U-turn to pull up beside me.

Fabulous.

“Anyway, can you come tow me?”

“Where are you?” His voice was appreciably cooler than when he’d answered the phone.

No one would accuse me of being wise, that was for sure. Made total sense to piss off the cavalry when I was well and truly stuck.

And I didn’t know where I was.

I squinted through the snowy windshield. There was a street sign at the end of the block, but it was snowing too hard for me to make it out. Luckily, I could ask Officer Friendly.

He knocked on the window with his bare knuckles. “Had some trouble, I see.”

“So everyone sees.” When he frowned beneath the brim of his standard issue hat, I forced my shoulders to relax. “I’m on the phone with the tow place right now.”

“Tell Dare Sheriff Brooks is on scene.”

“Dare, Sheriff Brooks is on scene,” I repeated into the phone, knowing I’d aggravate the guy on the end even more. I’d probably annoyed the sheriff too.

“Gage,” the guy on the phone said testily. “Since you sound like an out-of-towner, ask Brooks where you are, and I’ll send the truck out.”

What had happened to that old adage that people in small towns were so easygoing? Probably required me not being a dick to them, but in my defense, my unscratched two-month-old car was now a mess.

My younger brother, Lennox, had warned me not to buy something that would depreciate so quickly.

*Cars aren’t an investment, Cal. Especially ones with a tawdry finish like yours.*

Yeah, well, I’d clearly not listened. I’d loved my “tawdry” paint job that now would need to be retouched. And hey, bright side, with this accident, I’d done all the depreciating at once.

At least it had been minor. Shouldn’t take long to fix.

“”You still there, tourist?”

I frowned. Charming guy. “Why don’t you just talk to the sheriff, rather than me playing telephone?” I attempted to hand the phone to the cop, but he shook his head and made a *gimme* gesture with his fingers.

I unclicked my belt and wrenched open the door, thankful that it seemed to be working correctly. The car was tilted at an angle, but with some finagling and shifting, I placed my boot on the cracked upper edge of the ditch and stepped out with



assistance from the sheriff. I shut my door as the sheriff gave me my next orders.

“Tell Dare you’re near the corner of East Lake Road and Grange.”

I repeated the information into the phone and managed a “thank you” before Gage hung up on me.

Wasn’t hospitality supposed to be a thing in small towns? I was beginning to think I’d been lied to.

First, Santa Claus was real. Then, small towns are wonderful, cozy places filled with lovely people.

The sheriff stepped back and eyed me up and down as he dipped his thumbs into the pockets of his trousers. “You’re not from here.”

Before I could reply to that incriminating statement—why it was incriminating, I wasn’t sure, but there was no mistaking his tone—a float on the back of a flatbed truck rolled by, complete with a inflated bouncy house-style Santa’s Workshop festooned with twinkling Christmas lights and little animated elves climbing up and down ladders. The truck’s driver blew the horn at the sheriff, and he waved, calling out a “Hey, Red, looking good,” as the vehicle continued down the street at a speed approaching my own pre-crash.

Falling snow wasn’t much of a deterrent around here. He’d better hope he didn’t encounter Buffalo Plaid Hat Guy.

I looked around. Said guy and his truck were long gone.

“So?”

I pocketed my phone. “So what?”

“You’re not from here,” he repeated. “What’s your business in Crescent Cove?”

“What, am I not allowed to drive through without a laminated pass? You should’ve asked the guy who pulled out in front of me why he couldn’t watch where he was going.”

The sheriff glanced at my awkwardly angled car, already gathering a healthy coating of snow. “Looks like you can’t

either.”

I balled up my fists in the pockets of my long tweed coat. I shouldn't flip off the sheriff in a town I wasn't familiar with.

Problem was, I really, really wanted to.

“I was just out for a drive,” I said defensively.

“Did you have a drink before you got behind the wheel?”

“No, but I wish I had.” Okay, that definitely wasn't the right thing to say. It wasn't even what I'd meant. Exactly. “I mean, I should've had a drink and stayed home, rather than venturing out in this weather.”

The sheriff crossed his arms over his quilted vest, pinned with some badge-looking thing he probably could've gotten at any dollar store. “Let's see some ID.”

“Oh, for fuck's sake. How about ticketing the guy who caused me to slide?”

“Do you see him?” He made a show of looking around. “I don't.”

“He stopped to talk to me, and then he left. How is that my fault?”

“Plate number?”

“I didn't see his plate.”

“Description of the vehicle?”

“A big brown truck.”

“UPS?”

“No, a SUV.”

“Make and model?”

“I didn't have time to see all that. Big and boxy.”

“Oh, well, now I can find him, no problem.” He stared at me. “ID? Take it out, nice and slow.”

“It's like I'm in an episode of *Law and Order*, if it was set in not-quite Mayberry.” Shaking my head, I withdrew my wallet, took out my college ID, and handed it over.

He tipped back his hat. “Professor?”

“Yes.”

“What do you teach?”

“Mythology and Applied Lessons in—”

“Good enough.” Clearly disinterested, he returned my ID and nodded at my car. “Explains the bright yellow.”

I tucked my ID away. “It does, does it?”

“License?”

“Are you kidding me? If I was out joyriding, I wouldn’t have come here.”

“I’ll have you know Crescent Cove is known the state over. At this rate, we’ll be known throughout the world.”

I pulled out my license and gave it to him. “For what? Obnoxious floats?”

His jaw clicked as he studied my license. “Small-town charm and...”

“And what?”

“Procreation,” he said in such a low voice I almost didn’t hear him.

I didn’t have time to ponder that inexplicable statement because a tow truck pulled up beside my car. A tall, bearded man in a baseball cap hopped down and flashed me a friendly smile that indicated he was *not* Gage Kramer and possible not even from this “quaint” Cove at all. “Hey there, I’m Dare Kramer. You are?”

“Callum MacGregor,” I said as we shook hands. “Thanks for coming out so fast.”

“In this weather, I figured you didn’t want to be standing around. Hi, Brooks. How’s that baby of yours?”

Brooks narrowed his eyes and said nothing. He was a charmer, this one.

Dare didn’t seem deterred. “Caught the short straw today, huh?” He clapped the sheriff on the back. “Last I saw,

Christian was on patrol.”

“He’s out too. All kinds of yahoos around tonight with the festival, and some of them can’t stay on the road.” With a narrowed-eyed stare for me, the sheriff returned my license. “I should give you a Breathalyzer.”

I shrugged and put it away. “Do what you wish. It’d be a waste of your time, as I haven’t had a drink since, at best guess, June sixteenth.”

The night Hudson, my youngest brother—by seven and five minutes respectively from the other two triplets—had celebrated getting his degree in graphic design. He was considered the free-spirited one among my brothers, other than my own edgy sideline in drawing and painting.

Drawing and painting itself wasn’t edgy, ignoring the whole starving artist thing. And I definitely was not starving after some of my recent commissions. But my choice of subject occasionally skirted the line for some.

Or *unskirted*, depending on my subject’s state of undress.

Unusual faces and locations captured the bulk of my attention, so those were what I painted most often. It just seemed more notable the few times I’d painted a woman’s form in a more natural way.

Well, notable to my family. The public at large didn’t know who I was. I did my work, cashed my checks, and enjoyed my anonymity.

“We’ll skip the Breathalyzer for now,” the sheriff said, although he didn’t seem happy about it.

Dare rubbed his gloved fingers over his bearded jaw. “She’s a beaut. Shame she got scuffed up, but we’ll get her in and out quick for you, with the holidays and all.”

“Oh, thanks. I really appreciate that.”

“Our shop does custom work. We’ll fix her up so she looks better than brand new. Later on, how do you feel about racing stripes? My brother and Tish and their team do some damn fine work.”

“Hmm. That might be an idea.” Since I hadn’t gotten off on the best foot with his brother, I’d probably end up with a middle finger painted on the fender, but why not give it a shot? “I’d like custom rims too.”

“They’d look sweet with a ride like this. Tell you what, I’ll bring it in and see what Gage and Tish think before we write you up a quote. We’ll set you up with an appointment for the custom work in the new year. Or we can—” Dare broke off as yet another ginormous float went by, this one consisting of a huge gazebo decorated with Christmas lights. A sign proclaimed it courtesy of August and Kinleigh’s Attic.

A flurry of honks went off as the driver moved into the opposite lane to pass our collection of vehicles on the side of the road, much to the sheriff’s consternation.

“We need to get this car out of here. Talk at the shop. You keep it moving once your vehicle is ready.” The sheriff pointed at me. “I don’t want to hear about you causing another ruckus in town.”

“I wasn’t aware I’d caused a ruckus to begin with, but I’ll take it under advisement.” By this point, I couldn’t do much other than shake my head.

At least I’d get an even more tricked out vehicle come the new year, even if it was at considerable cost. I could afford it. My account was nicely padded, and my agent thought a few more pieces would sell soon.

If I ever made it out of small town, USA. Hopefully, without a ticket. I wasn’t even sure for what.

Sheriff Brooks would think of something.

“Okay, let’s do this.” Dare smiled. “You’ll be on your way sooner than you think.”

Ninety minutes later, I finally walked out of the auto shop. The snow was still thick and steady, but the townsfolk didn’t seem to mind. The shop was just a bit down the street from what seemed to be a town square of sorts near the lake. The wide snow-covered lawn was covered with different food and game booths as well as the holiday floats I’d seen, plus a few

others. People roamed around with their mittened hands clutching cups of cocoa, talking and laughing, accompanied by excited kids and scampering dogs.

Somehow I'd driven right into a Hallmark Christmas movie.

There was even the gazebo that had clearly served as the inspiration for the float that had glided past my damaged car. The real thing was even more grand as it gleamed in the darkness, strung with miles of lights and with a tree sparkling inside. Families clustered into the space to surround the tree, their laughter carrying on the crisp breeze. Someone pitched a snowball at a woman in the crowd, and she shrieked and rushed down the steps to build a snow arsenal of her own.

I smiled despite my general irritation. I'd been told I'd be able to pick my car up probably tomorrow, thanks to the hefty rush fee I'd paid. We'd scheduled the custom work for the new year.

At least I'd already secured lodging. After a recommendation from the shop, I'd called to reserve a room at The Hummingbird's Nest bed and breakfast down the block. The sprawling inn overlooked the frosty gleam of the lake and the Christmas hijinks going on nearby.

There was certainly plenty to inspire me here—even if cozy holiday scenes and frigid winter landscapes weren't my typical subject matter—but I didn't have any of my supplies. I definitely didn't have my laptop. Handily, I could take photos and sketch in my on-the-go app if I wanted to capture anything until I got back to my studio at home.

In the meantime, I'd just grab a slice of pizza from Dare's and Gage's dad's booth, Robbie's Pizza, at the winter festival. I'd heard it was the best in town. Of course Dare was entirely biased, but my growling stomach was willing to take his word for it.

Gage had neither confirmed or denied. He'd just written up my work order silently while giving me a healthy dose of side-eye worthy of my students.

Further cementing my daredevil status in town, I crossed the street outside the crosswalk and headed into the middle of carnival madness.

I bought two slices of cheese pizza and a bag of fried dough that steamed my glasses. Then I looked around the crowded square for a place to sit—or lean, since there was a half wall just beyond the gazebo attached to the pier. I found a spot and ate while I stared at the sprawling homes that lined the lake, their lit windows so homey and comforting in the snowy dark.

Something twisted in my chest that felt suspiciously like yearning. I didn't mind spending time alone. In fact, due to my large family, I'd grown to appreciate solitude. But being in the center of a happy crowd at Christmas reminded me that hey, there was more to life than teaching and grading and sketching and painting. More than Sunday dinners at my parents' house filled with friendly or not so friendly squabbling, depending on who was in a mood that week.

The holidays were coming up, and since I'd turned down my best friend Bryce's pathetic attempts to set me up on a blind date with one of her friends, I'd likely be alone.

Again.

"Hey, mister, you dropped your fried dough." A young girl with a dark ponytail and braces held out the bag of warm fried dough I hadn't realized I'd dropped.

I took it from her and smiled. "Thanks. Hey, do you want a piece? I can't eat it all."

But she was already walking away, back to her family.

Swallowing a sigh, I turned toward the gazebo and stared at the gigantic tree, its boughs weighed down with tinsel and ornaments. On the other side of the gazebo someone had hung a large sprig of mistletoe, and a woman stood beneath it, gazing up at the thing as if she couldn't understand what it was.

Or as if she was waiting for someone to kiss her.

Tufts of her light-colored hair—maybe pink?—stuck out in every direction from beneath her knit hat, as if her long braids had started unraveling in the wind. Her cheeks were ruddy from the cold and her unbuttoned coat flapped in the breeze, revealing a long, soft-looking dress. I couldn't decipher many other details about her, other than the lipstick-red scarf tossed jauntily over her shoulder.

She was cute. Maybe even beautiful if I could've made out more of her features in the darkness.

I threw out my empty plate and strode toward the gazebo steps, clutching my bag of fried dough as if it was a bouquet of roses.

I stopped on the top step. This was stupid. What was I even doing in this town? As soon as my car was ready, I'd drive away and never look back—except for coming back for my custom car work appointment. When I was in the mood for company, I was all about enjoying Syracuse's city scene, visiting nightclubs and trendy eateries downtown. Most of the time, I simply didn't bother.

I definitely didn't approach random women in gazebos on a snowy night too close to Christmas, when my loneliness tasted like chalk in my throat.

Then she looked over at me and smiled, and I couldn't have stopped the forward motion of my feet if I'd tried.

I forgot the fried dough. Forgot the moms and dads and eager kids swarming about, pushing and nudging to get where they were going. That nameless woman drew me like the North star, a jewel glimmering in the darkness.

Words stuck in my head. I was usually so glib, so prepared with a ready remark. Not here. The dough slipped out of my hand as I reached her and simply lifted my hands to her icy-cold cheeks.

She was already rising on her tiptoes to meet me, her glossy pink lips parted and waiting.

We collided on a rush of breath, her mouth molding to mine as I gripped her jaw. I tilted her upward, taking her



unspoken invitation and slipping my tongue inside. She sucked on the tip lightly, igniting a fire in under my skin as she rubbed against me. She fisted a handful of my coat, tugging at the material, bringing me down to her level so she could kiss me back with the same intensity.

She tasted like vanilla ice cream. Pure, sweet. Innocent somehow, as if she was daring me to break my control.

She didn't know she already had.

My teeth skimmed over her full lower lip, and she moaned as my hand moved of its own volition to her breast. I had the briefest sensation of its weight in my palm, round and perfect, before she tore her lips away.

Fuck, I'd gone too far.

She stared at me for a moment before darting around me and fleeing down the steps, her scarf slipping off and sliding to the ground.

"Wait." I followed and picked it up, but she never looked back.

I pressed my lips together. They were still tingling from the pressure of hers.

"It's mistletoe, you pervert." Someone jostled me from behind, and I turned to see I'd been bumped by an older woman's cane as she descended the steps. "Not a peep show."

She gave me another wack on the ankle for good measure before letting out a "harrumph" and shuffling down the walk.

I fingered the baby-soft scarf my mystery woman had left behind. She didn't know it, but I'd be sketching her tonight wearing this.

And only this.

## TWO



MY DAY WAS NOT OFF TO A RIP-ROARING START. AND IT wasn't even the same day of the car-ditch mishap.

Maybe I'd finally learn that sweet small towns weren't necessarily meant for everyone.

"You don't recognize it?" I held up the bright red scarf as if it was the spoils from a prizefight. "Are you sure? It has your shop's tag right here." I jabbed at the embroidered *Kinleigh and August's attic* emblem near the fringe.

"No, I'm sorry." The woman who owned the store I was currently standing in glanced over her shoulder as a baby let out a wail. "That's my daughter. She needs lunch."

"Oh, okay, I'll wait while you give her a bottle or whatever."

Kinleigh smoothly pulled her long curly red hair over one shoulder. "Her lunch comes from my nipple."

I blinked. A sleepless night had left me on edge, and admittedly, I wasn't processing as fast as I would have normally. But that didn't compute for a good half a minute. "Oh. *Oh*."

"Yes, *oh*. And I'm afraid I can't share client lists in any case, even if I knew who had purchased that particular item."

"You do know. I can tell. Look, I'm not a crazy stalker, I swear. I just want to talk to her."

"As all crazy stalkers have claimed since the beginning of time."

I let out a breath. She did have a point. “No, it’s not like that. She kissed me. We kissed each other. You know that mistletoe at the gazebo?”

Kinleigh raised her ginger-colored eyebrows and waited.

“She was standing beneath it, and it was snowing, and God, she looked—”

“Willing to sleep with a handsome stranger who was a good kisser?”

“Obviously not, since I slept alone at the bed and breakfast.” I frowned. “Did you just call me handsome? Pretty sure you’re the only person who’s said something nice to me since I drove into town. Except Dare, but you’re a lot prettier than he is.”

Wordlessly, she held up a hand and tapped her sparkly wedding ring.

I had to laugh. “I wasn’t hitting on you. Just saying the welcome mat in this town has not been rolled out in my direction.”

“Yet a beautiful woman kissed you thoroughly enough you’re ready to search to the ends of the earth for her. Sounds pretty welcoming to me.”

“So far, I’ve only been here. That’s hardly searching to the ends of the earth.”

“We get a lot of tourists for the winter festival.”

“And she happened to have bought a scarf from you just before she met me?”

“Met you with her lips, you mean, since you haven’t even said her name.”

I had no answer for that.

“It’s Christmas,” I finally implored as her daughter released another cry from her white carriage a few feet away. Her mother’s attention was obviously split, so I’d take advantage of any moment of weakness I could. She might not know I wasn’t a serial killer but I did. “You have a baby and a

husband. Or wife,” I amended when she glanced back at me. “Surely you believe in romance.”

“Making out under mistletoe is not necessarily romance, but okay, fine. How about this? I’ll meet you halfway.”

I waited.

“I’ll contact her and let her know you’re looking for her. If you leave your information with me, I’ll pass it along if she’s interested.”

I frowned. “That’s smart and very kind of you. Thank you for being so protective of your customers.”

It was her turn to blink. “Are you warming up for her? I have to admit that’s a good line.”

I laughed as I scrawled my cell number on her mailing list signup pad and pushed it toward her. “Tell her my name is Callum. MacGregor,” I added after a second. “I’m twenty-nine, single, and oh, I love vanilla ice cream. I’m staying in town a bit longer.”

Mostly due to her, since my car would be ready in not too long. But I couldn’t just walk—drive—away without making a real effort to find this woman.

*Why? Because she has soft lips? Because she can kiss? Because her moan made you want to hear it when she was naked and on top of you?*

I shifted uncomfortably, suddenly very thankful for my long coat. I hadn’t expected to develop a semi in the middle of Kinleigh’s vintage clothes and home goods shop, but Crescent Cove was turning out to be an experience in a number of ways.

“Maybe you should stop before the ice cream part,” Kinleigh suggested, jotting down what I’d said just the same.

“She’ll know what it means.” Maybe, if I’d pegged her taste correctly.

“If you say so. Now if you’ll excuse me…” She trailed off. “Luna, c’mere a sec.”

A bouncy blond emerged from the back, jingling from her impressive collection of earrings and bracelets. “Sure thing, boss. What’s up?”

Kinleigh unbuttoning her blouse was my cue to split. “Thanks again,” I said before heading out. “Tell her to call day or night,” I added just before I closed the door behind me.

*Way to sound desperate.*

I glanced up and down the block. I wasn’t even certain I could recognize her in the daylight. Her hair had seemed pinkish in the dark. But I didn’t know if it was straight or curly, since she’d had it in braids.

Hell, for all I knew, she’d run because she was dating someone. Or engaged. Or married. Maybe she’d done both of us a favor, and I’d just have to chalk it up to a good moment not meant to be repeated.

*A great moment.*

Feeling moronic, I wrapped the red scarf I still carried around my neck. Then I lifted the fringes to my nose and took a long sniff. Not even the faintest scent of vanilla. Nothing but cold, crisp air singeing off my nose hairs.

I didn’t have a clue how to spend the day. My Christmas shopping for my family and Bryce and a few other friends had all been done before November 1<sup>st</sup>. I wasn’t one for putting things off. But my mom might enjoy a trinket I found in one of the shops here.

*Just give her the scarf. Pretty sure it’s cashmere.*

Nah, I’d just bide my time there.

I wandered in and out of a few shops. I found a kitten sun-catcher in one of them with a lake motif that I thought my mom might like in the dead of winter. A cat steering a boat was kind of weird, but she had a wacky enough sense of humor to appreciate it.

Then I took a walk near the water. Last night, I’d gotten a few clothes at a funky store called Vintage December so that I wouldn’t have to wear the same outfit today and possibly

tomorrow. Most of them were back at my room, but my messenger bag was still bulging from the sweater I'd brought with me for the day. The button-down was soft and a hell of a lot nicer than most of the things in my closet. I'd dropped a few hundred dollars in that shop since I hadn't exactly been prepared for an impromptu vacation in a lakeside town that had to be at least ten degrees colder than Syracuse.

After I shrugged on the cardigan, I closed my bag. The army green fabric was covered in old stamps in faded ink along with hand-sewn patches from all sorts of random cities in New York. I wondered if Crescent Cove had a patch I could add to my collection.

Maybe I'd have more interest in browsing later. For now, I was shopped out.

On my way back to the bed and breakfast, when I was shoulder to shoulder on the sidewalk with the midday shopping crowd—and yes, apparently the holiday festival was still in progress, judging from the amount of signs—I caught sight of a small art shop tucked beside the library. It was obviously new, and when I stepped inside, there were still dropcloths all over the floor.

“We aren't open yet, sorry,” a woman on a stepladder called out.

Though it wasn't in my nature to be rude, I'd noticed two things I needed. I grabbed the sketch pad off an easel and plucked a hunk of charcoal out of a cup. “I have to have these. Name your price.”

Her laugh was as airy as the windchimes tinkling from the eaves. “Well, seeing as you're my very first sale and I intend on framing that dollar, I won't overcharge you. But I'm really not open yet. I don't even have the register online.”

“How's fifty bucks for you to frame?” I was already prying out my wallet. If I'd ever needed the supplies more, I couldn't remember it. “Extra because you're really helping me out of a jam with these.”

“Sold.” She held out a hand, and I gave her the money. Rings winked on every finger. “You’re not spending your last dollar for those, are you? Here, let me get you a bag.”

“No, I have a few left. Thanks.” I let her take my purchases and put them in a paper sack before returning them to me. Then I slid my items into the messenger bag I’d grabbed from my car before turning it over to Dare.

True to her word, she slipped my money into a small frame she had waiting before hanging it on a hook on the wall. “There. Every Line A Story is officially in business. Thank you. I hope you’ll come back when we’re open for real in a couple weeks.” She turned back and dusted her hand on her hip. “I’m Colette.”

“Callum. Nice to meet you. Afraid I don’t live here or travel this way, but I wish you all the luck.”

She smiled, her long brown hair ponytail slipping over her shoulder. “If you change your mind, you know where to find me.”

Inwardly, I sighed. If only I’d met her the day before. Now my head was full of possibly pink hair and unforgettably soft lips.

I nodded to her and went back outside, taking a bracing breath of the crisp, water-tinged air. At least the snow had stopped, although the slate gray sky warned it wouldn’t be long.

We’d just see how long I would get.

I crossed the street and got lucky with a bench near the lake, just beyond the bulk of the festival mayhem. Even on the gloomy day, the small lapping waves of the lake glittered.

A giant snow globe had been set up near the shore. Fake snow whirled inside as children leaped around like little maniacs. I hoped the structure didn’t take flight in the wind, but it seemed securely tethered.

If not, Sheriff Unfriendly would have something else to grouse about.

Christmas carols played brightly from unseen speakers, and the scent of real roasted chestnuts carried on the air. I drew in deeply and considered making a lunch of them—after I worked on my sketch.

I dug out my newest acquisitions from my bag and flipped to the first page in the pad. I skated my fingertips over the fine weave of the paper. It wasn't super high-end, but there was nothing like the promise of a fresh start.

Perhaps that was what Crescent Cove could be for me too. Even if I hadn't realized I was searching for one.

I started sketching the snow globe first to warm up my fingers, stiff from the cold. I rarely remembered to put on the gloves, which was a problem when stilted movements would affect the piece.

The shape took form quickly. I added in the snow now playfully meandering from the thick clouds above, an interesting juxtaposition to the world of faux flakes inside the dome. Kids tumbled over one another while their smiling parents lingered outside, talking and sipping cups of coffee or cocoa. I wondered if they'd laced them with something stronger. If those screeching children were mine, I'd probably imbibe before mid-afternoon too.

I swallowed over the sudden lump in my throat, moving my fingers faster to compensate. Coming from a large family myself, I'd never had the great desire to have kids. I'd grown up with the triplets climbing over everything that was nailed down—and some stuff that wasn't—and the idea of willingly filling my own quiet home with so much noise and activity was...

Not so bad. Not anymore.

I sat back on the bench and finished one of the kids' faces. I couldn't see that clearly from this distance, but I imagined her cheeks were flushed, and her long braids were bobbing over her shoulders.

Braids. Like my pink-haired mystery woman who might never be anything but that.



Quickly, I flipped the page and moved the charcoal in rapid strokes. I was guessing at her shape, especially in this stage of undress. In *any* stage of undress. Bulky winter coats could hide a lot. I didn't even know her true hair color or its texture.

But I had a good imagination.

She came together even faster than the snow globe. All sinuous lines and curves. A hint of fullness here and there. Rounded and then slight. Long hair trailing down her back like water, free and flowing. And that scarf still wrapped around my neck protecting her modesty—just barely. The soft material cupped her and teased at what she might reveal if the urge struck. Those tantalizing bits of fringe trailed along her inner thigh, caressing her flesh like a lover.

Or like a man driven to sketch her, since he might never see her again.

I spent the most time on her lips. Their perfect bow, the divot on the top one, the slight dent in the bottom. So plump and glossy and bitable. This was the only part of her I felt like I knew without question, though I wouldn't mind a lifetime to learn about the rest.

“Oh my God. What are you doing? Are you—is that—oh my God.” At my side, a woman covered her mouth.

I blocked my sketch pad with my arm. This little town was driving me nuts. “It's my girlfriend,” I said quickly. A lie, sure, but not entirely.

Fine, yes, entirely. One kiss—no matter how hot—did not a relationship make.

“Where is she?” the woman asked accusingly, glancing around. We were surrounded by some adults, but children were definitely more prevalent.

“I'm going to meet her now.” I flipped the snow globe sketch over to cover the scarf one, although in retrospect, that might not have helped considering the subject of that one was kids. Which she noticed with a narrow-eyed stare the sheriff

would have applauded. “I’m an artist,” I muttered. “I’ve sold pieces. I have an agent.”

“You aren’t from Crescent Cove.” Her statement whipped my skin with as much force as the snow-laden breeze. “Are you here for the festival?”

“I live in Syracuse.” Defense and outrage laced my voice as I stood and shoved my supplies into my messenger bag. “I’m a professor, dammit.”

“Mmm-hmm.” She crossed her arms. “I’m friends with the sheriff, you know. So, you might just want to find your girlfriend,” I half-expected her to do air quotes, “and move along.”

Clearly, there was no point trying to explain myself. The woman in my sketch was quite obviously a fully grown woman, but maybe that also made me a pervert. The suggestion was there.

I’d been branded with a scarlet P in bucolic Crescent Cove.

With a quick salute, I crossed the snowy slope to the sidewalk. I was probably being a fool by sitting around and sketching as if the woman I sought would just fall into my lap.

Last night had been my chance, and I’d lost it. But maybe I would get a good commission out of the piece I’d just drawn, so it wasn’t all bad.

I headed up the street, dodging dogwalkers and joggers and pedestrians toting a million shopping bags. It would be impossible soon to get through town. If Dare wasn’t quite done with my car, it looked like I’d be spending the rest of the day in my room at the bed and breakfast. Ideally, I’d manage to dodge the far-too-nosy proprietress, Sage Hamilton, who had practically asked for my time of birth so she could run a report on me.

Seemed a common thing in this town.

I didn’t get it. The place was crawling with tourists, and from what I’d seen with others, they seemed to be treated well. But something about me set off alarm bells or something. Not that Sage had been mean to me. Far from it. She’d acted as if

she expected me to buy a home in town immediately, as if I'd fall under the Crescent Cove spell and never leave.

As if I could do nothing else.

I watched a couple embrace, the woman reaching up to cup the man's cheeks. Something about the moment pulled at me, and I knew I'd be sketching them later as well. The whole scene tugged at me. Her bright blue coat and her flushed cheeks and the snow swirling around them as he hauled her up off her feet so that she came half out of her impractical soft-soled shoes. She should have boots in this weather. The snow was piling up again, despite the heavy crowds clogging the sidewalk.

Everyone had somewhere to go. Someone to be with.

Except me.

I yanked out my phone. Maybe it was time I called Dare to nudge things along. At least I had some inspiration for my holiday break so I could spend time sketching around the family stuff, of which there would be plenty. My mom usually put up three or four trees and blasted Christmas music at levels typically reserved for teenagers.

And then I saw a flash of pink in the crowd.

Time stopped. My heart, my brain, and even my muscles went numb. Then I sprung into action.

Clutching my phone, I weaved through the festivalgoers, mumbling apologies, keeping my gaze firmly on my prize. She was moving quickly, but I was determined.

I just had to see if it was her. If it wasn't, I would give up and move on.

Somehow.

I surged forward and tapped the woman's shoulder. She looked back at me as hope briefly bloomed in my chest—

And it wasn't her. Not even close. Her face was all wrong. Her eyes were too close together, her lips were too thin. She smiled at me as I backed away, feeling like the most colossal idiot who had ever lived.

Until I turned my head and glimpsed the curvy woman standing in front of the café across the street.

Her hair wasn't pink. Wasn't even that light. At this distance, I could've mistaken her features. But I *knew* it was her.

Proving yet again I had no business in such an upstanding town, I dashed across the street outside the crosswalk. She didn't notice me as I jogged up to her, but that gave me time to study her face.

It was definitely her, and she was even more beautiful than I remembered. Even if now her hair was brown.

I unwound her scarf from around my neck, and her gaze shot to mine. "You lost this." I lifted the scarf. "And I'll return it, if you'll spend the rest of your life with me."

## THREE



THE AIR WAS BRISK, AND SNOW SNAPPED IN THE AIR. IT ALSO swirled around the man I hadn't been able to get out of my mind for the last day.

Making out under the mistletoe wasn't exactly in my life plan. Then again, having three jobs kind of killed all ideas of romance. So much so that the kiss seemed like a fuzzy flash in a dream. The kind you wake from with a gasp and can't quite shake.

Because surely that didn't happen in real life to a woman like me.

It happened in those Hallmark movies I secretly binge-watched in July and November through December. I couldn't help it. Those happy hours were a soft paintbrush over my usual lonely Christmases. Add in the Polaroids I took of styles for my look book, and watching those movies was almost like homework in between the moments of longing.

But it wasn't real.

And neither was getting kissed by a stranger.

Even if this stranger had stunning gray eyes that matched the perpetually overcast sky of my hometown. Intelligence sparked there and made all sorts of crazy thoughts flutter in my brain like the flakes that spun around on the shelf of snow globes that lined my bedroom bookcase.

And because I wanted to step closer to him, I folded my arms over my bulging look book journal against my chest. He was holding my favorite cashmere scarf. The one I'd bought

myself for graduation. Okay, so cosmetology school wasn't exactly like a college graduation, but I had a brand spanking new certificate that said I could cut hair in the state of New York. For me, that was a big thing. It had warranted a rare splurge of spending on myself.

His long, slightly dirty fingers were holding out the scarf to me like a gift. Well, it wasn't quite dirt on them, but they sure weren't clean.

I glanced down at those fingers and quickly tucked the urge to snarl at him that he was ruining the fine fabric under the polite smile I pasted on my face. "Forever shouldn't be offered up so easily for a scrap of cashmere."

He brought the crimson scarf up to his whiskered chin and slid it down his neck. "It's a lovely scrap of cashmere, and I wish I could say it still smells like you." He inhaled and something warm and foreign unfurled in my belly. "Unfortunately, that's not the case. But I remember how you tasted. And that's why vanilla is my new favorite flavor until the end of time."

I narrowed my eyes. "Then go to The Rusty Spoon and have yourself a vanilla milkshake. I highly recommend it."

A flash of teeth gleamed from his full lips. He had just enough scruff to make my palms itch to touch, and a head of thick hair that the hairdresser flourishing inside of me wanted to get a hold of. But it was the lonely woman inside of me who was the real troublemaker. She wanted to step closer and see if that kiss was just a fluke.

But she was me, and that wasn't happening.

"Then come with me."

"What?" I blinked out of the haze that seemed to descend when I was with him. "No. I have to work."

"Then after work."

I shook myself out of the stupor. "I don't know you. I don't go out with strangers."

He held out his hand. "Callum MacGregor."

Of course he had a hot name. Hell, it was a Hallmark movie name. Not a real guy. Not a George or Gary or Greg. Nope, he was a Callum.

I glanced down at his hand, but I didn't take it. I only hugged my notebook tighter. "Look, I'm flattered. And that kiss was..."

"Amazing. Stupendous. Life-altering."

I frowned. "It was a kiss."

He stepped forward. "You felt it. I know you did. You pulled me closer." His attention dropped to my mouth, and he reached for me.

I stepped back, my spine going rigid. "It was stupid."

His eyebrows snapped down. "No it wasn't. It was the best thing that has happened to me in a damn long time."

"Then you need some new hobbies."

"I have plenty of hobbies, thanks. More than I can keep up with. What I don't have is your name."

I took another step back and slammed into the handle of the door to Brewed Awakening. Flustered, I dropped my notebook, and he swooped down to pick it up before the snow soaked into the pages.

"Hey. Give that back."

He took my arm and gently moved me aside as a trio of girls came out with their coffees cupped in their hands as they talked animatedly about some guy from a TV show. I smiled at them awkwardly. They were regulars in the café.

The shorter one of the three glanced at me and then at my hot mistake, tilting her head with interest. "Who's your friend, Ellie?"

I resisted the urge to growl at Katie. Now he knew my name.

"Ellie, is it? It suits you." His long, dusty fingers clutched my idea book easily. As if they were born for such things. Long fingers that had cupped my face so tenderly, though

they'd been much cleaner then. Hygiene was important, dammit.

I reached for my notebook again, and he held it just out of reach. "He's no one. Stranger danger."

Katie's demeanor changed in a second. All three girls advanced on him. "Is he bothering you?"

Callum held up his other hand. "No trouble. Just trying to get to know the woman I'm going marry."

Katie's sky blue eyes went shiny. "Marry?" She curled her fingers around her to-go cup and brought it up for a quick sip, foam teasing her top lip. "Like love at first sight?"

"Oh, for God's sake. Keep the book and my favorite freaking scarf for all I care." I rushed around the girls and grabbed the door handle. "I'm going to be late, and Macy will kill me."

"Excuse me, ladies," Callum said with that charming drip of honey voice before he followed me inside. "C'mon, I'm harmless. There was an instant connection between us. You felt it too, or you wouldn't be so pissed at me."

I shrugged out of my coat. Before I could get it all the way down my long-sleeved uniform shirt, he was there to help. I huffed out an annoyed breath even as his snow-tinged cedar scent slid around me. The same scent that had chased me into dreams last night. My skin prickled where his calloused fingers grazed my wrist.

He draped my coat over his arm, and I did growl this time. "I don't have time for this."

"I'll hold onto it until your shift is over." He tucked my look book into the messenger bag over his shoulder. "It'll be safe with me. Same as you, Ellie. I promise."

"That's what murderers say."

His eyebrow spiked. "You know a few murderers?"

"No, but I watch plenty of true crime shows. Ted Bundy was super charming, wasn't he?"



“Not really. If you looked closer, his eyes were dead. Any woman with half a bit of awareness would see the same. You are far too wary to get tricked like that.”

*Tell that to my last boyfriend who got me to pay for half of the things he called essentials that he was short on cash for. Like his cell phone service and that nifty iPad I got him for Christmas last year.*

I narrowed my eyes. “Or you’re charming enough to tell stories like that to make a woman feel safe.”

His hand darted out to circle my wrist. His gray eyes went dark in reaction. “I feel your pulse skittering. You feel this *thing* between us too.”

“Could just be fear.”

“Not of me. I’m harmless, unlike my triplet brothers. They’re hell on earth.” He pulled on the lapel of his sweater. “Would a serial killer wear a cardigan?”

Probably not and no one should look so good in that stupid brown sweater, but he did. “Maybe a smart one would. You seem like a smart guy. Maybe too smart for your own good.”

“That’s what my mom tells me.” His long lashes swept down as he focused on my mouth again. “And I will say I’m smart enough not to let you get away again.” Then his gaze crashed into mine once more. “Not without examining just what’s between us.”

“You’re not from Crescent Cove or you’d be running for the hills, buddy. There’s no dating in the Cove. There’s only forever and so many babies you could rename us Bunny Cove.”

There. That should send him running. Most men who were smart and under thirty-ish escaped while they still could.

I couldn’t quite tell his age. There were lovely crinkles at the corners of his eyes, but that could just mean he liked to be outside.

Dammit, I needed to stop staring at him.

He swallowed tightly, and the flare of fear that he'd vanish just like I thought was quickly banked.

Or maybe I was afraid he'd stay. I couldn't decide which one was scarier.

He slid his fingers down my hand to tangle with my fingers. "That just makes me want to hear more."

"No, you don't. You want to turn right around and head back to wherever you come from."

"Wrong." The corner of his mouth lifted. "I'm actually trapped here until my car is done."

"I—"

"Yo, Vanilla, I'm pretty sure my schedule still has your name on it."

My shoulders rose to my ears at Macy Gideon's shout. She was my boss for a little while longer. However, she'd used my order nickname so I wasn't in real trouble.

I shook him free and pointed at him. "If you leave with my notebook, I'll find you and chop off those dirty fingers."

He laughed and looked down at his hand. "Sorry, I was sketching in the park."

Of course he was an artist. If there was a guy who was ill-equipped to be an adult, I was going to be attracted to him. Not this time. I was going to be strong and not fall for someone who had *no future* stamped on his forehead.

I turned to head into the back of the café where a line of people were waiting to be served. I hurried to the cash register and quickly tapped in my login, and then grabbed an apron from the drawer and tugged it over my head.

"Where do you need me?"

Macy's short hair was in frazzled spikes, telling me it had been a day already. She had three espresso pods brewing in the big purple beast that dominated the side counter. "Need a new batch of coffee in the carafes."

“Got it.” I turned to the long counter and pulled off the magnetic timers and reset them for another three hours. Habit and auto pilot took over, even while Callum’s intrusive personality vied for space in my too busy brain. I hooked the long handles over my arm and gathered all four thermoses up and then headed to the kitchen to use the industrial-sized brewer.

I’d been working at the café since Macy opened it a few years ago. She paid well, and I could always pick up a shift when I wanted extra cash. Now she had a much larger staff, but I was one of the originals, so I always got first pick of the bonus shifts. I was also the one everyone called because I could never say no to adding more money to my savings account.

But all that was going to change.

My cosmetology certificate was finally going to let me move on the plans I’d been making for the last four years. My bulging notebook and Pinterest board would finally have an outlet. I didn’t have to only be the girl who washed hair and swept up clippings just to soak up real life experience at To Dye For, the new salon that had opened this year. I officially had my own booth rental as of Monday.

I would be hanging up my apron Monday after the morning shift and trading it for a smock—a really cute black one with pink Christmas trees on it—and a closetful of clothes I’d slowly been gathering to show off my true style. Not the jeans and array of café and pizza T-shirts that I wore most of the time.

The real me.

Would he be interested in that girl?

Ugh. No. I wasn’t interested in starting some fling with Mr. Charming.

I touched my lips. They still buzzed at the thought of him. Life was changing for the better, and there was no room for a hot artist with clever lips in my current plans.

Even if I almost wished there was.

## FOUR



SIX HOURS LATER, MY ARTIST SHADOW HAD MOVED FROM THE main café to the the well-worn leather couch in the reading nook. He'd been busily scratching in his sketchbook, his gaze tracking my movements off and on. Just enough off that I didn't call Sheriff Brooks. Stalking wasn't sexy.

Callum, however, didn't give off that creepy vibe. He was just intense.

Along with being charming, he could make small talk with anyone and everyone. It was an enviable trait, but it still pissed me off. Especially since every female seemed to fall under his spell.

Including Mrs. Gunderson who could talk a body into the ground and then shovel after them to talk some more. But he didn't look bothered in the least.

I shot a glance over my shoulder at the chirpy laugh that came out of the older woman. Dear God, was she flirting with him?

Callum caught me looking and gave me a half smile that made every blood cell in my system go into overdrive before he refocused that obscene attention on Judy. There was no annoyance in his eyes, just a quiet friendliness that seemed to draw everyone into his sphere.

A few murmurs of gossip had fluttered through the air the first hour. That he was trouble and had been sketching in the park—what kind of man was he?

By the end of the lunch rush, he had a line of people waiting for portraits.

He didn't charge, so Macy didn't give him any trouble as long as he kept buying food and drinks. I'd also spotted him stuffing twenties into the tip jar at the register every time he got a coffee or tea. Was he trying to buy me off?

What kind of woman did he think I was?

Annoyed, I marched over to pick up the dishes scattered around him. A cookie plate with a few crumbs was stacked on his panini plate, and there was now a collection of mugs. I went around the back of the couch he'd made his mini office and literally couldn't go another step.

On his pad was a perfect rendering of the book nook area, including the haphazard mix of Halloween and Christmas that was Macy's aesthetic. From the perspective to the tiny details it was like a photograph, only far more clever. He'd added a few faces on the pink pumpkins stacked everywhere. Some were sweet, some reminded me of *The Nightmare Before Christmas*, and still others had a flair that was completely his own.

In the center of the portrait was Macy's step-daughter, Dani, who was in her usual spot doing homework. Instead of her face in a book, he'd created a rendering of her climbing the bookcase in the midst of decorating the top shelf. She had a sweetly mischievous look on her face and a lock of hair falling forward from her sharp pixie cut that matched Macy's.

"That's amazing."

I wanted to saw off my tongue. Giving him compliments would not move him along in any way.

Mrs. Gunderson shifted and looked over the top of the couch at me. "Isn't he amazing? I've commissioned him to do my cats for Christmas."

I pressed my lips together against a laugh. When it was sufficiently buried, I stepped around the end table and gathered his plates. "Is that right?"

Callum grinned. "They sound like rascallions."

Judy's laughter filled the room. "Oh, you are so correct. I can't wait. Are you sure that forty dollars is enough? It seems like your talent is worth so much more."

He patted Judy's hand. "Well, I'm here for a bit longer it seems." The look he gave me could have melted my panties. "It keeps my skills sharp."

"If they get any sharper, you'll need to open up your own shop," I muttered.

"Would you like that? Me here all the time?" He curled his long fingers around the handle of his mug and brought it to his lips. "Seeing you everyday would definitely make work far more palatable. I even got my own drink from Macy."

"What?" I blinked and my hand stilled over the stack of mugs. "She gave you one?"

He grinned. "Is that something special? I had a feeling it was kind of her thing."

"Yeah, but only if she likes you. And it usually takes at least five or six visits before she gives someone their own drink."

"I didn't have a choice in the drink. She just put it in front of me."

"That's how it works."

"Hmm." He took another sip. "Now she calls me Bourbon."

"Wow." Her bourbon-aged espresso beans weren't pulled out very often. Then again, he had been stuffing big bills into the tip jar. Macy was often a slave to the almighty dollar. Charging him extra for her special blend plus all those tips... Well, how could she resist?

Especially since he was obviously a city boy of some sort. He probably wouldn't notice the difference in cost.

Callum nodded to another coffee sitting just behind his stack. "That's yours if you'd like to quench your thirst."

I glanced down at the coffee. *My* coffee. It wasn't terribly original, but when it came to Macy's strong brew, I needed the sweetness of vanilla and milk with a dash of honey. Honey being her secret ingredient for me. It had taken two years for her to tell me what it was.

"Why did you get my drink?"

"For you, of course."

"I'm working."

"You work in a café. I'm pretty sure you're going to drink the product sometime."

I gathered the cups. "I'm fine."

"Suit yourself," he called after me.

I picked up the pace and dumped the mugs in my bin and brought it all into the back. Macy was waiting there for me.

"So, what's the story?"

"There isn't a story." I moved to the dishwasher and started stacking mugs and cups into the correct slots.

"Oh, there's a story. He's been sniffing after you for hours now."

"Right. It's been awhile. Shouldn't you be heading home anyway? You never stay away from Michael this long."

"He's with Grumps for the afternoon. Don't change the subject."

I gripped the edge of the counter. "I don't know why he's still here."

"Zzzt. Try again."

I huffed out a breath. "It's stupid, and he's just being stubborn. He'll go away soon."

"Considering he's spent about eighty bucks here, not including those big tips—I don't think so."

"Eighty? What are you charging him?"

Macy shrugged. “He keeps buying for all the people who sit for his pretty pictures.”

“What did Dani get out of him?”

“Double chocolate chip cookies and hot chocolate.” Macy gave me a wolfish smile. “She knows how to play men. I feel that I’ll be in trouble in about five years.”

I laughed despite my own annoyance. “I think you’re right. You’ll have too much fun needling Gideon.”

Her grin widened. “I live for making my husband nuts.”

“What’s that like?”

She frowned. “You know Gideon.”

“I know.” I shook my head. “Never mind.”

“Uh-oh. Are you drinking the Cove Kool-Aid?”

“No. Well, maybe a little. I’m in no rush for the baby part, but I’m tired of the dating roulette wheel. I’d like a guy who isn’t into games.” I peeked out into the dining room. I could just glimpse Callum on the couch. “He’s got games stamped all over him.”

“Even in the granddad sweater?”

I let the door close. “Not sure I’ve ever seen a grandfather fill out the shoulders of a sweater like that.”

“So, you have been looking. I knew there was a story. I can always smell it.”

“Your nose should be singed from coffee.”

“Blaspheme.”

I laughed as I crossed my arms and leaned against the counter. “We had a stupid moment under the mistletoe at the festival last night. It was snowing and the twinkle lights were bright and there he was all chilled and out of place. Rosy nose and funnel cake powder on his coat. Then he just sort of...”

“Planted one on you?”

“Ugh.” I could feel the heat flooding my neck and cheeks. “Yes. I wasn’t expecting it, and he actually knows how to kiss



—which is kind of a miracle compared to a lot of guys out there.”

“That’s a fact. Kinda how Gideon and I got into trouble. Though I was the one planting one on him.”

“On camera.”

Macy rolled her eyes. “Yeah, let’s not talk about that. Especially since it wasn’t the first time. Look, there’s no harm in finding out how it might go between you. I mean, he’s not from the Cove so maybe he isn’t afflicted like the rest of them. Just you know, wrap it twice.”

“Macy.” I twisted the end of my ponytail and wrinkled my nose.

“What? It’s true. Then again, we’ve had a few strangers wander through, and they still end up planting babies in unsuspecting women of this town. Maybe you’re right. Don’t hook up with the hot artist dude.”

“Right. See? That’s the smart thing.”

“Smart thing. Yep. You’re a smart girl.”

“I am.” I nodded. “See, you’re good at this stuff.”

“But…”

I tipped back my head. “No buts.”

“First of all—no, this is definitely not my bag. However, you not going to be under my daily watch anymore.”

“I’ll only be a few storefronts down. I’m not moving to Syracuse or anything.”

“Still.”

I grinned at her. “Maybe you’ll even let me cut your hair.”

She narrowed her eyes at me. “I do okay.”

I sighed. So much for Macy as my first paid customer. “That’s true. Someone must have taught you how to cut.”

She shrugged. “My mom was a hairdresser. It’s not an easy life. Then again, you’re used to being on your feet all day anyway. And I have a feeling you’ll be just fine.”

My eyes burned. “You think?”

“As I said, you’re smart. You don’t trip over your tongue because a hot dude smiles at you like a lot of the baristas who have worked here. If he gets your blood pumping, maybe don’t shut him down right away. You can go on a date like normal people.”

“I’m starting a new job.”

“Right. *A* job—not three like you have been doing. Just one job, like the rest of us.”

“You have two jobs.”

She waved me away. “I don’t count. I like both my jobs.”

“I love my job here.”

“No. You are very competent at your job and I appreciate that. But this isn’t your passion. I see you ripping pages out of the magazines left in the book nook.”

I flushed. “I’m sorry.”

“It’s fine. I don’t care. I’m aware that people in town just like to dump their magazines on me from their kids’ school magazine drives. But I see your brain spinning, and then you’re off stealing my tape dispenser to play collage with your idea book.”

I winced.

She pulled out a little Moleskine notebook from her back pocket. “I have one too.” She shoved it back in her pocket. “It’s in code, so don’t think you can steal my secrets.”

A laugh burst out of me. “I would never.”

“Take a chance on the hot artist. And if you still aren’t into him then shake him loose. I have a bat under the counter if you need it.” She straightened her shoulders. “Now give me your apron, and get out of here.”

“I still have another hour.”

“Go. If you want to go upstairs to get cleaned up, I’ll make sure Dani keeps him occupied.”

I nibbled on the inside of my cheek. Handily, my apartment was above the café. I'd managed to snag one of the few one-bedrooms when Rylee moved in with her husband.

“Go on. Be a girl for once. I won't hold it against you.”

“Maybe dinner would be okay.” I untied my apron and handed it to her.

She crumpled it in her hand, and then pointed at me. “And not at the diner. Come on, Vanilla, live a little.”

“Never thought you'd be a matchmaker.”

“Don't tell Vee, or I'll break your kneecap.”

“There's the Macy I know and love.”

“Yeah, yeah.” She pushed open the door then paused. “Go through the back. Knock his socks off.”

I played with the thin gold band on my thumb. If I was going to be stupid, I should at least go all in. “Think Dani can keep him busy for an hour?”

“Can do.”

I sneaked out the back door near the Dumpster and hurried down the alleyway to the side entrance to the apartments. The brisk winter air was like a slap. I was definitely making a mistake. Then again, dinner was a small price to pay to get back my notebook and my scarf.

I'd get a steak out of him, at least.

With a side of hot kisses...

No. Just a steak.

Probably.

## FIVE



I FOLDED MY ARMS AND FACED OFF WITH THE KID IN FRONT OF me. We were sketch battling in comic style—not my best medium, but I’d been a teenage boy long enough to have secret dreams of drawing Batman like most guys.

Dani flipped her pad around toward me. My eyebrows shot up. The kid was good. “How old are you?” I asked.

“Almost ten.”

“Damn.”

“You said a swear.”

I cringed. “I did.” I pulled out my wallet and withdrew a dollar. “Swear jar?”

She snatched it. “Sounds good to me.”

I was pretty sure her pocket was the swear jar, but I shrugged and looked down at my own paper. My superhero had a scrappy vibe that probably had more to do with the kid who had been amusing me for the last two hours than any talent of mine.

I showed her my sketch.

Her eyes widened, and she snatched the pad out of my hand. “Cool!”

“Guess we’ll have to call it a draw then.”

“Oh, mine’s still better. But this is awesome. Imma call her Ruby.”

I shook my head. Oh, to have the self-esteem of an almost ten-year-old. “And why is her name Ruby?”

She shrugged and ripped off the page before handing me back the sketch pad. Then she handed over her drawing. “Whatcha gonna call mine?”

I glanced down at her surprisingly detailed dog with wings. “Looks like a Jersey to me. Lots of attitude.”

“My friend Jessie is from there. Definitely lots of attitude. Macy says she’s a bad influence.” Her voice dropped to a stage whisper. “I think she likes her though.”

“Your... Macy, is pretty interesting herself.”

“She’s cool. She married my dad, and now I have a little brother. So, she’s like my bonus mom. You should go to The Haunt. If you’re not scared anyway.”

“The place next door?”

“Yep. There’s a life-size Michael Myers in there. And Freddy and Jason. There’s even a Swamp Thing. Macy let me put Santa hats on them.”

Her thought process was staggering. Then again, when it came to ‘kids’, the ones in my purview at the community college were mostly advanced teens, and they were still as random as their thought processes.

“Anyway. Thanks for drawing with me. It was fun. Way funner—”

“More fun.”

“Right. That’s what I said.”

I rolled my bottom lip behind my teeth so I didn’t laugh. She was something else.

“Way better than Grumps. He can’t even handle a crayon.”

“Well, that’s high praise then.”

“Not really.”

I shook my head and collapsed into the couch. “You’re tough, kid.”

“Yeah, that’s what my dad says too. Anyway, I really like your stuff. You can come back tomorrow if you want.”

“I can, huh?” I crossed my arms over my sketch pad on my belly.

Dani waved. “Gotta go pick up my brother.”

“Maybe I’ll see you tomorrow.” I’d suddenly developed more interest in sticking around town, so the possibility was there.

“Maybe I’ll beat you at drawing again.”

I laughed. “Wouldn’t doubt it.”

I tucked my supplies into my messenger bag. If I stuck around, I was going to have to stop into Colette’s place again. I was about two-thirds of the way through the hundred-page sketchbook just from sitting here for a day. And while some of the pieces were throwaway warmup sketches, a lot of them were actually good studies that just might be something more.

I was all about using models when I needed to, but for the most part, I preferred everyday subjects and Crescent Cove was full of characters. From the nosy busybody types, to the prolific level of children, and the added strangers in town for the festival, I’d been inundated with subject matter. People from all walks of life came in and out of the café. Some I drew from mental snapshots, while others were curious enough to ask to sit for me.

My brain was whirling with ideas for a new series, which my agent would be super excited about considering I’d been dry for the last few months. The fall term always sucked all the creativity out of me. All that new hope wrapped in the careless throwaway years of youth. I reached a few students—enough to keep my own hope alive. Occasionally, I found little pockets of inspiration within our class discussions. Some students even surprised me with their takes on old folklore.

The winter term was more for my advanced classes. They were wrapped up in their own projects, and that often gave me time to deal with my own. As well as allowing me to get my annual book published to keep my place at the college. If you

didn't publish, you perished. At least that was the current dean's point of view.

I had my initial research done on Tam Lin, a Scottish folktale. I was actually toying with writing an illustrated book. The prospect was scary as hell. I liked the anonymity of my alter ego, Cal. No last name on my paintings, just a sliced up version of my first. It was too unusual to use the full version without someone being able to connect a few dots.

At the very least, my Crescent Cove sojourn had produced enough seeds for a half dozen paintings. Dry period be gone.

For once, everything was falling in line. I should be settled, but instead, it was as if the whole world was a little tilted. I had a feeling that was more from a certain smart-mouthed barista.

One who had disappeared in the last hour or so.

I felt around in my bag and found her heavy notebook. It was bulging with clippings and glued-in notes. I didn't mean to open it. I knew more than most how much a sketchbook was more like a personal journal. But the spine was practically cracked with all the extra papers that had been added.

Glossy magazine pages had been ripped and altered, largely of women's faces and hair. Some had been restructured with pencils and paints while others had literally been cut to create a different style.

Notes were scribbled in the margins, numbers and names that didn't make a lick of sense to me.

A few brand names that I vaguely understood were highlighted with phone numbers or ID numbers—I couldn't tell which. But it was her script handwriting I was more interested in. It was slashing and feminine, not the cutesy teen bubble-style. No, this was the kind that came with a quick brain who couldn't get the words out fast enough.

Some of it had to be her own brand of shorthand.

I kept turning the pages. Her sense of color was startlingly intense. From the rich browns and reds to a million shades in between. It took a special eye to see variations like she did.

And the way she hacked at photos to create her own hairstyles then moved on to scratchy drawings that refined them into faceless drawings that reminded me of fashion drawings.

But she didn't seem to care about clothing, so I was more inclined to think she was into the cosmetology end of art.

“Nosy much?”

I snapped the book shut and looked up. “Sorry, it sort of...” I stood and was pretty sure my tongue rolled out of my head and across the café to stop at her feet.

She'd changed.

The sweet ponytail had been replaced with a tumble of light brown waves tinged with caramel. Large gold hoops hung from her ears and she'd done something with her face. It was enhanced with some female witchcraft. Not the kind that looked overdone. No, this was the little tricks of her trade, now that I knew her a little better.

She'd changed into some sort of dusky pink sweater that looked cloud soft and slipped off one shoulder—I intended to find out just how soft it was, mind you. Of course then there was the skin tight white jeans and boots that matched her sweater. But not just a regular pair of boots. These went over her knee with a spiked heel that made her legs look miles long.

Fuck.

“Sort of what? Hopped out of your bag and into your hand and the pages magically fanned open?” She crossed her arms, and it did ridiculous things to the curve of her chest. Also, her sweater lifted the tiniest bit to show off a slash of golden stomach.

Was she wearing a bra?

There was definitely no strap going on there. Maybe it was one of those strapless things that only women understood. Or just one strap? I didn't understand, but I wanted to. And I really wanted it to be on my floor tonight. Or just the sweater. I wasn't choosy. I just wanted her.

“Uh...”



“Eyes up, pal.”

I blew out a breath. “Sorry. You...wow.”

Her lips quirked up at the corner. Damn, she knew her power. Why did that make her even hotter?

I cleared my throat. “I was looking for you and then I took out the notebook and it was ready to bust open.”

She dropped her arms and came for me. I mean, came forward. The slow roll of her hips and those legs of hers made me crazy. I couldn't form a fucking thought. She tipped her head slightly and the scent of vanilla and honey flooded my senses. From the dusting of something shimmery on her shoulder to the glimmer of gold at her neck, ears, and wrists, she sparkled. She was a winter dream right in front of me.

And I was totally botching this. Again.

She took the notebook and dropped it into the huge bag over her other shoulder. “Thanks for keeping it safe. *Ish.*”

“I didn't touch it. Well, I mean I looked at a few pages, but I didn't hurt anything. It's really amazing,” I finished lamely.

“Thanks. I've been collecting for a long time.”

“Just collecting?”

She stepped closer. “Guess I'll find out Monday.”

“What's Monday?”

“Do you really care, Callum?”

“Of course I do.”

“You'll be gone by then, won't you?” She tipped her head and tucked a heavy lock of hair behind her ear. “Better question is why are you still here?”

“We had a moment.”

“Yeah. It was a moment. A nice one.”

“It was more than nice and you know it.” I stepped into her space and some of her bravado seemed to fall away.

She shrugged. “I’m not looking for a bit of mistletoe-flavored fun, Callum. Come to think of it, it’s poisonous. Did you know that?”

“I did. And actually in Norse mythology, it was the single thing that killed Baldr. He was immune to everything thanks to his mother, Frigg. Save for one little plant.” I invaded her space. “An arrow made of mistletoe was his ultimate demise.”

She licked her lips and stared at my mouth. “I didn’t know that part.”

“Then again, there were the Druids who used mistletoe in a lot of their rituals. They thought it had special powers. And as most things in pagan religion, the Christians nicked it for their own.” I slid my fingers along her hip. “It went from being used in solstice rituals with evergreen for various fertility reasons to finally becoming little pretty things in doorways and arches to catch a kiss.”

There were a lot more stories around mistletoe, but right now, most of it was leaving my brain. Probably because most of my blood had headed south.

“Oh.”

Her lashes swept down and I went for it once again. Instead of the bite of winter and snow with traces of vanilla, she tasted of sharp mint. But her sigh was the same, and when she melted into me, I took full advantage. I wrapped my arm around her back and drew her up against me.

The café sounds fell away, and there was nothing but her honey-scented sweetness. I resisted the urge to break a few laws—sex in public was definitely frowned upon, especially in a small town. And I’d already made that colossal mistake with our intimate public moment.

Instead, I tempered myself into a long, slow kiss. She gripped my shirt, and I was pretty sure a few chest hairs were sacrificed for the cause. I didn’t care. She was with me now, and that was all that mattered.

## SIX



FOR THE SECOND TIME IN AS MANY DAYS, I FOUND MYSELF kissing this man. And as with the first kiss, I didn't really understand why it happened. Only that I liked it.

A lot.

At least the first one I could blame on mistletoe. This one? Not so much.

The crash of dishes behind me finally dented the hormone haze. Callum being an artist and spouting random stories about mistletoe shouldn't have been a turn-on, and yet here I was.

I stepped back and teetered on my heels. He caught me and the very sizable hardness he was sporting should have put me off, and yet it so did not.

Those words *and yet* were my problem tonight.

Everything about him should have been in my turn-off column. No roots in Crescent Cove—check. Less than stable artist—check. Not looking for something serious—double check.

And here I was, dressed up and looking to impress.

*Run, Eleanor Ann Lawton, you run right now.*

*Not toward him. Away.*

Ignoring that voice, I leaned in and brushed his lips one more time. "Let's make this mistake worth it."

He frowned. "Why does it have to be a mistake?"

“You don’t exactly have *let’s date* in mind, do you?”

“I could.” He looked away too fast.

“Yeah, that’s what I thought.”

“I don’t know what this is yet. I do know I want to spend time with you.”

I readjusted my purse on my arm. “You want to spend time in my bed.”

“Well, I’m not averse to that, no.”

The fact that I wasn’t either gave me a lot of pause. I’d never been the kind of woman who hopped into bed with strangers. I usually ended up having shit taste in men, but it took a while to figure that out. And that usually included five dates or so. “You’re not from here, either.”

“No.” His eyes narrowed. “Why do I have a feeling you are going down a list in your head, and I’m not getting any checkmarks?”

“I have a lot of plans, Callum.”

“Say it again, Ellie.”

Something fluttered deep in parts of me I didn’t want to think about. “I have a lot of plans.”

“Callum. Say my name, Ellie.”

“Stop being charming.”

He grinned. “Well, there’s one checkmark.”

“Charming isn’t a virtue.”

“Is that what you’re looking for? Virtues?” His gaze dropped to my mouth again as he rolled his bottom lip behind his teeth. And that was far too enticing. “Virtues don’t keep you warm at night.”

“I don’t need a man to keep me warm at night. I’ve been taking care of myself for a damn long time. I even pay my own heating bill.”

“That little bite in your voice doesn’t do anything to turn me off, Ellie. It just makes me want you more.”

“You have some weird standards.”

“I’m pretty sure it’s just an Ellie standard. You’re ruining me for all other women, remember?”

“That endless charm is going to get you into trouble.”

“I don’t really have a lot of charm for anyone but you.”

“Oh, I witnessed plenty of it during my shift today.”

“You *were* paying attention.”

I tossed my hair over my shoulder. “I didn’t have to. The crowd around you told the tale no matter where I was in the café.”

“Ah, but you still looked for me.”

I huffed out a breath. “You are incorrigible.”

“So my mother tells me. She’d like you.”

My gut twisted. I didn’t want to think about his family or the three brothers he’d mentioned. It seemed big and intrusive and...warm. I was used to my solitary life. I had a few friends, but somehow I’d never really gotten too close to anyone in the years I’d lived here. My mom had landed here when I was seventeen. By the time I was eighteen, she’d lit out with bum number twenty-three and left me behind. Not that she’d ever really been a mom. But once I was eighteen, she didn’t have to legally stick around anymore.

“Hey.” He slid his fingers into my hair and brushed his thumb over my cheek. “Where did you go?”

“Nowhere fun.” I brushed his hand away.

“I’m just asking for you to give me tonight. If you still think this is a mistake after that, no harm no foul.”

“What’s the point? You don’t even live around here.”

“But I’m not far from here either. Less than an hour.”

I sighed. “Might as well be five. I’m starting a new job on Monday, and I won’t have time for two-hour long booty calls. And that’s hoping it would be more than fifteen minutes.”

“Oh, it would be. Not sure I can go two hours, but I’ll give it a go.”

I arched my brow.

He frowned then tipped his head back. “Oh, you mean to and from.”

“Exactly.” I toyed with the buttons of his goldenrod and soot colored shirt. The plaid suited him. A little traditional, but somehow not. His gray eyes were darker now. Stormier and intense in a way that made me want to make those mistakes. To throw caution out the window and live a little.

Especially with that lure of more than a fifteen-minute one and done.

*No. No, that’s not on the menu.*

We could have a nice evening together without sex. It would be easier to walk away if I didn’t know exactly how we fit together. Some fun might be good for me.

Hmm, how much longer than fifteen minutes would be take?

“Isn’t it exhausting to think so much?” He played with the hem of my sweater, the backs of his knuckles brushing along the skin of my midriff. “Just jump in with me. Just for a few hours.”

I sighed. I really was tired of thinking all the time. “Gonna buy me a steak?”

“Is that what you want?”

I laughed. “Macy said I should make you buy me an expensive dinner.”

“I’d do it if that’s what you want.” He trailed his fingers over my hip to get to my hand and laced our fingers. “What do you want, Ellie?”

I let myself consider the possibilities. “I’d like to walk around the festival. I’m usually working and never get to enjoy it.”

“Then that’s what we’ll do.” He drew me closer to the couch and grabbed my coat. “Now aren’t you glad I had your coat?”

“Is that what we’re going to call it? And not ransom?”

“I’ll do what I have to so I can spend time with you.” He twirled me around. “Now let’s get you dressed for outside. Even if I really like this one-shoulder deal.” His thumb caressed my skin before he held up my gray wool coat for me to put on.

I shivered when he flipped my hair out and draped it over my shoulder to make sure it didn’t get tangled in my hood. When I glanced back at him, he was so damn close.

Indecision lurked in his eyes. It would be so easy to just let this wicked chemistry lead me upstairs with him in tow. He seemed to understand that as much as we both wanted it, maybe it wasn’t a good idea.

Exhaling, he reached for his sweater on the couch and shrugged it on. He should have looked stodgy. Instead, he was all broad shoulders and sinful muscles. A thin leather bracelet peeked from his cuffs. It consisted of a heavy silver bead with some sort of intricate knots that clung to his wide wrist. He was far too intriguing in too many ways.

He pulled on his coat and handed me my red scarf. “Shall we?” He crooked his arm.

I couldn’t stop the smile as I slid my arm through his. “We shall.”

Even walking through the door made me feel like there was a change in the air. Evening had descended on the town. Just the barest hint of setting sun peeked from the trees over the water. The café was kitty corner from the park. The street lamps had been capped with lanterns to give the street an old world feel.

The gazebo—and scene of the crime—was lit up with white twinkle lights and fat retro bulbs in traditional colors, never mind the glistening tree itself. It reminded me of when I was really young, before my mother forgot what holidays

were. When we tried to eke out an existence in the shabby apartment in a small town that was more famous for the waterfall and old factories than anyone who lived there.

My mother had actually made an effort to give me a good Christmas that year. She'd been clear-eyed and not focused on some jerk to take care of her for once. She'd found decorations in the shed behind the old two-family house. We'd strung the ancient lights on the tiny Charlie Brown tree, and we had draped the remaining strings over the window ledge in my bedroom.

The lights on the gazebo shimmered in my vision, and the slap of cold singed my lungs.

Suddenly, I was twirling, and the lights seemed merry rather than sad. Callum caught my hand on the twirl out, and then I was overwhelmed with his cedar scent carrying on the cold breeze. A flashback to yesterday. No snow this time, but just like last night, he was nearly irresistible.

“I don't like that faraway look.”

His lips were so close that each word was a small puff of air against mine. Part of me wanted to blurt out the sadness that sneaked up on me this time of year, but the rest...

I didn't want to be the woman with the absentee parents. I was a strong, single woman who was just starting her career.

And I'd be strong and brave right now too.

I leaned in and closed the gap. His tongue was warm and a little too talented, but that was exactly what I needed.

A man who knew what he was doing. If I was going to act a little crazy, then it should be with a guy who knew what the hell he was doing.

The sound of a clearing throat had us pulling apart. Callum dragged his thumb over his lower lip right before he stepped away.

“Sorry to interrupt.” The jangle of keys dragged my attention away from the best kisser in the known universe. Well, at least my universe. Goodness.



Dare Kramer held up the keys. He had on a heavy tan jacket and an obviously homemade hat. There was no way he picked that blue out for himself. “We have the order in for the customization we talked about, but for now, we’ve got you all fixed up.”

“Fixed up?”

Callum flushed. “A guy in a truck backed out without looking, and I slid into a ditch.”

“Oh. Wow, so that’s why you’ve been hanging out.” Disappointment hit me harder than it should have. Of course he’d have a reason besides trying to get me to go out with him.

He took the keys from Dare. “Thanks, man. Do I need to sign anything?”

“Nah. We’re all set. I put the receipt in the glove box for your records or if you want to submit it to your insurance.”

“Thanks, but my premiums are enough.”

Dare chuckled. “I bet. It’s a sweet ride. We’re excited to work on it. We’ll give you a call in a few weeks.”

“Sounds good.” Callum pocketed his keys then tucked my arm through his. “Heading to the festival?”

“Kelsey dragged me over there earlier for the kid stuff.” Dare palmed the top of his head and settled his hat farther back. “My wife.”

“Sorry I missed them,” I said. “Sean sure is cute in his snowsuit.”

“The kid is Houdini. He’s always squirming out of it somehow.” He shrugged. “I’ve got tow truck duty, and some asshat already needs my help.”

“This asshat appreciates that you guys are so quick.” Callum grinned.

“Not touching that one.” Dare looked between us. “See you after the New Year.”

“Pretty sure that’s the most I’ve ever heard Dare say,” I said after Dare ambled off. “He must like you.”

“He likes my car.”

“That’s probably the truth.”

“Now where were we?”

“You were distracting me. Across the street, sir.”

He inclined his head. “As you wish.”

I dragged him across Main Street. “Don’t quote *Princess Bride* at me.”

“That’s it. You’re marrying me for real.”

A giggle escaped before I could squash it. “We’ll see.”

We wandered around the vendors who were hawking their wares, and we made sure to have cider and donuts from the nearby Happy Acres orchard. They had quite the entertainment lineup.

When I heard female giggling, I craned my neck. “Look at that crowd.”

Callum boosted me up and I grabbed hold of his shoulders. He grinned up at me. “What’s happening, do you think? Is it someone famous or one of the three-hundred babies who have overtaken this town?”

I laughed. “A bit of both actually.” There was a carriage there for sure, but the long dark hair of a tall man holding court told me it was a bit more. There had been a lot of excitement in Crescent Cove, thanks to my friend Ivy’s semi-famous rock producer husband.

He had quite a few famous friends, including one who spent part of the year at Happy Acres.

“Pretty sure that’s Ian Kagan over there.” I slid down Callum’s body. His hands firmed around my waist as he set me on the ground. My nipples tingled through a few layers. What was it about this guy?

He frowned. “Why is that name familiar?”

“Depends on if you listen to the rock stations.” I rested my palms on his chest.

“Do you?”

I shrugged. “I enjoy music. We fight over which channel to put it on at the salon.”

“Is that right?” He toyed with the ends of my hair. “That’s how you did the Cinderella transformation in less than an hour?”

“A woman never tells her secrets.” I looked away. Better to remember that I’d be turning back into that pumpkin at midnight.

He nudged my face back toward him. “Lest you forget, it was you who caught my attention yesterday. The girl with messy braids. I’m pretty sure they were pink too.”

I blushed. “Yeah, I drew the short straw for testing out a new temporary rinse. Took me four washes to get the cotton candy color out of my hair.”

“I enjoyed the pink, but I like the real you.”

“How do you know which is the real me? I could change my hair daily.”

His lips tipped up. “I’d like to find out.”

I stepped back and headed for the gazebo, but he caught up to me at the large oak tree and stopped me with a hand on my arm. “Is that so hard to believe?” he asked.

“What? That you want to get to know me?”

He nodded.

“Yes, actually. You’ve got the keys to your shiny ride. What’s keeping you here?”

“You. Ever since I joined you under that mistletoe.”

“Why?”

“Why not?”

I shook my head. “I’m not the girl who—”

“Has fun?”

I blinked. There wasn't an easy answer for that. I worked. I saved. I focused on the future. On finally doing something I loved and was good at. That was my idea of fun. Being stable for the first time in my life. I never wanted for money because I'd learned to budget from a very young age—because I 'd had to or I went hungry.

Fun wasn't part of my life.

“Take a chance on me. With an open mind and—”

“Legs?”

“Why Miss Lawton, that's positively scandalous.”

I frowned. “How do you know my last name?”

“The very helpful Mrs. Gunderson. She gave me the skinny on most of the town. I didn't know about the famous rockstar though.”

“He doesn't live here. His best friend does, so we see him from time to time.”

“Such a peculiar little town.”

“You don't know the half of it.”

He took my hand again. “Your hands are ice.” He took my other one and sandwiched it between both of his. He brought them up to his mouth and blew into the cup he'd made around them. “Pretty sure it's not the only thing that's icy.”

I stiffened.

“Don't get your back up. Just give me a chance. You've already made up your mind about what we are. And if that's really how you feel, I'll walk away. I'll hate it, and I'll always wonder what if, but I'll respect your wishes, Ellie. Always.”

## SEVEN



IN THE DISTANCE, A CHEERY BIT OF BELLS AND DRUMS HAD A small crowd singing along. I braced for the brush off as a guy doing a fair impression of Michael Bublé sang “Please Come Home For Christmas”.

Ellie had been looking for reasons to kill our date since we’d been interrupted by Dare. Hell, she’d been looking for a way out before then too, but at least then I’d had a chance. Now she was just searching for a reason to give me the boot.

Couldn’t she feel what was between us? Was it all on my side? I’d been attracted to plenty of women over the years. Some I acted on, some didn’t live up to the initial spark, and still others were lost opportunities.

I really didn’t want this to be the latter.

I curled my larger fingers around hers, but I didn’t grip tight. If she wanted to slip away, I’d deal with it. Probably with some pretty strong whisky—the Scottish kind. I was like my father in that regard. Sometimes all you could do was let a smooth Doublewood take care of your problems. As long as it only lasted a day or so.

Maybe a week for this woman.

Even after just a day with her in my bloodstream, it seemed like she would take a fair bit of time to forget—if ever.

She lifted her chin. “Dance with me?”

I hadn’t been prepared for that one.

“Or don’t you do that sort of thing?” she asked when I didn’t reply.

“My mother made sure I could hold my own.”

Her eyebrow quirked. “Is that right?”

“Don’t get weird. I’m not that much of a mama’s boy. But we are a well-rounded bunch.”

“Then I guess you need to put your dancing shoes where your mouth is.”

“I thought I’d put my foot in my mouth enough since I met you.”

Her eyes sparkled in the twinkle lights glowing off the tree above us.

“You didn’t even try to let me off the hook there.”

Her secret little smile was the only answer she gave me.

I drew her through the crowd to the small dance floor to the side of the stage. A jazzy version of Elvis’s “Blue Christmas” allowed me to draw her close and slowly sway with her. The music was too loud to talk, but I was happy enough to just enjoy her honey and vanilla scent. I pressed my cheek along her hair as we slowly circled in and around the other couples.

The guy on the stage lengthened the short classic tune with a few bits of flair. And he had a dramatic enough end to the song to let me dip her.

She gave a startled laugh and gripped my arms. I grinned down at her and slowly drew her back up. The song slid into a more upbeat song. Enough that I could do the two-step with her and twirl her between a few different couples.

I had the five pairs surrounding us laughing as we passed around one another. I even ended up dancing with a strapping man who reminded me of Santa for the last quarter of the song before finally ending up with Ellie back in my arms.

Her cheeks were flushed, and she was smiling so wide her cheeks must hurt. And God, she was fucking gorgeous.

The band started another jazzy version of a Christmas standard. She nodded to the edge of the dance floor and made a gesture for a drink.

“I didn’t think I could keep up with you. When you said you knew how to dance, you weren’t kidding.”

I maneuvered her through the small crush of people watching the dancers and we headed for the cider stand. The rockstar had made himself scarce so the line was much shorter now.

“Mom used to love to do the big Christmas shindig,” I said as we took our spots at the end of the line. “We’ve slowed things down over the years, but when my dad was still working at the college, she’d have all the teachers out to the farm. Did it up like it was a prom crossed with a winter dance from the sixties. Now she puts up all the decorations without the crowds.”

“That sounds...wow.”

“Yeah, my mom doesn’t do anything small.”

“And your dad is a teacher?”

“Was. He’s retired. Writing a book, I think. He’s been working on it for a while.” I laughed. “Mom keeps him busy.”

“Sounds like she’s a force.”

“Accurate.”

We finally got to the front of the line. A stunning woman with darkly-lashed gold eyes smiled at us, but her expression warmed considerably when she recognized my date. “Hey, Ellie.”

She waved. “It’s been a long time, Zoe. And you’re definitely way smaller than the last time I saw you.”

“Elvis and my idiot keep me running.”

My eyebrows shot up. “Elvis?”

She flipped a massive braid over her shoulder, the color almost as pure as the snow lining the streets. “Don’t go there. I

blame my fiancé for the name. I was delirious from giving birth, and he took advantage of me.”

Ellie absently stepped closer to me as people flowed around us. The band was taking a break, and everyone was looking for refreshments. I curled my arm around her back. She didn't shy away, so I counted that as a win.

Ellie's hand brushed my belt. “I caught Ian holding court.”

Zoe rolled her eyes. “I tried to convince him to stay home, but I think he likes seeing people act stupid over him. He's walking the baby around now. Motion usually knocks him out.”

“Stick me in the car when I'm not driving, and I'm out like a light.” Ellie glanced up at me. “Leaded or unleaded?”

I turned to Zoe. “There's an option?”

She waggled her eyebrows. “My brothers are into the cider and beer deal now too. We have some of those on tap as well.”

“Think I'm frozen enough to go for some warm unleaded.”

That was evidently the right answer. Ellie nodded. “Same.”

“Coming up.”

The line prevented more chitchat, and the two women waved goodbye. I glanced around for somewhere to sit. “Why don't we go by the water? I haven't been able to get down to see the big Christmas tree at the end of the pier. I started that way earlier, but the crowds were too thick.”

“It's chilly out there.”

“Now we've got warm cider, right?”

“Anything you want.”

She scraped her teeth over her lower lip before we crossed the lawn to head toward the pier. We were quiet as we sipped from our drinks. The sharp apple with a cinnamon finish was probably the best cider I'd had in a damn long time. I'd finished more than half of mine by the time we stepped onto the pier.



The breeze off the water was brisk, but not nearly as icy as I'd been expecting.

She drew in a lungful of air. "Snow soon."

I grinned down at her. "You can smell snow?"

"Not hard in a lake town. It's nearly every day. But a bit of warmth is always followed by snowflakes."

Cool LED white lights lined the railings of the long pier to the spectacular tree at the end. It was decked out in the fat, vintage Christmas lights like the gazebo. Huge gold and silver stars were tucked in the branches and were probably wired in there to combat the pull of the wind off the water.

But from here, it was like walking into an old postcard, and I appreciated the nostalgia and tradition. So many trees were glammed up and pink these days that it was nice to see something reminiscent of a classic Christmas.

The closer we got to the tree, the softer her face became. "I didn't get to do the tree thing very often as a kid."

I wasn't sure if I should ask for details, but the fact that she'd volunteered something about herself made me wary about screwing up. "Not into holidays?" Though that didn't seem right based on her pure happiness over the decorations and festivities.

"I learned not to be." She leaned on the railing next to the tree and stared across the water. "When I was a teenager, I used to look across the lake and wonder what it was like to be in one of those houses." She pointed to a large home lit up as if it embodied Christmas. "Like the Hamilton house out there. Every holiday, it looked like a postcard. And then in the summer, it was always bustling with posh parties."

"Do you want posh parties?"

She glanced up at me. "Not really my thing. But that house over there..." She pointed to the other side of the lake then braced her arm on the railing and propped her chin on her hand. "That house is more me. Those turrets and skinny windows mixed with grand ones. It's got those gingerbread details and a wraparound porch."

I followed where she pointed. It was decked out for Christmas, but instead of the pristine white lights like the Hamilton house she'd pointed out first, it had huge bulbs I could see from where we were. They lined the roofline, accentuating the sharp angles of the Victorian-style home. "Not usually the kind of house you see on a lake."

"No. It's such an odd little place in the middle of all the traditional Cape Cod styles and super ultra rich people with their modern mansions. And of course the condos that have infiltrated the Cove lately."

"I have a condo."

She wrinkled her nose at me. "Anyway, that's the house I always look at when I let myself dream."

*Let herself?* I had a feeling that didn't happen all too often. I slid my hand down her back. "Pretty good dream, if you ask me."

She straightened up. "Dreams are just that." She moved toward me fully for the first time since I'd met her. Well, beyond our first kiss. She'd melted into me under the mistletoe like taffy on a ninety-degree day, but I'd been chasing her ever since.

While I appreciated the chase, I wondered how it would end.

"How are you with fantasies?"

I swallowed. "Not that I'm complaining—because believe me, I'm not—but this is a bit of a change in mood."

The glow from the tree lit half her face. Her smile was slow and a little dangerous. "I've been convincing myself all night not to let myself enjoy you. I'm sure you'll be taking that hot little car out of town by morning."

"How do you know it's a hot little car?"

"Dare's eyes lit up like it was a dream. Pretty sure it's either a muscle car or one with an engine that men lust after."

I shrugged and dragged in a quick breath when her fingers slid under my coat then along my sweater. I cleared my throat.

“Engine.”

Her touch wandered lower. Her head was still tipped enough that she looked at me through her lashes. “Are you compensating?”

“Would I own up to it if I was?”

“Hmm. That’s true. Most men can’t gauge size.”

Not one to be outmaneuvered, I inched my hand into her coat and coasted over her hip to her spectacular ass.

Her breath hitched this time. The sound turned into a long exhale as I pulled her tight against me to show her just how adequate I was. Her nails dug into my plaid shirt, and I took a damn chance.

I’d been gambling on her all day. I wasn’t going to stop now.

She was right—we didn’t have a lot of time. Christmas was almost here, and I was tempted to invite her back to my folks’ house. But I had a feeling that would make her jackrabbit faster than the White Rabbit. Only her important date didn’t include me.

And I really wanted to change her mind.

I lowered my mouth to hers. Instead of pressing in on her with the need so readily flourishing between us, I took it easy. I gentled my explorations with a slow, drugging kiss. Cinnamon and apples mixed with her unique flavor, and I would’ve willingly drowned in her forever.

Her hands slid up to grip my shoulders. I cupped her face and tilted her head back to deepen the kiss. The crowd had thinned, and we were practically alone out here with only the lapping water and the deep night cloaked around us. We were far enough from the festival that it was only her quickened breath playing as our soundtrack.

A sound I’d be glad to hear much more of.

“Come to my room with me,” I said against her mouth. “We both need that fantasy.”

I'd been so wrapped up in my classes and stressing about a new project for my agent that there'd been little time for me to tend to my own needs.

Seeing her, tasting her, and wanting her had brought them back into such crisp focus, I literally ached. And maybe after one night, I could convince her for more. I had a feeling that once wouldn't be nearly enough for either of us.

"A fantasy," she said with a nod. "Yes."

I brought my other hand up to cup her cool cheek. "I'm at The Hummingbird's Nest."

"Guess we need to go get your car. It's a bit of walk, and I'm freaking cold."

I laughed. "Then let's get you warmed up."

"I'm sure you have a few ideas for that."

"You know what they say..."

"Skin on skin is the quickest way to warm up?"

"Damn, I like the way you think."

## EIGHT



THE HEATER WAS BLASTING IN CALLUM'S INSANELY BRIGHT car. Even in the dark of Dare's parking garage, it was like a neon banana. However, when the engine purred, I couldn't deny I enjoyed that bit of extra testosterone.

It was already thick in the air anyway. He'd practically dragged me over to the garage. Not that I could blame him. I'd been wishy washy in the extreme. Talk about hot and cold—even in my own mind.

Now that I'd given him the green light, he was going to run with it.

I wasn't used to being impulsive. That was my mother. And watching her make the same mistakes over and over again with men made me so careful not to do the same.

I glanced over at him in the shadows of the car. The bright blue lights of the various dials and speedometer tossed his face into stark relief. The hollowed out cheekbones and square jawline gave him that classically handsome look that made women stupid.

Clearly, I wasn't immune.

He curled his fingers around the shifter, and then he paused and directed all that ridiculous beauty my way. "This doesn't have to go any further than our date night. I can drop you home and pick you up and take you out for a proper dinner tomorrow."

I stuffed down the urge to laugh. "A proper dinner on Christmas Eve?"

He shrugged. “Or I can cook you dinner.”

“Is that right? At The Hummingbird’s Nest?”

“No, my place. Well-rounded, remember?”

I leaned into him, and he met me halfway. “Just take me to your room.” I said it against his mouth, the demand oddly reminiscent of how he’d been trying to convince me to go out with him all day.

He cupped the back of my head and kissed me hard before sitting straight again and fastening his seatbelt. I did the same and stared out the window at all the lights swaying in the increasing wind off the water.

There was a lot of pedestrian traffic, so our trip was slow going. We were a hearty bunch in the Cove, but most of the vendors were starting to pack it in. People had families to get to and holiday plans to finalize. And here I was with a stranger, feeling more at home with him than I did with most of my friends.

Not sure what that said about me—or maybe him.

He was so easy with everyone he met. I was polite and friendly, but not like him. He just instantly took to people. And to be truthful, they took to him. Dancing in the park like he’d choreographed it himself. Not missing a beat even when Mr. Phillips ended up in his arms. He was our town Santa and that dance had been the sweetest thing I’d ever seen.

And the sexiest.

Callum was so at ease within his own skin that he was able to be sweet, sexy, or funny in an instant.

I wanted to see all the other sides of him.

He gave me an absent smile as he turned up the radio. An old Creed song was on, and he exaggeratedly sang “Arms Wide Open” until I was laughing with him instead of overthinking everything.

The ride to The Hummingbird’s Nest was over before it started. He pulled into the winding road, and we sang along to the next song as he parked. An old Keith Urban song went

through a few stages—from messing up lyrics, to laughing, to kissing.

I couldn't get enough of his mouth. It was full and warm and oh so talented. He nipped at my lower lip until I practically climbed into his lap to get closer.

He opened his door, and the slap of cold air broke us apart. He quickly got out and came around to help me out of the low slung car with more kisses and laughter.

“You're so damn beautiful.” He threaded his fingers through my hair. “Unbelievably beautiful.”

I flushed and looked down. “You've got me here. You don't have to pour it on.” I leaned back into his car to get my bag from the floor.

“Evidently, I do.” He circled my waist and hauled me against him. “It's not just physical, Ellie. I keep catching these flashes of something under that serious face. When you let yourself enjoy the moment, you glow.”

“Stop.”

“I'm an artist. Do you know how hard I look for that glow? And it's in the most random of people. A woman in her nineties I found at a park. She was feeding pigeons of all things. Greta Bloom. I'll never forget her. She had that light. And here you are with the same one, but you also have so much more.”

He lowered his mouth to mine and I gave in. I didn't even care if it was a line at this point. He made me feel like there was something warm and bright inside of me, and I was willing to believe to keep this feeling.

We stumbled our way up to the entrance, barely able to keep our hands off one another. There was a crush of people at the main desk, probably overflow from the festival. Because he was already settled in a room, we were able to sneak around and head for the stairs.

I wasn't paying attention and nearly wiped out on the small caution sign.

“Shit.” He lifted me and hauled me over one of the signs that explained they were renovating.

The stairs were an old spiral style, and we kept bouncing off the railing and one another as we tripped our way upstairs and down the hallway to his room. He fumbled with his key and backed into the room, dragging me in with him. Coats hit the floor, and his sweater followed them before he went to work on his shirt buttons.

I flipped my own sweater over my head, and he stopped in the middle of the room. “Sweet Zeus.”

I frowned. That seemed like an odd phrase, but I didn’t have time to think about it. I needed to help him out of his shirt. There were far too many buttons. We both fumbled with the tiny pearlescent disks. My fingers shook and his were too large.

My goodness, he was proportional. Finally, we got them all, and I pushed the gold and gray plaid shirt off his shoulders. Before I could get it down his wrists, they were caught. We’d forgotten the buttons at his cuffs.

He was at my mercy and I kinda liked it.

He kept trying to get his wrists free as I scraped my nails through the just-right amount of hair on his chest. It covered his extremely impressive pecs and arched down his lean torso with a lighter and silkier texture. I brushed my cheek along the softness and kissed my way down his abs.

“Ellie.”

My name was a strangled moan as I dropped to my knees. I flicked my tongue over the little divot of his navel. “It’s been a little while since I’ve done this, but I think I remember how this goes.” I jerked the tail of his belt free from the loops and loosened his buckle.

His cock curved up against his zipper, bulging for freedom. I flicked open the button of his jeans and slowly peeled down his zipper. The chili pepper boxers I revealed made me laugh.



“Better be the boxers you’re laughing at, woman.” He finally got his hands free from the shirt and tried to draw me up to my feet.

I shook my head then reached in for my prize. His stormy eyes went heavy and dark as I dragged the flat of my tongue along the underside of his length. A hint of that cedar scent hit me just before the salty, earthy flavor of him made my mouth water. I took more of him, swallowing down his taste and wanting more.

His head dropped back and his throat worked as he groaned my name. Spurred on by it, I took him again and again, coating him enough for me to palm his length and suck harder until he finally raked his fingers through my hair to stop me.

“God, that feels so good. I don’t want to come in your mouth first. I want you wrapped around me. Under me—fuck, even over me. Just not like this.”

I drew him deeper until the velvety head of his cock hit the back of my throat. I wanted to make him come. I could taste the power of it. As if he was a conduit to something bigger and more important. A freedom I’d been searching for all of my life.

Taking something for myself.

Taking *him* for myself.

He bent over to me and freed himself with a hiss. “I’ve never wanted a woman so badly. Please.”

I wiped my mouth, but he shook his head and lifted me, kissing me with wild abandon. Dirty and deep until I could scarcely breathe around it. I wrapped my legs around his waist, and he turned enough to get us onto the bed.

I wiggled higher, and he dragged at the cups of my strapless bra. “I wondered if you had one of these female contraptions under that sweater.” His eyes were almost black as he inched it down my ribs then yanked it around to get to the hooks. “Off. Off.” I tried to shimmy higher on the mattress, but he was having none of that. He bore down on me

as he tossed the scrap of satin over his shoulder. “There you are.” He tugged on one nipple and dragged his beardy chin over the other before licking it lightly. “My turn.”

“Turn?” I arched up off the bed as he twisted my nipple to just the edge of pain. The blood bloomed like fire under my skin, and warmth pooled in my belly. Pooled lower as I moved my hips restlessly. His cock was right there trapped between us.

He pressed it along my thigh as he shifted lower to get the button of my jeans undone. Again, he dragged his chin over my skin. Goosebumps rose and covered me from neck to toes. “Callum.”

“Say it again.” He traced the tip of his tongue along the lace edge of my panties, just under my bellybutton.

“Callum.”

He smiled against the light pink lace. “I’ll hear that in my dreams.”

I closed my eyes. I didn’t want to think about him dreaming of me. I only wanted to think of the now—the pleasure from this ill-advised plan. Not the nebulous future I couldn’t control.

Then he tucked his tongue under the elastic and groaned at what he found there. Nothing but skin and me. “Ellie.”

He peeled my jeans and panties down and growled. Wasn’t sure I’d ever heard a guy growl about me. He fumbled with my stretchy boots and finally got them off. He shoved his shoulders between my thighs and opened me wide then dragged his chin over my flesh to the absolutely bare skin around my slit.

Working at a salon meant I had access to all sorts of personal grooming. And keeping our Brazilian techniques sharp in a small town meant sometimes we had to practice on each other.

“Beautiful.” He glanced up at me as he traced his tongue along my swollen center.

I lifted my hips to either help him along or push him away. I wasn't sure which. It was too much and too invasive for a first time. And yet hadn't I done the same? Here was my tit for tat. I was pretty sure I wouldn't be pushing him away in the final moment as he'd done to me.

Reaching up toward the headboard, I only found pillows. I couldn't breathe around the rasping play of his tongue along every nerve ending inside me. When I couldn't move away from the onslaught of his lips and then the pressure of his finger sliding inward, I gave up and cupped my breast to tug at my nipple.

I was on the edge and crazed with it. No self-induced orgasms were like this. They were perfunctory when my insomnia got too bad, and it was the only way to knock my ass out. This was all-consuming as he watched me flail.

His nostrils flared as he held onto me and spread me wider. I tried to buck him off me, afraid the entire floor would hear my sounds. Finally, I grabbed one of the pillows behind me and screamed into it. The broken sobs had me curling into myself, but he wouldn't allow it.

He wanted inside every part of me.

Quickly, he climbed up and took the pillow from me, replacing it with his mouth. The wildness of my own taste was a chain reaction. He slid two fingers inside me and rode out the scream. I tasted blood as our teeth clashed in the shuddering chatter of my overwhelmed system.

He was right there with me. He swore and scraped his teeth down my neck as I cried out his name over and over. There was no generic cry for God. There was only Callum and the maelstrom of pleasure. When he fumbled between us, I recognized the unmistakable feel of latex, and then it just didn't matter. He was filling me, driving into me and chasing the end of my orgasm and demanding more. And I gave it. I gave him everything without thought to the aftermath.

I wrapped myself around him and accepted all of him. The sweat and the hardness, the power and the insanity. It shouldn't be this good. It shouldn't feel like everything.

But it was.

It did.

“Ellie. Come with me.” He slid one hand between us and the friction and the fullness were no match for self-preservation. I dug my nails into his back as he thrust into me again and again. And the one orgasm clawed into two.

He pinned me to the mattress and groaned against my neck then found my mouth as we held on to one another. I didn’t realize there were tears until he kissed them away and slowly, the room came back into focus.

The muscles I hadn’t used in well over a year shrieked even as I wanted to roll over and sleep for a lifetime. “Glorious,” I murmured into his skin.

He laughed and lightly kissed my shoulder. “You may not say the same when you see what I did to your neck.” He drew his thumb over an abrasion before he rolled off me with a wince.

We lay side by side, our breathing still labored. Eventually, he rolled off the bed and disappeared into the bathroom. The sound of water running and the flush of a toilet roused me from the near coma I’d slipped into.

He shifted me under the covers and kissed me. “I’m freaking famished.”

I cuddled into the cool white pillow and could have happily drifted off. “I should go.”

“No, stay. I’m going to go get us something to eat.”

I needed to go. Ties came with each minute I lingered in the afterglow. But the bed was so warm, and everything was so soft.

Including me.

He pressed a kiss to my forehead. “I’ll be right back.”

“Kay,” I mumbled.

I should really go.

## NINE



I RESISTED THE URGE TO WHISTLE MY WAY DOWN THE STAIRS. Ending up in Crescent Cove had been a lucky break after all.

Now if I could just figure out how to keep Ellie in my life for more than a few more mind-blowing hours...

One thing at a time.

First, I would make sure the rest of the evening went as well as it had started.

I headed downstairs as soundlessly as possible. A few of the steps creaked, so I made sure not to make too much noise.

I wasn't trying to hide exactly. I just didn't want to be noticed.

Or questioned.

Or gossiped about.

The elegantly appointed foyer beckoned. Sconces high on the wall flickered as if lit by candles. Tasteful Christmas bells and garland dripped from the reservations counter, and cheerful holiday carols played from recessed speakers. The air was scented with cinnamon and nutmeg. All seemed perfectly welcoming.

Yet once I reached the bottom stair, I didn't move.

It wasn't terribly late, but the desk seemed deserted. That was good news for me. I'd grab some sodas and salty snacks from the vending machines off the foyer, and hopefully, a few

condoms. Even a dignified establishment such as this should be prepared with typical vacation items, right?

Razors, pretzels, and rubbers. Seemed like a usual bed and breakfast shopping list.

I found the sodas. The salty treats. The sweet ones. And a discreet sign that said, “For personal care items, consult the desk.”

Inwardly, I groaned. Probably outwardly too.

We’d already had sex. Amazing, life-changing, jingle my balls off sex. I wanted more of it. I was pretty sure she did too. There were plenty of other ways to enjoy ourselves without the need for protection, but I couldn’t deny getting back into the sweet clasp of Ellie’s body was at the top of tonight’s agenda.

So, I was just going to go to the desk. They probably had other people manning it during the off-hours anyway. Sage Hamilton couldn’t be there all night long.

“Hi, there,” Sage said cheerfully when I rang the bell for service. She’d popped up from behind the counter.

I managed not to stumble backward but only narrowly. Did she hide behind there to surprise all the guests or was I just special?

“Hi, Sage. Late for you, isn’t it?”

“Oh, it’s almost Christmas, so we gave Alyce the night off. She’s usually the one who handles the desk after hours.”

“That must be hard on you.”

“Not so much, no. We’ll close early tomorrow, and Oliver—my husband—is watching our daughter. It gives me a night off, to tell you the truth.”

“But you’re working...?” I regretted asking as soon as the half-formed question was out.

“It gives me a night off from babymaking practice.”

“Oh. Um. Okay. Good luck with that.”

“We just kicked into high gear for our second kid, and the man is relentless. Give him a target, and he insists on shooting his gun over and over. But it’s fun for the most part. Just requires lots of stamina and hydration. Have you tried those vitamin waters? We have some in the vending machine. I recommend them for long sessions, if you know what I mean.” She waggled her brows, and I was fairly certain my kneecaps blushed.

But it also gave me a nice segue into what I needed. I would even extend this painful conversation if it led to more condoms. Preferably a few.

“That’s why I’m here actually.”

“Oh, I guessed. You had that look. Plus, all of that stuff.” She gestured to the items in my arms. “You have the munchies. Been there, done that.”

“Right.” I might die right in this very spot.

“It’s a different kind of munchies than you get after taking marijuana. At least I assume. I haven’t tried that myself.” She frowned. “You’re not smoking in the room, are you? That’s prohibited in Section IV of the agreement you signed.”

“No, of course not. I wouldn’t do that here.”

Or anywhere, at least not since college. If I stayed down here much longer, she’d probably know all about my days at the university too.

“I should hope not. How many do you need?”

Now the flush was steadily moving up my body. Soon, my nose would be redder than Rudolph’s. “Do you have a... package?”

“Yes. Three, six, and fifteen.”

“Wow, that’s quite a jump.”

“You always save when you buy in bulk.” Her cherubic face was so serious I wasn’t sure if she was kidding until she grinned. “It’s almost Christmas. Consider this my gift to you. Be sure to put a nice note in the guest book. Don’t mention the freebies though. I don’t want to shake loose the bargain

hunters.” She slid an organza-covered box tied with a bow my way.

I laughed so hard that one of our snacks went flying.

After I collected it, I tucked the box of condoms next to the pretzels in my arms. “Well, thanks. You’re all heart, Sage.”

She beamed. “I am, that’s why I’m going to warn you—you probably don’t need those. Unless you’ve had a vasectomy? And you look too young for that.” She waved a hand while I stared and wondered if we’d launched into another dimension. “Sorry, I’m getting too personal. Bad habit of mine. I just consider all of my guests to be staying in my home, so we’re more than friends, we’re family. Anyway, merry ho-ho-ho.”

“No, I haven’t had a vasectomy. What do you mean? Don’t need them, why?”

“You haven’t heard about Crescent Cove?”

Why, yes, now that she’d mentioned it, I’d heard about unplanned pregnancies related to the Cove. But that had to be like an old wives’ tale or something.

Even if it wasn’t, too late now. Still, the odds were in my favor.

Probably.

“Heard what?” I asked.

She bit her lip, her blue eyes getting even wider. “Let’s just say we’re having a baby boom. A lot of women come to town and end up getting pregnant. Quickly. Our tourism is up thirty-eight percent this year just due to that bit of legend and lore.”

The logical side of my brain immediately threw up a roadblock. “If that’s so, why are you needing to practice so much?”

“Oh, I could be pregnant already. We just enjoy the process.” She laughed. “Happy holidays!”

I went back upstairs in a zombie-like state. I couldn’t even claim not to believe what Sage had just claimed—that a



propensity towards pregnancy might as well be in the water—since I was a mythology professor. Fantastical tales were my lifeblood.

Had I somehow stepped into one?

I unlocked the door to find Ellie sitting in the middle of my bed, her hair a riot of waves around her bare shoulders. She pulled the sheet up to cover herself, and her eyes were soft from sleep. “What time is it?”

“Just a bit after ten.”

“Oh.” She swung her legs over the side. “I should really head home.”

I crossed to her, dumping my bounty on the bed. “I got us some snacks and drinks.”

The ribbon-wrapped care package landed beside her leg. She picked it up. “A present?”

“Sort of a present for us both.”

She tucked a lock of hair behind her ear then turned over the box. The rattle inside made her laugh. “Presents for us, indeed.” She loosened the bow and laughed again. “Ribbed for her pleasure, at least.”

“Bonus points to Sage.”

“Do I want to know?”

I grinned. “Uh, probably not.”

The echo of Sage’s warning about the baby boom in town should have tempered my lust, but it seemed to only get me more excited to break into the box.

After a Snickers bar.

I grabbed the candy bar and broke it in half then offered her the still-wrapped portion.

She took it, trading it for the box of condoms.

I set the box on the bedside table before sitting beside her. “Stay tonight.”

She looked down at her candy and fiddled with the wrapper. “I really shouldn’t.”

“We’ve already taken the plunge. No going back now.”

The corner of her mouth tipped up. “That’s true.” She took a bite of the candy and peeked around me. “Are those potato chips?”

“Why, yes, they are.”

“Gimme.”

I grinned and handed them over. “So, that means I can have the Doritos?”

“Maybe. Only if you brush your teeth.”

I leaned in and nipped a kiss before she could pop a chip in her mouth. “Deal.”

I stood and went to my new suitcase and pulled out a vintage concert T-shirt for her. She took it gratefully and pulled it on.

I picked up three different bottles of soda. “I wasn’t sure of your—okay, Dr. Pepper it is.”

She cracked the seal. “I pretty much drink coffee or Diet Coke but since it’s here.” She took a long swallow and sighed. “My mom loved this stuff. I used to scrape together tip money for her twelve-pack cans. Sometimes I’d sneak a can for myself.”

Scraped?

I had so many questions. Little slips from her about a less than stellar childhood made me ache for her. My household growing up had been noisy and full of laughter. A lot of fighting too. Far too many boys in one house meant a lot of strife in between pranks and enough laundry to ensure my mom taught me to be self-sufficient from an early age.

But being self-sufficient was a big difference from what she was talking about.

She popped another chip in her mouth with a sigh. “Didn’t realize I was so hungry.”

“We sort of skipped dinner.”

She peered into the snack-sized bag. “Not a big deal.”

Now I felt like an asshole. I hadn’t even fed her, for God’s sake. We’d been wrapped up in each other and caught up in the push and pull of attraction. Food definitely hadn’t been at the top of my menu. “Is that diner near the park an all-night kind of deal?”

“Normally, but with the festival, not so much.”

“Ahh.”

“Don’t worry about feeding me, Callum. I’m more of a small meals and snacks kind of woman. When you work as many jobs as I have, snagging food between shifts is the norm.”

“It doesn’t have to be that way.”

She dug into the bag for the last chip then licked the tips of her fingers. “You’re right, but I like my life this way. And working full-time at the salon probably won’t change the eating on the run thing.”

I leaned in and caught a salty kiss. “Or how about a very thoughtful partner who brings his girl dinner for her breaks?”

She smiled into another kiss. “Sounds pretty nice.”

The fact that I could picture that so easily made my chest burn. I rolled her under me on the bed. “I’ll make it up to you with a huge breakfast.”

She didn’t answer me, just welcomed me into her arms with a greedy kiss.

Snacks, dinner, and anything else fell out of my head. Her salty taste made me crave more. I slid my hand up under the T-shirt, coasting my fingertips over her silky flesh. I nipped her chin as my thumb rolled over her tight nipple. They were so damn sensitive. She’d practically crawled out of her skin the moment I touched her.

It only made me want to draw out every damn touch. I’d rushed the first time. Feeling her come apart under my mouth

had put me on a one-way collision with impatience. My singular focus had been getting that clasp warmth around me.

I'd almost climbed on her without protection. At the last minute, I'd remembered my wallet and the sole condom in there. And the only reason I had one was because of my brother's sense of humor. Hudson had stuck a trio in my stocking last year. And yeah, a year's worth of sex left me with just one.

Again, every part of this situation so wasn't me.

But I wanted it to be. I wanted to hold onto this feeling for longer than just a night. She was worth more than a few stolen hours. I needed to show her that.

I slowed down each touch until her sighs ended in my name. Her legs shifted under me until she could curl one around my hip, dragging me in closer.

"You're killing me," she said as she bit my earlobe. "Inside me. Use that lovely wrapped present, dammit."

"You want my present?"

She rolled her eyes, but there was laughter dancing in those dark depths. She slipped her hand between us and into my jeans. "If I say yes, will you get the show on the road?"

"Why are you in such a hurry?"

In lieu of an answer, she used some damn impressive muscles to flip me over. She shoved up the thermal shirt I'd been wearing and went for my zipper. "Where's that box?"

I groaned and lifted my hips to help her get a better hold on me. I fumbled for the box next to us, and she plucked it out of my hands. Before I could say her name, she had the foil ripped and was rolling it down my cock.

She climbed on me and slid slowly down my length. I groaned at her perfect heat and could only hold on. Her head fell back, and her nipples were rock hard against the vintage Hysteria shirt I'd purchased the night before. The shirt that I'd never wear without thinking about this moment.

I shifted so I could sit up and get a taste of her. I pushed at the soft cotton and found her even softer skin. I sucked on one taut tip and tugged at the other until she straightened and met my gaze. Her hair was a halo of honey-brown waves, and her teeth were scoring her lower lip.

I thrust up into her, and the sounds she'd been holding back tumbled free with my name wrapped in a sigh. I banded my arms around her back and held her against me, tipping her hips forward to get deeper. I'd climb inside her if I could. "God, you feel good. So wet and warm," I said against her neck. "Like you were made for me."

Her eyes widened just before they closed. I gripped her hair to get her to open them again, but she kept them shut. Almost as if she could block me out.

Hell, I wasn't just the conduit for her damn pleasure.

I flipped us over and lifted her thigh higher around my ribs. Her eyes popped wide, and the strangled scream she let out eased the tension inside me.

I lowered my mouth and kissed her hard, invading every part of her—tongue, cock, heart. It wasn't just fucking. It wasn't just pleasure. I wanted it to be more. Maybe that made me stupid, but it was honest.

As she arched under me, her nails dug into my shoulders, and she tightened around me, her breath fast and labored. She was close, and I wanted to go with her. My knuckles dug into the mattress as I sped up to catch her. To never let her go.

She said my name on a shattered cry, and then it was nothing but *her* name on my lips as I finally emptied myself inside of her.

I fell on top of her, my knees and back giving out. Suddenly, I was boneless.

Possibly paralyzed too.

I pressed my face into her neck, dragging in that honeyed vanilla scent that clung to her. And maybe a little bit of me was mixed with her now.

The thought made me greedy enough to wish I could have her all over again.

Once certain body parts rejuvenated anyway.

I gently pulled out of her, holding the edge of the condom as I rolled off her. Then I sat up and looked over at her. She had her arm over her face, and she was still breathing hard.

Carefully, I nudged her arm away so I could see her. “It’s never been like this for me either.”

She glanced away.

I tugged back her chin so she would look at me. Her eyes were so damn sad. “Is that so bad?”

She rolled onto her side before tucking her hand under a pillow, but she didn’t answer me.

I blew out a breath and went into the bathroom to take care of the condom.

When I came back out, she was waiting for me. I took it as a good sign that she was still wearing my T-shirt instead of changing into her clothes. She touched my chest briefly then slid past me and closed the door behind her.

Dammit, why was everything so hard with her? Couldn’t she see how good we were together? Would it really be so awful trying to make this work?

Maybe I *was* an asshole.

Padding over to the bench near the dresser in my room, I pulled out my notebook from my messenger bag and sat down. Now that I knew more about her, I could fill in some of the blurrier details. The little mole beside her chin and another on the edge of her collarbone. The hoops she wore.

I didn’t know how long she was in the bathroom, but when I looked up, she was staring down at my drawing.

Her eyebrows knitted as she drank in the details—including the red scarf I’d adjusted on the form. It was an undulating ribbon of cashmere dancing around her curves.

“Are you drawing me?”

“Drew, actually.” I turned the pad around so she could get a better look.

“Naked?”

“Well, it was more of a wish fulfillment thing at first. This crazy-beautiful girl kisses me under the mistletoe—”

“And so, you what? Go for an anime version of me with lusher tits and ass?”

“No.” I looked down at the drawing. “Okay, so it’s a little more of an idealized woman instead of you.”

“Thanks.”

“No.” I growled. “It’s coming out wrong. I just drew you because I couldn’t get you out of my head. And now you’re here, and I wanted to capture you.” I set the notebook down and touched the little mole on her chin. “The *real* you.”

I traced the back of my knuckles down her neck. “Longer, more elegant neck and finer shoulders. Beautiful, firm breasts.” I cupped her for a moment before sliding down to her hips and the scrap of lace she’d put back on.

I dug my fingers into her hips and drew her closer to me. “The real woman I’m getting to know is the one I want, not the moment’s fantasy.”

She was still frowning, but she didn’t pull away. “It’s a lot, Callum.”

“I’m an artist—for real. It’s how I process things. It was the only thing I could do to figure out how to keep the moment.”

“But I’m naked.”

I huffed out a half laugh. “Well, I’m still a guy. And you’re so goddamn beautiful, you stole my brain cells.” I lifted my hands to cup her face. “I admit it, I’m a little weird. But you have a notebook full of floating heads from magazines that you attacked with scissors and glue.”

She laughed and relaxed a little. “I suppose that’s true.”

I pressed a light kiss to her mouth and led her back to bed. “Stay with me tonight.”

“I should really head home.”

I flicked back the covers. “I promise I won’t ask for more if you still want to leave in the morning. I hope I can change your mind.” I took her hand and toyed with the ring on her thumb. I’d need to add that to the drawing. “Give me tonight, at least.”

She sat on the mattress and tucked her legs under the sheet. I turned out the light and slid in beside her. Sometimes the dark was an easier place to talk. I curled her into my body, my front to her back until she relaxed against my chest.

“Tell me about your new job.”

She settled into the abundance of pillows. “It’s not really new.”

“Feels new.”

“More like advancing from intern to novice.”

“Explain.”

“I’ve been going to night school—or day. However you want to put it. Part time for a really long time. In between working two jobs, I was able to get some experience at the salon while I took all the certification classes. But I also had to get so many hours in at the school salon. It was a lot of hair-cutting for free. Well, mostly free. I was able to get some tips on the side, but the school does cheap haircuts to get people to come in. The one nice thing is I learned to cut all hair types. It broadened my training, going slower.”

She lightly drew her nails up and down my arm as she spoke of the various hardships of training to get ready to go out into the real world. Like an apprenticeship. I likened it to my own job. I’d worked as a teaching assistant for peanuts until I’d finally finished my education to be a professor.

I’d felt like something was missing, so I’d turned to art. I understood some of what she was describing.



“Because school took so long, I feel like I can go right to a booth rental at Melody’s shop.”

I threaded my fingers through her hair as she spoke about her dreams. For the first time, it seemed like I was getting to know her.

At least it was a start.

“I can work for myself, finally. No one else.”

“Seems like you’ve been doing that all along.”

“It’s different.” Her voice was getting drowsy. “I actually think I’m ready for the first time.”

I continued to stroke her hair, a sensation of peace coming over me. This was right where I was supposed to be. She was exactly who—and what—I’d been meant to find.

Her deep, even breathing dragged me along into dreams as well. I dreamed of her in a strange old house with rooms of all different sizes. A maze of a place full of towers and large glass arches. Her voice was a soft echo full of laughter, but it always seemed just out of reach.

Finally, I found her on the wraparound porch. A white dress shirt teased her thighs, and those big gold hoop earrings glinted almost as brightly as her smile.

A knock at the door dragged me out of the dream.

Sun slanted into the room. I rolled over, but the sheets had long ago cooled.

She was gone.

I stumbled out of bed and jerked on my jeans. Another knock had me scrubbing my face with my hands to wake up. “What?”

“Maid service.”

“Can you come back?”

“Yes, sir.”

I glanced around the room. There wasn’t a trace of her left. Her coat, her bag, and even her scarf were all gone this time.

Disappointment carved through me, quick and sharp.

I trudged into the bathroom to do my business then brushed my teeth. I didn't want to wash her off my skin quite yet.

I went back into the main part of my room and saw something white propped up on my notebook on the dresser.

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*You gave me one of the loveliest Christmases that I can remember. I haven't had a whole lot to smile about in the last few years, but you gave me that. I'm sorry I couldn't stay. It's just easier this way.*

*Thank you, Callum.*

*ELLIE*

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I crinkled the note and swore. I thought I'd gotten through to her. Thought she might have given us a chance. I wanted to go after her to try to make her see what she was throwing away.

But I couldn't.

I'd promised her she could walk away if that was what she really wanted.

I tossed the note into the trash bin and headed for the shower.

Evidently, it was time to leave Crescent Cove in my rearview mirror.

## TEN



### *Valentine's Day*

I PUSHED THE BROOM ACROSS THE CLAY-COLORED MATTE TILE. Clippings from a half dozen clients shuffled along the floor in front of my favorite rubber broom. It had been a busy morning. People excited for a romantic evening had come in for last-minute beautifications.

My book was slowly growing with customers. Some were from the Cove thanks to my years at Brewed Awakening and before that at Robbie's Pizza.

I'd made plenty of acquaintances in town. Enough that I was able to network a little with help from a few coupons. I'd also been doing some videos on the Instagram and TikTok accounts I'd convinced Melody to try out. I was in charge of them, but I actually didn't mind it. Our followers were slowly increasing due to some clever hashtags as well.

All the books I'd read and workshops I'd taken in marketing over the years were finally proving useful. With a little luck from walk-ins and word of mouth, things seemed to be looking up.

I'd given myself six months of savings in a special slush account to cover living expenses, booth rental, and of course my apartment rent. If I really needed to dip into my nest egg, I could. Budgeting had been my life for a long time. Long enough that I still lived way below my means even though I didn't have to anymore.

I was already seeing steady growth in my bank account, especially since I'd established multiple payment options to accommodate younger clients. Melody, the owner of the salon, was still living with a cash and carry setup for the most part, but I was slowly getting her to come around to my way of thinking.

All in all, I was happy.

But I was always tired. A good kind of tired most of the time. Falling into bed after working a full day doing what I loved was a new feeling. And okay, maybe I was going to bed before nine o'clock most nights. It was winter, and the days were shorter.

February was made for sleeping in when I could, and I'd found a lot of joy in making some improvements in the salon. Melody hadn't exactly been on board right away, but money talked. Clients were already commenting on how spa-like the place felt. I'd also used my own cash and time. I'd become comfortable with do-it-yourself ideas years ago because money hadn't been abundant for most of my life.

In the end, Melody thought we could charge a little more because we looked so posh.

I'd done that. My ideas and my ingenuity. Self-pride was new to me, but it felt good.

Most nights I was too tired to think about the man who'd come into my life like a spring storm. Wild and messy, full of wind and excitement. Just as fast as he'd arrived, I knew he'd be gone.

I'd made sure to leave first.

I wasn't sure I could have handled him walking away. It was humbling to know that. He'd overwhelmed me not only physically, but with the way he saw me. That fantasy drawing he'd done of a seductive, almost playful woman—that wasn't who I was.

At least I didn't think so.

Sooner or later, he'd see that and lose interest. It had happened many times in my life to my mother and I. Hot and

heavy passion was easy, but there was rarely any lasting substance.

And Callum was an artist, for God's sake. There was no stability there. No peace. And I couldn't allow myself to wonder or hope. Not now. Not when I was just putting my plans into motion.

I had a stubborn side, one I stuffed under the bed each morning. After the lonely nights that made me wonder a bit too much. That insane little voice that said *what if?* It was the same one who wouldn't let me delete the message from Kinleigh with Callum's phone number.

I hadn't been expecting her call the week between Christmas and New Year's. I hadn't recognized the number, but I knew Kinleigh's sweet voice as she left a rambling explanation about the man who'd been looking for me. And she had a gut feeling that I should give him a chance.

Maybe I thought about him sometimes when the day was slow, or the night was long. Maybe I almost called him once or five times.

Suddenly, the floor wavered in my vision. I leaned to the left, and if I hadn't had the broom handle to hold on to, I would have gone down.

"Whoa, Ellie." Paisley Jones, the third stylist in the salon, rushed over to me. Her freakishly strong fingers gripped my upper arm and pushed me into the chair at her station. "You all right?"

"Yeah, just got a little lightheaded there for a second." Had I eaten today? Nothing appealed lately. "Could you grab my water bottle?"

"Yeah, sure, babe." Paisley rushed over to my area at the back of the salon and returned with my purple bottle. "Here. Drink up. Have you eaten?"

I shrugged while I gulped the cool water.

"Want me to run over to the diner or Jersey's for a sandwich?"

I wrinkled my nose. “Everything tastes so *ugh* lately.” I took another deep drag on my straw.

“I wish. I just entered shark week. I could Hoover down everything from the diner’s menu right now. Especially Gina’s new poutine addition. Dear God, that’s good.”

I huffed out a laugh. We could definitely agree there. “Salt is the primary ingredient in my period week menu.”

“Doesn’t help the ankles, but gawd, so good.” She yanked open her drawer and pulled out her phone. “Now I gotta make an order, dammit. You sure you don’t want?”

“No, I...” I hadn’t wanted anything salty in a while. Not in the last month at all. “Shit.” I slid out of her chair and ran for my station.

“Hey, don’t move so fast. I don’t want to scrape you out of the hair, girl.”

“Right. Crap.” I turned around to finish my chore.

Paisley waved me off then grabbed the broom. “I got it.”

“Thanks.”

She already had her cell at her ear and was chitchatting with someone at the diner.

I quickly went for my own drawer and phone. “I’m running to the bathroom, Melody!” I called out.

“Okay!”

“No, no. Don’t do this to me.” I shut myself into our small water closet and opened my period tracker app.

*Six days late.*

“Oh, shit.” I collapsed onto the little bench full of more plants. I shoved them over to make room for my butt.

I tipped my head between my knees. “No way,” I whispered.

If I said it out loud then that made it real.

*Shut up, Ellie. Don’t say it.*

Pregnant.

Maybe.

Swallowing hard, I sat up. Maybe I was just late. Starting a new job was the ultimate form of stress and it could have pushed my cycle into the red zone. Not that I'd ever, ever, *ever* been late in my life, but I could be.

I did some math in my head and it wasn't good. Not good at all. "Damn you, Crescent Cove water."

I rose and stared at myself in the mirror. My face was a bit pale, but otherwise, I looked the same. I'd swapped out my Christmas smock for a Valentine's day one over my skinny jeans and fuzzy sweater.

And now I had to pee.

"Shoot." I hung up my smock and started unbuttoning my jeans. Then I hesitated. Should I hold it for a pee test?

Did I want to get a pregnancy test here?

Everyone would know I'd gotten one. As it was, people still asked me if I had talked to the hot artist from the festival.

The answer was no.

No, I had not, and I didn't intend to.

Not really.

Probably not.

But now?

Quickly, I did my business and washed my hands. I took my smock with me, but I hung it up in our little locker area. I didn't have a customer for another hour. That was just enough time to go to the pharmacy in the next town over.

I really didn't want to be the next bit of gossip fodder in this town.

But if I was pregnant...

The timing was all wrong. The situation was crazy. I wasn't ready to be a mother.

Or was I?



# ELEVEN



MY CAR WAS THE CAUSE OF MY LIFE STRESS.

I should sell it.

Burn it?

Nah, too hasty. Selling it was a good idea. To someone far enough away that I would never take the chance of seeing it again on the street. A person in Idaho, for example. I never went to Idaho. That had to be safe.

I even went online and searched for a small town in that state with a dealership that might want to buy back my baby. I was that desperate.

Or insane, take your pick.

I'd stayed up too late grading papers several nights in a row, which had led to a recent dependence on Death by Coffee. Turned out they weren't lying. Once you got on that stuff, it was hard to get off of it.

Who needed sleep, right?

Well, it turned out I did. Since my breakup—did it count as a breakup if our entire relationship had lasted under thirty-six hours?—and the start of the semester had worn me raw, I obviously should not be making big life choices.

So, naturally, I made several.

I didn't sell my car. I did, however, agree to move my appointment for custom work to mid-February. Specifically, February 14<sup>th</sup>. A day I was guaranteed not to be busy, since I'd

been dropped faster than tequila made a woman's clothes come off.

Also, I was never voluntarily listening to the country channel on satellite radio again.

But as that date drew closer and my loneliness grew deeper instead of lessening, I began to consider the paths life had taken me on. Specifically, how I'd ended up in Crescent Cove and when I was going back.

There could be a message that I wasn't seeing.

Sure, certain heartbreak and an early onset midlife crisis seemed like the likely ones. But I was an artist. Trained to look deeper.

An artist who was doing a series of paintings on the one woman I was supposed to be forgetting. So far, that wasn't working out too well. Not to mention I was dreaming about her so much that I had no choice but to get them out of my head and on to paper.

I looked between the trio of canvases I had on easels in my studio. What I should've done was put them up for consignment—once they were finished anyway. The last thing I needed were more reminders of her.

Though it didn't matter, because I thought of her all day every day anyway.

The first one was an amalgamation of that charcoal drawing I'd done in the park the day after our kiss. I'd changed her attire from just the scarf to the white dress shirt I'd dreamed of the night we'd been together. The material draped over her curves, clinging to her in some places and falling loosely in others.

Of course I kept dreaming about her in it.

I was near obsessed with getting everything down. The interesting shadows that teased the juncture of her thighs, mostly hidden by her shirttails. *My* shirttails, the buttons strategically undone. Her long hair dipped over one eye.

She made the perfect ingenue.

Perfectly unattainable.

In the second painting, she was different, although the changes were modest. Her hair was just a bit wilder, her shoulders back, the shirt barely held closed. More shadows. More defiance in every line of her body. Her beauty fisted my throat and made the sweeps of my paintbrush erratic.

I tried to catalog every detail, to show the subtle changes from the first. I didn't know why I'd done a series. We'd only had that one stolen night. It wasn't as if I'd seen her evolve. I never would.

The third canvas was bare.

I didn't know what I'd do for that one. I'd just known I had to do three.

After I'd worked for a while getting the shading just right of her hair over her shoulder, I grabbed my phone and took a few quick snapshots of the paintings in progress. I liked to catalog the stages of each piece. Some of my customers enjoyed seeing the process of them coming to life. And sometimes, I just needed to have a record of every step.

Then I tossed my cell over my shoulder in the direction of the mattress and went back to it.

Awhile later, my phone buzzed, and I fumbled on my bed until I found it in the disordered sheets. When I did manage to lay down, rest was elusive. More nights than not, I stumbled out of bed to paint. I was driven to finish these, even if it felt like I was painting a future I couldn't see yet.

Maybe that was just wishful thinking.

I glanced at the readout. My real estate agent, Connie.

My heartbeat kicked into high gear.

“Hi, Connie. What's up?”

“You know what's up. Your offer was accepted.”

I sat on the edge of my bed. “No counter?”

“None. Looks like you're going to be a new homeowner, Callum. Congratulations.”

Those words echoed in my head as I drove toward Crescent Cove an hour later. Instead of the mini blizzard I'd encountered the first time I'd driven this route, today the sunshine reflected off the icicles gleaming on roofs and sparkled on the thin glaze of snow on lawns. It was still cold enough to freeze my balls, but the sun made me think spring was coming.

Someday.

Dare had a loaner waiting for me when I dropped off my car for the custom work we'd talked about. He was in the middle of a job so he just waved hello while Gage handled the paperwork.

"I'm going to live here soon," I announced.

Not that he'd asked. Or even spoken much to me. Apparently, Crescent Cove-ites had long memories. At least this one did.

He grunted. "Oh, yeah?"

"Yes, I'm buying a house on the lake."

"Where exactly?"

We discussed details, and surprise of all surprises, Gage was my new neighbor. Sort of. He wasn't right next door, which probably was good for the state of my pumpkins next Halloween. He seemed much friendlier today than he had in December, but I wouldn't exactly say he'd rolled out the welcome wagon.

Closer though. In general, the townsfolk were pretty friendly. Maybe eventually, I'd be one of them.

Dare's idea of a loaner was more family friendly than my sports car. The Jeep was more practical than mine as well, especially to drive out to the lake view roads. I parked on the street near the hair salon and walked straight inside, ready to face my fate with a smile.

All right, that was a total lie. I was already sweating bullets, but I could do a poker face with the best of them. Especially when I had one hell of a bribe in my back pocket.

I hadn't bought a house just to get a woman to go out with me.

Not exactly. That would've been crazy.

I'd done it because the house had spoken to me, as so much of this town did. It was as if I'd been caught in a web once I'd entered the town limits of Crescent Cove. One I didn't want to shake free of anytime soon.

Stepping in to To Dye For made me think of Ellie immediately. Somehow it felt like her. I hadn't been in many salons, but I knew this one with its farmhouse-style décor and plethora of plants was different. Special. Much like the woman I'd come to whisk away to my house on the water—

No, I'd come to ask her out for a low pressure lunch. I wouldn't scare her away this time. I was living the casual life now.

Minus the offer I'd had accepted on the house she loved. A minor detail, really.

One she didn't need to know about until after lunch. Way after. At least not until I walked her back to her car.

A pretty blond in a billowy poet's blouse flashed a smile at me. "Hi, I'm Paisley. Do you have an appointment?"

"No. I'm actually looking for Ellie."

"Oh. Oh. *Ohhh.*" On the third *oh*, she braced both hands on the counter and actually leaned over to check me out from head to toe. "You must be artist dude. Nice job, girl."

"Excuse me?"

"So, Ellie actually isn't available right now. As you can see." Expansively, she threw back her arm to encompass the rest of the hair styling stations. It was a small operation but had room to grow. Everything was neat as a pin and welcoming. "But you are here. Very much here. Hmm."

"Okay, is she due in today? I can wait. Or maybe you could tell me her hours?"

"No, I can't do that. Confidentiality laws and all."

I frowned. “But this is a salon. What if I wanted her to do my hair?” I swallowed hard at the inappropriate images that filled my head, most of them involving Ellie, shaving cream, and partial nudity.

Perhaps total nudity. It was my daydream. I could make it as X-rated as I wanted to.

As long as I stayed hidden by this counter.

“Hmm, that’s an idea, right? I can’t send you away if you wanted her to do your *hair*. Since you would be a paying customer and all. No freebies,” she added, as if she could sense I was about to demand a chop on the house.

“I’ll pay of course.”

“Right. Because paying customers have to be served no matter what. The client is always right. Isn’t that true, Melody?” Paisley asked an older blond woman blow-drying a high school-aged girl’s hair at the first station. “We have to make sure they’re happy.”

Melody frowned as she looked between us, and then it appeared as if Paisley did a quick hand gesture just out of my range of sight. “Oh, definitely. The customer is the boss. We just want to make sure they’re pleased.”

“Right.” Paisley nodded vigorously as she faced me again. “So, tell us, what exactly are your needs today?”

I glanced over my shoulder. “Is this going on YouTube? I feel like I’m being videotaped to be made fun of later.”

She surprised me by letting out a light laugh. “I like you. You seem responsible.” She looked me up and down again. “Nice coat. Burberry? You must have a job.”

I took another look at my surroundings. The hidden camera was going to become apparent at any moment, I just knew it. “I do. Two, in fact. One is a bit more...transient, but the other is quite stable. Are you sure Ellie isn’t here? I really need to talk to her.”

Paisley cocked her head, narrowing her eyes. “Are you going to let her shape your hair? It’s overgrown.”

“I like it that way,” I said defensively.

I didn't add I hadn't gotten it cut since just before I'd met Ellie. Depression tended to do that to a man.

“But yes, she can cut it. She can do whatever she wants to do to me.” At Paisley's arched brow, I cleared my throat. “I mean, hair-wise.”

“I'm sure.”

I stayed silent.

“Good thing Ellie saw you first. Then again, there was a reason she hasn't seen you since. And why might that be?”

I was pretty sure they knew who I was. And that meant Ellie had mentioned me. She hadn't forgotten me the minute she'd rolled out of bed.

Logically, I'd known it wasn't possible. Not after the connection we'd had—and probably still had, if she would just give it a chance.

Somehow I'd have to make her see I was worth the risk.

“It was her choice. I'm here to see if perhaps I can change her mind.” I hoped I sounded confident and not overdue for a visit from Sheriff Brooks.

“Is that right?”

“Yes. I'm not here to be a nuisance.” God, was I being a fool to do all this? “Look, I just want to see her. I need to see her. I—” I broke off at Paisley's widening smile. “What?”

“Oh, you'll do, won't you? Wait right here while I get her.”

I crossed my arms. “I thought you said she wasn't here.”

“I said she wasn't available. If you didn't get past the gate, I would've told you that she'd moved to Montana. But you made it past level one. Don't get cocky. You're got many levels to go.”

I shook my head as she headed into the back. “This town is always going to keep me on my toes.”

“You've got that right,” Melody agreed with a wink.

## TWELVE



“OH, GOOD. THERE YOU ARE.” PAISLEY PUSHED ME FARTHER into the back to the room where we did waxing and frowned at me. “Are you okay?”

“I don’t know.”

She grabbed my hands. “Well, I have some news you may not be excited about. I can get rid of him if you really want me to.”

“Rid of who?”

“Hottie artist dude. Your delicious hookup.”

I crossed my arms over my middle. “How do you know about Callum?”

“Honey, this is Crescent Cove. Who doesn’t know you were kissing a piece of stranger hotness in the park?”

I flushed. Here I’d thought I’d kept a low profile since that day. Little did I know I was still a topic of conversation. “Are people talking about me?”

“Oh, honey. Not like that. We’re just all suckers for romance in this town. Especially in the winter. Nothing else happens around here except babymaking, you know that.” Paisley frowned. “Are you sure you’re all right?”

I didn’t know about the rest of her statement, but babymaking was right. Maybe. “Wait, is he here?”

“That’s what I was saying. He’s out front looking for you.”



“Here.” I could still breathe, I was almost sure. “In the salon?”

“What else does *here* mean? Are you all right? You look really pale.”

I nodded. “Yeah, I’m good.”

“I can get rid of him, easy peasy. I’ll just dropkick him to the street. He didn’t tweak my crazy stalker dude radar, but I’ve been wrong before.”

“No. He’s not that. He’s been very respectful.”

“Not too respectful, I hope.” Paisley’s smile was wicked. “He looks a bit buttoned up, but seems like maybe not all the way, you know?”

Oh, I knew. He was gentle and sweet, but also I had a memory of him flipping me over and banging the hell out of me on a loop in my dreams. I tried to ignore those particular urges, but if he was here?

And then there was this little lateness thing.

Late.

He was here.

And I could not deal with that right now. No way. “Yeah, get rid of him.”

She hooked a thumb toward the front. “Okay. He’s dust. Do you want like forever dust or...come back later when I’ve prettied myself up?”

I touched my hair. “Do I look that bad?”

“No. Of course not. You always look amazing. But you know, a killer ‘you can’t have this’ kind of look. That kind.”

I shook my head. I’d tried that before. I’d caved like an overcooked soufflé and ended up going to the festival then losing all my clothes. “I’m not ready to see him. I—”

*I’m afraid I might be pregnant, and I can’t deal with it on my own, let alone deal with freaking out in front of my possible baby daddy.*

Oh, and I had to talk to him here in front of my co-workers. You know, no big deal.

Paisley drew me into her arms and hugged me hard. “It’s okay. Whatever it is, it’s okay.”

My eyes misted, and I leaned into her for a second. I linked my arms around her and hugged her back. “Thanks.”

“Us girls gotta stick together.”

I nodded. “Okay.” I dabbed at my eyes. “Send him back to my chair.”

“I’ll be right here if you need me.” She squeezed my arm one more time and went back to the front.

I believed her. It was a new feeling for me. It remained to be seen just how much I’d need my new friend.

I stopped at the lockers and put on my smock again. I fluffed my hair and detangled my hoops from the fresh highlights Paisley had done for me the day before.

“He’s just a guy. You can talk to him and then...” I stared at myself in the mirror.

And then...what?

Then I’d deal with whatever came next. That was what I always did.

Pushing open the curtain, I straightened my shoulders and crossed to my station. I took a minute to soak all of him in. It should have been easier to see him by now.

My gaze tracked down his long, muscular frame. His Burberry coat was open over one of his usual cardigan sweaters. This one was a soft gray like his eyes. His jeans had stress wears in all the right places and a pair of battered Timberlands peeked out from the frayed cuffs. Again, there was an affluence to him that didn’t quite match his artist moniker.

I thought most artists made their money posthumously—unless they were in the city. Maybe Syracuse wasn’t his home

either. Maybe a lot of different things. I didn't really know Callum MacGregor very well.

Well enough to sleep with him.

Well enough to make a baby.

Maybe.

"Ellie?" He stepped closer.

I'd totally zoned out. "Sorry. I'm a bit distracted. Did you want a haircut?" I immediately reached up to sift my fingers through his hair. And I wished I hadn't. I was used to touching because hair was my job.

Callum wasn't just a head of hair.

His cedar and brisk winter air scent set me back on my heels. It dragged me back to the festival and his arms around me.

He leaned into my touch, his eyes closing. "I missed you touching me."

I dropped my hand. "I'm sure you could find another hairdresser a bit closer to you. If you're looking for a discount, the MoneyMaster coupon expired last week."

His smile made me light up inside in a way I'd almost forgotten I could. He had given me that at Christmas. "I can pay full price. Why does everyone think I'm cheap?"

"Because you spend all your dough on hot cars and fancy threads?"

I decided to touch his tweed coat this time. Why, I did not know. It looked soft, and I just wanted to lay my head on it and rest. Not plan or worry or stress for one freaking moment and let someone else take care of me.

Not that he'd offered. Or that he wanted to. Just something about his open, hopeful expression and the fact that he kept coming back for me, time and time again, made me want to trust he'd give me a safe place to land for just a little while.

My mom had left me, but this virtual stranger wanted to be in my world. I couldn't figure out how to handle it, so I kept

screwing it up.

And now I might be screwing up a life that wasn't even solely my own if I continued on this path.

"Ellie," he murmured as my chin wobbled. I gripped one of his buttons to keep from letting the tears I didn't know I'd stored up flow. "What is it?"

I didn't look up at his face, just stared at his pearlized button clutched between my fingers. "Can we go somewhere?"

"Sure. Of course." His voice was so gentle and not the least bit judgmental. "Where would you like to go?"

"Not anywhere with a bed," I said a touch too loudly, squeezing my eyes shut at the muffled laugh I heard from behind me.

"Who needs one of those? I've heard Crescent Cove trees are mighty sturdy."

I shook my head, laughing despite my nerves. And embarrassment. And about fifty other emotions he stirred up in me so easily. No wonder I wanted to flee every time he got too close.

"No beds," he said low enough for my ears only. "Let's go for a ride. In a car," he added for the benefit of my eavesdropping coworkers.

I couldn't exactly blame them. Apparently, Callum and I were big news in town. I didn't know why when it came to that either, but I was beginning to think there were a few things I needed to learn more about.

Swallowing deeply, I looked up at Callum. People too.

"Okay. Let me get my jacket." I turned toward Paisley to ask if it was all right, but she was already waving me off. "Oh, I have Mrs. Bloom coming in."

She waved me off. "I'll take care of her."

"Are you sure?"

"Totally. Get out of here, you crazy kids."

The word *kids* stopped me in my tracks. At least that was a bright side. Just one kid. Maybe.

Then again, Callum had triplets in his family. Was that hereditary? I gazed down at my stomach, nicely hidden by my smock.

Nope, I was not going there. I wasn't a big person. There was no room for...all that.

"Are you okay?" Callum asked, peering over my shoulder as I stared at my belly.

"Yes, I'm fine. One second." I whipped off my smock and returned it to my area before grabbing my jacket.

He was waiting for me by the door, and we walked out to the street where he'd parked in silence. When he motioned to a Jeep instead of his hot yellow car, I did a doubletake. "You sold it? Why? I have good memories of that car."

"Me too." The huskiness of his voice made me curl my fingers into my palms. "But no, I'm just getting some custom work done on it at Dare's shop. He gave me this loaner." He opened the passenger door for me. "What do you think of it?"

"I love Jeeps, but if you get one, I hope you paint it neon green. Normal colors don't seem to suit you."

"They don't?" He sounded inordinately pleased.

"Not anymore. I mean, when I first saw the grandpa sweater—" I couldn't stop from giggling when he poked me in the side. "Very attractive grandpa."

"That's better." He frowned. "How old are you anyway?"

"Twenty-four."

"Whew."

"What about you?"

"Thirty in a few months."

"Did you suddenly think I was barely legal? Little late to worry."

He leaned in and spoke against my temple, ruffling my hair with his deliciously warm breath. “I’d have to take my luck with that sort of sin, since I can’t seem to stay away. Now get in.”

As I did what he asked, I realized I was shivering—and not from the cold.

My hottie artist hookup was dangerous. Not physically, but in every other possible way.

He didn’t tell me where we were going, and I didn’t say anything as he drove up one of the side roads that led around the lake.

Until he stopped at a hidden lane called Wolf Hollow Way and signaled to make the turn.

We were near the house. *My* house. I’d never gotten quite this close before because this was a private road surrounded by enough trees to make me think of all the scary movies I was only brave enough to watch with all the lights blazing and a big bucket of popcorn. He veered off and drove into a clearing that opened up near the lake, pulling to a stop close to the water.

I opened my door and stepped out, taking a deep breath of air tinged with the scent of the lake. The sun glistened off the cover of ice, nearly blinding me for the second it took to pull out my sunglasses from my jacket pocket.

“You’re going to get arrested for trespassing,” I warned instead of all the much nicer things that flitted through my brain.

Like...

*How beautiful. Thank you for showing me this. How did you know I needed the water and the sunshine?*

He didn’t blink as he walked around the Jeep to stand with me. I moved back and he shut my door. Always a gentleman.

I didn’t know how to share the sweeter parts of myself with him without being worried that he’d toss them back in my face.

For a moment, he shifted from foot to foot, as if he was weighing what to say. Then he went for broke.

“It’s not trespassing when you own the place.”

“You...I...what? Here? My favorite spot? Why?”

He turned to me, a smile curving his lips. “Turns out you have amazing taste.” He stepped forward and cupped my elbows, his touch easy. “I was supposed to invite you to a nice, casual lunch. Then I was supposed to get a haircut. So far, my day isn’t going as I planned at all.”

“I think I’m pregnant.”

In another situation, watching the color leech from his face might’ve been funny. Right now, it wasn’t. Not at all.

“Say that again.”

“I think I’m pregnant. I don’t know for sure. I haven’t taken a test. I’m just late, and I’m never late—Callum, put me down!” I screeched as he lifted me up in the air, spinning me around so fast I gripped his shoulders to keep from falling. But he held on to me securely, never letting go even when I slid down his body back to the ground.

He pushed my sunglasses on top of my head and cupped my face in his hands. “Can we go find out now?”

His gray eyes were filled with excitement and terror and what seemed like genuine pleasure. “Did you understand what I said? What it means?”

“Yes, I was there that day in health class. When sperm meets egg, you get a baby or babies—”

“Baby. Say it with me. B-a-b-y. As in one, singular. I don’t have the capacity for triplets.”

“Oh, you’d be surprised how elastic—”

I reached up to close his lips with my fingers. “Unless you want me to talk about how elastic your male body parts are, please don’t.”

He chuckled and nodded, so I dropped my hand. He immediately grabbed it and lifted it to his mouth to kiss my

knuckles. “I was warned about Crescent Cove. I can’t say I really believed it, but it didn’t stop me from being with you. Nothing would. Not a hurricane or a blizzard or a Dear John note on the dresser when I was already on my way to falling in love with you.”

The words spun around dizzily in my head. I stumbled back to lean against the Jeep because the world was tilting, and I wasn’t entirely sure it was just because he was a gorgeous, wonderful, insane man.

He moved toward me instantly. “Are you all right? Do you want to sit down? I don’t have the keys yet, but there are chairs on the wraparound porch.”

I shook my head, pressing my lips together against a smile. Warmth bloomed inside me, the kind that even my logical mind couldn’t squash. “I didn’t even know the house was for sale.”

“Me either. My timing was just right. Guess it was fate.”

“Fate or not, you can’t fall in love in not even a day. It’s not possible.”

“Tell that to Ariadne, who fell in love with Theseus as soon as she saw him on the dock, which probably isn’t that dissimilar from a gazebo—why are you laughing?”

“I don’t know who those people are.”

“They’re from Greek mythology. I teach it at the community college. It’s not as fancy a position as Lennox has with his powerful law firm, or Finn with his architectural firm, but it suits me. I’m a good teacher.” Not so subtly, he moved closer to me. “I have patience and a love of the subject material.”

“You have good hands too,” I mused idly as he cupped my hips. Then I laughed again, feeling like the hugest fool who had ever lived. “You’re really a professor? I thought you were a flighty artist with an inconsistent income.”

“I really am a professor. And I can be flighty. And my income can be inconsistent, though less so in the past couple of years thanks to my paintings.” He rubbed his thumb over



my lower lip. “But I’m exceptional at making promises. I don’t give my word unless I can keep it.”

“Callum,” I whispered, but I wasn’t strong enough to hold him off.

Not when I so badly wanted him to line up our mouths and kiss me like he’d missed me so much over the past six weeks. Just as I’d missed him.

He slid his fingers through my windswept hair, his lips gentle and persuasive with that undercurrent of need that had me rising to my tiptoes to meet his kiss. I wound my arms around his waist, nestling them under his long coat, and just allowed myself to sink into him. To enjoy for a moment without thinking about the next.

Breathless, we finally parted a few minutes later. He ran his fingertip between my breasts and kept on going, stopping just above my belly button. “Do you really think so?”

The wonder in his question made a lump form in my throat. “It’s a definite possibility.”

“If you are, if *we* are, I’ll do everything in this world to make you happy. I swear it on my life.” His Adam’s apple bobbed. “I’ll make both of you happy and me too. Or you know, all four of us—” He laughed as I punched him in the ribs. “Ow. My woman is strong.”

“Is that what I am?” I was still dazed from all he’d said.

Words were easy. Emotions and actions weren’t. And if he was faking his reaction to the possible existence of this child, then he had me fooled. His sincerity was as much a part of him as his cedar scent or the misty gray of his eyes.

Or his sweet, confusing heart.

He drew me against him and brushed my hair off my cheek. “If you’ll have me.”

“I’m scared.” Admitting it was probably the hardest thing I’d ever done.

“Oh, baby, I am too.” He pressed my hand against his chest so that I could feel his rapid heartbeat through the

material. “But it’s a good scared. It means I want this. I want you and what can be. Whatever is meant for us. I’m right here, ready to take every step with you.”

My lips quivered into a smile as I put my sunglasses back into place. “Is that casual lunch still on the table? Because suddenly, I’m starving.”

I wasn’t lying. For the first time in a while, all I wanted was a big juicy cheeseburger and thick steak fries from the diner. Or that poutine from Gina that Paisley had mentioned.

And if some of the reason my appetite had returned was because of this impossible, incredible man beside me, well, so be it.

I wasn’t running anymore.

“Absolutely. Your choice. Let’s go.” He started walking around the Jeep to the driver’s side, but I grabbed his hand and held on tight as he looked back at me.

“After we go buy a pregnancy test? If you wouldn’t mind being there while I make sure.”

This time, I wasn’t even surprised when he spun me around. Although I made him put me down a lot faster, since my stomach and I weren’t on the best of terms when he tried stuff like that.

But the rest of me secretly loved it.

God, I was a sap.

The whole way to the drugstore a town over, Callum rubbed my knee and smiled at me every time our gazes locked. Which was often.

When I’d told him where to go, he hadn’t even questioned why we had to travel so far when there were stores in town.

And when I went in the store’s small, dingy bathroom to do what I needed to do, he paced in the hallway, asking every thirty seconds, “Is it time yet?”

I opened the door and took a quick glance around before dragging him inside so he could look at the little stick with me.

One of us whooped. It was probably him. I was too shell-shocked to do anything but press my forehead against his strong, solid chest when he hauled me into a hug.

“We did it,” he murmured into my hair over and over.

I let out a sniffly laugh. “You do realize this wasn’t a goal we were aiming for. It just kind of happened.”

“Yes, we got lucky. It’s as if we’re in our own mythology tale, centered in that far away land called Crescendia Cove. They’ll write about us someday.”

As I laughed harder, he smoothed his thumbs under my cheeks. That was how I knew I was crying. “Is that so?”

“Yes. The story will be about the beautiful woman with pink messy braids and hope in her eyes who kissed the lonely man under the mistletoe and gave him a reason to believe. And he pledged to give her and their baby a lifetime of Christmases, because who says you can only celebrate once a year?”

I leaned against him, because I was finally beginning to have faith that I could. That he wouldn’t have come back so many times if he didn’t truly want to stay.

“Who says,” I repeated softly as his lips met mine.



# Epilogue

# ELLIE

## *Christmas Eve Eve*

MY BREATH CAUGHT ON THE TURN INTO MY HOUSE. *OUR* house—a house made for a family. Something I'd never dreamed of having. Cal had indulged me in my love of Christmas decorations. I was pretty sure he might be out-Christmasing even me.

The huge oak tree at the edge of our property was decked out in about a bazillion white lights. Huge red Christmas balls and illuminated white stars swung merrily in the breeze off the water. Callum had spent one of the nice Sundays in November monkeying all over that tree to get it done. All because he found a photo in my family look book.

Well, it was sort of ours now.

Photos for inspiration that I'd found in magazines and printed out from online made up the book, just like with my hair-focused one. I knew Pinterest would be easier, but it had seemed to be the perfect joint planning thing for us as we'd gotten to know each other over the last year. He sneaked in sketches, and I went for glossy photos.

His brothers—who were just as insane as he'd warned me—had come to help decorate while his mom and I stayed on a quilt with the babies.

Yeah, babies. Plural.

Wouldn't have pegged me spending my pregnancy bonding with my mother-in-law-to-be through thick ankles, stretch marks, and late night cravings, but I had. Cal had gotten the news that his mother was pregnant a day after we'd taken our test. We'd gone to tell his folks, and they'd had a special update of their own.

Cal and his dad had worn matching stunned expressions for a few weeks.

His mom had given birth to Cal early in life, and while she wasn't the oldest mother in the medical journals, she'd astounded our obstetrician with how easily she'd made it through the pregnancy. I guessed after triplets, anything was easy. And because I didn't have a doctor of my own, we'd just ended up doing our entire pregnancies together, right down to the office visits.

But my fiancé had a master's degree in adapting. He happened to have one in Mythology as well. If he ever finished his thesis for his PhD, he'd be a full-fledged doctor too.

But our new little family kept him busy.

Our deep and abiding love for this crazy Victorian house on the lake took up even more time. Cal had made it his mission in life to make all my dreams come true. It was a bit more of a fixer upper than we'd been expecting. There had been a reason the sellers had taken his offer with no questions asked. We'd been renovating it during the majority of my pregnancy, but we were taking a break to enjoy our new little girl's first year.

That and our daughter had inherited my allergy to plaster dust.

It was just too much misery for one man to take.

The farther I got up the drive, the more I was able to let the stress of the day fade. The salon had been madness. We'd hired two more stylists and a barber. With the unending beard love, men were looking to up their salon game, and we were happy to move with the times.

Going back to work had been hard, but knowing our daughter was in good hands—mostly her dad’s—had made it a little easier to go back part-time. Cal was done with school for the holidays and had decided to bring his class load down to two classes in the new semester.

Painting was taking up more and more of his time. And he liked being home with our baby. She was such a daddy’s girl, she’d probably have a paintbrush in her hands before a crayon. I was okay with it, especially because Cal was just as wrapped around her little finger as I was.

We were spending Christmas Day at the MacGregor farm so we were keeping Christmas Eve for ourselves. I still had a million things to do. I’d been perfecting my lasagna game on Cal’s brothers for the last two weeks. I was pretty sure the last batch in my passenger seat was going to knock my fiancé’s socks off.

It wasn’t that I was a bad cook, I was just very regimented. It wasn’t fun for me. I could create any color in the rainbow on a head of hair, but ask me to be creative with ingredients and I froze. Luckily, Callum was a decent cook and even better at ordering take-out.

But it was our first official Christmas together, and I really wanted it to be special. And naked was definitely on the menu for dessert. Especially since our little insomniac had finally learned how to sleep through the night.

Mostly.

I pulled in the circular drive to my spot. A garage was in the future plans, but for now, we still parked outside. Cal’s Supra was tarped and tucked under our carport waiting for spring. He’d wanted to sell it when I’d told him we were pregnant, but I secretly loved that stupid penis mobile.

Surprisingly, his SUV wasn’t here. He must have taken the baby out to do some last-minute shopping.

I grabbed the insulated bag that held my precious lasagna and headed for the front steps. I still couldn’t believe this was our place. I’d managed to get those traditional bulbs for the

roofline in the sale of the house. I mean, really, what was the previous owner going to do with them? It was like they were made for the house.

Each bulb was tucked perfectly into the gingerbread lace along the gables and roofline, as well as the trim and corbels. I'd done a staggering amount of research to make sure any outside renovations kept up with the age of the house. Callum had gotten into the deep dive of research—way past me. The professor in him geeked out and found levels of history to our house I didn't even know how to find.

Then he'd done a painting of the house with me on the porch wearing his white dress shirt for my birthday. He could be very sweet at times. I had a feeling he was working on something else for Christmas. He hadn't let me in his studio for the last few weeks.

Just as I got to the steps, twin beams of light came up the drive. Cal's Mazda SUV slowed around our circular drive. He waved at me then parked.

I set the lasagna down on the steps and went to meet him.

He hopped out and I got a little zing. I wasn't sure I'd ever get used to how sexy my guy was. He had a gray tweed jacket on over a soft black cashmere sweater and jeans. To accent his professor chic, he was wearing his pageboy hat. It shouldn't have worked, but I had one hot teacher-slash-artist for a lover. And soon-to-be husband.

“Hey there. I was hoping I'd beat you home.” He drew me in for a quick kiss.

“Well, hello there yourself. You taste like...chocolate.”

There were enough lights on our house to light up a street so I could plainly see the flush rising up his neck. “I had to pick up a few last-minute presents. Faith and I had a date at the diner.”

“You had Greta's chocolate cream pie, didn't you?”

He held up a finger. “I did. But...” He leaned back into the SUV and pulled out a bag. “I brought a whole pie home for Christmas.”



“Okay. Forgiven.” I took the bag and peeked inside. “Anything else for me in there?”

“Different bag and not until tomorrow.”

“Mean.”

He grinned at me. Then the piercing scream of our daughter tried to shatter glass. He crossed his eyes and put his other bags down. He opened the door to the backseat. “Faith Mistletoe MacGregor, what is your malfunction?”

I laughed and peeked around the window to wiggle my fingers at Faith. “Hello, love. Are you giving your daddy trouble?”

“Only because she’s not the center of attention for five seconds.”

Faith giggled and grabbed Cal’s beard.

“Ouch.” He untwisted her fingers and finally got the five point harness undone. Just like a champ, he had her swaddled into the blanket we always kept in the car. Coats and carseats didn’t work anymore with all the new laws.

I flipped back the edge of the blanket so she could see me. “Boo.”

Faith’s laugh bubbled out along with some drool. I had a feeling teething was going to be in our future sooner rather than later. Cal hiked her onto his shoulder and grabbed her bag, handing it off to me.

Weighed down with all our bags, we trudged up to the front steps.

“What’s this?” He pointed at the insulated container on the porch.

“Nothing.”

“Hmm.” He gave me a narrow-eyed look and opened the door for me.

Before I could get through the door, he gave me a quick, hot kiss.

He glanced up at the mistletoe.

“That’s new.” I couldn’t stop the smile even as Faith howled out her disgust at being bundled up.

“Okay, okay. I’m moving as fast as I can.” We headed inside and Cal whipped off her blanket and slung it on the couch. “I may have put a few decorations up.”

I automatically picked up the blanket and folded it. “We have decorations everywhere.”

“Yeah, just a few.” He bounced Faith a few times to get her giggling again as he undid her sweater.

I glanced at the archways to each room from the foyer. There were lit up bows of evergreen tacked up with a little dangling bit of mistletoe for each. “Really?”

“What? It’s the Christmas spirit.”

“You don’t need an excuse to kiss me, sir.”

“No, but I don’t mind the extra bonus kisses.” He picked up two of the shopping bags and dropped them by the tree.

I followed, picking up the baby things he’d left laying around. Before we got into the kitchen, he swung me around into his arms with Faith. He planted a kiss on Faith’s ruddy cheeks then one on my laughing mouth.

“Did you eat?” He went right for the fridge and took out a bottle for Faith. We had a nice schedule down for her, and it seemed to help her sleeping habits.

Callum was a very good father. Between the research he’d done—books on baby to childhood development littered our bedroom and another dozen were scattered in his office—and his precise schedule, we had a damn happy baby on our hands.

And a happy mom. I didn’t worry about leaving him alone with her. Callum had stepped up and then some. His studio was a study in chaos, but when it came to our baby, he was as organized as...well, a teacher.

Guess I’d gotten the best of both worlds there.

I picked up the cap from the bottle and put it in the sterilizer. Well, some things were still chaos. And personally, the fact that he wasn't perfect was a relief. I certainly wasn't.

He'd settled with the baby at the kitchen table. He propped up her bottle with his thumb and took off his hat, tossing it on the table. "Did you want to feed her?"

I moved to kiss her goose-down fluffy blond curls then threaded my fingers through his wild hat hair. "Nah, you guys are all settled. I'll just put some stuff away."

He snagged the loop on my jeans and dragged me back. He lifted his chin toward the holly berries mixed with mistletoe hanging from the chandelier. "Pay your toll first."

I bent down and kissed him softly. "How many of these do you have in the house?"

"A few."

I rolled my eyes, but I had a feeling I'd enjoy the hunt after Faith went to bed.

Domestic chores took up the rest of our evening. Laundry, bath time, and Callum's favorite part of the night—story time.

I looked in on them in the rocking chair in Faith's room. It was one of the smaller rooms in the house, but right next door to ours. It was painted a soft lavender with ash furniture in a pale sandy color. We'd put up a small pre-lit tree in her room on her dresser. There was an ornament from each of her uncles hanging up, as well as her grandma and grandpa. Even her new aunt Cara had sent an ornament for her tree.

New traditions—just for our little family.

It was pretty amazing.

I was happy to see there was no mistletoe in her room. It was poisonous, after all. And knowing Cal, all the mistletoe in the house was probably silk, just to be safe.

But Faith was definitely in the 'put everything in her mouth' phase. Right now, it was the corner of her Llama Lovey's tail from Paisley. I watched them for a little while longer then sneaked away to shower off the day.

When I returned to our room, the lights were turned on low, and candles were flickering all over the room. The Christmas tree was lit up in our triple window, and the fireplace was crackling. I expected Cal to be lounging on the bed waiting for me, but the room was empty.

In the corner, just beyond the tree, was one of Cal's easels.

Did I know him or what?

A canvas was wrapped in kraft paper with a massive red bow.

There was something different about the room. I looked around, and finally landed on the paintings over our headboard. There was usually three hung up there. The triptych Cal had painted of me. I still wasn't used to seeing my form on a canvas, but I was getting used to seeing myself through his eyes.

The first painting was the altered version of his drawing with my red scarf. Now I was wearing a man's white dress shirt, teasing innocence and a hint of all the curves he loved to draw.

The second painting was a bit more wild. My hair looked as if I'd just spent the night making love. Instead of being buttoned, this shirt showed more than it hid, and my chin was lifted, my eyes defiant and hooded with knowledge.

The third was softer. I was rounder with my baby-filled belly peeking from the shirt. The cuffs were rolled up, and my engagement ring sparkled on my left hand.

I glanced down at my ring and thumbed the underside of the band to straighten it. The icy diamond was in an antique setting with a starburst shape of smaller diamonds surrounding it. Callum never did anything small.

A hand slid along my hip. Cal's cedar scent surrounded me just before his arms did. His slightly rough fingers slipped inside my robe to trace over my waist. "Our princess is finally asleep."

"Must have been right after I left. You've been busy."

“I pulled out most of the stuff earlier. Just stashed it in the closet.” He kissed my neck. “I know we have tomorrow as our day with Faith, but I couldn’t wait any longer to give you your present.”

I covered his hand with my left one. “I’ve been thinking about yours too.”

He tucked his chin on my shoulder. “Oh? Is it under this robe?”

“Kinda.”

He toyed with the sash. “I like the idea of that.”

I turned in his arms. “You’re easy to please.”

“You naked is pretty much my favorite amusement park.”

I laughed as I cupped his cheek. “I love you, Cal.”

He straightened up a little and caught my wrist. He swallowed thickly. “You don’t say it a lot, but I know you do.”

“Saying it isn’t easy for me, but this past year has shown me what it’s like to love. I’m so grateful for you and our little girl. And that you’ve given me so much time and patience to figure it out.”

He dropped a light kiss on my lips. “You’re worth waiting for. Besides, I’ve got a ring on it.” He brushed his nose along mine. “I know you’re not going anywhere.”

“How about we put another ring on? You too, this time.”

A smile spread across his face. “Are you asking me to marry you? Didn’t we already do that?” He picked up my left hand and kissed my ring.

“Yeah, but I think we should do the real deal. The ceremony and the family, the dress and all the crazy that goes with it. Though I’m thinking more of a small thing. Maybe in our backyard in front of the lake.”

“Yeah?” He cleared his throat. “I could get behind that.”

“I’d say Valentine’s Day, but it might be a little chilly. So, how does May sound to you?”

“I say it sounds like a damn fine Christmas present. Do I get to show you mine now?”

“Could it be on the easel?”

“Maybe.” He flicked the tail of my robe. “Might want to close that though, or I’ll never get through the unwrapping, because I enjoy unwrapping you way more.”

I cinched my belt and followed him to the tree. I touched the tip of a mockingbird ornament I’d found in Kinleigh’s shop. She always had the best ornaments. I’d never really had a reason to buy them until now.

Cal grabbed my hand and dragged me over to the easel. “Okay, open it.”

“No ceremony or ritual this time?”

“No. Just nerves.”

I hooked my finger around his pinky. “I always love your paintings.”

“I know. Just I worked hard on them.”

“Them?” I moved in front of the easel and carefully untied the ribbons from the corner. I laid the long streamers and carefully constructed bow on the chair in the corner. Then I pulled the washi tape from the back of the package. It was so lovingly wrapped that I had a feeling I shouldn’t rip into it.

Even if my guy’s impatience practically vibrated through the room.

But I was rewarded for the careful attention. On the inside of the kraft paper were little pencil drawings of Faith and I through the last few months. Me breast feeding her, us going for a walk around the lake, Faith sleeping on her daddy’s desk, and even a few of her nestled in blankets on his dropcloths.

I laid the little treasures on our bed. Those would be going in my family book.

I went back to the painting and peeled back the muslin covering. My heart tripped out of my chest at the soft focus portrait. Callum’s beloved white dress shirt had another

starring role. This time, our daughter was cradled in my arms. My hair was gathered on top of my head, with a few tendrils teasing my neck and cheeks.

Faith's newborn face was pink and healthy and full of serenity as she gazed up at me.

"Is this what you see?"

"Every time."

My eyes misted as I touched Faith's sweet face and the absolute awe on mine. "It's beautiful, Cal. One of the most beautiful things I've ever seen."

"I'm glad. The two loves of my life right there." He came up behind me. "And a little something extra back there too."

I lifted the canvas off the easel and found another painting. It was larger and more square. I tugged away the covering and laughed. "That's so perfect."

The white shirt was pooled around Faith and a mass of Christmas lights on top of a pile of dropcloths. She was on her tummy and had the corner of the shirt collar in her mouth.

"I figure we can have this less intimate painting for the downstairs." He pressed the side of his cheek against mine. "A little painting history of our mistletoe baby every Christmas sounds like a perfect holiday tradition."

I spotted the tiny sprig of mistletoe in the corner of the painting with Cal's signature.

"Our mistletoe baby. I like the sound of that."

"So, what's next? A firecracker baby?"

I spun around and wrapped my arms around his neck. "What happens if the next baby is conceived on a Wednesday?"

"So, you do want a next baby?"

I shrugged. "Maybe. And I guess a firecracker baby sounds good to me too."

"And maybe a Valentine's Day heart?"

“Don’t push your luck.”

He grinned. “I’m never going to stop doing that.”

***Turn the page to read Jake and Freckles’ story! This is a special, unavailable book! Unless you’re a NEWSLETTER subscriber. We loooove to give them extra bonus gifts!***



# FIREMAN DADDY

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A CRESCENT COVE FIREFIGHTER SHORT  
ROMANCE

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Fireman Daddy

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*I got my happily-ever-after...except it wasn't.*

My HEA ended when my formerly star quarterback husband slept with—no, not our old head cheerleader. Someone else. Hello, this isn't a Lifetime movie.

So, I left New York City and went home to small town Crescent Cove. I'd inherited a bar that was apparently the watering hole for local firemen. Super hot firemen, namely one in particular.

Okay, so maybe this *is* a Lifetime movie.

Especially since the fire code chief—and my ex's high school friend—keeps hassling me about getting the bar up to code, when all I want to do is get the place fixed up so I can go back to the city.

Don't I?

But Jake is making me remember why I love my hometown. And it turns out he isn't only good at preventing fires, he's even better at starting them.

And the one between us may just burn forever...

*Author's note: Jake isn't a daddy yet, but if he has his way, he'll be knocking up Erica faster than you can say five-alarm blaze. Fireman Daddy is a 18K novella with no cliffhanger and a happily-ever-after.*

# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Sometimes we make up fictional places that end up having the same names as actual places. These are our fictional interpretations only. Please grant us leeway if our creative vision isn't true to reality.

*For every girl who ever wanted to get swept off her feet by a  
hot fireman.*

# ONE



THE WIND TOSSED MY HAIR UP AND AROUND MY FACE, obscuring my vision. Too late—I'd already seen my future. Hiding behind my hair might be preferable, but it certainly wouldn't make my sudden status as a proprietress any less daunting.

I scooped my wild dark hair back and wished for one of my hair ties. My sleek New York City blow-out wasn't going to last through this. I could already feel my curls frizzing in the humidity. More accurately, I probably wouldn't last through this.

I swore I'd never be back here again. Especially this spot on the broken pavement thanks to a particularly heinous winter. I pulled out my phone and opened my notes app.

## **Call paver.**

Was that a hole in the neon glass of the sign? *Madre de dios.*

## **Research who fixes neon signs from 1987.**

I shoved my phone back into my purse and picked my way across the uneven parking lot. I winced at the gravel dust on my crimson Jimmy Choo shoes. I should have stopped at my sister's house to change, but that would lead to a whole Ramos family reunion thing I wasn't quite ready for. Being the eldest daughter came with a lot of chaos and responsibilities. I had one older brother and three younger sisters. It was exhausting.

Maybe I'd take advantage of my not-so-new bar and have a shot or two to gird my loins.

I climbed the rickety stairs and sighed as I pulled my phone out again. I should probably just hold onto it.

### **Find reputable contractor.**

I knew I should have just let the lawyer take care of it. I'd gotten an offer from Maitland Enterprises to buy it sight unseen, but I couldn't quite get Sharkey's voice out of my head. More like a belligerent growl, but I could be misremembering. It had been ten years since I'd worked here.

And he'd always been sweet to me. Always given me a safe spot to hide from my family. Not because I didn't love them. That was never my problem, quite the opposite really. Nope, Richard "Sharkey" Thompson had given me space to be just Erica.

My first adult job that hadn't been babysitting.

The first time I'd made actual money myself.

And that was why I would be handling the sale of the bar on my own. I owed him that much at least.

I stepped up to the door and punched in the code the lawyer had given me for the realtor lock.

The heel of my shoe wobbled, then cracked through the wooden board before I could step away. I landed hard on my ass. "No. No, please, no." I turned my ankle to see the damage. Luckily, there was none to my actual ankle.

I rolled onto my knees and gently picked up my shoe—half of my shoe, that is. The other half was wedged into the splintered wood. All five inches of the stiletto heel I'd bought with my first bonus.

My favorite shoes.

My perfect red Jimmy Choos that actually made me look like I had nice long legs. I was well aware I did not, but a woman needed a little smoke and mirrors sometimes.

I twisted the heel and wanted to weep as the satin was scraped with each turn, but it wouldn't budge. "Shit."



“I’ve been told there’s a perfectly serviceable bathroom inside. At least I hope so. I don’t want to have to shut you down. It’s my favorite place to have a beer.”

The wind chose right then to whip through and my hair flew forward to dance around my face. I knew that voice. I landed on my hip and heard a tear.

Seriously? Could this day get any better?

The squeak of the boards behind me had me flipping my hair out of my eyes. “No, wait the boards are—”

Too late.

His large booted feet killed the rest of the board. However, he was far more agile. Instead of crashing through, he simply plucked me up and hopped back down onto the much safer pavement.

I yelped and grabbed onto his shoulders, my hair still curtaining my face.

He had very nice shoulders.

*Dios.* Get a grip.

Where was my usual city stranger danger panic?

I finally got my hair back out of my eyes and stared up at a familiar pair of hazel eyes.

Instinctively, I brushed my finger over my nose. I knew for a fact there were no freckles showing. I was careful to cover them up so people took me seriously at the office. I lifted my chin. “Would you please put me down?”

He nodded to my bare foot. “Sure about that? When did you get your last tetanus?”

I lifted my foot to point my bare red-tipped toes. I hadn’t bothered with stockings or hose since spring was in full bloom. “Fair point. What are you doing here?” And why could he carry me so easily? I might’ve been petite height-wise, but I had the Ramos hips and butt.

His huge hand gripped my thigh while his other firmly spanned my middle, a little too close to the side of my breast.

Thank God for the lapels of my suit coat since my breasts hadn't gotten the memo that while I might not be in stranger danger territory, I was definitely not supposed to have tingly nipple thoughts about this man.

“Saving your very shapely ass evidently.”

“I had it handled.”

A dimple dented his bearded cheek, and a slash of white teeth flashed. “Of course you did, Freckles.”

My damn nipples went on high alert again. God, he smelled good. Like the post-football game bonfires we used to have in high school with the new addition of sandalwood instead of the typical Calvin Klein scent all the guys used to wear. This scent was far more distracting. “Stop calling me that.”

“You used to like when I called you that.”

I did. Far more than was wise. And that was a major reason Jacob Mills was part of my past. One that I had very carefully left behind.

Oh, and he was also my ex-husband's best friend. Couldn't forget that part.

## TWO



WALKING UP TO THE FIRE STATION'S FAVORITE BAR HAD NEVER come with such a delectable distraction before. Then again, most of us knew to step around that soft board unlike the handful of feminine perfection I was holding. In fact, most of the guys from the station had been making a schedule to come over and help old Sharkey with the place. If there was one thing a fireman knew how to do, it was to mop floors and drink beer.

But then the old man had gotten sick, and things fell even more by the wayside.

We'd all come to celebrate his life last week then found a closed sign waiting for us the next day. Sharkey didn't have any family to leave the bar to. Actually, I'd expected it to go into escrow and get snapped up by the developer who was buying up every available building in town.

What I hadn't expected was Erica Ramos.

Her little chin lifted as her dark eyes blazed at me. "Well, are you going to bring me back to my car or inside?"

I laughed. "What are you doing here, Fr—" I cleared my throat at the daggers headed my way. "What are you doing here?"

"Evidently, I now own this place."

My hold firmed. "Sorry?"

"Yeah, surprised me too. I haven't talked to him since the summer after high school. I have no idea why he left it to me."

“Because he didn’t have anyone else.”

Her eyebrows lowered. “Surely he had someone more important than me.”

“He always loved you, Freckles.” I shrugged when she growled at me. “Can’t help it.”

“Try.”

“Do you really want me to?”

She sighed and shook her thick hair back. “You used to be sweeter.”

“Shit changes in ten years.”

She clutched my uniform shirt, and her frown intensified. “Evidently.” That saucy little eyebrow hadn’t though. It still said a million things without her saying a damn word.

“Guess we’re going inside. I’m the fire code chief for this county. I thought I was here to meet with the lawyer to make sure everything was up to code for the sale of the bar.”

“Good. Then we can make this quick. Because I intend on selling as soon as possible.”

If she had punched me in the chest, it would have been kinder. I instinctively held her closer to my chest. Her lips parted, and I was very glad I had my sunglasses on because I couldn’t stop staring her mouth.

Shifting my grip to hold her more securely in my arms, I headed up the steps. “Obviously, the porch steps are not on my checklist.”

“Shocker.”

I set her down inside the door. My palms itched to get my hands back on her, but I took a step back. “Do you have a spare set of stilts in the car? Or maybe something a little more suitable?”

“I can...” She sighed at my look. “Right.” She twisted a small bag forward. The slim strap cut between her breasts and pulled her suit lapels open again. That red lacy thing she was wearing was going to kill me.

She held up a key fob. “Trunk.”

“And what would her majesty like for me to bring back to her?”

She narrowed her gaze. “You used to be less sarcastic.”

“I used to be a nice guy.” Until life had taught me that being too accommodating never worked out.

“I have a pair of black flats in a side pocket of the trunk.”

“Got it.” Before I said something even more stupid, I turned on my heel and escaped. The brisk spring air helped to clear my head. It was better than her spicy floral scent making me want things I shouldn’t.

I crossed the disaster zone of a parking lot and popped her trunk to find a very orderly set-up. An emergency roadside kit, a compact black suitcase with a red stripe around the zipper, and sure enough, there was a small fabric bag tucked along the side.

*Bingo.* I shoved the little bag into my jacket pocket, then closed the trunk and pressed my palms against the car’s steel frame.

Fuck, I’d missed her. All it took was ten minutes in her space to bring it all back.

Oh, I’d had moments over the years. When the moon was high over the lake and I took my bike out for a long night drive, I thought about her sometimes. The stolen moments when she fought with Danny and sent out a text SOS to pick her up.

Mostly because she was insane. She would jump out of his car at a stoplight or stop sign when they were mid-fight and stomp off. And Danny was always dickish enough to leave her.

*Idiot.*

And I’d ride in like the white knight I wished I could be for her. Having her wrap her curvy little self around me had been a special kind of torture. But I’d lived for those rides. I’d hoped she would see how wrong Danny was for her. Even if

she never saw me as any more than the sweet guy she could lean on when she was in trouble.

That boy was long gone, and I'd sure as shit never had sweet thoughts about her. No, they were decidedly X-rated. No matter whom I'd dated in high school, they were a poor substitute for Freckles. Not that she ever knew that. Because best friends never poached, and I'd been Danny Hughes' best friend since kindergarten.

He was still an idiot.

And I was still in love with Erica.

“Son of a bitch.”

## THREE



I FLIPPED OFF MY OTHER SHOE. THE FLOOR WAS A LITTLE dusty, but surprisingly clean overall. I'd figured the inside would match the outside. The tables and chairs were worn, but still serviceable with a bit of elbow grease and maybe some polish. An ancient tarp covered the taps, secured by bungee cord. The bar itself was shrouded in a large piece of paint-stained canvas.

I frowned at the thick gray smoke coming from the kitchen. What the hell? I rushed around the bar and through the swinging door. The heavy scent of cigarette smoke slammed into *deja vu*.

“Rita!”

The crabby waitress with the improbable crayon-red hair who had been attached to this place since before I was born was sitting next to the back door cracked open to let in air. Of course it never helped, but Rita did what she wanted.

Why Sharkey put up with her, I never knew.

But her ass had been Velcroed to that chair every day I'd worked there. I guess it didn't much matter if the bar was closed or not.

She took a long drag and blew a stream of smoke at me. “Look what the cat dragged in.”

Still sweet as ever too.

I snatched the cigarette out of her hand and stubbed it out into the pail of sand she used to prop open the door. “You can't

smoke in here.”

She calmly took out her leather cigarette pack holder. The leather was cracked and held together by safety pins. I was pretty sure it was older than my mother. She plucked another one from the Newport 100s pack with the tips of her long red nails. “What are you doing back here, kid?”

I grabbed her lighter. “We are in the middle of getting reviewed by the fire code chief,” I whispered furiously. “You cannot smoke in here. What are you doing here?”

She shrugged. “Working.” She pulled a pack of matches out of a different pocket and lit up.

I looked over my shoulder. This was not happening to me. I straightened my spine and gentled my voice. Maybe she was so deep in mourning for Sharkey she didn’t know she currently didn’t have employment. “Rita, the bar is closed.”

“I know that, you twit. I’m not stupid.” She blew a stream of smoke toward the door this time. How kind of her. “I’m here to meet with the new owner of this place.”

“Well that’s me.”

She shot out of the chair. “The hell it is.” She dropped her cigarette and stomped it out with her thick-soled black shoes.

I covered my face with my hands. “*Dios mio.*”

“Erica?”

“You’re going to get us into trouble.” I rushed to the back door, propped it open, and waved my hand against the smoke, but it was no use.

“Still such a good girl. Always following the rules.” Rita grabbed her purse and breezed by me to the back parking lot.

Jacob filled the doorway. His impressive shoulders barely fit through the door. I didn’t remember him being so...*beefy* when we were kids. He’d always been tall, if a little bit on the beanpole end. Between basketball and football, he’d been the sweet-natured jock who was friends with everyone and yet truly close to no one.



A little sliver of unease hit me. Where had that thought come from?

He narrowed his gaze. “Since when did you smoke?”

“Not me. Rita was here.”

“That makes more sense.” He tossed my little mesh bag at me. “Let’s get this done, Freckles.”

I caught it and sighed. Today was not turning out how I’d imagined.

I pulled on my shoes and followed him out. Sure enough, he had a clipboard this time around. I was pretty sure most fire code agents used a tablet. Then again, Crescent Cove was a small town. Maybe they didn’t have that kind of technology in the budget.

He made *tsking* sounds as he walked around the bar. He checked outlets and vents, and he even carried out a small stepladder from beside the front door he must have brought back in with him. He kept humming to himself as he marked things off.

I followed him around, my blouse sticking to my back with every step. There was no air circulation in this godforsaken place.

I wasn’t sure if checks were good or bad. The more his brow furrowed, the more I went with the shit column.

By the time he put the damn clipboard down, my shoulders were aching from tension.

Jacob tucked his pen behind his ear. “Well, you’re not quite to full shut down, but there’s a lot you’re going to have to fix before you sell this place.”

“Can’t I sell it without the fixes?”

“You can.” He propped his fist on his hip. “You’d take a helluva loss. If you made some simple repairs, you’d come out further ahead for sure.”

“Is that a professional opinion? Aren’t you supposed to be impartial?”

He dropped the clipboard on the table. “Look, Freckles. I loved this place. The Cove doesn’t have too many bars that aren’t overrun by townies looking to let off steam. Station 49 took to this place over the last year. We loved Sharkey, and I want to make sure you’re taken care of.”

My heart pounded. “Why?”

“We take care of our own. Sharkey thought you were good enough to take on this place, so I guess we have to as well.”

I crossed my arms over my chest. “Gee, thanks.”

He stepped closer to me, and his spicy woodsmoke scent filled my head. “Besides, you used to be one of my closest...” His gaze dropped to my mouth. “Friends. I take care of my friends.”

I stepped back and bumped into a chair. I tamped down the urge to growl at him. I hadn’t been that girl in a damn long time. I didn’t lose my temper and I wouldn’t be baited by him. “I appreciate that, Jacob.”

“Just Jake these days, Freckles.”

I poked him in the chest. “Stop calling me that.”

He grinned down at me. “No can do. Especially when they’re burning through your carefully applied face paint.”

“It’s not paint. It’s one-hundred-dollar concealer.” My fingers went to my nose automatically. Sure enough, my makeup wasn’t holding up to the heat in the bar.

He snorted. “You paid too much. Besides, you look better all natural.” He picked up his clipboard. “I’ll be back with the boys soon to start working on this list.”

“What list? Don’t I get a copy of the citations or whatever?”

“Citations?” He barked out a laugh. “I’m not a cop. But yes, you’ll get a written report of your violations in twenty-four to seventy-two hours.” He tucked the sheets in his inside jacket pocket.

“What? I can’t wait that long.” I chased after him. “Jake, you have to give me the preliminary findings.”

“You gotta stop watching cop shows, darlin’.”

“Erica. My name is Erica!” And okay, maybe I watched way too many true crime documentaries. But what else should I call the results of this farce of a meeting?

He slid on his aviators before he opened the bar’s door. “Go see your mom and sisters. I’ll be in touch.”

“That is not how this is supposed to work, Jake Mills,” I called after him.

He turned around and walked backward toward his truck. “How did you think it was going to work? You’re back in the Cove, Freckles. Things here aren’t like how they are in the big city.”

I stomped on the porch and heard another crack. I quickly stepped to a more secure board.

“Careful there or I’m going to wonder if you like me scooping you up in my arms.” He opened his truck door. “I know I enjoyed it.” He gave me a salute and shut the door before I could reply.

I ran down the stairs, but he just waved as he drove off, spitting gravel in his wake.

This was supposed to be a quick trip. In and out, with maybe some of my mother’s empanadas as a treat.

Not a project, dammit. And definitely not one involving Jake Mills.

## FOUR



THE OVERCAST SKIES ON SUNDAY MORNING IN THE COVE LEFT me feeling lazy.

I stared at my childhood bedroom ceiling. It had been turned into a craft room for my mother, leaving only a lumpy futon for guests.

Better to make sure company didn't overstay their welcome.

I knew my mother well. Since she'd ejected all her kids, she had restructured our house into a showcase for exactly what she'd always wanted. Add in the fact that her sole son was a master carpenter who didn't know how to tell his mother no, and she definitely got her way.

She always had a plan. Probably where I'd gotten it from, even if we'd both chew off a finger before we owned up to being anything alike.

Unlike her, however, I was hiding out.

The last two days had been a lesson in patience and strategy. I had about a dozen new notes in my phone about what I'd need to do to offload the bar. That was in between fielding calls from my boss who had been blowing up my phone with texts and emails inquiring when I would be back. I'd worked my way up from junior marketing specialist—aka paid intern—after five grueling years at the midtown office for one of the largest financial firms in New York City.

I was one of the leads on a major marketing campaign. The singular goal I'd had in my five-year plan.

A far cry from my life in Crescent Cove.

Here, I'd played mom to my sisters while my parents worked. Or I'd babysat for kids in the neighborhood while waiting tables to save every penny I could for college. On a lark, I'd tried for a scholarship while helping Danny with his forms. I hadn't really thought I had a chance in hell, but when we were both accepted, it had seemed as if the universe was giving me a sign.

Instead of growing apart in college, we'd stayed together. Back then, I took comfort in having a boyfriend so I could concentrate on school. It was easier to hold on to the familiar even if we never quite fit. Marriage had been the next logical step. We'd even started working for the same company.

*Logical* shouldn't have been the word used when he actually asked me. I should have run the minute he treated it like a business transaction. Being stable and married had been a leg up to advance in Thompson Financial. And Danny had become the king of shortcuts—the right friends, the right woman. Until I hadn't satisfied that slot anymore.

My phone buzzed on my chest, dragging me out of the past.

What now? Another fire to put out? My sister badgering me to meet her at the diner?

I lifted it and saw Jake's name.

I shut my eyes and instead of annoyance, I got a flash of Jake's crinkles framing his eyes behind his amber aviator sunglasses. No part of him reminded me of the boy I'd left behind all those years ago. That Jake was long, lanky, sweet—and now?

Now my nipples tightened at the memory of him holding me against his very wide, very muscular chest.

I clutched my phone as it buzzed again and covered my face with my arm.

“Get up, *mija*.”

I groaned and was very glad I was still under my blanket. “*Mami*, knock.”

“I birthed you, I don’t care if you’re naked.” Bonnie Ramos stood in the doorway, her dark hair piled up on her head. Her latest obsession was yoga, including all the gear. Today’s ensemble included llamas over a bright purple background. A racerback tank that showed way too much boob for my brain to handle and a perfect face of makeup completed the look. “Get up. You’ve been lounging long enough.”

I hadn’t lounged in probably three years, but she was right.

I took a quick peek at Jake’s text.

**Meet me at the bar, Freckles. I have some news.**

I flung back my covers.

My mother’s eyebrow arched. “And what on that phone got you out of bed so fast? I’ve been calling for you for an hour.”

I grabbed my overnighter and kissed her on the cheek as I flew by. “Incentive, *Mami*.”

She followed me down the hall. “And who might have given you such incentive?”

I paused outside the bathroom door, dropping my bag before I pointed at her. “No.”

“What?”

She acted so innocent, but I knew her far too well. “It’s not like that. I’m going to the bar.”

She put her hands on her hips. “To see Jacob Mills?”

“No. Well, yes, Jake will be there.” I shook back my hair and mirrored her stance. “He’s the fire code chief. I’m meeting him so I can get the bar sold and get back to the city. Nothing more, nothing less.”

She shrugged. “If you say so, *mija*.” She turned on her heel. “I made some of your fancy coffee.”

“Don’t get any ideas about me and Jake,” I called after her.

“I didn’t say anything,” she said and disappeared around the corner and down the stairs.

I kicked my bag into the bathroom and stripped. I’d walked right into that trap. I knew better and still did it. My bloodline was mostly Spanish and Italian. Many of my family members, extended and otherwise, saw a single woman as a project to tackle. Being the first of us kids to marry and divorce made me a double target.

Their enduring disappointment and my advanced age—their words, not mine—made for extra heaping doses of matchmaking. I got at least three phone calls a week asking about my status and when I was giving my parents a grandbaby.

I pinned up my hair under a plastic cap and climbed into the shower. I slid a hand over my flat belly as I soaped up. I’d always assumed I’d have a child one day, but my priorities had shifted when Danny’s focus zeroed in on work. Sure, I wanted a family, but I didn’t want to be the only one willing to make sacrifices. So, I’d pushed thoughts of children down.

Being home with my family and seeing the baby boom taking over the town was just messing with my head. Lots of things were.

I quickly shaved since my dark hair made quick daily maintenance preferable to letting things go. Then I raided my sister Frankie’s closet since I’d only packed enough to get through the weekend. She was a little more athletic than I was, but one of her old sundresses would do in a pinch. Besides, she probably hadn’t seen this dress since high school, so I should be safe from her wrath.

That and she lived in Hell’s Kitchen these days.

I tugged at the front of the dress, hoping to stretch it a little. Instead, the center button kept popping. “Dammit,” I muttered under my breath.

I went back to her closet and flicked through her hangers. We might be sisters, but Francesca Ramos was on the lighter end of the skin tone spectrum. All the colors she had made me look like I had jaundice.

This was the only black one in her collection. I was a full cup size larger than Frankie. Did I go for vanity, or comfort?

I slipped a pink sweater off one of the hangers. A little bit of both, evidently.

I shrugged it on and closed the gaping buttons, then grabbed my purse and rushed down the stairs into the kitchen. Sunlight had burned through the gray clouds, allowing for a rare bit of March springtime heat. I made myself a quick travel mug of coffee and wandered to the window.

My father was on the patio with his radio blaring as he prepped his garden. It was tempting to go out there and sit with him. It had been so long since I'd simply sat and listened to him hum along with Elvis. He always said the King's smooth voice was made for teasing blooms out of the flowers as much as girls out of their skirts back in the day.

I let the sheer curtains fall back over the kitchen window with a sigh. Regardless of the status of the bar, I'd have to go back to the city in the morning. I'd have to look into taking some personal time if Jake's report was less than stellar.

I wasn't sure how I was going to pull all of this off.

I snagged a slice of my mother's fresh bread on the way out the door. I was on the opposite side of the town, and on the trip over, I got another two texts from Jake wondering where I was.

As I pulled up, I found him leaning against his dusty silver truck. The large grill made the breadth of his shoulders seem even wider. His long legs were crossed at the ankle, and those blasted aviators were shielding his eyes.

Different ones today. These were mirrored so I couldn't figure out his mood.

I stepped out of my car.



“You’re late.”

“I wasn’t aware we scheduled a time.”

His lips twitched a little before a dimple dented his beard. “Raiding your sister’s closets again, Freckles?”

I gritted my teeth and lifted my chin. “How do you know it’s not my dress?”

He shrugged and slowly straightened. “Maybe you like showing off your lacy underthings. Who am I to say?”

Suddenly, I wished for a little more than the little pink sweater as a coverup for my borrowed dress. I folded it tighter around me and crossed my arms. “This was supposed to be a one and done, Mills. I wasn’t prepared for more than an overnight. So, yes, I had to borrow some clothing.”

He pulled an envelope out of his denim jacket. His woodsmoke and spice scent wafted after it. “Then let’s get to it, and you can be on your way.”

“Good.” I fidgeted a little under the weight of his gaze.

He waved the envelope. “I won’t bite. Unless you’re into that sort of thing.”

Obviously, he was baiting me. I moved in and he pulled it out of reach. “Jake,” I growled.

“I don’t want you to get too upset. The bar has violated code for a long time. I’m not sure how Sharkey passed his last yearly visit. All I can figure is my predecessor enjoyed the beer enough to overlook a few things.”

“And you won’t.”

He moved in until our toes touched. “I like rules and order, Freckles. I take my job seriously.” His voice lowered to a rumble. “Beer isn’t enough of a bribe, either.”

*What about a sheer pink bra?*

I instantly hated that the thought occurred to me. But I wasn’t sure if it was because I wanted the bar issue to be take care of or—

Nope. No *or*, dammit.

He handed me the envelope. “I’ll help you get it up to code.”

“You will?”

He inclined his head. “Well, me and the boys from the firehouse. We love this place.”

“Right.” I couldn’t help the quick pang of disappointment. “Of course.”

I flipped open the envelope and gaped at the long list of offenses. I scanned the three pages, my blood boiling over each small infraction. And finally, the last one got me.

“The pool table isn’t regulation-sized for the space?” I slapped the pile of papers against his chest. I was so angry I couldn’t even form words. My job was to create ads full of them, yet I was at a complete loss. “You—you...*bully!*”

He caught them against his very hard belly. “Now, Freckles, I’m just doing my job.”

“You’re being completely ridiculous. Is this because I’m a woman?”

His eyebrows furrowed, and his eyes went flat. “No, these are real infractions.”

His voice was so matter of fact. Rage swirled around me like a dust storm.

Before I said something I might regret later, I stomped up the stairs. There was fresh wood leading up to the door. It wasn’t stained like the rest of the ancient porch, but there had been effort put into making the boards match up.

That attention to detail should have slowed my roll, but then I slammed open the door and saw the pool table. The pool table I’d played at for most of my summers as a teen.

Where Danny and Jake had taught me to play, no less.

Mostly Jake. Danny never had a handle on the angles like Jake. My ex used to get bored and wander off to try to charm Rita into giving him beer.

Memories tumbled free. Laughter and the jukebox playing well into the night. Curfew bent on dozens of nights, thanks to endless quarters fed into the table or the juke.

I walked around the perimeter and grabbed one of the pool cues off the wall. I heard Jake's heavy boots on the scarred floor, so I knew he'd followed. "And just how is this not regulation?" I swung it above the green felt recklessly. The chalk-stained tip grazed his belt buckle.

To Jake's credit, he didn't even flinch. He simply took off his sunglasses and tucked them in the pocket of his pristine white T-shirt, then tossed his jacket on the foosball table. He eased the cue out of my hands and circled the table slowly.

I backed up into the wall.

"Your proof is right there."

I frowned up at him. "What, that you're crowding me?"

"There should be a minimum of five feet on every side of the pool table." He stepped in front of me, and the space shrank. His shoulders seemed extra massive with the denim shirt over his white T-shirt. My skin flushed from the heat coming off him.

Memories battered me. Jake had always run hot. His skin had been like a furnace on all those late nights on his bike when he'd rescued me after I'd fought with Danny. Keeping me warm and safe.

His chest brushed along the buttons of my dress. "Does it seem like there is five feet of space right here, Freckles?"

No, there was no damn space.

And I didn't mind.

## FIVE



HER CHEST HEAVED AND OUR HEIGHT DIFFERENCE GAVE ME A damn good point of view. Erica had been blessed by the gods in the breast department. Not too big, but more than a handful for sure. They pushed at the black material of her dress, begging to be freed.

My mouth watered, and my dick was definitely on board with that idea.

“Why did Sharkey get away with it for years?”

My gaze locked on her lush lower lip. Her lipstick had worn away, leaving her natural pink. I wanted a taste so fucking bad. I’d dreamed of that mouth throughout my formative years, and now that we were very much adults, my imagination made things even worse.

Because I knew the pleasures that could be held in just a kiss. As a teen, I’d been too focused on the end result. Too impatient to explore and enjoy.

Now I wanted to snack on her mouth, her breasts, and most definitely, her pussy. The borrowed sundress wasn’t quite her style. Probably out of Frankie’s closet, based on the length.

I’d thank her next time I saw her.

Only problem was, I’d come here with a plan. I would show her what needed to be done and offer to help her. I’d ingratiate myself and maybe even use the guys at the firehouse to prove our willingness to offer assistance. Anything to show her why she needed to stay.

All those ideas were dust now.

My impulse control had always been shit when it came to this woman. I prided myself on the rules and order of my job. For once, I didn't want to control my urges in her direction.

I didn't want to be the good guy.

I wanted to *take*.

“Because no one fucking cared until me, Freckles.” I moved in until my knee slipped between her thighs.

Her sweet breath puffed against my neck, and I couldn't quite bury a growl.

I set the stick against the wall, pinning her in place with my hips. I waited a heartbeat, then two. I didn't trust myself quite yet. I'd wanted her for so damn long.

I planted my hands on either side of her. “Is this where you run? Or where you knee me in the balls for invading your space?” I lowered my mouth to her jawline and breathed her in. Some spicy floral scent that I was willing to wear on my skin for the rest of my life.

“Why are you doing this?” Her voice was barely a whisper.

I flicked my tongue over the pulse in her neck. Her heart was racing. I leaned back enough to peer into her huge dark eyes. There was a little fear, but mostly want.

For me.

*Finally.*

“Because wanting you for almost fifteen years is just too much to ask of one man.”

Her fingers twisted into my shirt. “What?”

I brushed my lips ever so lightly along hers. Damn, she was sweet. My higher brain function was ready to leave the premises. “You had to know.”

She shook her head even as she dragged her nails over my belly through my T-shirt. I tightened my abdominal muscles

instinctively to show her I wasn't a skinny basketball kid anymore.

Danny's sidekick.

The boy who had always loved her, even though my best friend did too.

The man who couldn't bury those emotions anymore.

My fingertips were white from pressing into the wall to stop myself from holding her so tightly neither of us could breathe.

My arms ached.

My shoulders cast a shadow over her, but a sliver of sunlight streaked across her face. Just enough to show me that I wasn't alone in this craziness.

I gave her one more chance to escape. The hint of mint lingered between us as her chest rose and fell with... excitement? Panic? Need?

I sure hoped some of it was need. I didn't want to be the only one feeling desperate.

I tugged on her lower lip. Bit hard enough to feel it throb under my tongue as the blood came rushing back. I eased the hurt with a sweet brush of lips, then there was only her taste ruling me.

Distantly, I wondered if I was too much—too savage, too big and clumsy. But then she scraped her fingernails up my belly to my chest before she dug into my shoulders and held on. She lifted onto her toes to meet my mouth. Her undeniable moan of pleasure severed the restraint I had left.

I slid my arms around her, my hand cupping her ass as I pulled her ever closer to me. Our height difference made it far too easy for me to lift her.

She yelped, but instead of making a halfhearted attempt to say *'oh, I'm too heavy,'* she simply wrapped her strong legs around my waist.

"Fuck, yes," I said against her mouth and dove in again.

No corner was left untouched. She gave and I took ruthlessly. Tangled tongues and grappling fingers warred between us. Nothing was close enough.

I lifted her dress. The scrap of panties she wore was barely a barrier. Her heat teased along the tips of my long fingers. I didn't pause to ask.

I was done with that.

I sunk two fingers into her pussy while I sucked on her tongue. She pushed back on me, driving them deeper as she grinded against the bulge under my zipper. My forearm burned and my wrist screamed at the position, but I wasn't stopping for anything.

Not even if this place went up in flames around us.

I curled my fingers along the swollen perfection of her, gritting my teeth against the strength of her muscles. God, she was going to feel so good around my cock.

She held on to my shoulders, then she drove her hand into my hair, her nails scraping along my scalp. I sped up and she cried out, tearing her mouth away. Her head fell back as she bounced on my plunging fingers. "Don't you stop. Don't you stop."

"Never." I shifted her a little higher so I could get my arm into a better position.

She yelped, and her thighs shook.

"Yes," I growled against her throat. "Yes. Come on my hand. Tighten that little pussy around my fingers."

"Jake." My name was barely discernible between her moans, but it was there. It was me who was giving her this pleasure.

I'd break my damn hand before I stopped.

She bore down on me, and I dragged my teeth down her neck to her shoulder as I let her ride me. The sounds coming from her weren't sweet. They were full of shock and almost pain.

When I tried to ease back, her head snapped up. “No. No, deeper, *please*.”

I swung her around to the pool table and set her down. I twisted her onto the felt so she was facing the short side. I slowly moved to the end and braced her ankle, opening her legs.

I slid my soaking wet fingers up her thigh and followed the trail with my tongue.

She stiffened, her fathomless dark eyes locked on me.

“I’ll give you everything you need.” I dragged her closer to me and draped her knee over my shoulder. That little taste hadn’t been nearly enough.

“I don’t need this. Just...you know, get inside me.”

I nuzzled over the soaked panel of her panties. “Every woman needs this.”

“It’s okay, seriously. You were so close with just those really big hands.” She laced her fingers with mine. “*Really* big hands.”

I laughed. “Have a little patience, Freckles.”

“It’s just that I usually like the sex part better, so don’t waste your time.”

“Waste...” I frowned. “Whomever told you it was a—” I lowered my forehead to her warm inner thigh. “Don’t say it.”

I raised my head, all the old anger about how Danny treated her roaring back.

She let me go and propped herself up on her elbows. “I’ve only ever been with...”

“Don’t say his name. Not now when your pussy is wet from me.”

She swallowed, and then lifted her chin. Pride and that fire I’d always loved lit her face. She flicked open the straining buttons of her dress and cupped her breast. “Then prove me wrong. Show me what I’ve been missing.”



I shoved up the skirt of her dress and ripped the tiny strings of her panties.

Her eyes widened. “Those were my favorite pair.”

“I’ll buy ten of them,” I said just before I buried my tongue inside her.

Her back arched up off the green felt as I finally got the full flavor of her on my tongue.

I opened her wider. The pain of her heel digging into my back didn’t deter me. It just made me work harder. Long, slow licks. I used my thumb to strum her clit until it was so tight she could barely take my touch.

I didn’t stop.

The singular focus that had made me the youngest chief in Crescent Cove history came in handy. I wouldn’t squander my only chance to show her how good we could be together.

I was rusty as fuck when it came to touching a woman. Work had been my solace for so long that I’d let dating fall by the wayside.

I tuned into her. The lift of her hips, the little sounds she made, even the pain of her fingers in my hair as she tried to tug me away from her told me what I needed to know.

She needed this just as much as me. Maybe even more.

When her thighs clamped around my ears, I knew I’d happily die with my mouth on her every day of my life.

She screamed and I held on. I wedged my fingers in and her greedy body clamped down on them as I drank everything down that she gave me. My dick throbbed against the wood frame of the pool table, but I ignored it. Right now, it was all about giving her what she needed.

Her thighs shook, and the shivers traveled through her whole body. I peeked from between her thighs and groaned at how she’d ripped at her own clothing to touch herself. Cupping and tugging at her breasts.

I was so damn glad for my long arms. I reached up to help her, moaning into her slick pussy as I pushed her hand away to tug her nipple. I was tempted to climb up and taste her there too. To release my aching cock and get inside her. But I wanted her to break under me one more time.

I needed to stamp my tongue over every crevice.

I leaned back just enough, and she collapsed onto the table. Her chest heaved, and her hands tangled in her own hair. She was muttering something in the broken Spanish and Italian that always came out of her when she was super pissed off...or evidently, so turned on she couldn't get herself together.

I grinned. "Roll over, Freckles."

"What?"

I closed her legs and shifted her onto her knees. "I need more."

Her heart-shaped ass was irresistible. I bit the roundest part of her. She yelped, but it got her up and where I wanted her. I dove headfirst into her pussy from behind. But I didn't just want that. Nope, nothing was off limits to my tongue and mouth.

She was on all fours on the felt and gave me a startled look over her shoulder. "Jake!"

I dragged her to the end of the table. "I need you ready for me."

"My ass is off the menu."

I licked the sensitive flesh between her pussy and asshole. "So prim. But we can start with just your perfect pussy. But I guarantee I can make you feel so good you'd let me do anything to you. Including fuck you here." I circled her there and she instinctively pushed back on me. "That's right, love. Your body knows just how good it would be."

Slowly, I slid two fingers into her pussy.

She hissed out a long, slow breath as she slid her knees farther apart until she was splayed open, the perfect angle for me to take her. "Please, Jake. I can't even think."

I reached for my buckle. I'd tortured both of us long enough.

I slipped my fingers from her, and my mouth watered for her again. A sudden, very hateful thought dented the lust. I wasn't the guy who carried condoms in his wallet like the rest of the guys at the station.

"Fuck."

If I slid into her, I'd never be able to pull out. I couldn't even pretend that every inch of me didn't want to come inside her until the only scent she carried was us combined.

I also couldn't deny the hope it would plant a baby in her belly. I'd pushed aside thoughts of a family for work, but here and now, I could see it. Even as my dick was sending rage signals to my brain to just take her—and take her now—there was a larger part of me that wished for more.

But it would always be like that for me. It didn't matter that I'd barely seen her in ten years. My emotions toward her had just hibernated, and one touch brought them right back to the surface.

"Jake?"

"I don't have a fucking condom."

"Oh." She collapsed onto her forearms and brought her legs together to curl tight into herself. Obviously, the haze of desire was catchy. "I didn't even think about it."

I slid my arm under her belly, pulling her ass tighter to me. I groaned as my trapped dick throbbed against her skin. I leaned over her, resting my forehead along her back. "I want nothing more than to feel you around me. Come home with me."

"I can't wait that long."

"I don't want to be stupid here. I would never risk you." I spread my fingers over her soft belly.

"You're clean, right?"

"I get checkups all the time—that's not the problem."

“And you don’t trust me?” Her voice was soft and unsure.

“No. It’s not that.” The buttons of her dress had all slipped free, leaving it open and her skin there for the taking. I cupped her middle. “What if we made a baby?”

She shifted until her hand covered mine. “Right. You’re right. So irresponsible.”

“I want you so bad I know I wouldn’t be able to pull out.” I slid my hand lower to where she was still so swollen for me. I groaned and rocked against her. “And what’s worse, I wouldn’t care if this ended in a baby.”

## SIX



HE WAS CURLED AROUND ME AND MY BRAIN WAS FRIED FROM an absurd number of orgasms. I didn't hear him right.

I couldn't have.

"Jake."

"I mean it."

"You're insane." I pushed him back and hopped off the pool table. "You can't say something like that." I raked my hands through my hair. "It's just the lust talking. Guys say stupid things when they want to get their dick wet."

He came around the table and crowded me into the foosball table, caging his arms around me. His jacket fell to the floor. "No, guys say they'll pull out. I'm just honest enough to say I wouldn't. I'd keep you naked for days. Until you were walking bowlegged from having me between your thighs every minute of every day. Until you didn't remember what it felt like to be empty."

I shut my eyes against the fierce sureness in his hazel eyes. He was talking crazy.

And it sounded too perfect. I'd never belonged to someone like that. I'd been alone for so damn long. Way before Danny and I had broken up, he'd checked out of our relationship in favor of his career. Then he'd rolled on to the next woman who fit his new image.

Right now, sex and attraction made sense. I'd always had dangerous feelings for Jake. I'd buried them out of loyalty.

And Danny had been his closest friend, even if deep down, I'd always wondered if Jake was truly close to anyone. I wasn't the girl who would pit two men against each other. All those years ago, I told myself it was just because we spent so much time together. That explained why I always searched Jake out when Danny pissed me off.

But maybe I'd pissed Danny off for an excuse to call Jake.

God.

Maybe I'd run away from more than just this town after graduation.

"Don't shut me out."

My eyes flew open at the coarse tone of his voice. Instinctively, my hand sought out his face. I didn't know what to say. I couldn't handle all these emotions on top of this newest burden. I had enough to deal with when it came to the bar and the money pit of renovations.

He leaned into my touch. "I didn't mean to scare you."

"It's too much."

"Would it be so bad, having a family with me?"

He lowered his mouth to mine. Again, I got swept away into the heady rush of pleasure. He seemed to know just how to touch me.

As if he was made for me.

I scraped my fingers through his beard then looked down at his still-hard cock digging into my belly. "I don't even live here. I don't *want* to live here."

"Why? What's so good about the city? You have everything you need up here."

"Please stop."

He kneaded my ass. Jake wasn't gentle. I wasn't glass and each time he gripped me tighter, it was just more proof that he wanted me.

He rocked against me. “I’m playing dirty and I don’t care. Now that I’ve touched you, I don’t want to ever stop.”

No way could I go down that trail of thought. The spicy bonfire scent of him was making me insane. And the fact that he actually knew what to do with his tongue and fingers.

*Imagine what his cock could do?*

Nope.

That was what had gotten me in trouble here in the first place. I was lust-drunk, that was all. His impressive length pushed against the undone buttons of my dress and made the teeth of his zipper peel open in deference to his girth.

I reached into his jeans and gasped at the size of him. Proportional should have been a neon sign over his head. *Dios*. I dragged the head of his dick across my bare stomach, smearing myself with his precum.

“Jesus, Freckles. That isn’t helping.”

“I know.” I tried to do the math in my head. I was as regular as the sunrise, and there should be no way I’d get pregnant right now. At least I was pretty sure. “How far away is the drugstore? Did they build any new ones close by?”

“Not close enough.” He tipped his forehead to mine with a groan, then tried to step back.

I gripped him tighter and wrapped my other arm around his neck. He boosted me up, and I linked my legs around him. “Inside me.”

“Freckles...”

“Just do it. Please. I’m so tired of being empty.”

He set me back on the pool table, his mouth back on mine. I pushed at his shirt, needing to feel more of him. He reached behind his head and dragged it off, tossing it on the table. He lifted my ass and set me down on his shirt, still warm from his skin.

He lifted my knee up and turned me slightly. “Are you sure?” He painted the head of his cock along my center. The

angle would about kill me. Jake was so much taller than me—broader in so many ways.

Walking bowlegged wasn't a boast. I might not be able to walk at all.

And I was so on board.

I curled my fingers into his belt loops and dragged him closer. His jaw tightened as the broad head of his cock slid into me. He watched—unabashedly—the first deep stroke.

I arched my back and blew out a breath. It had been a damn long time since anyone had been inside me. My nails dug into his pecs as he pushed my legs open enough to make room for himself.

“God, you're splitting me apart.”

“You're so goddamn tight.” He stilled, letting me get used to him. I could see that it was killing him to stop. Every muscle in his body tensed, and a single bead of sweat slithered through his chest hair and hit my finger. “Freckles?”

“More.” I gripped him tighter, but I needed him to move. My hips undulated lightly. The sensory memory of the act was there, even if it had never felt anything like this.

His size was staggering.

Jake was everything I never knew I needed. Everything I was afraid to want.

He reached down and dragged his knuckle around the top of my pussy where we were joined. And then, just like before, he found my clit like he had some GPS coordinates for just what I needed.

He left me, then his hips snapped forward and...

“Yes. God, yes.”

There was nothing but Jake. Around me, inside me, over me. He braced himself with his forearm, and his mouth sealed us together completely. I curled my arms around his shoulders, wound my legs around his hips and held on.

Arching into him, we found our rhythm.



I clung to him like a lifeline as I raced for that feeling from before. The heady, brain busting orgasm that pushed aside the noise that always seemed to live inside of me. Tension coiled inside me while the oncoming pleasure dissipated in a rush of fear.

“Erica.”

His dark, low voice saying my name snapped me out of it.

He pushed back my hair and cradled my face as he burrowed into me. “Here with me. Stop thinking about whatever is going on in there.” He nipped my bottom lip. “Here.” His hand slipped down to my chest. “I feel your heart racing.” He shifted to grip my hip. “I feel you clasp that sweet pussy around me.”

My breath stalled. That he had so many words rocked me. It always seemed like they were lodged in my brain and would never come out. Not with my family, not with my husband, not with my friends.

He slipped out of me.

“No, Jake. I’m—”

What?

*I’m sorry? Please fuck me some more?*

*Dios.*

He sat on the pool table, and then hauled me up to straddle his lap. His long legs were outstretched, and he’d shoved down his jeans to his knees.

He lifted me, his arms bulging with muscles. “Put me inside you.”

I fumbled between us, gripping him and stroking his shaft before pressing him along my slit. So big and so hot. The friction of the hair on his thighs buzzed against my skin as I slowly positioned him.

He growled. “What are you waiting for?”

I shook back my hair, my sudden giggle surprising me. “You’re the one who changed our positions, buddy.”

He seized my hips and dropped me down on him hard enough that my teeth snapped together. Quickly, he switched his hold so his huge fingers dug into as much of my ass and hips as he could reach.

I'd thought the little bit of friction before was good. Now?

Now there was no escaping *this*. I was on top, making everything between us even more intimate.

I rocked against him, and he hit a certain incredible spot inside me again and again. White-hot pleasure swamped me. The tremors started at my toes, locking all my nerve endings in an endless loop of sensory indulgence. I shuddered around him, holding him fast as he suddenly took my mouth, hot and hard.

I gripped his shoulders and trusted the fall.

Trusted that I wouldn't end up covered in gravel and glass.

Trusted that he'd be with me.

I opened my eyes. Our gazes locked, and the flood of him inside me triggered my own orgasm.

One of his hands ended up in my hair as he clamped me against him, pulsing inside of me like nothing I'd ever known.

I didn't even realize tears were falling until he brushed them away with his thumbs. Our kiss went from nearly feral to languid and soft.

I sighed and laid my cheek against his chest. His heart thundered in time with my own.

Just sex?

What a lie.

## SEVEN



“BIG SIS!”

“Oh, shit.” Erica scrambled off me and flew around the back of the bar.

Sweet Jesus, my dick was still wet from her, and she’d already moved so far across the room it seemed as if she was in a different state.

She crouched low to button up her dress. “Would you put that thing away?” she whispered frantically.

My *thing* didn’t really appreciate the new nickname, but I hitched up my jeans and tucked myself behind my zipper. I was pulling my shirt over my head when Erica’s youngest sister, Gina Ramos, came around the corner.

She paused on the threshold between the entrance and the main part of the bar before she looked my way with a raised brow. Then she scanned the rest of the room and crossed her arms with a sly smile. “Well, hello, Chief Mills.”

I blew out a breath. Great. Lunch at the diner was going to get a little weird. “Gina.”

Freckles popped up from behind the bar, her buttons semi-straight save for the ones holding in her magnificent breasts.

Gina pressed her lips together, glancing from me to her and then back again. “How’d the meeting go?”

I tucked in my shirt and grabbed my jacket from the floor. “As well as can be expected.”

“I bet.” Gina cocked her hip. “So, did you convince my stubborn big sister to stick around for more than a few days?” She tucked her tongue in her cheek. “Maybe you used some of your persuasive talents?”

I wasn’t going there.

“I have to head back to the city today.”

My gaze swung to Freckles. Funny how she hadn’t mentioned that earlier. “Is that so?”

“It’s called work. You might have heard of it. Just as you may have given me a three-page list of things to fix thanks to *your* job.”

“Freckles—”

“Stop calling me that.” She shoved her hair out of her eyes. “How did you actually think this bar would get fixed? Sharkey didn’t leave me with much more than the land itself and a few thousand dollars to fix it.”

“I told you we’d help you.”

“No, actually, you really didn’t.” She stormed across the bar to stand in front of me and jammed her finger into my chest. “You’re too busy telling me exactly what’s wrong with my bar.” She heaved out a breath. “*The* bar.”

I swallowed a smile. Now was definitely not the time to grin down at her. Mostly because I wasn’t entirely sure she wouldn’t rip my lips off my face. Or worse. But that little slip—*my* bar—gave me way more hope than was probably wise.

Because she was right. I had only been giving her a laundry list of problems. Riding in to save her wasn’t the right way to go at all. We weren’t seventeen anymore.

“I can help.”

She seemed to finally register that her sister was in the room as well. Well, beyond the shocked and naked deal. She tipped her head toward Gina. “Why?”

Gina’s eyebrows shot up. “What do you mean *why*? You’re my sister.”

That was a very good question. My family was very small. Just me and my sister were left. I'd literally hand her my arm if she asked for it. The Ramos family had always seemed much the same.

"*Manita*, of course."

"Don't start that. Yes, you're my big sister and I love you, but if you'd just let us come down and help you, this could be done without a ton of money. *Sei così testardo.*"

I never knew if they were speaking Spanish or Italian or a bastardization of both, but I knew that one. Every single Ramos woman—and man, for that matter—were stubborn as hell.

"I don't want Damien and Papa coming in here fighting."

"The guys want to come in to help." I held up my hand before the women had a chance to dismiss my offer. "This has become the fire station's favorite bar. In fact, we had intended to help Sharkey before he got sick." I moved to Freckles and took her hand. "Let us help you."

"I don't even know if I want to keep the bar. I don't want you guys to spend money and all that if it's just going to get torn down."

I rocked back on my heels and dropped her hand. "So, Maitland has contacted you."

"Of course, he has." She paced away from me.

I shoved my hands into the pockets of my jacket. "And your answer?"

"My answer is I don't know." She widened her arms. "This is a ton of work and I have a job already."

"So you keep saying," I muttered.

"I have a life in the city." She put her hands on her hips. "I haven't lived here in years, Jake. I'm just supposed to uproot myself and move back?"

*Yes.*

That was exactly what I wanted her to do. There was nothing to stop her—stop *us*. Danny was part of our past, but he hadn't been a factor in my life since freshman year of college. I'd had no intention of sticking around to wait to see when or if he would propose to the woman I loved, and he hadn't done much to prolong our friendship.

Made me think he'd probably done the same with their marriage.

I had no patience for waiting her out. But that was exactly what I needed to do. To show her that this place was exactly where she was supposed to be. "Then come back next weekend, and we'll work on the place together."

Her cheeks heated, and her gaze dropped to my mouth. I nearly groaned with the need to cross to her and show her all the reasons to stay, but my dick was going to have to take a backseat right now. I had to play the long game.

"I'll round up the guys." I turned to Gina. "You get your family to come down here, and we'll see just what we can do with it."

I stepped in front of Freckles, dragging my thumb over her swollen lower lip. I wanted more of her. I needed to make her see just how good we were together, but that kind of power play wasn't the way to go.

Dropping my hand, I stepped away from her and her seductive scent. "Then you can make your decision."

And I'd do everything I could to change her mind about Crescent Cove and this bar.

And *us*.

## EIGHT



I PULLED INTO THE GRAVEL PARKING LOT ON THE FOLLOWING bright and sunny Friday afternoon. I'd managed to get out of work a few hours early, so I didn't have to fight traffic out of the city. Of course, Manhattanites were more likely to head to Long Island or New Jersey for the weekend than to drive four hours to central New York.

I'd almost taken a flight, but I would have ended up coming in even later. So, here I was putting another couple hundred miles on my car.

But the trip upstate reminded me how much I liked driving, and I'd actually handled three meetings on the way, thanks to the Bluetooth in my car.

Now I could focus on the bar this weekend.

A half dozen cars were in the parking lot as I approached from the back entrance. An ancient pickup truck with more rust than paint full of lumber and tools was backed up to the loading dock. The back door of the bar was open, and a familiar redhead was smoking as she held the door for a trio of burly guys.

I parked and grabbed my bag. I slammed my door and growled under my breath. "Jake."

At least I'd dressed the part this time, wearing old jeans, sturdy boots, and a layer of long-sleeved and short-sleeved T-shirts in deference to the early spring temperatures.

I jogged to meet a fourth man carrying lumber on his shoulder.

“Ma’am.” He adjusted the stack of boards he was hauling. “We’re not open yet.”

“I know. I’m the owner.”

“Oh.” He smiled broadly. “You want to talk to Mills then.”

“Considering he’s *not* the owner, you’re damn right I do.”

The ridiculously jacked man in front of me didn’t seem frightened or offended. He just grinned, a dimple popping from his trendy scruff. He was wearing a slouchy navy knit hat and an EMT T-shirt that stretched across his impressive chest. “He’s inside.”

I marched in ahead of him, my ire growing with the laughter behind me and the banging and loud male noises ahead. Rita gave me a salute and held the door for me as I stalked inside. Jake was in the middle of a half dozen men, one being my brother.

Perfect. Just what I needed. We’d sort of discussed having people come to the bar to help, but I thought I’d have today to figure out a game plan. My older brother thinking he could take over meant my father would be next, followed by...

Yep. There she was. Along the back of the eating area was a long table loaded with food, courtesy of my mother. She was shouting out orders for the boys to hydrate and eat as all good Italian-slash-Spanish women did.

I was not a good woman.

I wasn’t feeding these animals.

Okay, that was a lie. I’d totally have fed them if I’d known they were coming. If I’d made the damn decisions.

Damien and Jake had their heads together over some sort of plans. My brother’s handiwork, I was sure.

“Excuse me. Move, please.” I pushed through the men. Far too many of them were congregated around the bar area, and all of them towered over me.

Two of them were draping the game area with drop cloths, and another three were taking care of the floor. Paint cans



were stacked against the right side of the main room, and drywall was being installed on the left.

“Who paid for this?”

Jake held up one finger while he finished talking to my brother.

I stalked over to him and grabbed it and bent it back until he yelped. “Do not put your finger up at me when I’m asking a question about *my* bar.”

“Okay, okay. Ease up, Freckles.” I released him, and he shook out his hand. “Impressive technique.”

“Do not try to be charming. What are you doing here? And who authorized these purchases?” I swung around to my brother. “And who invited you?”

Damien grinned. “Nice to see you too, *hermanita*.”

“Don’t make me slap that smile off you. I told you I was handling this.”

“And I’m sure you can do it well, but we wanted to get a jump on things. It’s just drywall and primer, *piccola*.”

I hated when he called me that. Yes, I was the tiniest of the siblings, but we were close in age and it was insulting.

All of them doing this without even consulting me as if I couldn’t possibly know the next step to take was really freaking insulting too.

“Freckles—”

“I have a name. I’d appreciate if everyone used it.” My voice rose to a screech. Enough that I could feel the flush creeping up my neck and heading for my cheeks. I couldn’t stand feeling out of control, and no part of this bar situation was sitting right with me.

My mother started clapping for attention. “All right, off you go to work. Let me talk to my daughter.”

“*Mami*,” I muttered.

Her dark eyes flashed at me, and I bit my tongue. “You go over there—” She gestured to the food-laden table. “Now.”

I ignored her directive. I’d pay for it later, but I needed air. And lots of it.

I headed for the front vestibule. Another half dozen firefighters and EMTs were working on the porch. My shoulders were tight and I knew I was being an ungrateful shit, but everything was going on without my say so.

This was exactly why I’d left Crescent Cove. I hated that everyone got into everyone else’s business. The chaos made me mental.

I mumbled thanks to the guys for their work and hurried down the makeshift stairs they had set up. I stalked across the parking lot and followed the gravel-strewn path to the road. I needed to walk off some of this anger. The lake was so close, I could taste the water on the air. The one thing I did miss was the lake. Maybe if I saw it, it would help me chill the hell out.

“Freckles.”

I stiffened at Jake’s voice and kept walking.

“Erica, come on.”

My name sounded wrong on his lips and that pissed me off even more. I whirled around. “You cannot take over my life.”

“We talked about having everyone come in and start the renos. Remember?”

“Yeah, we *talked* about it. There was no plan.” I put my hands on my hips. “Actually, let me be clear. No plan *I* was involved in.”

“You were in the city. I figured I’d start it for you.”

“You figured.” We were on the side of the road, and people were blaring their horns as they drove by.

He hooked his hand through my arm and pulled me back toward the parking lot. “Would you just listen?”

“Please enlighten me. Because I love when people make all the decisions for me.”

He raked his fingers through his freshly shorn hair. I tried not to get distracted by the fact that his beard was also trimmed, and he was ridiculously handsome in his aviator sunglasses. He had on an old navy CCFD T-shirt that had been through so many washings it had shrunk enough to cling to his wide chest.

Not the time for getting distracted. I was mad at him.

He crowded into me and cupped my face. “You’re strong and perfect and don’t need help from anyone. But I want to help. I want to show you I can be the kind of guy who is here for you.”

Shocked, I lifted my hands to his wrists and didn’t stop him when he bent down and kissed me right in front of everyone. The mouth I hated that I’d missed for a week.

The taste that had stalked me all week long—especially in dreams.

I went up on my toes and kissed him back. There were whoops and whistles coming from the porch, and right then, I didn’t even care. Damn him and his talented mouth and capable hands that made me want things I thought I’d never want again.

The scary little part that always secretly wanted this man.

“Chief!”

“Not now, Sullivan,” he muttered against my mouth.

I could feel someone in our space, and I tried to get my thoughts together. This freaking man always left me so off balance.

The not-so-subtle clearing of a throat made Jake groan into my mouth.

Jake finally let me go and turned toward the man I’d met just a little while ago. “First of all, Ben, stop calling me Chief.”

“Right, Chief.”

Jake sighed. “What is it?”

“Sorry. Ma’am.” Ben gave me a tight smile before focusing on Jake once more. “We just got a call.”

The parking lot was suddenly full of men and women piling into trucks and cars. “Okay, we’ll hold down the fort. Be safe.”

“It’s an all hands-on deck, sir. One of the mansions on the lake.”

“Shit.” Jake’s demeanor changed. He stood taller, and his shoulders went military straight. “Right. You called in extra trucks?”

Ben nodded. “We’re using the lake water, but it’s still thawing.”

Jake swore, regret heavy in his eyes. “I gotta go, Freckles.”

My heart twisted with a worry I’d never really faced before.

“Need a ride, sir?” Ben asked.

“I’ve got my truck.”

Ben jogged back to the parking lot.

I turned to find Jake even closer. “Please, be careful.”

“Always.” He cupped my elbows and dragged me up onto my toes. The kiss was hot and deep. “I’ll be back as soon as I can.” Then he took off after the younger man.

“This fight isn’t over,” I yelled after him.

He turned, still jogging backward, his teeth a bright slash against his dark beard. “I’m gonna fight with you till my dying breath, Freckles.”

I blew out a breath. I had a very strong feeling he was correct.

I made my way back to Sharkey’s. All my mad had fizzled out. Knowing Jake was a firefighter was one thing, but the realization that he would place himself in danger sat a little heavier today. I glanced over my shoulder at the lake and the wisps of smoke teasing the late afternoon sky.

I wasn't sure if that was my imagination or fact. The lake was fairly large, but the mansions that hugged the craggy coastline were mostly populated on one side. The other side had been bought up by Maitland Enterprises. They were building a spa and high-end summer properties last I'd heard from my weekly gossip from my mother.

As I got closer to the bar, I glimpsed two lone men cleaning up the porch, so it wasn't a safety hazard. At least that was my guess. Then my brother came out to help in his usual high-handed fashion.

I had to smile at the familiarity of it, even though just a short while ago his taking over had pissed me off. I supposed a hot kiss could make anyone's mood sweeter.

The pop and crunch of gravel behind me slowed my gait.

A black BMW carefully navigated the potholes and broken pavement. The tinted window lowered. A man with silvered blond hair and a golf tan—and matching outfit—was behind the wheel. “Miss Ramos?”

“Who's asking?”

“May we speak?”

I crossed my arms. “Whatever you're selling, I'm not interested.”

“I'm here for a face-to-face meeting. Our lawyers have spoken, but I wanted to see if we could talk business owner to business owner. I'm Arthur Maitland.”

The construction noise seemed to get sucked into a vacuum for a moment before my heartbeat thundered in my ears.

I was still off balance from Jake and his kisses. From the heavy dose of reality about what it would mean to allow myself to love Jake.

My throat went tight.

For a split second, I wanted to listen to Arthur's every word. I could walk away from all these problems. I could take the easy money and go back to the city and my safe life.

I wouldn't have to face the feelings I had for Jake, or deal with my loud, invasive family. All the inconveniences of a small town where everyone was in your business.

The laundry list of pros was long.

I glanced at the porch where my brother stood. The two guys who had been helping to stack lumber out of the way and tarp the half-done stairs were already getting in their trucks to leave.

The narrow-eyed glance I received as they drove by was as much of a wake-up call as skinny-dipping in the lake this time of year.

"I'm not interested in selling."

*Did that actually come out of my mouth?*

I sucked in a breath. I was almost certain it had. My heart knew what to say even before my mouth.

Actually, I'd been holding down what my heart wanted for so long it was like being set free for the first time in too many years to count.

Danny holding me down.

My job as a marketing manager at the finance company—which I only had because it was smart to work for them. Because Danny and I had been the golden couple for a short while.

Now my ex-husband was an executive at the Manhattan branch, and it literally felt like being with him had been another life.

One I'd never really loved.

"You'll be putting far more money into this establishment than it's worth. I can take it off your hands. We can even discuss a little incentive."

I lifted my chin. What Maitland wanted was the access to the lake. It was prime real estate on this side of the Cove. "Sharkey's isn't for sale. And neither is Crescent Cove, Mr. Maitland."

He put his car into park.

“No. Don’t park. Don’t get out of your car. It’ll be a waste of time.”

He took off his sunglasses. “You’re making a mistake.”

I nodded. “Maybe. But this is a neighborhood spot for our firefighters and police. When I’m done with it, this will be a great community place for the Cove.”

“Are you sure the bank will feel the same way? It could be all that and more when I tear it down and put up a restaurant.”

No, I wasn’t sure. But I’d bet I could get a lot of amazing references in this town, thanks to my family and friends.

Sometimes, asking for help could be a good thing.

I tipped my head to the side and stared Maitland down. “That a firefighter who makes an average salary could afford?”

His jaw tightened.

I hadn’t even been aware that I’d been looking at Sharkey’s like that. But my creative marketing background that had been wasted on corporate brochures and bland campaigns finally clicked into gear.

Ideas started filling my head. Like expanding the parking lot into a large eating area that could bring families to this part of the lake once more. Becoming a place that would be more than just a bar.

So much flooded my brain. Things I never knew I wanted. A home and a place to raise a family had been right here all this time. I’d just been too stubborn to see it.

“Remember this moment in a year when your business fails, and you’re forced to sell to me for a fraction of what I’m offering you now.”

My mouth was as dry as dust, but I gave him a confident smile. “We’ll see, won’t we?”

Maitland’s charming smile dissolved as he rolled up his window and backed out of the parking lot. The rims of his

stupidly expensive tires scraped over a pothole before he peeled out into the road.

“My sister, the badass.”

I whirled toward my brother’s voice. “Rude. Were you listening?”

He draped his arm over my shoulders. “Here I am complimenting you, and I get nothing but shit.”

I dug my knuckles into his ribs.

“Ow.”

“You’re hovering.”

“I had to make sure that dick wasn’t going to hassle you.”

“I had it under control.”

“Of course, you did. I was just here as backup. Just because I worry about you and want to make sure nothing happens to you doesn’t mean I don’t think you can handle yourself.”

“I’m pretty sure that’s the definition, actually.”

“It would have been if I’d interrupted and told him to shove his golf clubs up his ass and get off our property. But I let you handle it.”

I peered up at my brother. Somehow, the word *our* didn’t get my hackles up. “I guess you’re right.”

“No guessing. Facts. Being able to handle yourself doesn’t mean you have to do it alone.”

“I’ve had to do a lot of stuff on my own, Damien.”

“Only because you pushed us all away for your fancy husband.”

“That wasn’t why. I left because I needed to know I could stand on my own.”

“How’d that work out for you?”

For a moment, I rested my cheek on my brother’s shoulder. “I thought it was great. Until I inherited this stupid bar. Now I



want to make it amazing.”

“And make babies with Jake Mills.”

I shoved my knuckles into my brother’s ribs again. “No.”

“Gina told me she caught you guys half-naked.”

I shoved his arm off me. “Gina needs to shut her mouth.”

“Mills is a good guy. I always thought you should have dated him in school instead of that punk Danny.”

“Yeah, I’m beginning to think so too.”

“I always knew you were smart, *piccola*. Sometimes, it just takes you awhile.”

“Gee, thanks.”

“Come on. You can see what it’s like to *not* have help.”

“How much of a mess did they leave?”

“A Gina, Frankie, and Papa in the kitchen kind of mess.”

I groaned. “Great.”

He nudged my shoulder with his. “I’m really glad you’re back.”

“Who says I’m back?”

“You’re back.” He lifted me onto the porch.

I didn’t disabuse him of that notion. Instead, I held out a hand to help him up the extra-large stairs. He surprised me by taking my hand.

We headed back inside. My mother and Gina both had paintbrushes in their hands.

My sister hopped off the stepstool and held out a paintbrush. “Tell me you’re better at trim than I am?”

I took the brush. “I guess we’re going to find out.” I stopped in front of my mother. “Sorry, *Mami*.”

“Pride is a good thing. I taught all my children to have it. But when you start sounding like a spoiled brat, it’s my job to call you out. These people came here to help you.”

“I know. I just didn’t like Jake taking over.”

“He’s been spending all his spare time talking to your brother about the cheapest and best way to fix up the bar enough for you to get it open and money coming in. That boy loves you. He always has.”

I stared down at my feet. “We were kids.”

“I met your father when I was eighteen. Not so different.” She glanced over at my father working with Damien. “Some things you just know.”

I’d never doubted that my parents were anything other than perfect for one another. While plenty of my friends went through divorces and dealing with stepparents, my parents had grown together, accepting the people they had become with the passage of years. They had been meant for each other.

Maybe Jake and I were too. We’d just taken the long route.

I rubbed my chest. That was for later.

Right now, I had to focus on the goal ahead.

I picked up the little paint can and climbed up the small ladder to paint the trim around the doorway. My sister was right—she was terrible at it.

An hour passed, then another. Still, there wasn’t any word from Jake.

Anxiety buzzed in my stomach like a swarm of angry bees.

We heard reports about the fire on the local radio station, and I found myself checking the news apps on my phone.

My brother’s phone went off, followed by Gina’s and my mother’s.

My heart stopped when my mother turned off the radio and walked over to me. “*Mami?*”

She tucked one of my curls around my ear. “We should go to the hospital, *mija.*”

“Why?”

“Just get your things.”

“He’s okay, right?”

“I don’t know a lot of information. Your cousin is an EMT, and he saw Jake get taken away in an ambulance.”

My knees buckled, and my sister and my mother grabbed me. “I’m okay.” My voice was little more than a whisper. I swallowed a lump in my throat as my eyes burned. “Can you drive me?”

My mother curled her arm around my back. “Yes. We’ll all go.”

I gripped her hand. “Please tell me he’s going to be fine. Lie if you have to.”

Her smile was gentle, but deep lines of worry creased around her eyes. “He just got you back. Trust me, he’ll be just fine.”

## NINE



THE RIDE TO THE HOSPITAL WAS ETERNAL. THEN TRYING TO get someone to allow me near him took another million hours. At least it felt like it. I wasn't family so they wouldn't give me any details.

The rest of the firemen were still working on the blaze so I couldn't even ask them to find out for me. The mansion had a carriage house at the back and the fire had spread due to the winds off the water. One other person got hurt dragging Jake to safety, but he was in the burn unit.

I'd convinced my mom and sister to go check with the nurses' station again just so I could have a minute to myself. Well, me and another woman about my age who was about to gnaw her fingernails down to the quick. She seemed vaguely familiar, but I couldn't concentrate long enough to keep a thought in my head.

Was Jake burned?

Was he hurt?

Who had saved him?

I stared at my paint-splattered sneakers, forcing my breathing to level before I freaked out in the middle of the waiting room. I gripped my hands so hard to make them stop trembling that my knuckles went white.

"Ma'am."

I looked up, my heart rate swinging into dangerous territory. Ben Sullivan stood in front of me, his hands wrapped

in white gauze.

I popped to my feet and grabbed his wrist. “Ben. Are you okay?”

He winced and eased his hand out of mine.

“I’m sorry.”

He gave me a gentle smile. “I’m okay. Just superficial burns. I had to take my gloves off to move some debris off the chief.”

I closed my eyes and felt the room sway.

“Hey, hey. Relax. I can’t really catch you right now. He’s fine. I promise. One of the beams that fell on him—”

“God.” I sat back down.

Ben crouched in front of me. “It wasn’t that bad, just knocked his mask off so he got a little smoke inhalation. He’s fine—honestly. They just had to get him cleaned up and had to get his O2 stats back up.”

“But he’s okay?”

He nodded.

A tall, leggy blond with pink streaks in her hair stood up on the far side of the waiting room. “Are you talking about my brother?”

Ben rose. “Are you Kayla?”

She nodded.

His gaze quickly tracked her then hit the floor and bounced over her shoulder. Obviously, he was trying *not* to check her out.

Man, Kayla was Jake’s sister. She’d just been a kid when I moved away. Definitely not the case anymore.

Ben cleared his throat. “Jake sent me down to get you.”

My chest constricted. “Just her?”

Ben shook his head. “He didn’t know you were here.”

“Why wouldn’t I be here?” I popped up again. No watery knees this time.

Ben shrugged. “After this afternoon, we weren’t quite sure which side your loyalties were on.”

“Loyalties—” I glanced at the woman now standing beside me before looking at Ben. Ripping his damn head off while his hands were wrapped in gauze seemed ill-advised. Not with this girl trembling beside me. “Now is not the time for this. Can you just take us to Jake?”

“I can take Kayla. I’ll see if he wants to see you.”

I fisted my hands.

“No, she can come.” Kayla’s voice was shaky, but her face was sure. “I know he’d want her there.”

I swallowed down the angry tears. “Thank you.”

“Suit yourself.” Ben held out his arm. “We have to head upstairs.”

Kayla tucked her hair behind her ear. “I didn’t recognize you or I’d have come over to sit with you.”

I gave her a tight smile. “Same. You were a lot smaller last time I saw you.”

“Braces and crooked pigtails.”

I laughed. “Yes. That I remember.”

She gripped my forearm as we followed Ben down the hall to the bank of elevators. “I know Jake wants you in the room. The guys are just... Well, the guys. Protective to a fault. Why I don’t live in town.”

“You don’t?”

She shook her head. “I work in Syracuse—well, worked. I just got fired.”

“Fired?”

She shrugged. “When I got the call that Jake was in the hospital, my boss didn’t take too kindly to me wanting to leave.”

“Jerk. It’s family. I’m sure we can talk to him or her.”

Kayla shrugged. “It was a shit job. I took it because I thought I was going to be training to be a sous chef. In reality, I was just learning how not to get my ass groped.”

“Jesus.”

Ben shot a dark glance over his shoulder.

“All part of working in the restaurant field. Waitressing gets it far worse.”

“Not in my bar.”

“Yeah?” She finger-combed her hair. “Jake told me you took over Sharkey’s. Or at least inherited.”

“It’s mine.” It was the first time I’d really said it out loud. “It needs work, but it’s going to be amazing when I’m done with it.” I gave Ben a little side-eye. “When *we’re* done with it.”

Ben held the door to the elevator open, but he didn’t say anything as we crossed the threshold.

“So, are you a chef?”

She shrugged. “Trying to be. School didn’t take, but I’m self-taught. I’ve been cooking and working in restaurants since I was sixteen.”

The elevator opened and Ben strode off. Kayla’s gaze followed him then returned to mine, her cheeks flushed.

Ben was attractive, if a little...intense. “Maybe we can talk about that when we get Jake situated?”

Her face went slack with shock. “Really?”

“Pretty sure you have a good reference.”

She grabbed my hands. “I do. And not just Jake.”

I grinned. “Good, because I’m pretty sure I’m going to go kick your brother’s ass.” I stalked off the elevator and down the hall.

Ben was talking to a doctor near a cracked open door. I walked right past them into the room, the younger EMT

sputtering for me to wait.

Nope. There was no way I was taking another minute to wonder and stress over what Jake looked like.

Or just how hurt he was.

A curtain shrouded the bed, and I recognized the boots set on top of a chair. Definitely Jake's. I swung the curtain wide open before I stopped to think that I didn't have a right to do this.

It didn't even occur to me. He was just mine.

"How dare you."

He wore a hospital smock and still had his work pants on. His uniform shirt was nowhere to be seen. His deep dark eyes opened, tired and sooty where the crinkles dug deep into his face from being outdoors all the time. An oxygen mask covered his nose and mouth. His arm was in a sling, but otherwise, he looked okay.

A few bruises maybe.

Relief jacked up my anger. "You didn't think I'd come here for you?"

Surprise dented the exhaustion. He tried to pull the oxygen mask down. "Freckles—"

I pushed the mask back up on his face. "No. I get to talk right now. You just keep that thing on. You scared me, dammit. Walking away with that smile on your face like you're going to be mine for all time. Then you don't want me here. That is not going to happen, buster."

His hand flexed, and anger sparked in his eyes. He pulled the mask down. "You're the one who talked to Maitland. What was I supposed to think?"

I gripped the edge of his bed. "Your firefighters told on me? Like I was doing something wrong?"

"What was I supposed to think?" His voice was rusty, as if he'd been coughing for days. "You keep telling me you're leaving."



I shut my eyes against the threatening flood of tears. “You’re right. Then again, I’m new at all this stuff. I don’t move at the speed of light like you do. I’m a normal person who needs to think things through a little.”

“Yeah? So, why are you coming in here—” He started coughing and lifted the mask to suck in a few lungfuls of straight oxygen.

I pushed the hospital table out of my way. “Jake.”

“I’m fine.”

I pushed the mask over his mouth again. “You sit there, Jake Mills, and let me do the talking this time.”

He grinned behind the mask and gestured for me to continue.

I shook my hair back. I could see the streaks of white paint in my wild curls from my periphery. God only knew what I looked like right now, but I didn’t care. “I told Maitland to keep driving—not to even park his big fancy car. I told him Sharkey’s was mine. I’m not going anywhere.”

Jake’s eyes were wary.

“I love you, Jake. I’ve always loved you.”

He tried to sit up, but I pressed him back.

He shoved the mask away. “You can’t say that to me and think I’m going to be laying down the first time you fucking say it.”

He pulled me down with his good arm and covered my mouth with his own. He smelled like smoke and wet ash. I tunneled my fingers through his hair and held on to him.

Some of the anger bled out of me. He was hurt and I was yelling at him, but God, I’d been so scared. I’d just figured out I wanted him, and I’d almost lost him at the same time.

His grip was just as tight as mine. “I’m fine, Freckles. My guys got me out. They always do, because I fucking trained them to be the best in the area.”

I pressed my forehead to his. His hair was singed along his hairline, and it was just one more reminder of how close the fire had come to him.

He hoisted me up onto the bed and tucked me along the side of him. “I’m good, baby. I swear it.”

I turned my face into his chest and let the tears come. I didn’t sob and break down, just let out a few that had been hovering. “You can’t leave me.”

“Never. I’ll never let you go again.”

“I’ve got plans for us.”

He kissed the top of my head.

“Put your mask back on.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

I clung to him in the cramped bed. I didn’t mind the tight quarters. It was my spot with him. My spot had always been by his side. I’d just been too stupid to reach out for it before.

I wouldn’t be again.

Kayla peeked around the curtain. “Is it safe to come in?”

I hid a smile against the furnace that was Jake’s chest. “Yes, it’s safe.”

Jake held out an arm for his little sister. “I’m okay, Cupcake.”

I laughed. “I guess I’m not the only one with a nickname.”

Kayla’s cheeks reddened. “I hate it.”

I laid my hand on his chest by my cheek. “Yeah, it’s not so bad.”

The tromp of boots and male voices created chaos a few minutes later.

Over a dozen firefighters came in to see him throughout the evening. Luckily, Jake was in a solo room. I got a few snarky comments and cold shoulders until the gossip chain had caught up to my news of telling Maitland to take a leap into the lake.

Literally or figuratively, his pick.

Soon after, my parents came in to see Jake, and then headed home. Kayla fessed up about her job situation, and I told him we were hatching a plan.

Finally, everyone cleared out.

Jake shoved at the flat pillow behind his head with a snarl. “I don’t understand why I can’t go home.”

We’d been informed that the mansion was definitely a lost cause. Thankfully, the fire hadn’t spread to the next property. A welcome spring rain had helped out there.

And my guy was acting as if it had been just another day at work.

“Says the man who has had so many coughing fits your abs probably hurt.”

He lifted his ill-fitting hospital gown to show off his very impressive torso. “As you can see, my abs are quite fine. So is the rest of me.”

I just lifted an eyebrow at him. “Rest. Doctor’s orders.”

“You mean nurse. Because I haven’t had a doctor come in to see me so I can freaking go home.”

“Which is exactly why we’re staying until morning.”

“I don’t want to stay here—wait, did you say we?”

“Can’t get rid of me that easily, buddy. But you have to rest. No pervy hospital fantasies will be played out tonight.”

“Who said I had hospital fantasies?”

Avoiding his gaze, I straightened his blankets.

“Or is that you, Miss Ramos?”

“It is not.”

“You’re the one who mentioned it.”

“Yeah, well, you’re the one who keeps showing off your chest and abs.”

“You like it.”

I hid a smile. “I’d like it better after a shower and with a very large bed.”

“That can be arranged.”

“Tomorrow.” I climbed back into the hospital bed with him. I’d had to get out for a while to get the circulation moving again. “Right now, I just want to hold on to you, if that’s okay.”

“More than.” He made a little room, but there wasn’t much to be had.

I settled myself against him as best as I could, tucking my head under his chin. His deep, even breathing calmed me, as did the cool oxygenated air from his mask that helped combat the heat that seemed to radiate off him.

“I love you, Freckles.”

I smiled against his neck. “I love you too, Jake.”

—

# EPILOGUE

## **Jake**

*3 MONTHS LATER*

I hefted a keg and brought it outside to the tented area by the lake. We'd looked into purchasing the land surrounding Sharkey's to expand the bar. One addition had been a space to rent out for parties with an incredible pavilion built by Erica's brother.

A dock was set up beside it with a floating deck perfect for water sports. Currently, the latest class of Crescent Cove High was having one helluva party. Sheriff Brooks was vigilantly watching to make sure the only beer drinking was being done by the over twenty-one crowd, which included parents.

A fleet of Sea-Doos were currently racing around the lake. Their bleating motors gunned up and down the straightaways just past the anchored boats. A lake town was made for this kind of setup, and my girl was very good at creating just the right kind of family-focused establishment.

My sister was making a name for herself in the kitchen. She knew how to cook the hell out of meat, fish, and surprisingly, vegetarian fare that lured more than one customer back for more.

I scanned the pavilion and found Freckles holding court. She was smiling and touching shoulders and making sure

everyone was happy. Sun streaked over her curls, adding a touch of fire to the wild, midnight waves I loved to distraction.

As usual, she seemed to know I was looking at her. Her gaze zeroed in on me, and she flashed me a wide smile. Her lips were berry-stained, and her honey-toned skin was even darker now from days out in the sun getting the space ready for our first big party of the season.

She'd already booked four more. Knowing how she worked a room, I'd wager another handful of parties would be added to our schedule before the night was over.

I frowned when she grabbed hold of a deck chair. She covered the move well enough, but she quickly reached for the little bag where she kept her bottle of water and drank deeply before continuing on to another umbrella-shaded table of people.

“Let me grab that, Chief.” Ben took the keg from me and added it to the huge metal drums of dry ice mixed with the regular kind to keep the kegs cold against the brutal heat bouncing off the water.

Kayla and her new assistant had a smoker going and a half-dozen grills for regular hamburger and hotdog fare. Another one was set aside for veggie kabobs to make everyone happy.

Both of the women in my life were something to behold when it came to running a business. Their teamwork made it even better.

I wandered over to Freckles and slid an arm around her waist. “Think I can steal my girl for a few minutes?” I asked the couple she was speaking to.

Freckles patted my chest. “This rude man is Chief Jake Mills.”

The tall man held out his hand. “I’m Seth Hamilton, and this is my wife, Ally. We were just talking about a few properties I have in mind for you to look at.”

“Oh, right. The realtor guy.”

“Yes. We’re looking forward to working with you two to find the perfect house.”

Well, that was quick. We’d talked about finding a house, but we hadn’t dealt with the financial part yet. We both had sizable nest eggs to put down on a nice house or a fixer upper, depending on what we found.

Seth smiled. “My sister-in-law, Sage, owns the Hummingbird’s Nest. She’s expanding as well.”

“Oh, right. I’ve had lunch there. She hosts some of our pancake breakfast charity drives.” Absently, I brushed a kiss along Erica’s temple.

“That’s our Sage. Women killing it in the Cove. Just as it should be.” Ally linked her fingers with Seth. “We’d love to have you over to the café, Erica. A group of us women entrepreneurs meet to talk over coffee—or decaffeinated drinks for the ever-growing bunch of mamas-to-be.”

Erica stiffened next to me. I glanced down at her.

She covered well, offering us a big smile. “I’d really like that.”

“Good. We’ll set it up. You sound like you can hold your own with the Brewed Awakening crew.”

“Would be nice to take a break.”

“She needs it.” I hugged her tighter to me. “Hope you guys can enjoy some food. My sister cooks a mean brisket.”

Seth’s eyes lit up. “Maybe we will.”

I pulled her away and urged her toward the path we’d created from our land to the lake.

“I shouldn’t go far. What if they—”

“Your staff has everything well in hand. You trained them well.”

She sighed but let me lead her away just the same.

“You okay, Freckles?”

“I’m perfect, why?”



“I know you too well.” I linked our fingers. “You’ve been running yourself ragged for weeks.”

“Months,” she corrected.

I laughed. “Agreed.” I stopped her on the path just out of sight of the nearest pocket of noisy teens. I cupped her face. “So, you’re really okay?”

She gripped my forearms. “You’re too astute.”

“I pay attention. Chicks dig that.”

“Yeah, well, I had something planned.”

I swallowed. “Planned?”

Sounded kind of like what I’d had in the works for about six weeks.

If the jeweler got another call from me, he swore he’d up the price another five hundred bucks for pain and suffering. But I wanted the perfect ring to ask her to be mine. I’d decided to put my mother’s diamond at the center of it, with a little extra flash to suit my fiery woman’s temper and passion.

Erica pulled my hand down to her chest and I forgot all about rings. “Have you noticed things are changing a little?”

“Well, everything’s been changing. Including the house thing you just lobbed at me.” Her distracting breasts were too close for me to concentrate. And yes, her breasts were a bit more than a handful these days, but I didn’t mind that in the least.

“About that. We’re going to need the room.”

I looked up from my second favorite place on her body. “I promise, my sister is moving into her own apartment. Soon enough, we’ll have the place to ourselves.”

She moved my hand lower to her belly. “More room.”

My heart thundered, and my eyes widened.

She grinned. “I knew you’d catch on quick.”

I cupped the slight curve of her belly. “A baby?” I whispered.

“Looks like those swimmers of yours were in a hurry that first night in the bar. You freaking knocked me up on the first try, sir.”

I wrapped my arms around her and twirled her around. “No shit. I told you I wanted to put a baby inside this perfect body.”

“Don’t make it weird.”

I laughed and set her down, and then crouched in front of her belly. “Hello in there. I’m gonna marry your mom and be the best dad ever, I swear.”

She slid her fingers through my hair. “Jake, we haven’t talked about that yet.”

“You know you’re going to marry me.” I slid my hand up the back of her leg and gave her ass a good squeeze on the way up as I stood.

“I…”

“I had a plan too.” I laced my fingers along her lower back, pressing her belly against mine. “But I don’t care. When I get the ring in from my buddy’s jeweler friend, I’m going to ask you again. Probably naked.”

She laughed as her tears started rolling. She lifted her hands to my face, petting my beard like she always did.

“I love you. I’ve loved you since we were kids. I’m going to make sure you know that each and every day. Our kids will never wonder if their parents love one another. In fact, they’ll probably run away from us in disgust because I can’t stop kissing you and touching you.” I dropped kisses on her mouth after every word.

Her laughter was the sweetest sound.

She curled her fingers around my wrists and rose onto her toes to get even closer. “Of course I’ll marry you. I love you, my fireman daddy,” she whispered.

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# ROCKSTAR DADDY

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# WILDER ROCK BOOK 1

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Rockstar Daddy

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# ROCKSTAR DADDY

*Never trust a cold condom.*

Wait, let me back up. I'm Kellan McGuire, and I'm a rockstar in hiding, at least for the weekend. Enter Maggie Kelly, the famed Kelly virgin - AKA my small hometown's favorite good girl.

Did I mention she's really good? And I'm so...not.

Except Maggie isn't a virgin any longer. She actually just went through a rough breakup due to her ex's penchant for strippers.

And I don't want to be a rockstar this weekend. Not with her.

I just want to be Kellan, the wolf to her Little Red Riding Hood. The guy who shows her all the dark, dirty things she never dared to dream.

In return, she gave *me* something I never dared to dream about either - a baby.

A family.

Our family, if I can convince her I'm worth the risk.

***Author's note:*** *this book may be called Rockstar Daddy, but the emphasis is on lots of babymaking practice, laughter, a few tears, and a serious case of insta-love.*

*For those who live in the super snowy places in the world.  
This is for you.*



ONE

# KELLAN

FUCKING BLIZZARD.

Again.

Why was I even surprised?

I was the jackass who had grown up on the outskirts of Turnbull, New York, snow capital of the northeast, and had escaped to sunny LA only to return.

Voluntarily.

No one had held a gun to my head or shackled my wrists. Nope, I'd strapped my surfboard to the roof of my SUV and made the trek home to buy property on the very edge of town. Outside of town, truth be told. Because the icy tundra in the city proper—ha ha—wasn't enough for me. Might as well build a damn shack with my own two hands and surround it with pine trees and solitude.

So much freaking solitude.

True, it was just my vacation home. Cue more laughter. My place to escape from the rigors of being a famous rockstar.

At least the rockstar part was right. In my head if nowhere else. The famous? Working on that. Wilder Mind's first single was due to drop just after the holidays, and our manager, Lila Crandall, was prepping us for the big time. A lot of that was smoke and mirrors designed to build us up into being the showmen we weren't quite yet, but under her bluster, there was a kernel of truth.

Wilder Mind was poised to take on the world.

Me? I was poised to chop some wood so I could hole up in my cabin and spend New Year's Eve soaking up the silence.

No other company. No other voices. Especially no incessant interview questions or even the shrill scream of fans. Not that we'd dealt with much of that yet. Only a taste. A hint of things to come if we were lucky enough to make it big.

In the meantime, it would be just me and my old Taylor acoustic, a roaring fire, and a case of Coors.

Hey, I never said I had highbrow tastes. So sue me.

Blowing out a breath, I heaved the ax through the chilly air, savoring the pleasant burn in my muscles. I was chopping way more wood than I'd need for a weekend at the cabin. If I was lucky, I'd make it back to Turnbull a few times over the winter. With the single dropping, we'd be branching out. Spreading out to do shows some distance from LA, which meant all the press that went with that. I'd be talking myself hoarse before I was expected to go up and bleed out onstage for the price of a ticket.

That was my role. My *new* role. The one I'd craved since I was a kid with a cheap thrift store guitar, a joint in my back pocket, and the requisite amount of teenage angst that made me think I could be a great songwriter.

Now I was getting my shot, and the battered composition notebook I'd been lugging around for years—first in backpacks, then in briefcases during my brief stint working at Ripper Records—was definitely getting a workout.

Just like my arms. I slammed the axe into the snowpack and threw back my head. Shit. The chill seared my lungs, yanking out my breath in icy puffs. And I still wasn't smart enough to go inside.

Nope, I kept splitting logs, continuing until the overcast afternoon turned into dusk. The foggy dark hung in ribbons of mist around my forest, and I didn't stop until the distant cry of a lonely coyote made me think maybe it was time for that fire.

We didn't get a lot of coyotes out this way, but we had some. In this much dense forestation, you got quite the range

of creatures. Even the occasional black bear. My mom had told stories about one coming up to the back door and rattling the knob of her folks' old ramshackle place, but I had to think that was bullshit.

Maybe I just hoped it. If a frigging bear couldn't just break down a door, fuck the rest of us who rued being so goddamn polite all the time.

Still, much as I lobbied for the rights of bears and coyotes, I wasn't stupid enough to be whaling on logs after dark. Not when I had a twelve-pack and a hot shower waiting for my sore ass.

"Getting soft," I muttered after stowing the axe and piling up the wood to haul inside.

I grunted as I made my way around the side of the cabin in the knee-deep snow, part of a cord of wood in my arms. Obviously, I needed to hit the gym harder before Wilder Mind went out on tour. My body freaking hurt. I was covered in sweat. Probably looked like a frigging maniac with snow sticking to my beardy face.

I jumped around night after night onstage in closet-sized clubs and bars, but I wasn't as hardy as when I'd lived in good old Turnbull full-time. Back when I'd worked on cars and picked up odd construction jobs to get by.

It had been blind luck and a dose of small town friendliness that had even gotten my ass out to LA. Lila's mom and pop ran the local orchard, and my mom had gotten to talking to Lila's mother one day about how I didn't want to be stuck working construction for the rest of my life. One thing led to another and under six months later, I'd been on a plane out to LA to meet with Donovan Lewis, the head of the record label Lila worked for. We hit it off and though I didn't know shit about selling anything that didn't come in a bucket or wrapped in cellophane, I'd ended up as an account rep.

Representing artists. Me. The guy who'd barely graduated high school but could schmooze a quart of milk out of a cow. Or so my mom had claimed to Lila's mother.

Because a way with cows surely meant a way with egotistical, often drugged out musicians. Right.

Somehow it had worked though. Lila said I had a knack. Donovan had given me raises. A bunch of them, in short succession. The mogul some jokingly referred to as Lord Lewis didn't shortchange his talent, and he'd seen something in me. I owed him and Lila a shit-ton of gratitude. First, for hiring me to represent some of their musical acts, and then for trusting me to front a band.

The band part I had more familiarity with. I'd been stroking an acoustic long before I'd stroked my first girl. Let's just say I'd done my share of touching both, and leave it at that.

One more thing about Turnbull? They had some damn fine women, but it was hard to see them clearly under all the layers of outerwear when it snowed for what felt like half the freaking year. I preferred California women anyway. They seemed more good-natured as a rule. Maybe all the sunshine and hot temperatures put them in a better mood.

And goddammit, I loved me a woman in a bikini.

When I reached the front of my property and heard the squeal of tires, I didn't react fast enough. Put the image of a half-naked, tanned woman in the mind of a man who'd nearly frozen his nuts off and who wouldn't miss a car fishtailing off the road?

Right into my ditch.

Tires spun, spewing up snow and dirt and tiny rocks, and a horn went off about sixteen times. And I stared, my wood in my arms. Shocked as hell that anyone had even come down this practically deserted road in the first place, never mind took the curve way too fast and gone ass up in the ditch.

The chick was now attempting to shimmy her way out of the driver's side window. Painfully. With no shortage of groans and screeches and noises no adult female should ever make.

Since she was moving—and frantically at that—I had to figure she couldn't be too badly injured. Still, she could have done harm to herself she'd yet to realize.

With more than a small sigh, I set down the wood on the short set of steps to the cabin, brushed off my hands on the thighs of my jeans, and trudged down the snowy hill to where the squealing damsel's car was lodged.

She turned her neck and gave me the biggest, brightest smile I'd ever seen. I was a little taken aback, since she was half in and half out of a window and her car was fucked up, if not totaled. It appeared to be an older model under the snow and grime, and an accident like hers could screw up the frame. If that happened, the vehicle was shot.

Not that she seemed worried overmuch.

“Hi!” she called over the rushing wind, her voice as cheerful as her expression. “Thank God for you.”

I didn't know how to respond to that, so I came around the ditch and eyed her lopsided car. “Yep, well and truly stuck.”

She blinked at me from under the pink fringe of a stocking cap. “It's just a little fender bender.”

“Oh yeah? Then why are you climbing out of the window?”

She wiggled. “Because the door won't open.”

“Seems a bit worse than a fender bender to me.” I came around the driver's side, hooked my hands under her armpits in her heavy down coat, and simply plucked her out of the car.

Only afterward did I think of possible internal injuries. Though what possible injury could've allowed her to jump and dance around now that she'd been freed, I did not know.

The other thing I noticed about her right away? She was dressed as if she was in competition with the Michelin man, except her bulk was made out of layers. Many layers. She had earmuffs under her hat to go with her bulky scarf, huge coat, ski pants—likely layered over thermals—and some serious freaking boots with enough snaps and ties to secure a horse.

And yet she was still jumping around, blowing on her gloved fingers, and laughing like a crazy person.

“Whoa, that was nuts. I seriously feared for my life. I saw Jesus and heard angels and all that stuff.” She frowned at her car with its likely bent axle. “I paid extra for the best snow tires. I still skidded. That seems like a warranty violation. Don’t you think?”

What I thought was this chick was going to talk my head off.

“The forecast predicted two feet today. Typical lake effect. Are you not from around here?” Though it was hard to believe someone from a warmer climate would’ve been that well-prepared, but maybe. They did tend to have thinner blood than us hardy northern types.

Though what the hell was I saying? I was a California boy now too.

Happily.

I’d never actually heard someone roll their eyes at me before, but her disgust was palpable. “Hello, look at me. Do I seem unprepared for this weather? If anything, I *over*prepared. In my trunk, I have a spare battery kit, a First-Aid kit, a tire repair kit and—”

“Lady, I got it. You’re prepared. You just spun out. It happens.”

She propped her hands on her hips. Or at least where I figured her hips would be. Hard to tell with her coat.

“Very pragmatic of you, buddy, but now what? I’m stuck and I need to get to Mrs. Pringles’ before she goes to New Year’s Eve mass. This is her first year without her husband, and she puts on a brave face, but she and Joe were so in love. It was sweet to see, really. And if I can’t get there before mass, then I’ll have to wait until she gets back, or worse yet, go join her in the church, which would be okay except I kind of got ex-communicated last year.”

I wiped away the flakes collecting on my face. I would’ve hoped my expression coupled with how I looked might’ve

intimidated her—big, burly, bearded—but if anything fazed this one, it wasn't me glaring at her during her endless monologue.

“I'm sure I'll regret asking this, but why, exactly, do you need to go to grandmother's house?”

She brushed snow off the arms of her coat. It was coming down faster than she could efficiently whisk it away. “Oh, she's not my grandmother—”

“That was a joke, Red.” I gestured toward her attire. Red and pink everything, which didn't go together but somehow seemed to suit her. “You also have a car instead of a basket, but let me mix a metaphor or two.”

“Ah. Big bad wolf, is it then? Sorry, you don't seem to fit.” She marched toward me and grasped the side of my pants. “Wile E. Coyote sweats aren't exactly scary, tough guy.”

“Don't touch,” I growled and that made her step back and cock her head, much like a puppy. Instead of a floppy ear, she had the bouncy pouf on top of her hat. “I can't just touch you.”

She seemed to think about that. It was getting darker, and the snowflakes falling between us were coming faster and harder. But if I wasn't mistaken, she was pondering that comment as if I'd just said the most important thing she'd ever heard.

“No,” she said after a moment. “I guess you can't. You shouldn't. Just because Derek ran off with Trini isn't a reason for me to let strange men touch me. Especially ones wearing sweatpants.”

“What's wrong with sweatpants?”

The most ridiculous thing about this whole conversation? I didn't *want* to touch her. I was almost sure. So what if it had been a while for me? That was by choice. God knows I had women throwing themselves at me front, back and center, and it only promised to get worse as things took off with the single. I'd backed off the fuck-and-duck game simply because I'd gotten bored.



I was tired of fake women cloaked in pretenses who just wanted me for my fame. As much as I exploited my growing fame to get any damn thing I wanted.

Never said I wasn't a fucked-up bastard, now did I?

“There’s nothing wrong with them, per se. They’re just not fashionable.”

Although my face felt as if it was freezing into place, I cocked a brow. “Oh, and that eye-searing combo you have on is? You practically have on a snowsuit. Like a child.”

Her cheeks reddened. I don’t know how I could tell the difference considering she’d been awful damn pink from the wind to start with, but somehow, I knew I’d gotten to her. “I’m not a child. I’m a grown woman who likes to be prepared.”

“Huh.” I crossed my arms and jutted my chin toward her car. “So how’s that working out for you?”

She stepped forward, kicking up snow with her gigantic boots. Then she let her gaze wander down the front of me and let out a little *harrumph*. “And you know what else? Statistics say that eighty-eight-point-six of grown men who wear sweatpants are either still living in their mother’s basements or they’re serial killers.”

Deliberately, I moved into her space, dwarfing her with my size. And yet again, she did not back down. “Those are some odds, Red. Are you feeling lucky?”

TWO

# MAGGIE

I WAS SUPPOSED TO BE AFRAID OF THIS GUY. THAT WAS WHAT he wanted me to be anyway. Why else would he be looming over me as if he wanted to do me bodily harm?

But I wasn't buying it. Let's go over the evidence.

Wile E. Coyote sweats.

Enough concern to pluck me out of my car like a wilted vegetable.

Back to the Wile E. Coyote sweats.

Also, possibly the kindest, softest, most intriguing brown eyes I'd ever seen. Surrounded by a frame of inky lashes. Such a heavy fringe that snow kept gathering on them until he grew impatient and blinked it away.

But that was neither here nor there.

"First of all, there are most likely no serial killers in Turnbull or the surrounding towns. That's extremely improbable, given the size of the population."

"So are your dumbass statistics, but I didn't call you on them, did I?"

I wasn't pouting at being called a dumbass. Lord knows I'd been called much worse. As the youngest of six, I'd gotten used to verbal abuse at a young age. I almost enjoyed it.

Just because I looked small and defenseless didn't mean I was. I tended to sneak up on people like a bunny.

*Aww, she's so cute and fluffy—CHOMP.*

“Then again, you’re not making any effort to assist a stranded traveler, so maybe you are planning to Ted Bundy me. Where’s your fake cast, huh?” I gave his arms in the sleeves of his surprisingly thin coat a glance before pretending to search the snowbanks around us. “Where’s your VW Bug with the passenger seat taken out?”

“What the hell are you talking about?”

“Ted Bundy. One of the most famous serial killers of all time. Don’t you people respect the titans in your field?”

“What people is that, exactly?”

His bored tone was making me feel stupid. So much for going toe-to-toe with this giant behemoth. He didn’t find me amusing and he obviously had no intention of helping to free my vehicle.

So time for plan B.

“I’ll just get my bread.” There was no helping my clipped tone as I stomped back toward the ditch. Not that I could even be sure he’d heard me. With the howling wind and the crunch of my boots on the snowy, uneven ground at the side of the road, maybe he hadn’t heard a word I’d spoken.

Then his big hands clamped around my upper arms and he hauled me back as if I’d been on the verge of falling into a fire pit. “Hold it. What bread?”

“Kindly unhand me.”

He made a low noise in his throat and without looking back at him, I knew he’d done that cocked brow thing again. Pretty hot. I couldn’t move one eyebrow independent of the other, so I tended to appreciate skills in others that I did not possess.

“You have no reason to try to get back in that car.”

“Yes, I do. I need my bread before it gets cold.” I sighed. “Well, any colder than it already is. My hot bag can only do so much.”

“Your hot bag? Woman, you make no sense.”

“Stop calling me woman, and it’s an insulated bag to seal in warmth. I used it to protect Mrs. Pringles’ bread. It’s her favorite, pumpkin chocolate chip.” I craned my neck to look up at him, intending to shove his big paws off me, but his head was tilted and his lips were parted, revealing just a hint of bright white teeth.

And those dark assessing eyes were searing right through every damn layer of my clothing.

“Kindly unhand me,” I repeated, not missing the slight chatter of my teeth. I wished I could blame the cold. It was so much worse than that.

I was by the side of the road with a disabled car and a possible Ted Bundy wannabe with soulful eyes, and I didn’t even really care that he was keeping me from my bread.

Mrs. Pringles’ bread. Same difference.

“You might injure yourself further if you attempt reentry. Let the professionals handle it.”

“Further?” I frowned. “I’m not injured.”

Was I? Quickly, I took stock. Everything still worked. Arms, legs, mouth. Definitely mouth. Sure, my heart was beating a bit too fast and my thoughts were skidding out of control, but that was normal for me. My dad called me “fanciful,” which he partially blamed on my obsession with the macabre. My mama said I spent too much time with my head stuck in a book. My brothers—all three of them—called me some variation of Magpie, my childhood nickname that had stuck like a damn flytrap. Maeve and Regan, my perfect older sisters, just sighed at my supposed antics and went on with their lives.

So yeah, mental babbling was typical for me. And often, actual babbling, though the dude hulking over me was not inspiring to foam at the mouth as I usually might.

I didn’t know men like him. The guys I attracted were safe, nice boys. The kind who went to church on Sundays and pulled their elderly neighbor’s newspaper out of the bushes and always referred to my parents as “Sir and Ma’am.” They

didn't have edges. They didn't skimp on their manners. They definitely didn't miss their morning shave.

As far as assisting someone with car trouble, they would've been sweet and helpful and fixed the problem before I could ask. Not brusque and dismissive and now rough as the brute hauled me around and set me a few feet away from my vehicle.

"Stay there." He pointed at me. "I'm going to take care of your problem so you can get on your way."

"About time. Do you have a truck hoist?"

He was already moving toward my car. He studied the door for a moment, then yanked on the handle. It opened for him with only the slightest effort.

Traitorous car.

Fumbling inside, he realized my window was the crank-up kind and shut it so the front seat didn't fill with snow. "Guess the door wasn't so stuck after all," he shouted over the wind.

I rolled my eyes. Sure, if I had the strength of an ox, no problem. "I asked if you had a truck hoist?"

"A truck hoist?" he echoed, clearly not paying attention as he studied my car.

"Yes, to pull me out of the ditch."

"No, I don't have a truck hoist. What I do have should do the trick though." He shut the door without grabbing my bread or any of my belongings, then climbed out of the ditch, pulled a cell phone from his pocket, and hit a button. Smugly, I might add.

This man did not have an air of friendly cooperation, that was for sure. As for neighborly concern? Nope. Nada.

After a minute, his smug expression flattened. His mouth thinned out and he gazed at his phone as if he'd misdialed. He hit a button again, waited, then yanked the phone from his ear. "What the fuck?"

I tried not to blanch. Of course, I'd heard swearing before. I was a college student, wasn't I? But in my family home, we had a tip jar. Anyone who swore put in a five-dollar bill. Forget a one-dollar bill. My parents had wanted us to learn appropriate words swiftly, and parting with five dollars of our allowance had worked fast.

Pretty sure this dude didn't have a jar. If he did, he'd probably smash it with one of his hamhock fists.

"Is there a problem?"

"No. Definitely not. The tow truck place isn't answering. No big."

"It's New Year's Eve."

"You don't say?"

I ignored his sarcasm and lifted my voice to speak over the growing wind. The darker it got, the more frigid it was growing outside. But I'd be damned if I shivered. If he could seem impervious to the weather, so could I. "If you're not using a national company and instead supporting a local business, it's not surprising. This is a holiday. Therefore, holiday hours."

"Thank you, Miss Know-It-All, but I'm well aware of this particular company's hours. It's a family business."

"Your family? Yet you don't own a truck hoist?" I cocked my head. "Seems fishy."

"I said family business, not my business."

"Ah, like your dad? Or your brother?"

"Look, they aren't answering, so we'll have to just wait." He glanced around at the gathering snow as if he planned for us to wait at the edge of the road.

If that was the case, I was definitely going to try to get back into my car. As much as I loved Mrs. Pringle, I knew my stomach was on the verge of roaring. That bread was going to be mine. I'd skipped lunch, and boy oh boy, I knew better than to take shortcuts. They never paid off.

“Okay. Well, thanks.” Even if he couldn’t be polite, I could. “I appreciate your...” But I wasn’t a liar. “Conversation.”

I couldn’t be certain in the near darkness, but I was almost sure his lips twitched. “Conversation, is it?”

I shrugged.

“Come on,” he said, indicating with his chin for me to head up the short incline to a dark, forbidding, *tiny* house.

Immediately, my back went up. And my spidey senses started to tingle.

Or that might have been my extremities due to frostbite setting in.

“No, thank you. I don’t think that’s a good idea. I’ll just stay here and call AAA.”

“You have AAA?”

“Of course I do.” I bit my lip, vividly picturing the expired notice on my desk at home. I’d paid that, right? It had been at the top of my To Do list, but with the holidays...

Okay, maybe not.

“You seem uncertain.”

“Not really.”

He gusted out a sigh. “It’s freezing out here. Let’s go inside and get warm. I’ll call the towing company again later.”

“If they’re not answering now,” I shouted over the wind, moving closer when my voice seemed to get sucked away, “what makes you think they will later? It’s a holiday. People are out celebrating.”

“Are you?” He pointed at himself. “Am I? No. Not everyone is in a fucking party mood. Now come on.”

When I didn’t budge, he gave me a stern look that made me half expect him to haul me over his shoulder like a sack of Maggie. Then he let out another of those windy breaths. “Please?”



My frozen face cracked into a smile. “Did that hurt?”

“A little. Not as much as my nuts shriveling up into my spine though.”

I swallowed. Along with not hearing a ton of swear words on a daily basis, I also wasn’t privy to men referring to their nuts as if that counted as ordinary conversation.

*Hi, my nuts hurt. Pass the crackers.*

“You, um, should definitely go inside then. That sounds painful.”

“It is. Come on. I won’t bite.”

“Are you sure?”

Now he did more than almost smile. He barked out a laugh. “Not unless you want me to, honey, and even then, I’m pretty sure you aren’t my type.” He tilted his head and lifted his voice above the howling wind. “I’m not into church girls. Even the ex-communicated kind, which does sound interesting.”

“It is. No, I’m not telling you.” I rubbed my mittened hand over my stinging cheeks. “What happens between a girl and her priest is private.”

“Wow. Some *Thorn Birds* shit? Kinky little thing, aren’t you?”

Was that actually approval I saw in his midnight eyes? They’d definitely warmed. Speaking of kinky...

“Hardly.” I sniffed, and not out of haughtiness.

I had to sneeze, and I had to pee. I was also freezing and starving and desperately in need of a long, hot shower.

Then again, did I dare get naked within the same four walls as this guy? Even if I wasn’t his type?

Serial killers had types too. They also didn’t kill everyone they met. I couldn’t be sure this guy was safe, but if I wasn’t in his target victim group, he could be a homicidal lunatic and I wouldn’t necessarily be in danger. Plus, I knew some judo.

Oh, the rationalizations a girl who urgently needs a bathroom will make.

“Okay. I’ll go inside with you. Briefly. Until we can reach the towing company. Otherwise, I will have many people out looking for me, and they will descend on your place like a swarm of locusts if I’m not home in a matter of hours.”

Much to my consternation most of the time. I was well and truly sick of being so overprotected by my family, though I loved them for their concern. It was just hard to have much of a life when you were watched like a rabid animal expected at any moment to go on a rampage through town.

In truth, I just mostly studied and worked, along with spending time with my bestie and my boyf—

Yep, not going there.

“Not if I tie you up and make you call them to say you’re okay and not to look for you. Then I might throw your chair in the basement and leave you without food and water.”

His voice was entirely too serious, which was how I guessed he was lying. It was a gamble, but I was going to bet that the usual serial killer didn’t advertise his intentions so brazenly. “You forgot to add that you’d have your way with me first.”

“Hoping, Red?” Before I could stammer out a response, he grabbed my arm and towed me behind him. “Not my type, remember?”

“I didn’t say yes,” I called.

He promptly ignored me.

After dragging me up a short snowy hill, we made our way up a scarcely shoveled path to a short set of rickety steps. He stopped to pick up some wood, then stomped up the steps and pressed his shoulder into the door. “Come on,” he shouted in my general direction before barreling into the dark house.

Hell, I didn’t even know if it was truly his. He could be an illegal squatter there for all I knew.

The fact of the matter was that I knew most of the people in Turnbull. This was on the outskirts, true, and the occasional person came or went without stirring my notice, but we lived in a small, self-contained area. We might be surrounded by trees and hills and blocked in by mountains of snow for almost half the year, due to our proximity to Lake Ontario, but we kept track of our own.

Also, it was hard to make quick getaways when a snowpocalypse wasn't a disaster so much as a way of life.

Biting my lip, I cast a quick glance back toward the road. In the time it had taken us to walk up to the house—though calling it that seemed to be an overstatement—my poor car had become even more buried. The snow wasn't coming down in flakes now. More like pellets.

“Red,” he growled. “Forget the damn bread.”

Something about his irritation made me laugh. I clapped a hand over my mouth, then bent at the waist when more laughter rolled out. I couldn't catch my breath and what breaths I could take were laced with ice. Crappy time to be on the verge of hysteria.

Guess my accident had shook me up more than I'd thought. Or else it was due to the man himself.

So I stood up straight, threw back my shoulders, and strutted inside in my giant boots to my beheading.

At least he'd turned on the lights. As I shut the door behind me and shifted to survey my surroundings, from down the hall came a string of curse words shot off in succession like gunfire.

My eyes widened. If he was trying to ease me into feeling comfortable before he struck, he wasn't too good at it.

“Are you okay?” I asked carefully, darting glances right and left as I crept up the hallway to where his voice was coming from.

And stopped dead at the mouth of the sparse, rustic kitchen.

He was standing at the stove in nothing but a pair of silky black boxers with a spatula in his hand, poking at whatever congealed mess was in his dented pan. It was one like you'd see in a camping kit, meant to be used on nights under the stars and no other time, ever. But that was his home cookware.

Fit him somehow, as did the intricate swirls and lines of dark ink that wrapped around his muscular shoulders and biceps. More ink covered his back and sides. He was a human canvas, tattooed and rippling with muscle.

I didn't find that arousing. That he was the exact opposite of my lanky, inkless ex was merely something I noted.

"Fucking burner is fucking out." He stabbed at the red mass in his pan. Without sparing me a glance, he continued. "Why are you still dressed like a damn polar bear? Get out of those wet clothes. You were standing in a snowbank for a good fifteen minutes or more."

"Polar bears don't need clothing, as they have fur."

That he only growled made me laugh. And cautiously unwind my scarf.

While he continued to fiddle with the non-working stove, I cleared my throat. "You have a microwave. Just heat up the soup." Cautiously, I stepped closer and peered at the gross stuff he kept trying to stir. "That is soup, right?"

"Yes. Tomato. I was going to make grilled cheese to go with it. Can't now, because fucking burner is—"

"Fucking out," I finished, surprised by how liberating it felt to curse. There weren't any tip jars here.

No furnace either apparently, as it was nearly as cold inside as it had been out. Or else I'd caught a serious freaking chill.

"Look at you. Your teeth are chattering." He turned to me and yanked off my fuzzy hat, causing the long hair I'd tucked underneath to come tumbling out. He gazed at it as if he was surprised I had hair at all, then managed to shake off his shock and tugged off my earmuffs too.

Sound rushed into my ears, including the uneven hiss of his breaths through his tightly clenched teeth.

I raised my gaze to his. He was staring at me in a way I wasn't used to from men. When a girl grew up in a small town with three strapping, overprotective brothers, you got used to guys being too afraid to take their shot. As such, I'd grown accustomed to dating the safe, parental-friendly boys. I liked them. They were predictable. No serial killers in the bunch.

None of them made my blood heat the way this one was with merely a heavy-lidded look.

He gripped my hat and earmuffs in his hands, crumpling them. This close to him, without even the buffer of his clothes, he seemed even more huge. Tall, muscled, dangerous.

I didn't know that kind of male. Had never wanted to.

Until now.

"Keep going," I said softly, challenging myself as much as I was him. I gestured to the rest of my outerwear. "Lots more clothes to strip off me, Wolf."

THREE

# KELLAN

I'D KNOWN A LOT OF WOMEN IN MY DAY, AND THE BEST OF them tended to be, shall we say, fickle.

This one, however?

The ficklest in the history of the goddamn vagina.

First, she was all cheerful like a Strawberry Shortcake doll on acid. Then suspicious, as if she suspected I intended to imprison her in a dungeon in my house and use her for sexual favors. She'd barely even come inside, her distrust of me was so thick.

Now? The chick was asking me to undress her.

As in naked.

No fucking clothes. All that silky dark hair spread out around us as I parted her creamy thighs and—

Nope.

I'd go fuck her forgotten loaf of bread first. I had enough problems. The last thing I needed was to get messed up with some local girl who jumped every time I swore.

Local girls were clingy. They were the homespun house and hearth types who wouldn't understand a guy who made his living on the road. On stage, in front of thousands of screaming female fans.

Okay, that wasn't me yet. But I was on my way. I'd get there, and I'd be damned if I let anything hold me back. Not like my dad had. He'd gotten saddled with a kid and wife way

too early, and he'd abandoned his dreams to stay home and pretend to be a doting dad.

He'd split before I turned eight, and I couldn't even completely hold it against him. Some dudes weren't meant for regular relationships. One woman forever sounded like a recipe for heartburn to me.

And this chick? If she ever let a guy in her pants, she probably had *forever* stenciled on her cooch.

"You have two hands, right?" I tossed back her hat and earmuffs, then grabbed my spatula. Better to have something in my hand that didn't smell like whatever sorcery she'd slathered all over her skin. Fuck if it didn't remind me of chocolate.

Who smelled like chocolate other than bakers?

"I surely do," she muttered, and if I didn't know better, I'd say she sounded disappointed. But she swiftly disappeared down the hall, so fast that I wondered if she intended to head out the door and hike back to town.

*Don't want what's between my pearly gates? Well, fuck you then! I'll show you by dying in a snowbank before morning!*

Though it definitely wasn't a case of not wanting to take the express pass into her drive-through. Without that crazy hat and those stupid earmuffs, she was kind of hot. I'd even gotten a glimpse of her neck as she unwound the scarf of doom. She might even have a pair of breasts under all those layers.

Not that it mattered to me. She could be flat as a board and I'd keep to my plans.

Fire, beer, a night spent relaxing. In that order.

And no fucking soup.

"Put it in the microwave," she called over her shoulder.

I stared at the pan. "For how long?"

"Look at the can." She didn't tack on *dumbass* but it was heavily implied.



“I can’t make grilled cheese in a microwave,” I yelled back.

“Yes, you can. Cheese sandwiches are great microwaved.”

I huffed under my breath. Soup and grilled cheese in a microwave. Whatever.

Most likely, she went to one of those fancy country club-type colleges and was home on her winter break. They probably had sleepovers in her dorm and jumped around in footie PJs while flinging popcorn at each other and chanting the school fight song.

Hmm, that was an oddly arousing image. Clearly I needed to get laid. Fast. And not by Little Red Riding Hood and her basket of bread.

Her ginormous boots clomped over the rough-hewn floorboards. Then I heard her gasp.

I dropped the spatula into the pan of cold gunk and rushed down the hall, stopping short at the carved out entrance to the living room. I’d gone for that exact look, angling the boards and beams to make it seem as if the room itself had been dug out of the forest. Every part of the cabin straddled the line between spartan and primitive. Including the large fireplace that Red was crouching in front of to warm her hands.

Yes, she’d finally removed her mittens. Praise Jesus.

“Go take a shower. You can borrow some clean clothes—”

“My clothes are clean. I changed right before I got in the car.” She jerked to her feet and spun toward me, sending those rivulets of dark hair down her back like a waterfall. It was so long and thick that I couldn’t keep my mind from very bad thoughts.

Like fisting a handful and pounding into her from behind, working her good and hard just to make her swear with those pretty pink, good girl lips.

“That’s not what I meant. I meant you walked through all that snow and you’ve gotta be all wet.”

“Nope.” She crossed her arms over her coat-covered chest. Hadn’t even loosened a damn button. “I pride myself on choosing outerwear that keeps me dry under all circumstances. Especially a short walk in a little snowstorm.”

I snorted. Couldn’t help it. “*Little* snowstorm? Born and raised in Turnbull, huh?”

“Maybe.” She gnawed on her puffy pink lower lip, and I knew she did it often. That was her tell. Along with those sneaky glances she kept taking of me when she thought I wasn’t paying attention. “What difference does it make?”

“Nothing.” I turned back toward the hall. “I don’t care.”

“It’s just your clothes would all be too big. If I took a shower,” she added, her voice trailing off.

“What do you have on under that snowsuit? Anything resembling a T-shirt?”

“A cardigan and a silk blouse.”

With my back to her, I rolled my eyes. “Silk. Of course. Well, you can wear the blouse and tie the sweater around your waist for protection from my roving eyes if you want while you’re drying your super pants by the fire. I have a rack in the bedroom.”

“I don’t know you. It hardly seems proper to take off my clothes and...wash in your home.”

“Five minutes ago, you wanted me to strip you in my kitchen. Inconsistent much?”

“My God. I didn’t mean naked. You thought I meant naked? No. Not naked. I meant...not naked.”

“Oh, so you meant not naked?” I couldn’t hold back my smirk. “Just checking,” I said an instant before she flung her scarf at me.

Look at that, I’d even spotted a collarbone. Now we were getting somewhere.

“I was referring to my outerwear. In a friendly sort of way.”

“Oh right. Gotcha.” I nodded. “We’ve been like best friends this whole time.”

Despite her scowl, I could’ve sworn I glimpsed amusement in her big blue eyes.

Always blue. It was as if the universe knew I was a sucker for them, so I was sent some temptation every few months.

Ah hell, every few weeks. Sometimes every few hours.

I was currently having a dry spell. Or I had been until this one curbed it right into my ditch.

“I’m not sure if you’re aware of this, but some girls practice flirting on whichever big brute happens to be around. It’s a good way to try out new approaches.”

“Huh. Fascinating. Is accusing a guy of being a serial killer one of your approaches as well? If so, maybe retire that one.”

She let out a laugh and unzipped her coat. I was so taken aback that she’d revealed her white silk and pink cashmere—had to be cashmere, right?—beneath that I nearly missed the next thing she said.

“No, that’s what happens when you’re an entirely too street smart criminal justice student. My apologies.” She pulled off the coat and tugged her hair over one shoulder.

Luckily she didn’t know she’d transfixed me. Just like that.

Maybe it was the firelight dancing over her pale skin. Or the delicate necklace circling her throat. Or her eyes.

Her hair was a consideration too. Fistable, fuckable hair.

But the worst part? That little glimmer of a smile playing around her mouth. As if perhaps she did have an inkling I was more interested than not. She was a woman after all, and they had all their secrets when it came to unmanning the opposite sex.

“Why are you smiling?” I demanded.

“Oh, am I? Sorry. I shouldn’t smile without asking first.” She attempted to fix her expression into sober lines before letting her gaze drop for a second too long.

And I realized exactly how she knew I was feigning most of my disgust in her direction.

Damn dick, always getting me into trouble. That it was larger than the average tool didn't do me any favors either. At least in situations like this.

Since I didn't have a response, I went back into the kitchen to nuke my damn soup and grilled cheese.

I'd gotten as far as opening the microwave door when she stomped into the room. Her boots always made it sound like she was pissed off, but I didn't check her face to see if I'd somehow offended her with my aroused member.

Fuck it, she'd offended *me* by being smoking hot and interrupting my private New Year's Eve.

"Don't do that," she screeched as I was about to stick the pan into the microwave. I hadn't been sure it would fit, but I was good at angles.

I sent her a sidelong glance as she snatched the pan from me. *Very* good.

"This isn't safe for the microwave. You'll start a fire. We don't need that tonight." She put down the pan on the counter and glanced around the small room before sorting through the cupboards above the broken stove. "Microwave-safe dish?"

"What the fuck all is that?"

She sighed and emerged with a pile of plastic bowls I'd thrown in the cabinet a couple of years ago. Her lips pursed and she blew off the layer of dust before digging one out from the middle of the stack. Then she dumped my soup into the bowl, covered it with a paper napkin, and slid the soup into the microwave, programming it for sixty seconds.

"To start," she said. "It'll require stirring and additional heating in thirty-second increments. You'll have to check it."

I grunted something, but it probably wasn't "thank you."

"Any other plastic plates? Flat ones? For the grilled cheese sandwiches," she added as I stared.

“Sandwiches plural? I didn’t offer you one.”

Her face dropped and for a second, I felt like a dick.

Just a second because she opened her mouth.

“Just like I didn’t offer you my underwear, but you assumed. At least I won’t be hurting if I don’t get your crusty bread.” She waggled her brows at my groin. “Can you say the same?”

Then she sashayed out of my kitchen.

A moment later, I heard the shower turn on down the hall, right before the microwave sounded its cheerful little ding. I took out the soup and stirred, then slid the bowl back inside for another thirty seconds. Rinse and repeat one more time after that.

When I finally tasted the results, I was prepared for it to still be cold one layer down. Nope, Little Red Betty Crocker Hood apparently included cooking in her repertoire too.

Fuck it if the damn soup wasn’t perfect.

FOUR

# MAGGIE

THE BRUTE'S SHOWER WAS A DREAM. LIKE A SERIOUS freaking wet dream, set in the middle of a cabin that was more lean-to than HGTV-special.

But now that I'd seen this bathroom, I so did not care. He could've had a fire pit in the kitchen instead of actual appliances, and it so wouldn't have made a bit of difference.

Because he had all *this*.

The tiles were black and white, gleaming as if they'd just been cleaned with a toothbrush. The shower was a combo tub and appeared to be made from some kind of glazed wood. I didn't know anything about fancy bathroom setups or the difference between high-end and simply pretty. All I knew was that the copper fixtures and huge tub and shower stall were calling my name.

So much so that I shut the door and shed my clothes without thinking of a few vital things that only occurred to me once I was under the orgasmically hot spray.

Did I mention the multiple shower heads?

*Fuck me.* I'd even swear for this one, though in my own head didn't count.

But as amazing as the crisscrossing warm streams of water were, they didn't keep me from realizing I hadn't locked the bathroom door. Or located some towels before I hopped into a stranger's shower and lathered up with—I looked at the large blue-green bottle in my hand—mountain man shampoo, for when you want to bring the wilderness inside you.

Huh. That sounded kind of dirty. And no matter how hard I scrubbed at my hair, I still didn't have a towel.

Head full of suds, eyes stinging from water and shampoo, I tugged back the shower door and gave the bathroom a bleary glance. There weren't even any cabinets in here. Was I just missing them? Where did the dude keep his toilet paper, for God's sake?

My gaze alighted on the roll. That was an idea. I could hop out and dry off with a ton of toilet paper, and he'd never know I was too lame to even think of a towel.

Still, he was really letting down his potential guests by not thinking of their comfort and providing one within easy reach.

I snorted. Yeah, he was definitely Miss Manners in all other ways. He wouldn't even give me a bite of his probably plastic-like cheese.

Screw it. I'd just woman up and ask for a towel. No big. I was a grown woman. He'd open the door—since you know, I'd skipped locking it, some crim justice student I was—and toss in a towel, and I'd finish the best shower I'd ever had in my life in complete peace.

First I would rinse off my hair. No sense in risking blindness.

As soon as I'd finished washing it, I grabbed the long length and pulled it over one shoulder. Time to summon help.

Right.

I took a deep breath. And another. And another, until the already foggy shower door turned seriously steamy.

*Just do it.*

“Hey—” I yelled out, belatedly realizing that I didn't know his name.

I was naked and wet in his bathroom, but I couldn't even call for him because I didn't know if he was a Bob or a George or a Biff.



Biff would only be fair. He deserved to be a Biff, surpassing that he was.

“Hey,” I yelled again over the roar of the water. I could have turned it off, but then I would freeze. Out there? Super cold. In here? Gloriously hot.

I intended to bask in that heat for another ten minutes or so, until the hot water gave out. Maybe it never would and I could hide in the shower for the rest of the night.

A girl could dream.

The bathroom door creaked open. I jolted, gripping the edge of the shower door as I cautiously inched it open.

This was not good.

A second later, a large tanned hand inched through the narrow opening between the door and the jamb. On the tip of his finger was a fuzzy gray towel.

“Looking for this?” he asked in a singsong voice, and I hated him more than a little.

Alas, I was desperate.

“Oh, thank God. You do have towels.”

“A towel, yes.”

“Wait. One towel?” I frowned and tried not to fidget. “Is it even clean?”

“It was before I used it for my shower this morning.”

“Ugh. *Ew*. Seriously?” As soon as the words were out, I bit my lip. Beggars and all that.

Though there was the TP...

“Sorry, I didn’t plan for little Red Riding Hood to deign to use my shower tonight.” He started to pull back his hand. “Carry on.”

“No, no, wait! How am I supposed to get dry?”

“I have a feeling you spend plenty of time dry, so figure it out.”

It took me a second to get his crude double entendre. I chalked up my slowness to the fact that I was standing with one foot on top of the other and swaying as I tried to get some of the hot water on my back while maintaining my grip on the shower door.

“Asshole,” I said under my breath.

“Excuse me? What was that? Did the virginal one just swear?” The door swung open and he lifted a hand to his rounded mouth as if he was stunned. “I just can’t believe—”

Then he just stopped talking. Stopped breathing too, or maybe that was only me.

I was naked on the other side of the only slightly opaque shower door, and that was discounting my precarious lean around the edge. My breasts weren’t tiny. He had to see... everything.

Damn near everything.

He wasn’t speaking, and he also wasn’t turning around to leave. Nor was I yelling at him to get out.

“Looks like I’m plenty wet right now,” I said sweetly, blowing a wet curl out of my eyes.

Dry and virginal, my ass.

When he stepped farther into the room, I realized this was not a man who could be stopped with a smart aleck remark. He’d just toss back something even worse at me.

“You hid a hell of a lot under that snowsuit, Red.” His voice was pure gravel.

A more prudent woman wouldn’t have darted a glance below his waist. But I’d just been dumped by my long-term boyfriend for a woman who wore feathers and spraypaint for a living, so maybe I needed some reassurance.

*That some random oafish man can get hard for your naked body? Nice, Mags. Real nice.*

Except he’d been hard for me before, when I’d been more than fully dressed.

As for the current erection situation? All systems go.

*Still not throwing him out, are you, Mags?*

I cleared my throat and adjusted my grip on the door. I'd left behind wet fingerprints, and only part of the dampness was from the shower. I was that flummoxed by this guy.

By some stupidly hot stranger seeing me naked—and *liking* it.

“Float like a butterfly, sting like a bee,” I whispered, the closest thing to a comeback I could summon.

His trance snapped, and his overly generous mouth curved. “You always say the thing I least expect.” He followed that up by walking forward and pulling open the shower door while I stood there slack-jawed like a dang guppy. Water sprayed out into the bathroom, hitting his cheeks and chest, and he just took his sweet time eating me up with his eyes.

And I let him.

Almost as if he was moving in slow-motion, he leaned over and turned off the water, then wrapped the towel around me and tucked the end in the front near my breasts. The towel that had been all over his naked body not that long ago.

“I hadn't finished washing,” I said weakly. It was a victory that I managed to speak at all.

I'd already gone further with this man than I had with anyone other than Derek, and I didn't even know his name.

“The hot water doesn't last very long.” He spoke as nonchalantly as if we were sitting around fully dressed in his living room. “I put in a tank that accommodated my needs, and I take quick showers.”

“So you built this place yourself?”

“Yeah. With help, of course.”

“It's...nice.”

“Glad you approve.” He smirked at me, and I fumbled to grip the edge of the towel, making sure it covered me. Not sure why I cared, since he'd already seen everything.

Including that I hadn't shaved or...trimmed up in a few days. I hadn't foreseen a need. My boyfriend and I were through, and I had recently rediscovered my love of flannel pajamas. Besides, what girl goes to town on her lady bits with the shave gel when she's currently hating all men, forever and ever, amen?

Now I'd just been naked with this guy, and I sincerely regretted my life choices. All of them. Including the one that meant I couldn't just mindlessly enjoy carnal pleasures of the flesh with this surprisingly attractive—yet still brutish—man, though I still had a condom left in my purse.

Because we didn't know each other, and I didn't even like his personality all that much. His body, however? The lean muscles and tats that I now had a bird's eye view of wrapping around his shoulders and biceps and right on down his forearms...

I quite enjoyed all of that.

So who said we had to talk to each other? We could just—

*Nope.* We could not. Ex-communicated from Our Holy Mother Church of The Four Corners or not, I could not do such a thing.

Even if I really wanted to.

"This bathroom is gorgeous," I hastened to add. "It could use just a few more things. Some additional amenities, you could say."

"Oh yeah?" He stepped back and crossed his arms, bracing his thumb against his mouth. "Like what?"

"Storage. You need a linen closet for guest towels."

"I don't have guests here. Next."

"And you need a hamper, to store—"

"I have one towel, and I undress in the other room. Next."

"You just parade around naked through the house?"

The smirk I'd glimpsed briefly a moment ago had now taken up permanent residence on his face. "Who's gonna see?"

The forest people?”

“You don’t have neighbors?”

“Did you see any?”

“I didn’t scope out the neighborhood before I steered into the ditch.” As soon as I’d said it, I realized my mistake.

His mouth thinned. “You steered into the ditch?”

“Not exactly, I hit an icy patch and—”

“Red.” The word was a growl.

I was already growing to like that sound coming from the depths of his chest. It emphasized how much of a male he was. Uncouth, rough around the edges, barely even sociable. Yet still so very male that it made every part of me sit up and take notice.

Including my nipples, which had decided to do the *hey, how you doin’?* salute against his terrycloth towel.

“There was a deer,” I mumbled, hearing my father’s voice in my head. He’d go up one side of me and down the other if he knew what I’d done.

“You drove off the road to avoid a deer?”

“And a doe,” I added, gripping the front of the towel in one hand and the hem in the other. “I didn’t know what to do.”

“What you do is not risk your damn life driving off the road when you don’t know what you’re driving into.”

“It would’ve been fine if my stupid tires hadn’t spun out.”

“Listen to me, Red.” He gripped my shoulders and I went still. Not from fear, but brutal awareness, the kind that I’d always imagined slammed into a person before they were attacked. That one second of utter knowing, complete certainty, that your life would never be exactly the same again. “You don’t risk yourself for anyone—or anything—else. You understand me? You are your first priority. Always.”

“Survival of the fittest?” Anger brewed in my belly, and I shook off his hold. “I don’t live like that. I didn’t need to hit

that deer and her baby, and I didn't. And I'm fine. Aren't I?" I lifted my arms, which had the unintended effect of causing my towel to dip lower than it should have. But I just hitched it up, climbed out of the stall, and marched with my bare feet and dripping legs out of the bathroom and up the hall.

I wanted the warmth of the fire and to bask in his curiosity in me for a little while longer. He didn't know how to tag me, couldn't quite figure me out, and I liked that. But if I didn't put some distance between us, soon enough he'd have me pegged.

God knows I'd never been anyone else's enigma. I'd always been safe, comfortable, predictable Magpie.

Forcing back a sigh, I rushed into the living room. The space was sparse to the point of almost emptiness, but it helped the house seem bigger than it was. The big fireplace and stone mantel and large flat screen TV mounted on the opposite wall were the main features of the room. Along with them was a long couch perfect for naps and a couple of armchairs, plus a few side tables here and there that looked just rustic enough to possibly have been handmade by him as well.

Guess he was kind of an enigma too. So was the beauty of strangers. The possibilities were endless.

The guitar leaning against the chair next to the fire gave me pause. I ran my fingertips over the cherry wood, shivering again though the warm shower and fire had helped to chase away much of my chill.

Was the brute a guitar player? I tried to imagine him cradling the instrument as he'd cradled the wood and found it wasn't as hard to imagine as I would have thought. I debated asking him about it, then decided obviously it was a hobby. He wasn't the kind of guy to have a prop guitar in the living room to pick up chicks.

I seriously doubted he needed any help.

When he found me staring pensively into the fire a little while later, he didn't speak. Just held out a plate with a

misshapen lump of cheese with half a piece of bread on either side.

I laughed. Hard.

“So I didn’t have enough bread for sandwiches for two. Didn’t expect to need it. The plan was to eat my soup and my sandwich, and get so shit-faced I didn’t see midnight.”

The gruffness of his tone got to me. I couldn’t even say why. Maybe because I knew he was making an effort, and that perhaps he didn’t make much of an effort for all that many people. Possibly because people hadn’t made much of an effort for him.

There went my college psych classes, rearing their ugly heads again.

I took the plate and picked up the sandwich he’d made me, biting in despite my extreme aversion to melted plastic. It didn’t taste so bad after all. I chewed and swallowed before wiping my mouth with the edge of the towel.

His molten dark gaze tracked the movement like a hunter studying his prey. Worse, since I was almost sure he didn’t intend to kill me. But what he’d leave behind would be wreckage just the same.

“So where’s the alcohol?” I tried to sound casual, as if I got loaded all the time.

I also often went into strange men’s houses, and stripped down, and let them see me with a little bit more fluff between my legs than I preferred. Plus, I ate their sandwiches without wondering about possible poison meant to knock me out so they could do bad things to me.

Things that in the case of this guy, I really wanted to be awake for.

“It’s Coors. Nothing fruity and pink with little umbrellas.”

I frowned. “I drink beer. Girly drinks are for sissies.”

“Oh, is that so?” He stepped back and crossed his arms again. I was starting to wonder if he did that intentionally to make all his muscles ripple. Combined with the thick swirls of

dark ink that seemed to cover far too much of his golden skin, he seemed dangerous.

Alluring.

And I wasn't even drunk yet. *Yet* being the operative word, since this was New Year's Eve. If tonight was going to be my first night to get even partially wasted, I'd picked an auspicious evening for it.

"Yes. Beer is my favorite." Favorite only if I was dying of thirst and had no other options, but semantics. "Can I have one?"

"Are you of age?"

I threw back my shoulders. "Excuse me?"

"Easy question. Easy answer."

"I'm twenty-three." In February. Close enough.

"Okay. I'll get you a beer and then we'll see about calling the tow truck so you can get on home. Since all your people will be out looking for you soon, I'm sure." He did air quotes around *your people*, and I did not appreciate it.

I did have people. Lots of them. Coming from a family of six kids, it wasn't an exaggeration. Only problem was they were all out partying tonight. I'd been invited to a celebration or two myself, but I'd eschewed the invites to bring bread to Mrs. Pringles. After that, I'd planned to take a long hot shower and curl up with my e-reader.

Alone, but not lonely. I had intended to practice self-love. Self-nurturing, in fact.

*But if you could get someone else to love and nurture you tonight...*

"You're right. I probably shouldn't take the time to drink with you. I should get dressed and see about getting towed." I took another bite of my sandwich. "I'll just catch a ride home with the tow truck guy."

"Or lady," he said under his breath, grabbing his cell off the table beside the fire.



He swiped a few times, held the phone to his ear, and waited. Frowning, he pulled the phone back and tapped a few times before listening again. “What the hell?”

“Still not answering?” Fussily, I arranged my towel to make sure I wasn’t showing too much of my legs. Not that he seemed to be bowled over by desire anyway, but just in case.

Ignoring me, he tapped the phone a couple more times and lifted it to his ear again. After a moment, he turned around and grunted out a message. That, yes, I could still hear though he’d turned his back.

“Hey Beth, been trying to reach you at work. I have a situation with a vehicle that needs transport. Crashed outside my place. Maybe you can give the chick a ride too? If not, I’ll deal. Thanks.”

My frown grew the longer he spoke in his so-not-hushed tones. Beth. Probably some old girlfriend. Or current girlfriend. I didn’t even know his name, so I certainly had no right to be offended that he might not be single.

He’d seen me naked, but so had the doctor at the hospital where I was born. No big deal.

Once he’d ended the call and turned back, I jerked to my feet and set aside the half-eaten sandwich. “I can handle my own transportation home. Don’t worry about it. Same with the tow truck. I’ll call my Dad and we’ll handle it in the morning with AAA, who is never closed.”

“No, but you’ll be waiting two hours on the morning of a holiday during a big snowstorm. Beth should be here before then.” He raked a hand through his shaggy dark hair. “I’m not sure what’s going on with her.”

“Maybe found a better hot date?” I hadn’t meant to be snarky. Normally I was quite pleasant.

He just huffed and strode out of the room.

I picked up the sandwich and took another bite. It really wasn’t half-bad. No point in starving myself.

When he returned, he had two bottles of beer and a bowl that I presumed contained his soup. It had to be ice cold by now, or maybe he'd re-nuked it.

He popped the top of my beer and handed it over. I took it, nodding my thanks, and swiftly realized I'd have to actually drink it. Preferably without gagging.

I took a quick hit, then another. Feeling his eyes on me, I kept knocking them back. And lo and behold, after the first few putrid swallows, a nice warmth began to swim through my veins. I started drinking faster just to get more of that pleasant floaty feeling.

"Easy," he admonished. "Don't want you passing out on me."

"Oh, I can hold my liquor." I burped and clapped a hand over my mouth as he grinned.

"I'm sure. What are you, five-feet-nothing and a buck twenty?"

"Five-two and one-thirty-five."

"Wow, a woman who freely discloses her age and her weight."

"I'll also disclose my marital status and my name, if you'd like those too."

He sat on the padded leather ottoman on the other side of the fire and set his beer down. He scooped up soup and hummed under his breath, which might have indicated approval. I couldn't be sure. "Yes. I would."

"Single. Extremely single." Great. Now I sounded desperate and on the make. "And my name is Margaret Kelly."

He choked. "No way. Not the Kelly *virgin*."

FIVE

# KELLAN

SHE STARED AT ME AS IF I WERE SATAN. TAIL, HORNS, AND all.

“I’m not a virgin.” She said the word with obvious distaste. “I don’t know where you’re getting your information, but it’s obviously wrong.”

“More like outdated.” I stirred my lukewarm soup and shoveled in a few spoonfuls before lifting my gaze to hers again. She tended to look like a damn wounded bird, until her shields popped down once again.

I wasn’t proud of putting that hurt expression in her eyes even once. Putting her back up was a whole different thing altogether.

She was mouthy and vibrant and I couldn’t for the life of me figure out my reaction to her. Was it because it had been a while since I’d been with a woman? Or was there something about Margaret in particular that intrigued me?

“Outdated, huh? What is that supposed to mean?”

“You have an older sister, right? Maeve?”

“Yes.” She sighed. “She still thinks I’m a virgin. She probably will until I’m old and gray and have six kids.”

“Well, in her defense, I knew her a long time ago.” And quite personally, as I recalled groping her more than once under the bleachers at Turnbull High. She’d been a sexy, wild art student who’d done crazy stuff like painting words on her

boobs so that when I got her top off, some kind of naughty message would be waiting for me.

Now that I'd seen both sisters' racks, I had to acknowledge that obviously the Kellys had been genetically blessed.

The one thing I hadn't seen on Maeve was her pussy. We'd made out a few times, but we'd never gone that far. I'd wanted to, of course, but she'd claimed to be a good Catholic girl who was saving her "cherry" for a boy who wanted to marry her. I'd suspected that was a load of bull, but then she'd brought up her other sisters, Regan and Magpie, the baby, and she'd insisted they'd all taken a purity pledge.

That had made me hard for a week. Back then, the idea of taking on three virgin sisters had pretty much been my idea of heaven wrapped up in a DD-sized bow.

"How long?"

I counted back in my head. "Probably about a decade, give or take. Fuck me."

She pressed her lips together and stared at her beer. Her probably close-to-empty beer.

"Want another one?" I asked.

I shouldn't be getting her drunk. No matter what she said, I had a feeling she didn't do it often. Especially now that I knew she was the youngest Kelly girl.

In town, she was practically revered as a saint. One of the few young people today who always helped the elderly cross the street and did kind gestures like baking bread for someone when she should've been out living it up like other girls her age.

Though I'd lived in LA for several years, I'd heard enough about Magpie in town from the guys I'd gone to school with. I had the same crew as I always had—including a couple of the dudes in my band, who I'd brought with me out west—and they'd mentioned the Kelly sisters. Hard not to. They were all fucking gorgeous, or at least so I'd heard.

I'd never seen Magpie before, not in the flesh. Now that I'd *really* seen everything, I doubted I'd ever forget.

She nodded quickly, and it took me a second to remember what I'd asked her. Another beer. Right.

*Stop thinking about her gorgeous fucking body, jackass. You're never going to touch her.*

I set aside my bowl and rose. I'd made it about two steps when her soft voice reached me. "Did you sleep with her?"

"With who?"

"Maeve." She huffed out a breath. "She's beautiful, and she has a lot of fun with guys."

"I didn't sleep with her."

She let out a sigh. Relief?

I should've stopped there. But since I was me, I didn't.

"I wanted to. Would have in a hot second, but she was saving her virginity for marriage."

Margaret let out such a loud laugh that I did a doubletake. "She told you that? Oh God. She must've not liked you then. Or else you have a small penis."

It was stupid to feel affronted. Or to respond with an equally juvenile comment. "Don't think so, since she put it in her mouth a time or five."

She didn't stop laughing. "Yeah, then she must've been trying to let you down gently." She wiped her eyes. "I needed that laugh. Thanks."

"Look at me, Red. Does any part of me seem small?"

Taking a sip of her beer, she let her gaze wander over me. "Not particularly, but some parts of the anatomy aren't built to scale."

"You mean like your huge tits that don't go with the rest of your tiny body?"

I expected her to blanch or stutter or divert her gaze. Instead she nodded. "Exactly like that."

Since I didn't have a reply that wouldn't take us into dangerous territory, I went into the kitchen and got her another beer.

I didn't rush. Nor did I dally. This was my place, for fuck's sake, and I wasn't about to let her drive me into my kitchen. There was a reason I was single. I liked doing my own thing when and where I wanted to without having to check in with someone else. I had friends, of course, and plenty of them, but we all did our own thing and lived and let live.

Even in Wilder Mind, we didn't get in each other's faces. Sure, if someone went way off the rails, either musically or personally, we'd figure out what was going on. Otherwise, nope. No handholding here.

The sound of the TV turning on made me pull my head out of the fridge. I'd been staring into it blindly for a couple of minutes. Like a dumbass.

Not hiding from her, huh? Sure.

Party sounds and music flowed into the kitchen, and at once, I knew what she was watching. That New Year's Fuckin' Eve or whatever it was called. Bunch of boy bands and girls with poufy hair and lots of freezing people standing around Times Square, dancing their asses off.

Great. Now I was supposed to watch that?

I wished I'd brought my cell into the kitchen. Not that I doubted my sister would call me as soon as she got my message. If she wasn't answering the phone at the tow truck shop or calling me back, something must be up. Big time. She always made sure the shop was open on holidays so she had a chance of competing with the big guys like AAA who were open twenty-four/seven. It was hard enough being a female in a male-dominated business without conceding business to the large fish in her small pond to boot. So she went the extra mile whenever she could.

Except tonight. Maybe her babysitter had fallen through. Rainy was three now, and she was touchy with new people. If

the regular babysitter couldn't make it, Beth would've stayed home with her.

I couldn't dwell on Beth's whereabouts or it would make me crazy.

Another thing I couldn't do was peer into this nearly empty refrigerator all night long. Just because I had a strange chick in a towel that barely hid her smokin' hot body in my living room wasn't a reason to hide out.

Neither was the fact that I'd messed around with her older sister. Or that I'd seen her naked, and I was pretty sure we'd both wanted to do more seeing. And exploring.

It hadn't much mattered that we didn't know or particularly like each other. If she'd been a groupie, fine. I would've hit that and moved on. We both would've had a great time and that was that.

But she was a good girl. One of the untouchable Kellys. A family of decent, hardworking, *nice* people.

She also had a bunch of burly as fuck older brothers who'd kick my ass if I put a finger on her virginal skin. Especially since I might like a taste of that sweet pussy I'd glimpsed in the shower, but I sure wasn't marrying it. That deal wasn't for me.

No way would I live my dad's life of settling all over again. Much better that I was honest about what I was from day one.

Grabbing another couple beers and a bag of pretzels from the cupboard—likely stale, since I rarely visited the cabin—I headed into the living room. She was curled up in one corner of the couch, singing along to whatever swill was on TV, winding one long strand of dark hair around her finger.

Her towel was about two high notes away from indecency, and bastard that I was, I wasn't going to tell her.

I sat beside her and opened her beer before passing it to her. I tore into the pretzels, decided they were edible, and passed those over to her too. She sipped and munched, singing



along in between swallows. Completely unconcerned that she was letting loose in front of a stranger.

Her voice was better than average. Deep, husky, with a hint of gravel that brought to mind Janis Joplin if you tilted your head just right. She seemed to know the lyrics to everything.

At the first commercial break, she turned to me. “What’s your name?”

“Kellan McGuire.” The devil on my shoulder was far too curious. “Do you know who I am?”

“Should I?”

That made me smile. “Well, we did grow up in the same town, and I knew of you.” A cop-out, but I was allowed a few.

“Yeah, but I’m one of the Kellys. Everyone knows us in Turnbull. We’re like the Kardashians, without the bling or the scandals.”

I groaned. “You’re not like them. Trust me. I’ve met—” I broke off and cleared my throat. Luckily she was staring at the latest pop star du jour on the TV and not paying attention to me.

Last thing I needed to do was show my hand by admitting I knew one of them. I rather liked that Magpie didn’t know I was famous. All right, semi-famous now. I definitely wasn’t a household name yet. Maybe I never would be.

But she didn’t know me from Adam. I was just anonymous Kellan, a gruff jerk from Turnbull who’d let her into his house and made her a shitty sandwich and gawked at her truly spectacular tits.

Margaret was singing again, and the artist hadn’t even started yet. Guess she was warming up. Probably more than the woman in a leather jumpsuit and false eyelashes onstage had bothered to do.

Being on both sides of the stage had taught me how many shortcuts were taken by the talent—and their managers. As many as they could get away with. Not Wilder Mind. We

rehearsed the shit out of everything. We had a work ethic, and fame wasn't going to change us.

I hoped.

“You really tell people to call you Margaret?” I blurted, feeling like a jackass as she blinked at me. Her eyes were definitely more out-of-focus than they'd been. Maybe she'd hit her limit.

“No. I just told you that on the off-chance you didn't know my family.” She sighed and took a long gulp. “Fat chance.”

I stretched my arm along the back of the couch and toyed with the ends of her wet hair. She shot me a glance, lowering her lids until I found myself riveted by her thick dark lashes fluttering against her cheeks. Her pulse was probably just as jumpy. She was unnerved by me, and I liked that. I enjoyed being in control and spending time with a woman who didn't try to mount me like a damn show horse the second she glimpsed the anaconda in my jeans.

Not that most of them really cared about my dick. The part of me they wanted a crack at was in my back pocket and getting fatter with every passing month. Aka my wallet.

“What do you prefer to be called?”

“Let me guess,” she said drily. “We've now reached the portion of the evening where you're going to try to feel me up, all casual-like.”

I had to grin. This babe let me get away with zero shit. “Who said I'd be casual? Maybe I just intended to haul you on my lap.”

She jerked a shoulder. “What would that consist of, exactly?” When I didn't reply, she circled a finger. “The... hauling.”

I tried to keep the surprise off my face. I hadn't expected Magpie Kelly to lead me into this kind of conversation. Just proved my initial assessment that she was a pro at keeping me off my game.

“Hmm. Guess I’d start by pulling you on my lap and facing you toward the TV. Since you like to sing and all. Though how you know all these crappy songs is beyond me. Pop’s your thing, huh?”

Yet another reason why she wouldn’t know me or my band if *this* was the kind of music she preferred. We were a helluva lot harder-edged than the Luscious Lovahboys. Yes, that was the band’s actual name.

God save me.

“I listen to a lot of different stuff. Country too. A little R&B.”

I grunted. Yep, she wouldn’t be hearing Wilder Mind anytime soon.

Not that I cared if she knew my music. After tonight, I wouldn’t be talking to her again. It had been a complete accident she’d spun out in front of my house. Since I doubted I’d be getting my sister on the phone tonight, we’d just have to deal with each other until the morning.

From the way she was staring at the side of my face, Margaret was still waiting for my answer regarding the hauling thing.

“So I’m singing and sitting on your lap,” she prompted. “Then what?”

A very good question. What kind of answer was Magpie looking for? The truth or something sweet and romanticized?

Not that it mattered. I’d be straight with her and trust she could handle it. If she couldn’t, perhaps she’d learn next time not to ask questions she wasn’t prepared to hear the answers to.

“Then I’d probably push back your hair so I could kiss your neck.” If I wasn’t imagining things, she sucked in a breath. “Just light kisses at first, so you didn’t stop focusing on the TV.”

“Making sure I was distracted while you enacted your devious plan?”

“Making you come until you scream isn’t devious. It’s a damn charitable act.”

She choked on her mouthful of beer, then immediately went back for another hit. For a few moments, she stared at the screen. Not singing. I wasn’t even sure she was still breathing.

“So you think you could do that?”

“Kiss your neck?” Knowing full well she didn’t mean the neck thing at all. “Sure.”

“No. The other.”

“Other. Hmm. Coming, you mean?”

“Yes.”

She was fiddling with her hair and looking anywhere but at me. Instead of teasing her, I wanted to know more. To peel back her layers and delve inside—and that wasn’t just my way of getting in her pants.

Well, under her towel. *My* towel. Because knowing she was wrapped up in something that smelled like me was sexy as fuck.

“You said you weren’t a virgin.” I touched her bare knee with the backs of my fingers, expecting her to jolt. She just took a shuddery breath. “Is that true?”

“Yes. Derek and I had sex a lot.”

I instantly hated Derek and I had no idea who he was.

“Derek who?”

She bit her lip as she smiled. “You’re growling again.”

Didn’t surprise me. “Answer the question.”

“Derek Smiley, my ex-boyfriend. We were going to get married once he’d saved up enough for a proper ring. I didn’t care about that. He did. At least that’s what he said. He was building his nest egg for us, working three jobs. Lies. All lies.” She gripped her beer and rubbed her thumb through the condensation. “He ran off with a stripper,” she whispered.

“Excuse me?”

“Yeah. How lame, right? For me, not him. I imagine bagging a stripper was probably the pinnacle of his life. Much more exciting than the famed Kelly virgin. By the way, none of us were virgins past eighteen. So just in case you had some purity fantasy going on, sorry to burst your bubble.”

I shifted uncomfortably. “Fantasies aren’t to be judged.”

She giggled, and I decided it might be the best sound in the universe.

“Really?”

“Absolutely.”

“I’m not sure I have any, other than actually coming during sex. I never have. Before or sometimes after, yes, but during? Unicorn.” She swigged back more beer then frowned and tipped the bottle upside down. “Aww. It’s empty.”

I laughed. “Sorry, babe. I think you’ve hit your limit.”

“Why? It’s New Year’s Eve. I want to get my party on.” She licked her lips. “I still have one condom left.”

Just like that, my cock stirred. Pathetic. If I was being honest, it had been stirring in her presence all night.

She was still lounging around in only a towel, and I could smell my shampoo on her from where I was sitting. Having my scent on her only made it harder to keep my hand from veering into her silky dark hair to pull her head back. Her full lips would part and she’d inhale deeply, and I wouldn’t be able to stop myself.

I’d take, and keep right on taking. And that wasn’t fair to do to a girl like her. One who didn’t understand the rules.

Fuck and run. No feelings, no strings. Definitely no “I’ll call you” afterward.

She was a nice girl who baked bread for neighbors. Bread that was probably a solid brick now. Like the condom that had to be in her purse out in her car, because she sure didn’t have any pockets under my towel.

“Is that supposed to entice me? You’ve got one rubber left from Smiley dude, so I’m supposed to grab you and blow your mind?”

“Sure. That’d be fine.”

I had to laugh. She was something else. “I think that’s the beer talking, not you. In the morning, you’ll be glad cooler heads prevailed. Meaning mine.”

“Is it that you don’t find me sexy? It’s okay if you don’t. Maeve is a hard act to live up to. She knows that tie a cherry stem with her tongue trick and everything.”

“Maeve was a long time ago. I had different tastes back then.”

“Uh oh. You’re not one of those Christian Grey-type guys, are you? I don’t like to be whipped. I’m kind of pain averse, actually.”

“Huh? Who said anything about whipping?”

She shrugged. “I guess I’ll have another beer.”

“I’m the one being forced to watch this New Year’s crap and you’re the one getting loaded.”

“Ha. Loaded. Right. Fine, we’ll just change the channel.” She grabbed the remote from between her thigh and the arm of the couch and flipped channels, stopping at something that was distinctly not PG. Or even R.

Try X.

“Wow.” She tilted her head to the side like a puppy. “You pay for this?”

“Better than the stuff you get for free,” I tossed back, reaching over her for the remote. “Margaret, give me that.”

“You know what they called me.”

Halfway leaning across her lap, I stopped and turned my head. Her mouth, puffy and vulnerable, was inches from mine.

“You called me it earlier. Magpie. Because I talk too much and I’m too out there. Always the girl with the crazy ideas.

Like wanting to be a district attorney, when Turnbull would have to buy a horse to even be a two-horse town.”

Normally I would’ve laughed, but not when her big eyes were so serious. So intent on mine. “It’s just a nickname. Families give those out all the time.”

“Do you have one?”

“My mama calls me Kell. My dad calls me son. Bethy—” I stopped.

“Bethy. Before it was Beth. Is she your girlfriend?”

For some reason, it seemed vitally important that I be honest with her. “No, she’s my little sister.”

“Oh.” Her face brightened. “I prefer to be called Maggie, by the way.” She reached out to brush the hair away from my forehead, and I swear my damn heart just thudded to a stop.

What the hell was it about this girl?

“I have a request.”

All I could do was nod.

“Can you call me Maggie when you kiss me?”

SIX



# MAGGIE

“I’M NOT GOING TO KISS YOU.”

I was disappointed, but I did my best not to show it. I might’ve had two beers in me, but I was still lucid enough to know that I was probably acting out of character.

But I didn’t care. I wanted to have fun. To be someone other than myself for one night.

Kellan wasn’t a stripper, and I wasn’t looking to have revenge sex. Though that screaming orgasm he’d mentioned did sound kind of nice.

For once I wasn’t even thinking about Derek. Except to realize I wasn’t. I just was thinking about myself, and how I’d missed out on so many things because I was so worried about being safe and good and careful. I didn’t want to end up a statistic. Someone who trusted the wrong person and got roofied or something.

Hell, that could’ve already happened tonight, but for some reason, I wasn’t afraid of Kellan. Uneasy at times, but not afraid. He wouldn’t hurt me, at least not physically.

He picked up the remote and turned the channel.

*Bye-bye porno.*

I forced down my dismay. So what if I wasn’t a siren? He was a sexy guy and probably had his pick of women. You’d think the surly thing would put females off, but it hadn’t put me off so I couldn’t talk.

I was partially drunk though and not worthy of being trusted. Plus, I'd dated Derek for four years, hadn't I?

"Four years," I mumbled, staring at the TV.

Kellan had put it back on the New Year's Eve show. Weird, since I knew he didn't like it.

He glanced at me. "Huh?"

"I was with Derek for four years. Do you know he didn't go down on me until year three?" Kellan had been mid-guzzle and choked as I shook my head. "Said it wasn't respectful toward me."

"Tool," he muttered.

"No, his tool wasn't anything to write home about either. Probably seven inches while fully erect." I held out my fingers and tried to think back. "Hmm, maybe six-and-a-half. Flaccid, I think he was like four."

"Wow. You're harsh." Kellan slid me a sideways grin, and I blinked. The expression turned his face from merely attractive to holy-fucking-shit, melt-my-panties.

And yes, I just swore in my head again—twice—and no, I did not care.

"I like it, Maggie," Kellan said, holding out his bottle to clink. Mine was empty but I did it just the same. It felt like a victory, sitting here with this near-stranger on New Year's Eve and telling him about my failed relationship.

I wasn't crying. Didn't even feel misty. I felt...strong. Like I'd already handled the situation with Derek, so now the time had come to stop hiding from life.

But that didn't mean I was going to throw myself at this guy. I was certain Maeve hadn't had to. Short of telling him that I wasn't quite as pure as he believed, I didn't know how else to convince him I could be blasé about a one-night-stand too.

It would help if I convinced myself first.

I shivered, and I wasn't sure if it was from cold or nerves. Turned out walking the talk was harder than it looked. Too bad I couldn't sign up for vixen training at community college along with my regular courseload.

Without saying anything, Kellan reached behind him and grabbed the plaid throw draped on the back of the sofa. He wrapped it around me much as he had the towel, tucking in the edge in the front. Not making eye contact as he hid most of my body from his view.

"Thanks." I swallowed and tugged at the hem of the blanket. "This is big enough for both of us if you get cold. Just boxers aren't exactly enough for this weather."

"Nah. I'm fine. Hot-blooded." He quirked his lips and rose, walking out of the room before I could reply.

He was being a total gentleman, exactly what I'd hoped for when I walked through his door. So I had no right to feel disappointed. It wasn't his fault that I'd decided to shed some of my Derek-related bad memories courtesy of Kellan's rock hard, tattooed body.

I sighed. Oh well. At least looking was free.

Tucking my legs up under me, I focused on the TV. The show would be going for another couple of hours until midnight, so I would just sing my little heart out and laugh at the jokes that weren't all that funny.

Somewhere around eleven, Kellan decided to return with two beers, a bottle of water, and a plate of what appeared to be snacks in hand. The pretzels had sufficed since I'd missed out on finishing my sandwich while it was still edible, but I wasn't at all sure about the irregularly-shaped hunks of cheese and pepperoni.

"I checked dates," he said when I just stared at the plate he held out. "You won't die."

"Promise?"

"Eat, Red." After I took the plate, he opened my beer and passed it to me along with the bottle of water. "Last water I

had left. Must've known a sexy brunette would wreck in front of my house while I was here this weekend."

The words *sexy brunette* made a flicker of heat shoot through me. I could tell he had to fight to abide by usual niceties, so he probably wouldn't lie out of kindness either.

"Thank you." I ate a chunk of cheese and a thin slice of pepperoni, washing them down with the beer. That same warmth rolled through my system as before. Thank God.

I was so over being cold.

"Still watching this?" He nodded at the screen. "Anyone decent show up yet?"

"Depends what you consider decent. What kind of music do you like?"

He scratched the hair darkening his chin. It wasn't a full beard, more like a few days' growth. I liked the look on him.

"Harder stuff," he said finally. "Fatal Legend, Oblivion, 30 Seconds to Mars."

"Hmm. None of that here. How do you feel about Madonna?"

His curved lips as he tossed back his beer answered that.

We ate and drank in companionable silence through another few songs, passing the plate back and forth. When a band I'd never heard of came onstage, I glanced at Kellan again. "What do you do?"

"Do?"

"Yes, you know, for a job. I already told you I'm in school, studying criminal justice."

"Not sure you spelled that out in so many words."

"Close enough. I have a couple of part-time jobs too. It took me a while to figure out what I wanted to do."

"Jobs doing what?"

I didn't miss that he'd diverted me from my question, but I let him. Momentarily. "As a secretary in an accounting firm a

few days a week, and I also work at Pizza Uno on weekends and the occasional extra shift.”

“Full-time in school?”

“Yes. I got started late. I have a lot of ground to cover. Of course, I’ll probably move to a bigger town like Syracuse or Albany if I intend to become district attorney someday. Probably Syracuse. That guy’s been in office forever. He usually runs unopposed.” I shook my head. “Can’t imagine no one wanting that job.”

“You actually know who the district attorney is in those places?”

“Sure.”

“Are you a nerd?”

“I watch *Dr. Who* and *Firefly* on repeat and I’ve read Harry Potter eight times so far, so what do you think?”

Again, the corner of his mouth lifted.

“Your turn,” I said lightly. “What do you do?”

“I work with musicians.”

Interesting. Explained his derision of the bands onstage, if that was his business. “You do that in Turnbull? How? Or do you travel down to the city for work?”

The city being New York, but everyone from around Turnbull knew which city I meant. No one called Turnbull anything but a town, and it was barely even that.

“No. I don’t live in Turnbull anymore. Haven’t for a few years. I live in LA now.”

“Oh.” And there was no reason at all for me to feel disappointed.

“My family’s still here obviously, so I come back.”

“How often?” Nope, that didn’t sound desperate. Okay, just a little. But shit, the first new friend—sort of friend—I’d made in how long and he didn’t even live on the same coast anymore.

Figured.

“Now and then, when I have reason to.” His gaze rested on mine for a shade longer than was reasonable before he took another slug from his beer.

“So what’s your reason? To see your parents and your sister? Old friends?”

“All the above, plus my niece. Rainy.” He smiled a genuine smile, and I found myself doing the same.

“Pretty name. How old is she?”

“Three, and she’s a total spitfire just like her mother. Smart as a damn whip. She can count to twenty already and she’s reading and everything.”

“That’s great. Takes after you, maybe?”

“Ha.” His shoulders shook with silent laughter. “I sucked in school. Only thing I aced in those days was making out with the cheerleaders. That I was an expert in.”

“Are cheerleaders better at sex than the average girl?”

“You would ask that.”

“Just wondering.”

“You wonder an awful lot. No, they probably aren’t. But the uniforms are hot.”

“So if I’d worn a cheerleader uniform instead of a snowsuit, we might be rolling around on the rug right now?”

“What rug? I have hardwood floors.”

“Just saying. Play along.”

“If you were wearing a cheerleading outfit in these temperatures, you’d be blue and suffering from frostbite. And hypothermia isn’t sexy. Not much range of motion in frozen limbs.”

“True. But some guys don’t care if the girl doesn’t move, so…”

“Tool,” he muttered again.

I smiled and sipped my beer. “So what kind of musicians do you work with? And doing what exactly? Managing them? Set work? I’m afraid I don’t know all that goes into putting on shows. I just enjoy them.”

“Managing them.”

“That must be exciting, being so close to the action.”

He shrugged and tipped back his beer. He was drinking a lot more slowly than I was. “It’s not all it’s cracked up to be.”

“No? Why not?”

“Because a lot of music types are egotistical fucks with more attitude than talent. You need ego, but you also need the goods to back it up.”

“That’s true about everything, isn’t it?”

“Music attracts the vain. Some of them just want attention for as little as possible.”

I nodded sagely. “Fame whores.”

He cocked a brow. “Miss Kelly, I do believe you just said a naughty word.”

“I know a few of them,” I said before swallowing more beer, smiling around the mouth of my bottle.

“Me too. Maybe we should compare notes.”

“I think you just don’t want to watch the Luscious Lovahboys’ final set.”

“You are absolutely correct about that.”

Laughing with him felt so natural, as natural as arguing with him outside had. Normally I was shy around new people. Not so with this one. Of course, the way we’d met hadn’t been usual in any shape or form.

It was the kind of story meant to tell grandchildren one day. If I was the sort of girl who fancied romantic happy endings, which I so was not.

One-night-stand girl, reporting for booty.

“I think maybe you should share your dirty words first,” I said. “So I know how deep we’re going here.”

“Oh, I always go deep.”

Right. I gulped down beer to wet my parched throat. “You go first.”

“Tits.”

“You said that before. I can handle that.” Especially since from the direction of his gaze, he was using his X-ray vision to see mine through the blanket he’d wrapped so carefully around me.

“Making it easy on you. Pussy.”

I jerked a shoulder though it was hard to keep my face composed. “I have one. Ain’t no big.”

“Cock.”

It wasn’t so much the word itself as the rough growl of his voice. That growl turned me into putty.

I licked my lips. “Good one.”

He leaned over and shocked the hell out of me by flicking his tongue along the side of my chin. I didn’t jerk back, but it was a close thing. “Missed a drop,” he murmured as he eased back.

I rubbed my chin, mainly to hold in the warmth a moment longer. If just his tongue had caused my body to surge to life, what would his lips and hands and all the rest of him do?

I might not survive it, but I was willing to see.

“I thought you weren’t going to kiss me.”

“You think that was a kiss? Oh Red, you’ve missed out.”

It was probably his smirk that drove me over the edge. That or sheer sexual starvation. I hadn’t always been thrilled with Derek’s skills in bed, but I’d subscribed to the bread and water theory. Substandard sustenance was still enough to keep body and soul together. Besides, it wasn’t like I’d had much to



compare him to, other than romance novels and my own remarkably dirty imagination.

Now this living, breathing cranky Adonis of a man was sitting right beside me half naked. Heat pumped from his massive body. He had a smart mouth, a snarky attitude, and mostly sucked at social niceties.

Kellan McGuire was the opposite of my ex in every way.

And he wanted me, no matter what he said. I could see it in his eyes. His gorgeous molten brown eyes. Like hot cocoa set on boil.

I glimpsed more in them than arousal. That was easy, and I'd seen it a few times from men. Not ones like him, but men just the same.

Genuine affection lurked in his gaze, and a hint of fear. Somehow little ol' me, Magpie Kelly, had made this huge, grumpy sex god afraid.

That was the biggest aphrodisiac of all.

Carefully, I set aside the plate of snacks and my nearly empty beer. I dug out the water bottle wedged between my hip and the arm of the couch, taking a quick sip to get rid of the yeasty taste.

I wanted to taste something different altogether.

Before he could counter the move, I shifted onto his lap. His pupils flared wide and he bobbed his beer, grabbing hold of it where it now rested between my breasts. I gasped at the cold even through the layers of fabric, and a muscle in his jaw ticked, a warning I'd be foolish not to heed.

This man unleashed would be more than I could imagine. Possibly more than I could handle and come out whole.

And I did not care.

"You said you wouldn't kiss me," I said, brushing his hair away from his face again as I had before.

The softness was a shock just as it had been the first time. His face and body were all hard angles, but his hair and his

eyes and his mouth—oh God, his mouth—appeared so soft.

He gave a minute shake of his head, that muscle in his jaw jumping once more.

*Last chance to back out, Magpie. You are seriously out of your depth here.*

Exhibit A, the rigid column coming to life between my legs. Straining against me where I was already wet and hot and so needy for more.

“So I’m going to kiss you.”

SEVEN

# KELLAN

WARM, SILKY LIPS BRUSHED OVER MINE. TENDERLY. AS IF WE were friends who'd met up after years of separation.

Good, *chaste* friends.

Fuck that. She'd ripped the lid off this thing, so now we were going for a dive.

I slid my hand into her hair and molded my lips to hers, tilting her where I wanted her. I didn't press for entrance. Not right away. That was the kind of dick move pulled by guys who didn't care about a woman's pleasure.

I wanted her to open to me of her own volition. Always.

Impatiently, she fisted her hand in my hair and tugged my head where *she* wanted it as our slow, shallow kisses turned into more. Somehow I knew it would always be that way between us. Both of us fighting for dominance until we found our spot.

The spot where her moan poured over me like honey, tearing an answering groan from my throat. I cupped her cheek, spanning her delicate skin with my fingers, opening my eyes as her lips trembled apart for me.

She jerked forward on my lap, her grip becoming restless in my hair at the first brush of our tongues.

One taste was all it took to make me ravenous.

I wasn't fully conscious of wrapping my arms around her and flipping her beneath me on the couch. Even less so of driving into the giving juncture between her legs, thankfully

protected by layers of material. Sort of protected. The towel and the throw were all rucked up around her, and good goddamn, I didn't think I could stop. Although I'd never fucked without a condom in my life, I wasn't at all sure I could hold back long enough to suit up.

If I even had a rubber. Which I did not.

"Fuck." I slammed my fist into the arm of the sofa beside her head, and she jumped, the blissed-out expression on her face vanishing in favor of sheer terror.

"I'm sorry." I rubbed my thumb over her lower lip. "I didn't mean to scare you."

She exhaled shakily. "Can we just clarify about what? That it was...like *that*, or that you pinned me down and you're so hard and huge, or that you nearly took five years off my life by shaking the couch with your meaty fist?"

It was such a crappy time to laugh. Then I stopped and stared down at her. Her nearly black hair was spread out over the arm of the sofa, her pale blue eyes blurry, her lips soft and wet from mine.

"What did you mean, like that?"

"Huh?"

"You said it was *like that*. Explain."

Her throat moved as she swallowed, and I wanted to lick it. Wanted to lick her damn everywhere, to explore every secret hollow and crevice of her curvy body. She was slight some places and full in others, and I ached with the need to imprint every inch with my touch. Fuck that Smiley bastard. She was mine now.

Mine for a night. Christ. What the hell was I thinking? Had lust really addled my brain that much?

Evidently so.

"You were there, right?" Her voice quaked. "I don't know how to explain. I just...it's never been like that for me before. Ever. Not even the first time I kissed Derek, and he told me I looked like Snow White."

I threw back my head and laughed. “No fuckin’ way. Lines like that work?” As soon as I asked the question, I made the mistake of glancing at her face.

Hurt expression achieved once again. Jesus. I was an asshole.

“I mean, you kind of do...”

The corner of her mouth lifted. “If you’re going to lie, I’d rather you say I look like Megan Fox. Snow White is kind of untouchable.”

I fisted both hands in her hair and ranged my body over hers, easing into that cradle between her legs as if it had been made for me. Hard to say which of us moaned louder. “You totally look like Megan Fox,” I murmured, hovering my lips over hers as I distantly registered the announcer onscreen counting down to midnight.

“Liar.” She was smiling as she placed her finger over my mouth, barely holding our faces apart. “But I appreciate the effort.”

“Maybe I want in your pants or something.”

She arched a delicate dark brow. “Or something? Can you be more specific?”

I shifted my head and spoke against her ear. “I want to slide so deep into your hot, tight pussy that you don’t have enough breath to scream.”

“Oh.” Her chest shuddered against mine. “Is that all?”

The TV announcer shouted that it was midnight. The dawn of a new year. Time to kiss the one you loved, or the one you’d love tonight.

“That’s everything.” I slid my mouth across her cheek until it covered hers.

She kissed me back with the same fervor that was burning in me. We didn’t take time to ease in. Not this time. This time it was all slashing lips and eager tongues and hungry, wandering hands.

Mine especially. If I didn't touch her naked body, I was going to fucking explode.

I unwrapped the blanket I'd wound around her in the hopes of preventing just this. Just like the big, bulky towel, its purpose was to conceal. If I couldn't see her long as hell legs and her tiny waist and those incredible breasts, maybe I wouldn't throw her down like a damn savage and whisper dirty things into her ear.

Maybe not, but I hadn't counted on her climbing onto my lap. Hadn't counted on her in a million ways.

She wasn't using me for my growing fame. She didn't think I had any. I'd told her a white lie, and she'd accepted it without a blink.

A year ago, even six months ago, it had been more true than not. I hadn't expected to step out from behind the desk. When I'd arrived in LA with a rainbow Mohawk and cockiness and energy to spare, I was solely focused on doing the best for my artists. Back then, I'd had no illusions about stepping onstage myself. I played music on the side, and I'd put that dream aside for reality.

Then my dream had become my life, and I'd soon found it had a dark underbelly. I might get to perform and sing my songs and play guitar for women who couldn't get enough of me, and hell, I might even get a little coin.

But I wouldn't get *this*—a woman who gazed up at me with eyes huge with excitement and wonder, wanting me for me. Not anymore. I'd sold that dream to buy another.

Except for tonight.

Unwrapping her was like peeling the paper off a gift. When I got through one layer, there was still the towel. Pulling that apart and hearing her little hitches of breath had to be the sexiest thing I'd experienced in far too long.

Maybe ever.

She was so wide-eyed, so innocent even if she wasn't a virgin. Did it make me a bastard that I wanted to be the one to

show her everything? I craved the chance to teach her every dark, depraved thing scrolling through my head.

Her fingers brushed my scruff and I flicked my gaze up to hers. One more pull of the towel and she'd be fully bared.

A present just for me.

“What're you thinking right now?” she asked softly.

I chuckled. If any other woman had asked me that right before fucking, I would've aimed for the door. Sex wasn't about thinking. It was about letting your actions do the talking.

But she wasn't any other woman. I didn't know why she wasn't, but she was not.

“I'm thinking I don't have any goddamn condoms, and I'm really pissed off about that.”

Her face fell and then she grinned. It was like being plunged from darkness into bright, sparkling light. “I do. I told you. It's in the car.”

“The car is like ten million miles away right now.”

“True.” She chewed on her lower lip. “You could always, you know, pull out.”

“And come in my hand instead of inside you.” Sounded like the worst idea ever.

“You could come on me.” Her abused lip disappeared between her teeth again and I had to shut my eyes to keep from grabbing my dick. “Anywhere you want.”

“Fuck.” I buried my face in her hair, drawing in long, heady draughts of my shampoo. That she smelled like me was another turn-on in an ocean of them.

Swallowing hard, I tugged on the towel and squeezed my eyes tight like a damn kid. If I didn't see her, if I just explored her with my hands, maybe I could hold onto a shred of my sanity.

Her flesh was so soft. Almost like satin. I stroked my fingers down her throat and over her heart, stopping to feel the crazy beat. She was scared too. Overwhelmed.



It wasn't just me.

She rolled her hips impatiently against mine and I cupped one of her breasts, eager to touch every part of her. To learn every inch. Her nipples were harder than diamonds and one flick of my thumb had her arching.

"Legs open," I demanded, and she dropped one foot to the floor, giving me all the room I needed.

I stroked one breast then the other, testing the touches that drew the biggest response. What made her shiver and buck and drag her nails up the back of my neck.

"You won't have to pull my face to your pussy, Red." I had to open my eyes. Just for a second. I was losing it without knowing what she looked like at every step. "I'm trying like fuck not to dive on it like a damn starving man."

She whimpered, tossing her head back and forth on the arm of the sofa.

I clamped my hand over her slit and squeezed.

"Yes. God, yes." She dropped her head back over the side, baring her neck to me. I couldn't stop myself from grazing her pale skin with my teeth, dragging them upward to make her delicate flesh pink. Her eyes flew open, her gaze latching on mine as I slipped a finger into the inferno between her legs she'd kept from me all night.

Like a goddamn fire. So fucking wet. I couldn't believe she could be that ready so fast. Just from a couple of kisses and a few fumbling touches.

"He didn't take care of you, did he? Fucking bastard."

She stared at me silently, watching me as I moved down her body. I didn't need an answer. I had it already, just seeing the dampness waiting for me on the swollen lips of her pussy beneath her trim strip of dark curls.

Time for the thirsty man to take a drink.

Flattening my hand on her lower belly, I closed my mouth over her. She fisted her fingers in my hair, tugging on me from the first lick. Motionless? Like hell. She was like a live wire

beneath me, spreading her thighs before I even had to ask. Splitting them wide open so that every part of her was on display.

I rubbed my thumb over her stiff clit, so slowly that she ground her teeth together. Now I was watching her face. I had to see every response as I discovered her limits and shoved her over them.

Speeding up my thumb made her tug harder. Slowing it down earned me the joy of seeing her raise her shoulders from the couch, thrusting her perfect breasts high. Her ruby nipples were like cherries meant for my mouth. I sucked one while I slipped even lower, using my thumb to wedge inside her entrance. Inching in as she gasped and moaned, gyrating her hips helplessly in her urgency to make me go faster.

I didn't. I slid a finger inside her to go with my thumb, my gaze on her eyes as her pupils blew wide.

“So goddamn tight. Squeeze my fingers.”

She did, her throat moving as another moan escaped. The sound seemed to surprise her so I scissored my fingers, stretching her methodically.

I wanted more of her sounds. I wanted them all.

“You're going to strangle my cock,” I said against her breast, pressing deeper into her snug channel. “How many orgasms can you give me first?”

“I can't,” she whispered, shaking her head.

I withdrew my soaked fingers and pressed them against her mouth. “Suck.”

Hesitantly, she drew the tips between her teeth. Moaning softly as I pushed them inside.

“That's what you've given me so far. Gimme more.”

I moved back down her body and yanked her leg over my shoulder. And this time I didn't go slow, or ease her in.

Or me for that matter.

Sliding in two fingers, I sealed my mouth around her clit and sucked. The thigh against my ear shook and she bowed off the couch, chasing my erotic kisses as I slipped back then sank in again for more. I flicked my tongue between my drenched knuckles, fingerfucking her pussy with everything I had, half crazed to swallow her down. She was close. Her heart throbbing against my lips, her cries thin and high. The roar in my ears drowning out everything but her. Already I was tuned to her, and the need she couldn't hold back a second longer.

But I could.

At the last second, I shifted and bit her inner thigh. She groaned as I flattened my hand over her quaking pussy, offering enough pressure to keep her revved but not enough to go over.

“Mean,” she said, all wounded eyes and pouty lips.

Somehow I laughed through the constriction about to turn my dick inside out. She was worth it.

When her sobbing breaths started to slow, I lowered my head again. I aimed straight for her clit, licking it with short, fast strokes. I slid two fingers inside without hesitation. She was so slick and tight, so ready to come on my hand.

I flexed my hips, driving my aching cock into the cushions. Wasn't enough. When she spasmed against my tongue and her walls quivered around my fingers, I drew her clit between my teeth. I didn't stop sucking through her cries and the frantic throb of her heart against my lips. She yanked at my hair as she flooded my mouth, and I'd never tasted anything sweeter.

*Mine.* The word wasn't just a passing thought now, but a primal rhythm in my blood.

Gently, I set down her leg and moved up her body to frame her face with hands that shook. I met her mouth with my own, slicking my tongue against hers. Wanting her to taste what I had. Sharing it with her while she coiled her limp arms around my neck and hung on.

“Thank you,” she breathed once we finally separated.

I lifted a brow.

“I was taught to always say thanks when I received a gift. I’m pretty sure that’s the best one I ever got. Like...by far.”

“Jesus.” I turned my face into her hair and laughed. “You’re something else.”

“You too.” She skimmed her hand down my back and wiggled her fingers under my waistband. “Can I see your ass now? I bet it’s fantastic.” She slid her hand lower under the silky fabric and purred like a damn cat as she dug her nails into my flesh. “Oh yes. Fantastic. So tight.”

“I think that was my line,” I muttered, my ears heating.

She slid her hand around to the front and cupped my cock, her fingers stretching and not coming close to meeting. Just like her lips.

“Holy crap. Should I say thanks again now or later?”

I shoved her shoulder as she giggled and drew me back again for another kiss. A sweet, sloppy one this time, punctuated by more giggles as I traced my fingers up and down her sides. “I have to go outside,” I said between kisses.

“No, you don’t. It might not fit the first time, but we can keep trying.”

My only response was a growl, which made her giggle again.

“Condom,” I reminded her.

“Oh.”

“Yeah, oh.”

She nudged my face back and twirled a finger around her nipple, batting her eyelashes. Because I knew exactly what she meant, I pinched her hip.

“Did I say I thought you were innocent?”

“Yes. I kind of am, in terms of sheer variety of experience. But I read dirty books, so that makes up for a lot.”

I grunted and pulled her curious hand out of my boxers. If I didn't get up and go now, I'd never be able to.

“Wait here. Don't get dressed.”

She braced her head on her hand and yanked the throw over her breasts. “Nah, those snow pants are restrictive. Why do you think I sat around in a towel all night?”

“To torture me?”

Her lips curved. “Maybe a little. But I tortured myself more. It's freezing in here.” Her eyes twinkled. “Luckily the fire and the beer kept me from frostbite. And now...other things.”

“The other things weren't on my agenda for tonight, but you can be persuasive when you want to be.”

“Mmm-hmm. Are you still in here? Go already.”

“Going. Need to grab my pants from the other room. Cold out there, ya know.”

“Here. Save yourself a trip.” She unwound the throw from around herself and tossed it to me before tugging up the towel to cover her breasts and between her legs. “Are you sure the temperature won't hurt it?”

I shrugged, deliberately misunderstanding her. “Cold doesn't break dicks. A prolonged case of blue balls might cause me some harm though.”

“Smarty pants. I mean the condom. Let me look on my phone—hey, I don't have my phone.” She patted her hip. “Oh God, it's been out there in the freezing car all night. It's probably broken, and I never called my parents to let them know I wouldn't be home tonight after all.” She rubbed her forehead as if it ached. “They probably think I'm at Ken's but —”

“Who the hell is Ken?”

“You're growling again.”

I crossed my arms and waited.

“Ken is my best friend. Kendra,” she added with extra emphasis on the second syllable. “Why do you care? It’s not like you intend to call me tomorrow, Mr. I Live in LA and Hobnob with Musicians.”

I did more than ‘hobnob’ with them, but she didn’t need to know that. “I’m not a call tomorrow kind of guy.”

“Good.” She jerked a shoulder and the towel slipped, revealing the mouth-watering curve of her breast. “I don’t want that. I’ve decided I’m going to be a one-night stand kind of girl. I’ve spent enough months whining about Derek.”

My sore, still not completely deflated dick—thanks to the glimpse I’d gotten of her breast—really wasn’t interested in her relationship issues. But I felt bad for her, and she was a nice girl.

Way too nice for the likes of me, so what the fuck was I doing with her?

I scratched the back of my neck. “So, ahh, how long has it been? Since you guys ended.”

“Two months since we first called it quits. But we weren’t sleeping together at the very end. He was always too tired from working so hard. Truth was he was banging the stripper.” She sighed and shifted halfway into a sitting position, somehow missing the fact that both of her nipples were now peeking above the towel and waving hello.

And my eager cock was saluting right back.

“That’s unfortunate.”

“Not so much. You have a better ass.” She grinned at me, and I was frigging dazzled. Like lights blinding me, can’t see due to the damn spots in my vision type of shit.

*Fuck me.*

Time to get outside so we could finish what we’d started. Then I could move on and accept the reality of what this was. Excellent sex with a hot as hell, cute girl who was a little crazy and a lot fun and different from any of the women I’d been with in a long time.

“Keys?”

She flushed and bit her lip. “Think I might’ve left them in the car. I panicked when I went off the road.”

This chick, man.

“I’ll be right back.” I tossed her the blanket. If she thought I was going out in a damn near blizzard in just that and my boxers, she was nuts. “Keep warm for me.”

“Oh, I’m warm. Running hot right now.”

“We’ll see about that.”

“Can you grab my phone too? It’s in my purse. Just bring the whole thing in. Please and thank you.”

“Uh-huh. Anything else?”

“I wouldn’t mind some chocolate. PMS is a bitch.”

Ignoring her, I headed to the front door and grabbed the sweats and hoodie I’d thrown on a peg. I tended to strip down the moment I came in the door.

Once I’d pulled them back on, I stuffed my feet into my boots and grabbed my coat. And opened my door to a world of white.

Fucking hell. Her pussy was the only one in the universe worth dealing with that.

“Be careful,” she called, her words sucked away by me closing the door.

I stomped my way through drifts that were way higher than they’d been even hours ago. By morning, we’d need to dig our way out of here.

Maybe we could just stay in and fuck all weekend. Scavenge for whatever was left in the cupboards and discover a few new positions.

With one condom? Not likely.

A crazy part of me almost didn’t care. I’d never gone bareback before, but she was making me do things tonight that made no sense. I was already so out of my comfort zone with

her. Next we'd be cuddling in the afterglow or some shit, and I wasn't even sure I'd mind.

I'd just blame it on the cold currently singeing my eyeballs and focus on getting that treasured piece of latex and back the hell inside.

Trudging through the snow, I made my way to her car, still tilted precariously in the ditch. I tipped my head back and stared at the cloudy sky. A night like this should've been prime weather for Beth to make some good money. Maybe she had more work than she could handle and that was why she wasn't answering the phone. Or calling me back, all these hours later.

Tomorrow I'd get over there as soon as I could shovel my way out of here. I'd give Maggie a ride home and we'd figure out how to get her car towed. Either through Beth or AAA or some other place.

Then I'd get on with having the rest of my relaxing solo weekend before I had to get my ass back to LA in time for the promotional tour for the single. That song release would mark the day my life officially became insane, possibly for good.

If I was lucky, even if living in a fishbowl no longer sounded nearly as incredible as I'd once believed.

I skidded down the side of the ditch and yanked on her car door handle. It took a few tries due to the damage and the cold—amazing how it was harder when I didn't have her nearby to show off for—but I finally pried the door open.

Getting inside wouldn't be nearly as easy.

Angling my body, I twisted and wedged inside, fumbling across the seat for the fluffy thing I figured had to be her purse. It looked like a chia pet made from pink fur. What the hell?

Halfway back out, I spotted a tinfoil-wrapped lump on the floor that had to be her friend's loaf of bread. I snagged that too and bumped my elbow against the bulging glove compartment, attempting to close it, but the contents spilled out everywhere. I could barely make out most of them in the



watery moonlight through the windshield. Mostly maps and papers and girl crap it looked like. Hairbrush and tampons and inexplicable female items. I dug through the stuff just in case she'd shoved chocolate in there too for emergencies—which was not a pussy thing to do since I was hoping to get laid—and was about to give up when a miraculous piece of foil practically jumped into my hand.

She kept her condoms in the glove compartment? Damn, girl.

My mind filled with images of her rolling around in the cramped backseat with the Smiley dude and I nearly crushed the foil in my fist. Nope, that wouldn't do.

Picturing me rolling around with her in the back, however, worked just fine. Okay, *her* rolling and bouncing, and me shoving her pale thighs wide before I slid deep into her slick pink pussy—

“Fuck.” I pushed my wrist against my twitching cock through my sweats. Just thinking about nailing her had me practically creaming in my damn pants.

*You really think you'll have burned that out of your system by tomorrow? Good luck, brother.*

I pocketed the condom and tried to pick up as much of the mess on the floor as I could. Impatience was riding me hard, so I pushed things into the glove compartment haphazardly and slammed the door closed. Then I backed out of the car and shut the door.

Shit, her keys.

Fighting the wind, I retrieved them through brute force and extreme desire for sex. And okay, so I wanted to do a nice thing. Turnbull was beyond safe, especially on a night like this, but the keys shouldn't be left outside any longer. Being trusting was one thing. Unsafe another.

*Isn't that why she's sleeping with you? Because she's way too trusting and sweet?*

Not going there again.

I slitted my eyes against the driving snow and trudged back to the house, clutching her ridiculous purse and her beloved loaf of bread as if they were priceless.

My stomach grumbled as I hunched my shoulders against the howling wind. I was going to enjoy eating that freaking bread almost as much as I'd loved eating her pussy.

Almost. Nothing could compare with that salty sweet perfection.

My cock leaped against the soft material of my sweats and I nearly groaned. I wanted to go down on her again. I'd have to get her off that way one more time before I finally pounded her deep.

So fucking deep.

I clomped across the small stoop, trying to dislodge the snow attached to my boots and slipping inside to soak my sweats and my feet. A hot shower sounded excellent, with my sexy little car wrecker for company. I wouldn't mind washing her back.

Or her front.

Pushing my shoulder against the door, I muscled it open. I juggled purse and bread and checked my pocket to make sure that important piece of foil was still safe and sound. Oh, and her keys. Perfect.

I set down what I'd retrieved and shrugged out of my coat, hanging it and my hoodie on the peg. I kicked off my sodden boots and shed my sweats—and boxers too.

The time for being subtle had passed, as evidenced by the major wood I was sporting as I carted her purse and bread into the living room.

Fussy pink purse, check, old lady's borrowed bread, check. Keys and rubber of glory, check.

Massive cold-proof boner, double check.

“Sorry, no chocolate, unless it's in this crazy thing.” I held up her purse by the handle and glanced at the couch.

She was sound asleep.

My chest tightened and my dick wilted, pretty much in succession. Then I smiled, because it matched the rest of the night.

I'd never forget it, that was for damn sure. Or her.

I set down her stuff and went to crouch beside the sofa, intending to adjust her blanket. She'd said she was cold, and she was half uncovered.

She rolled over, her arm dangling, thick lashes fluttering. "Kellan."

Softly, she started to snore.

Somehow that did it. Her murmuring my name while she was unconscious meant she had to sleep in my bed, even if no other woman ever had. Not here in my sanctuary. But she was already different in a matter of hours.

More different than I wanted to consider.

Carefully, I gathered her up in my arms, brushing kisses against her forehead as she stirred. She fell back asleep almost immediately and didn't wake as I carried her down the hall to my bedroom.

I placed her on the center of the bed and tugged up the covers. I'd have to start the fireplace in here too. She wasn't like me and hot despite the weather.

Besides, if she didn't realize I was doing it, this didn't count as taking care of her. I was the only one who would ever know, and for this moment, I could pretend. I could imagine that maybe I wasn't a dickhead rockstar who'd fuck her and roll out of bed to head to the next town and the next conquest.

That I was worthy of a girl like this wanting to marry me like she'd wanted to marry that Smiley dude. And not just for the money that would someday be mine if the fates—and a hell of a lot of hard work—aligned.

A lot of maybes, and no one was in my head to hear them but me.

Once I'd started the fire, I went to grab her stuff from the living room and set it on the nightstand, including the condom and her keys. Then I crawled into bed with her. Close, but not too close. Giving her space.

Until I couldn't any longer and slid my arm around her waist, drawing her against me. She smiled in her sleep and I was sunk. I shut my eyes and let myself pretend once more.

That this beautiful, funny woman was actually mine.

EIGHT

# MAGGIE

I WOKE IN DARKNESS.

I blinked, trying to figure out why the moonlight was slanting across the bedroom ceiling. It didn't in my bedroom at home, except on rare occasions. I turned my head, my eyes adjusting to the lack of light. No curtains? Mine were lacy and white and billowed in the breeze.

There was another glow on the ceiling, a flicker of orangish-yellow flames. I rose on one elbow, squinting at the fireplace opposite the bed. My gaze darted to the heavy arm pinning me down and my heart leaped into my throat before throbbing between my legs.

I didn't sleep with a man in my parents' house. Not even with Derek, and we'd all believed I would marry him one day. That was just the rules—no sleeping with the opposite sex outside of wedlock under my parents' roof. Since I appreciated being able to live there for low rent while I finished up my courses at the community college, I abided by their wishes. For the last couple of months, I hadn't had a man to invite over anyway.

Now I had one in bed with me—a huge, muscular guy with more than a little scruff that had abraded my thighs when he'd gone down on me. Something I wanted again, desperately.

He'd put me in his bed. When had I fallen asleep? Had we...

*No.* I remembered him going out to grab the condom and my purse from the car, but the rest was a blur. It was probably

because I had sucked down all that beer. I was a total lightweight, so it didn't take much. Add in the orgasm of the ages and no wonder I'd been down for the count.

Now I was just down for more sex. Like pronto. But that didn't mean I had full control of my mouth when Kellan opened a baleful eye and let his gaze drop to my exposed breasts.

"It ain't morning," he rumbled, and I swear my nipples tingled as if he'd sucked on them.

"No. I slept like the dead though." I rubbed my eyes. "You didn't roofie me, did you?"

Yep, that would be the "not in control of my mouth" portion of the program.

He tightened the arm around my waist and hoisted me on top of him so I was straddling his hips with the sheet twisted beneath my breasts. My natural inclination was to cover them, but I'd seen enough approval in his eyes as he gazed at my naked body tonight to brazen my way through. Even in the low light, I could tell he was checking me out and his open perusal emboldened me.

"I gave you three beers and one helluva orgasm before you passed out on me." His fingers dug into my waist. "I don't drug women. When I found you sleeping, I brought you to bed with me. Where we slept."

His tense tone made me want to soothe my thoughtless question. As a criminal justice student, sometimes me and my classmates employed weird ways of alleviating the heaviness of the topics we dealt with. Along with making morgue jokes and inappropriate remarks about serial killers, a few of us also had a fetish for slasher movies. I was guilty of all three.

"I'm sorry," I said quietly, rubbing his bare chest. Touching him freely was a revelation. His skin was rough with hair and so hot, barely seeming to contain the corded muscles beneath. "That was tasteless of me and a side effect of my studies. It's not anything to be kidded about and I apologize."

“Your studies lead you to talking about roofies? Yeah, I guess they would,” he said before I could answer.

“I learn all the ways people hurt each other, and the methods we have of classifying them and stopping them.”

“You can’t.”

“No, but we can try. Trying is our only option. Otherwise, every person we don’t try to protect is on our watch.”

“A crusader.” He touched my bare belly and I dropped my head back. “I admire that, even if I think it’s a lost cause.”

“More or less lost than me getting you inside me tonight?” I asked huskily, well beyond any pride. I knew what I wanted, and I was tired of not getting it.

If this was my chance to show the universe I was willing to claim what I desired most, I intended to start with the very fine specimen of Kellan’s cock.

“From accusing me of drugging you to demanding sex. You’re an odd one, Magpie Kelly.”

I was still running my hands over his chest. Couldn’t stop. I dug my nails into his skin and savored his hiss of breath. “When you fuck me, call me Maggie when you call out my name.”

Though I’d barely gotten the curse word out, I’d managed it. Definite progress.

He grasped my breast roughly, his touch igniting my senses. Our eyes locked. “When I fuck you, you’ll be the only one calling out.”

My heartbeat quickened and I leaned back to free his stiffening cock from his boxers. The limited light in the bedroom still allowed me to see the pearl of fluid at the tip. “Are you a betting man, Kellan McGuire?”

Like a damn viper, he moved lightning fast again and rolled me beneath him. He pressed three fingers over my mouth, trapping my words and my breath as he leaned over me to reach the nightstand. “Yes. I’m betting the next thing you do is scream.”



I screamed behind his hand just to annoy him and he pushed his fingers between my lips, mimicking the hot shaft he thrust between my legs. Heavy and thick, he pulsed against my aching slit, shutting me up quick.

“Nice to know you have lungs.” He pulled out his wet fingers and slid his hand between our tightly wedged bodies, stroking them into me without hesitation. Two opened me up and I gasped, turning my head while he dangled a glorious foil packet over my head. “Think we should try for three.”

“Orgasms?”

“Greedy girl.” He chuckled darkly. “Fingers. Since you were worried about me fitting. Not a problem, by the way.” He spoke against my ear. “You know this snug little pussy would never keep me out.”

I writhed against his hand as he made good on his promise. I was pretty sure he was correct. No part of my body was restricted to him. Absolutely none. At least after another beer and some building up first.

Scary as hell and yet I wanted to see how far we could go. How far he would take me.

Willingly.

“Almost there already.” He bit my lower lip as he pumped his three huge fingers in and out, stretching me in a way that bordered on pain. It wouldn’t be anything compared to his cock, so I wanted the burn. Craved it.

I nodded, whimpering at the angle change when he flexed his hand. He hit some spot inside me that had my eyes flaring wide. All I could see was his intent expression. He was learning me, I realized. Studying me like I might a textbook, except his method was way more hands-on.

“Oh yeah, you’re going to fly for me.” His thumb swept over my clit and I jolted off the bed, only held in place by the heft of his body. I liked having him on top of me, forcing me to take more and more. There was no evading him this way—or myself.

His fingers twisted and spread, scissoring inside me until the telltale heat built low in my belly. Too fast for me to try to slow this down. Too fast to do anything but brace my heels on the bed and rock into his dirty thrusts. I could hear what he was doing to me, every lewd bit of it, and that only turned me on more.

I wanted him to put his fingers in my mouth again. So I could taste myself. I wanted to suck on them while his knowing dark eyes drank down every movement.

“Stubborn little thing.” He crushed his mouth down on mine, but his tongue was silky soft as he slipped inside. He kept the pressure of our kiss a direct counterpoint to his furious pounding between my legs. He skimmed that secret spot again and again, and I jerked beneath him, helpless.

I had become his instrument, and with just his fingers and mouth, he kept me hovering on the edge.

“I want your screams.” He bit my earlobe, and the sharp pain tugged my clit. “Scream for me.”

In any other situation, I would’ve laughed at him and myself for even being tempted. But in this dark, warm bedroom, so far away from the world I’d known before I met him, nothing seemed funny. No request seemed out of bounds.

Then he hooked his fingers inside me, angling just right, and brushed my clit, and I didn’t have a choice but to do his bidding. I screamed myself raw, first as the pleasure engulfed me and left me shaking and then again and again as he just kept going.

No cease. No mercy.

The first orgasm was like ripping off a Band-Aid. The second—and third—were like dropping into an endless rippling pool of warm water. My body floated away from me and my mind followed suit, leaving me at his control. Quaking, moaning, lost to him. Nothing but a mass of sensations as I watched him strip off his boxers.

He knelt between my legs and stroked his hard cock. He was so erect that his shaft stood away from his body, aiming

straight at me. He needed the tight warmth that I could provide, and I needed the swift, deep thrusts he'd give me. Vanquishing everything but him and me.

*Us*, the most beautiful word I'd ever heard.

The sound of the foil packet being opened was loud in the darkness. The fire crackled, the flames highlighting the breadth of his shoulders as he rolled on the latex. He remained silent, staring at me all the while.

I couldn't look away.

He didn't fumble into position. Didn't ask me what I wanted. He just gripped my thighs and hauled me closer, drawing up my legs to hook around his waist. Then he loomed over me and grasped my chin, distracting me with long, slow kisses that belied the jut of his cock against my cleft. His thumb found my clit at the same moment the head of his shaft entered me on a shallow, slippery thrust. He pulled back and surged into me again, deeper now, my body acceding to his invasion.

There was simply no choice. He dominated me. Possessed me.

*Owned* me.

My chest hitched on a trapped breath. God, he felt enormous, but I was so aroused there was no discomfort. Only pleasure chased his first pass. And the second, and the third.

So many times I lost track.

He pushed my legs higher, hooking them around his neck so he could pound into me without mercy. I moaned, thrashing beneath him on the mattress. I threw out a hand to grab the sheets and hit the nightstand instead. The pain that sang up my arm barely registered.

There was nothing but him.

The bed springs shrieked. So did my muscles, but I didn't care. I'd never experienced anything like this. Never been taken so ruthlessly. He wasn't showing me any tenderness. If anything, with every thrust, he was rougher, wilder. Grunts

burst from his throat and punishing fingers dug into whatever soft skin he could reach. His thumb was relentless on my aching clit.

If I'd had screams left to give as my orgasm built, I would've offered them to him. I was giving him everything else. My eyes, wide open on his. My body, pulsing with need. My heart—

No. That was mine still. I wouldn't give that away again so freely. Not even if I was feeling more than ever before in this furtive moment in the firelit dark.

“There.” He grinded into me, so forcefully that I sawed my teeth over my lower lip. “Right there.”

I whimpered, nearly delirious. I couldn't breathe, couldn't think. My body was full of him. He was in every pore, every hit of air I took. That alpine shampoo of his, the tang of sweat and sex. Then my own scent as he pressed his damp thumb into my mouth, giving me something to suck on while my core clenched.

I was so close to coming. Just a little more...

“Fuck.” He didn't stop, dragging his thumb away and replacing it with his mouth on mine. No matter how crazily he pumped into me, his kisses were always soft and lingering. So confusing. My body didn't get it, and my head definitely didn't.

Tears of frustration popped into my eyes as he drew back and flipped me over on my hands and knees. He clamped a hand on the back of my neck, holding me down while he pushed into me from behind. My eyes blurred so I closed them, biting the pillow at the rush of heat that accompanied his strokes.

I lost track of time. Of myself. All I could do was cry out into the pillow as he ravaged me, stroke by stroke. He finally found his release, his shout breaking against my shoulder. “Maggie.”

Just that, over and over. I would've smiled but I had no strength left.

His heaving hips forced me down to the mattress while sweat burned my eyes and my body shook through what seemed like one endless orgasm. I grasped for his hand, for some kind of anchor, and his fingers tangled with mine. Centering me when all I could do was drift.

“Kellan.” His name was the only word I could say. The only word I could think.

Before I’d recovered, he rolled me over. He stripped off the condom and disposed of it, then lowered his head to lick my slit. The gesture was so sexy and dirty that I couldn’t do anything but part my legs and yank on his hair as he pulled another climax out of my spent body.

There weren’t words when he brushed his lips over mine. I was still hungry for his taste. For *my* taste on his tongue. Lifetimes passed while he made love to my mouth and eased me down from my high.

So many highs. So much new.

I scraped my nails down his shoulders, clinging to him like an addict as he tugged the covers over our sweaty bodies.

“Sleep,” he said against my forehead, and I couldn’t argue. I sought his fingers in the dark, bringing them between my breasts.

Now I could rest.

I dropped into a welcome void of unconsciousness, knowing he guarded me in my sleep. His body so strong and hard as it sheltered mine.

I didn’t know how long I slept before a sudden pounding against the wall shook me awake. It sounded like someone was ripping apart the place, board by board. I shot up in bed as the house shook again and again.

Heart in my throat, I fumbled for Kellan, but he shoved me back and murmured, “Stay here.”

Someone was knocking. Shouting. More than one voice maybe? I shook my head, trying to clear it, as Kellan pulled on

his boxers and grabbed what I assumed was a pair of pants and shirt and quickly dressed in the dark.

“Don’t move,” he instructed me and I nodded, too out of sorts to argue.

Kellan’s footsteps pounded down the hall as I swung my shaky legs out of bed and reached for the glowing phone on the nightstand. But it wasn’t mine. It asked for a passcode, and still half asleep, I punched in the most basic one on the off chance he’d taken the easy route.

He had.

The time glowed at me. Six-eleven. Not even daylight. I could hear voices down the hall, hushed, urgent ones. Curiosity and panic warred inside me, but over both was the need to text my own phone. To know he had my number and I had his before we separated.

Because I knew we’d separate, that we’d been headed to this moment since I’d crashed into his ditch.

My phone beeped from within my purse on the nightstand. I had his number. He had mine. If either of us changed our minds, we had options.

If not, it would be only this, and this had been everything.

I gripped a handful of my hair and his phone, holding onto both as I stumbled to my feet. I dropped his cell on the nightstand and swung my gaze around the room. My clothes. Where were they now? Still in the bathroom where I’d shed them before my shower so many hours ago?

Even putting one foot in front of the other took effort. Luckily what was left of the fire lit my way out of Kellan’s bedroom and into the bathroom. I flipped on the light and gasped at my appearance.

I’d never looked just fucked before. Or if I had, it had never been like this, of that I was certain.

My skin was reddened from his beard. My chin and cheeks were flushed and bruising skin flared under my jaw and in interesting places along my neck. I turned to look at my back,

letting out another gasp at the path of stubble and hickeys that marred my pale skin.

I could feel the burn between my thighs too from his stubble. And his cock. I shuddered and gripped the edge of the sink in boneless fingers, twisting my thighs together as my wonderfully abused clit throbbed.

My nipples beaded as I studied myself, my gaze lingering despite the rising voices coming from down the hall. I couldn't look away from myself and who I'd become in the course of one night.

“Maggie.”

My father's shout made me lurch back from the mirror. I frowned and shoved my hair away from my face as I gazed around blearily. My clothes were stacked neatly on the back of the toilet where I'd left them earlier. I pulled them on haphazardly, hating each layer as I piled it back on.

I'd been the next thing to naked for most of the evening and naked all night long. I didn't want to hide in all this material again. More than that, I didn't want to open the door to my worried, frantic father and feel ashamed that I'd been more myself with a stranger than ever before in my life.

But I opened the door anyway, because my dad was concerned due to my careless actions and I loved him. Besides, all fairytales had to come to an end sometime, right?

“Maggie, baby, are you okay? When you didn't come home and didn't call, and we drove the route to Mrs. Pringles' and found your car here, of all places, we didn't know what had happened.” He cupped my face in ice cold hands. “Tell me you're all right,” he demanded, shooting an accusing glance over his shoulder.

“Daddy,” I whispered, pleading for him to understand.

Glancing back at me, he shook his head. My sweet, patient, rule-abiding father took one glance at his baby girl's wild hair and blurry eyes and shut his own.

“Let's go home,” he said finally.

I might've argued if I hadn't looked past him and glimpsed Kellan's closed-down face. He was standing with a slight brunette with braided hair and a weary expression. No one was smiling.

I tried to get Kellan to meet my eyes, but he wasn't looking at me. His gaze bounced everywhere else, never landing on any one spot for long.

So much for not calling the next day. He was dismissing me before I'd even made it out the front door.

*One-night stand, remember? Now be woman enough not to beg. Time to take your ass back home where you belong.*

Swallowing hard, I nodded and gave my father a weak smile. "Just let me get my things."



NINE

# KELLAN

“WHAT THE HELL WERE YOU THINKING?”

My sister Bethy’s sharp question hit me between the shoulder blades where I stood at the kitchen window, slamming back black coffee and wishing it were beer.

The amount I had left wasn’t nearly enough to get trashed the way I needed to.

Maybe if I had more beer, I wouldn’t have to hear Maggie’s breathy cries in my head anymore. Maybe I wouldn’t remember the feeling of her tightening around me until we both broke.

Eventually I’d get to the point where the memory faded. I hoped.

“Coffee?” I asked.

“No, I don’t want coffee.”

So she’d said after she returned from towing Maggie’s car back to her shop for her techs to get to work on it. She was a mechanic too, though she tended to run the shop more than keep her hand in. I’d hoped she would choose to stay there to work on Maggie’s car, not come back and harass me about what I’d been thinking.

I hadn’t. End of story.

“You know better than to sleep with a girl like her. She’s a townie and you are not. She’s not like you, Kell.”

“Tell me something I don’t know.”

“That’s not a judgment against you,” she said after a moment. “It’s just reality.”

Like the reality that neither Maggie or I had been paying attention to anything last night. She hadn’t called her parents to let them know not to expect her, and I hadn’t followed up with my sister to tell her to wait until later in the day to show up with the tow truck.

You know, because wanting more time with Maggie made sense, when I shouldn’t have had any with her to begin with.

In the end, it hadn’t mattered. Before first light, Maggie’s concerned father had driven the route he suspected Maggie would have taken. Upon finding her abandoned car, he’d called the shop for a tow anyway. Bethy had already been on the way.

When she’d arrived, she had tried to convince Maggie’s dad I wasn’t an axe murderer or a pervert who’d kidnapped his young, impressionable daughter. Of course, the fact that the one and only time the elder Kelly had met me a million years ago, I’d had my mouth on his middle daughter’s breast probably hadn’t helped things.

Ahh, memories. Ones I hadn’t seen fit to mention to Maggie.

No wonder I wanted to get shit-faced.

“The truth is,” Bethy continued, “that you break girls. You don’t mean to. It’s not like you lead them on, or lie to them, but you’re good-looking and the asshole personality type is currently in.” She held up a hand. “Just more reality.”

“What about the reality that Tom wasn’t good for you, but you wouldn’t listen to any of us?” As soon as the words were out, I regretted them. It wasn’t right to slap back at my sister when I was only pissed at myself. “Look, I didn’t mean—”

“I paid, didn’t I?” she asked quietly. “I’m still paying. So is Rainy. But without him, I wouldn’t have her. So sometimes you have to go through some shit to get your goddamn rainbow.”

A smile twisted my lips as I glanced at her. She looked exhausted, and she wasn't explaining much about why she hadn't answered her phone last night. I wanted to pry, but at the same time, I was just so fucking grateful she was okay. Strong and whole and untouched.

Tom hadn't hurt her again.

"And sometimes you gotta ride your fucking rainbow for as long as it lasts, knowing the dark is waiting. I won't apologize for it." I tipped back my head. "Fine, maybe I would apologize to someone, but it damn sure isn't you or her father."

"Stuff happens. You were snowed in and bored. Add in some beer and questionable choices..."

What had occurred was so far from that. If only I could categorize it that easily.

"I'm not discussing this with you. All right? We're both adults and that's the end of it."

"You think you can't get bruised up when you're over twenty-one, Kell? And she's barely that. She's a goddamn kid, and you know you're not going to call her. How do you think she'll feel when that single blows up and you're on the cover of every magazine?"

"She'll probably never know. She listens to sweet pop shit, not our stuff. I was just a guy from LA who deals with musicians. Nothing more, nothing less. And I *liked* that."

"It's a lie. You are more than that. You always have been."

I didn't reply.

"What if she gets ideas about you? Romantic ones? Then what? People know you in this town. If she wanted to, she could find a way to contact you, and you'll what, just let her down easy? Crush that poor girl's heart?" I heard Bethy's disappointment loud and clear. "You're the wiser, worldly one. You gotta stop thinking with your dick. Think of someone else for a change, Kell."

I swallowed the last of my coffee and banged the mug on the counter. I'd already had three cups this morning while I waited for my little sister to spit out what was on her mind. Now that she had, I wanted her to leave me the hell alone so I could gear up to deal with my life again.

I'd grown accustomed to weeks spent either seeking or in the spotlight, surrounded by people. Followed by a few days on my own, where I could be myself and actually breathe in my own skin. This weekend wasn't supposed to be about more drama. It was supposed to be where I got to escape it, for fuck's sake.

My phone buzzed in the pocket of my jeans and I tugged it out. "It's my manager, Lila. I gotta take this."

Bethy shrugged and grabbed her keys and her newsboy cap. "I have work. Stop by the shop before you roll out of here, all right?"

I grunted an affirmation and waited until she shut the front door behind her before I answered Lila's call.

"You have a radio call coming up Tuesday morning. Additional press for the single," she said after the briefest of niceties.

That was Lila Crandall's way. When I'd met her two days after landing in California, I'd thought she was a stupidly hot blond with a shark's smile and a no-nonsense manner. A couple of years later, I knew her to be whip-smart and intolerant of bullshit. If you couldn't get with the program right away, she wasn't going to wait.

I appreciated Lila's directness, especially today. She reminded me of someone else I'd met who was incapable of telling anything but the truth.

Being with Maggie last night had been refreshing. I'd grown numb to all the plastic and glitz that made up my world until I was confronted by Maggie's honesty. Everything about her was intoxicating.

Christ, I hadn't broken her. I had to believe that. She had no reason to fall for a guy like me.

*Just like you have no reason to fall for her?*

That was just it. She'd given me a million reasons to fall for her, and I'd given her none. Including not even asking if she was okay after I'd pounded her into the mattress. If I'd hurt her.

That was riding me harder than the rest. If I'd caused her pain or scared her or...Jesus. I wouldn't be able to live with myself. I barely could now.

But it wasn't like I could contact her. I mean, I could. I knew her name and her address, if her family still lived in the same house as they had back a decade ago when I'd been caught indulging in my oral fixation with Maeve. But we hadn't talked about anything beyond sex. We'd practically had a tacit agreement not to speak after last night. I certainly hadn't given her any reason to think otherwise.

Neither had she, so maybe she really had been looking for a one-time thing. She'd just gotten out of a long relationship and a rough breakup. The last thing she needed was me.

*Fuck.*

"Kellan. Are you still there? I asked you if you still intended to fly back on Tuesday? I'm booking more interviews Wednesday so we need you here and presentable first thing that morning. A limo will pick you up and take you to WKLP."

Presentable meant I had to shave my beard. I could either go for a more "manageable" trimmed look or I could shave it entirely, but either way, my current look didn't match the record company's idea of what Wilder Mind's frontman should look like.

Tomorrow I might even give two shits about that. Maybe.

"I'll see if I can switch my flight to tomorrow. The signal here is crap so it'd be hard to do an interview."

Besides, the sooner I got my ass back to LA, the faster I'd stop wondering if contacting Maggie was a good idea.

It wasn't. On any level. People in my business weren't meant for serious relationships. I'd never been one to try the fidelity thing, but even if I wanted to, there was so much BS in the tabloids that it was almost impossible to keep something going. Sure, some people managed it, and major props to them. But add in the distance and the crazy way we'd met and it didn't make sense. We didn't know each other, and chemistry in bed meant little.

Okay, it meant a damn lot, especially when just the thought of her had me harder than the window frame.

"We can send the jet for you. This media blitz is important." Lila's voice turned into white noise in my ear.

This was actually my life now. Jetting off for press junkets, and formalizing tour schedules, and preparing my look for the public. I wasn't merely the barely middle class son of a sometime roofer and full-time wanderer and a school secretary anymore.

I also wasn't a guy who ignored his gut. That instinct had gotten me out to California and into a business I knew nothing about. At least on the surface. I'd done so well that Lila and her boss Donovan had believed that me and the guys I'd grown up with—with a new addition or two—might just be more than a former high school garage band.

My gut hadn't steered me wrong yet.

"Lila, you're married, right?"

Lila cleared her throat. "Out of left field much?"

"Sorry."

"Yes, I am."

"To a guy in the business. A guitarist, isn't he? In Oblivion?"

"Yes. Why?"

"And you're happy."

"I am, yes. What is this about?"

Hell if I knew. I scraped my hand down my face, buzzing over the beard I needed to shave. My so-called hibernation weekend was ending sooner than I'd planned.

Perhaps that was a good thing. I still hadn't made a move that would create even more chaos, when I had an almost pathological aversion to it.

Since Lila was waiting for a reply, I blew out a breath. "I guess I'm just thinking about a lot of this stuff. How my life is changing. All the things I didn't think were possible suddenly are, and it's just fucking crazy."

"Your single hasn't blown up yet, Kellan." Lila's dry tone made me smile. "Hang on to your mic stand, Axl."

My smile turned into a genuine laugh. "Yeah, yeah, I know. I might die in obscurity or be on one of those *One Hit Wonder* shows in ten years. But what if, you know?"

"Oh, I know. I also know I wouldn't have pegged you as the settling down type of guy. If that's changed, look around you. Examples of making it work are there to be found."

"Yeah, maybe if you're both in the business. If you get how it works. Hell, if you're even on the same coast." I rubbed my temple. "Don't mind me. Just a lot of crap in my head and I'm dumping it on you."

"I often play the role of junior therapist with my artists. I get bonuses when I keep lead singers from running off and quitting the band, usually right before their biggest show. You'd be surprised how often I've had to."

"No, I wouldn't. Remember I sat around that table with you and Donovan and Dex more than a few times, trying to figure out how to keep Luc Moreau from getting arrested during a show."

"He's back in rehab for his sex addiction."

I winced. "Second time?"

"Try third. But he's insanely talented, so we deal with him. Just not sure how much longer that will be true."

"Don't worry. I'm not about to split the band."



“Better not. I vouched for you, you know. Turnbull strong and all that.”

I stared out the window at the bright blue sky and the snow shimmering like diamonds in the blinding sunshine. It was as if there had never even been a storm last night.

But there had.

“Turnbull strong,” I echoed. “Thanks, Lila. I’ll talk to you once I’m back in town.” I ended the call and started to slip my phone back in my pocket.

Then I took it out again and glanced at my list of texts. I wasn’t even sure why.

Within an instant, I noticed a message sent to an unknown number this morning. Six-eleven am.

*Holy shit.*

My heart sped up as I clicked on the message.

**In case we need a do-over and there isn’t a ditch available. Xo, Red.**

TEN

MAGGIE

TWO WEEKS LATER

“I’M GLAD YOU’RE NOT TRYING TO AVOID ME OR ANYTHING. Because that would really brass my balls.”

The stern voice in line behind me at Starbucks made me turn with a sheepish smile. I glanced up at my best friend Kendra, who was towering over me as she always did. Nothing new there. She also was dressed on point as usual in a red pantsuit that made her appear like the young executive she would soon be rather than a low-rent, harried college student like the rest of us.

What was new was the cocked eyebrow she aimed at me. Typically she saved that expression for one of our professors when they offered up something as fact that was debatable at best. And Ken *did* debate with them. She suffered no fools gladly.

Including me. *Especially* me.

“Why would I avoid you?”

“That’s a very good question.” Ken tucked her phone in her tiny white, ridiculously chic purse and crossed her arms. “Anytime now, Kelly.”

I had to grin as the line moved forward. “I’m not. I’ve just been busy. Trying to work extra hours before school starts up again in a few days.”

“Right. I hear that. Me too. Except I still manage to text my damn best friend every day just the same as I have since, oh, junior high. I still manage to ask her if she wants to meet up for a latte or a movie or a drink if it comes to that. You

know what I get in return? Whole lot of nothing. Line's moving, by the way."

I hunched my shoulders and moved forward. She was right and I felt like a complete jerk. Just because I was messed up and I didn't really know what to say to anyone right now wasn't an excuse to shut her out. Anyone but her.

We'd been tight since the day in kindergarten when Sam Broughton pulled my ponytail and made me trip on the playground. Kendra, the new girl who had transferred to the school mid-year, poked him in the chest and demanded he apologize to me. Which he had, stuttering. Then I'd asked Kendra to nap beside me and we'd been together through thick and thin since.

Everything except Kellan McGuire. He'd been the first person who made me need some distance from everyone in my life. Including Kendra.

Not because of them. I was blessed to have amazing people in my life. But because of me.

I'd known Kellan wasn't the type to call the next day. He hadn't made a secret of it. I appreciated that honesty and yet I couldn't help hoping. Couldn't help wondering why I was the kind of girl who might be good for a night or even a few years if worst came to worst. I just wasn't the kind of woman who made a man run away from his life.

And yes, I knew that was nonsense thinking. I couldn't help it. Mainly because I was pretty sure I'd run away from my life for Kellan, and that scared the hell out of me.

I loved my family so much. Loved my classes and my friends and even my little town that had more snow than residents. I loved being known by name at most of the places I went to on a regular basis. I liked the sense of community that came from growing roots in the same place generations of your family had grown theirs.

Before I crashed in that ditch, if anyone had asked me if I was dissatisfied, I would've said no. A little sad, yes. Definitely lonely. It was hard to go from being in a serious

relationship for years to being single again, even if the relationship had soured a long while before your guy split.

But otherwise, I'd been happy. Settled. Now I just wasn't. It was as if a door to a whole other world had popped open for me for an instant and then slammed shut while I still had my toes inside.

I was hurting. Way more than I'd hurt over Derek. I didn't know why. Didn't understand any of this.

And Kendra was still waiting for me to explain that I was unhappy and heartbroken and felt stupid because I knew better. So it was my fault I even cared about a guy who couldn't care about me.

To tell her that though, I'd have to admit what had happened New Year's Eve. I hadn't told her yet. No one knew, including my brothers and sisters. My older brothers would've gone to California and kicked Kellan's ass for hurting me. It didn't matter that I was a grown woman. To them, I was their baby sister and I needed protection. Sometimes even from myself.

My older sisters weren't much better. Maeve and Regan in tandem made a formidable opponent. They'd probably book seats on the same flight with Angus, Lachlan, and Liam. So would Kendra. She'd just tell me to stop wallowing first so I could help her beat Kellan to a pulp.

That wasn't the answer. What, I was supposed to hate on the guy because he didn't love me? I didn't expect him to. We were strangers. Barely more than that. So what if he already knew my body better than I did? It was an accident, just an aberration, like that whole freaking night.

The best night of my entire life.

"Miss, what would you like?"

I stared at the barista as if he'd spoken in a foreign language. Coffee. Right. My order.

"She wants a grande caramel macchiato, soy milk, no whip."

Leave it to Kendra to save the day.

“No, I want whip.” I placed a hand on Kendra’s arm. “Extra whip, please,” I told the barista.

“Since when? You hate whipped cream. I don’t understand how, but whatever, girl. Now you want extra?”

Shrugging, I lifted my brows at my best friend in a futile attempt to get her to let it go. I knew she wouldn’t. Coupled with being out of touch recently, changing my established drink order was akin to admitting I’d been kidnapped by aliens for medical experiments.

The barista smiled. “You got it. Anything else?”

Kendra let out a long sigh. “I’ll take a venti green tea latte and one of those peppermint cake pops.” She slid me a sidelong glance. “Want? Or did you decide you hate peppermint now?”

Since I was starving, I practically salivated at the words ‘cake pop’. “I’ll take two actually. One German chocolate, please. I’ll pay you back,” I said under my breath to Kendra as she stared.

“Stop it. I’m not worried about two dollars. It’s that you never eat two. You barely eat one without fretting about that jackass making some comment about your stomach.”

“Your stomach looks great to me,” the barista offered helpfully, putting all three of our cake pops into a little cardboard holder.

“She’s smokin’ hot,” Kendra said with a wink. “If I went lesbian, it’d be for her.”

The construction guys in line behind us nudged each other and laughed. I flushed so much that I had to fan my face as I stepped aside to let Kendra pay. It was her turn anyway, but after that comment, oh yeah, she was ponying up for my extra cake pop.

“Seriously?” I whispered to her as she joined me at the coffee pickup area, wearing a huge shit-eating grin. “You just cannot help yourself, can you?”

“Not really. Besides, it brought some color to these cheeks. You’re hella pale.” She pinched my right one as her smile dimmed. “You’re not sick, are you?”

I shook my head. Now probably wasn’t the time to mention how tired I’d been the last few days. I was working a lot, so I figured that was it. Not being able to sleep when I actually hit the bed without imagining Kellan making love to me didn’t help.

Neither did having to slide my hand beneath my cool sheets to take care of business for myself—sometimes two or three times before the ache subsided. I hadn’t touched myself as much in my whole life as I had in these past two weeks.

Bastard.

“Not sick, not returning phone calls, look super tired, being all vague and secretive and shit, uh huh.” Kendra gripped my shoulders. “Diagnosis: dick. As in you got yourself some.”

“Shh!” I looked around, hoping we hadn’t been overheard, caught between utter mortification and a laugh. Then she started to laugh and point at me and I knew it was over.

Jig was up. I *had* gotten some dick, and it had basically ruined me for any other dick, ever.

We waited for our drinks and then she carried them to our favorite table in the corner, which we only got after she stared at the couple sitting there until they finally left. Following her, I set down our container of cake pops. And promptly stuffed the peppermint one in my mouth, shrugging and pointing at my face when she pelted me with questions.

“Asshat.” She laughed and tossed a balled-up napkin at me before taking a long sip of her latte. “Fine. If you don’t tell me, I’m going to assume you went back to Dickless Derek. If that’s the case, I may just disown you.”

I snorted and pulled what was left of my cake pop out of my mouth. I’d demolished that sucker. “Yeah, right. You threaten that daily. Not gonna happen.”



“I can’t threaten anything daily since you don’t talk to me anymore.”

Guilt swamped me and I set down my barren stick. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have shut you out.”

Kendra sipped her latte and waited. She was like Buddha. She’d sit there patiently until the end of time if that was what it took to get me to ’fess up.

It took way less than that, because I’d missed my best friend. Desperately. I needed to confess all to her, even if I knew she’d tell me I was suffering from unrealistic expectations. Again. Though I was the criminal justice—and hopefully soon, pre-law—student, she was the one who always said, “if you can’t do the time, don’t do the crime.”

My crime? Dreaming too much and not realizing that people had flaws that had nothing to do with me.

“So there was a guy.”

“I knew it. What level guy are we talking about here? And it’s not Derek. Tell me it’s not Derek or I will probably go homicidal on your ass.”

My lips twitched. “Not Derek. He was...a stranger.”

I felt scandalous even saying it. In what universe did I, practically innocent Magpie Kelly, have torrid sex with a stranger? One who I’d practically begged to fuck me? It was almost inconceivable, especially since one of the reasons my ex had given for leaving me was that I didn’t have multiple orgasms so sex wasn’t “as much fun as it could be.” As if that was all my fault. Besides, I’d managed to come right, left, and center with Kellan, so whatever.

There was nothing wrong with me that a talented tongue, fingers, and big dick couldn’t solve. My problem was I wanted Kellan to work on my particular puzzle over and over again, and he’d probably already banged a bevy of babes in LA since he’d been back to work.

Me? I’d only banged my hand. *Both* hands. Possibly my cute little button vibrator once or twice.

“No way.” Ken sipped her latte, her dark eyes wide. “Seriously?”

“So seriously.”

“When?”

This was when it got a little stickier. “New Year’s Eve,” I said hesitantly, ducking to avoid the flurry of napkins she tossed my way.

“Two frigging weeks ago? You suck. I tell you the minute my dude pulls out, and you’re keeping that shit from me for this long?” She sat back and crossed her arms again. She did resting bitch face so well. “Uh uh. Disowned. Read my lips. Dis-owned. Also? I wouldn’t go lesbian for you now. Not even.”

I giggled and buried my face in the crook of my arm before peeking up at her. From her grin, she wasn’t pissed anymore. Much.

Thank God.

“So a stranger, huh? How did it happen? Let me guess. You both reached for the last round of celebratory New Year’s Eve pepperoni at the Quikky Mart.”

“Why do I like you again?”

“Because I call you on your bullshit and still come back for more? And because I buy you two cookie pops even though you only ever buy me one?”

“Valid points.” I nodded and took a sip of my macchiato, shutting my eyes as the delicious hot liquid slid down my throat. It was a chilly day, and boy, was this drink hitting the spot. “So remember I was making bread for the neighbors and Mrs. Pringles?”

“Yes. Former Girl Scout of the year, checking in for duty.”

“I was on my way out to Mrs. Pringles’ house when I saw a doe and her baby and swerved to avoid them. It was icy and I drove into a ditch. That was the night of the big storm, remember?”

“Oooh.” Kendra cupped her hands around her drink and leaned forward. “Hottie tow truck driver helped you with his plow? Literally?”

“Oh my God.” I laughed and offered her a bite of my German chocolate cake pop.

While she sampled it, I told the whole, semi-embarrassing story. How I’d accused Kellan of maybe being a serial killer then went all female on him as soon as he saw me naked. It hadn’t been like me at all.

By the time I reached the end of the night—after only giving her the briefest of details about the sex—her normally expressive eyes had shuttered. She had thoughts on the matter, I was sure, but she’d gone spookily silent.

“So he just let your daddy drag you home.”

“He didn’t drag me. I went willingly. Mostly.”

“But Wonder Dick didn’t stop him or defend your honor or hell, even say call me, sweet cheeks. Am I right?”

I tucked my hair behind my ears and nodded. “Yeah. Though Kellan’s not really a sweet cheeks type, which is good. Hello, creepy.”

“Okay, listen up. You’re wasting good brain cells on this guy. If he was into anything but the pussy, he would’ve surfaced by now.” She held up a hand when I sputtered. “I know, I know, crude. But sometimes you gotta tell it straight. The guy was horny and so were you, so no harm, no foul, right? Right. One-night stand, over and done.”

“What if it’s not?”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“It means I can’t forget him. He’s everywhere. When I go to sleep, when I wake up, he’s in my head. In here.” I rubbed my fist over my chest as Kendra rolled her eyes. “I know it’s crazy. It was one night. Who falls for someone in under twelve hours?”

“You did not fall for him. He just worked you good and you have not been worked good *ever*. That’s all it is. Trust

me,” she said, placing her hands flat on the table. “Find yourself another hot guy and try again. You’ll probably be just as into him if he’s as great in the sack.”

If only it were that easy. How I wished it was.

“What if I’m not? What if, I don’t know, we really had a connection and he’s just being stupid and pigheaded by not contacting me?”

“If you really thought he just needed a push, you would’ve contacted him yourself already.” She gave me a knowing look. “And you have not.”

“No.” But all of a sudden, my cell phone was burning a hole in the back pocket of my jeans. I’d left my purse at home, thinking I’d go for a walk while I was out, and instead I’d just beelined straight for coffee. Maybe I’d hoped Kendra would be here, as was her habit before she went to work at her part-time job at Jaxon Industries, an interior design firm.

Maybe I spent too much time hoping and wishing for things, when the answer was I needed to take control of my own destiny. Just as I had the night I’d come on to Kellan. Somehow I’d felt empowered to, as if he made me bolder. I didn’t know how or why. None of this made sense to me, but just the idea of texting him lifted some of the heaviness on my chest that I’d been carting around for the last two weeks.

Even if he didn’t answer, at least I would have acted. And if he didn’t answer, I’d know for a fact he was not for me and it was time to move on. One way or another.

I pulled out my phone.

“You’re not going to text him. Tell me you are not.”

I didn’t answer. Instead I pulled up the text I’d sent myself from his phone and I replied, typing with sure fingers.

Whatever happened, I would live with it. Me and my vibrator, Old Faithful.

**Your do-over expiration time is looming. Act now or forever hold your peace. Red.**

ELEVEN

# KELLAN

MY PHONE BUZZED IN THE MIDDLE OF REHEARSAL. NORMALLY I didn't carry it around in my pocket when we were spending a long day in the studio, but since New Year's, I'd felt the need.

I'd felt lots of needs since New Year's, and I was examining precisely none of them.

I ignored the buzz because we were in the middle of "Felicity," our keyboardist Myles's song about the most important woman in his life. Not his lover, as you'd assume. Felicity was just his closest friend, the one who'd helped him through his darkest days during a bad breakup with an ex and the death of his dog. Myles had never intended for us to cut the song for our first short album. He'd just offered it up for practice fodder, and the next thing we knew, Lila—who'd been sitting in that day—had suggested we record it for the EP.

Myles was still pissed. I was pretty sure Felicity didn't even know he'd written a song for her. Well, the lyrics anyway. The music had mostly been the brainchild of Myles and our two guitarists, AJ and Cameron, with an assist from our bassist, Jake. Bryan, our drummer, had seemed bored with the whole thing.

I guess when a guy came from a gig doing hardcore porn to playing the kit in an up and coming rock band, it was hard to stay, um, engaged.

At any rate, we were on take probably seven of the damn song. If I had to sing about Felicity's "open, giving heart" or "sweet, uncompromising nature" one more time, I'd probably

put my boot through my amp. I was seriously starting to dislike the chick and I'd never even met her. I'd known Myles since high school, but he'd met up with the great Felicity in college. He'd been working in a pub when I called him to come to LA to reform our old band.

Out of all the guys, I'd figured he would be most excited to make our dreams a reality. Instead he'd become more and more quiet with every press gig and photo shoot and rehearsal for the album.

Something was going on with him, and I didn't know what. The hard-partying guy I'd known back home hadn't been one to pine over a chick, supposed best friend or not. But I guess people changed.

Even me. Not that I was ready to admit it.

"Take five," I called as the buzz sounded again, letting me know I'd missed the text. "And Bry, maybe get the lead out before you come back, huh? Have a smoke or something?"

Bryan flipped me the bird and climbed down from the kit. He was always flawless and he knew it. Certainly didn't come from practicing overmuch. He just had an innate sense of rhythm. Maybe it had translated from the "big" screen. God knows he'd been plenty rhythmic on camera.

Not that I'd ever watched his movies. Bad enough I'd had to hear him nail some unsuspecting groupie two nights ago after our show at the Blue Rhino. They hadn't even made it off the damn drum riser. She'd stopped by for his autograph, and he'd ended up bending her back over the cymbals and hitting a high C in a whole new way.

I couldn't decide if I was disgusted or jealous. Possibly both.

"I've gotta make a phone call." Myles rose from behind his keyboard and shoved a hand through his shaggy dark hair.

He tended to grow it long, and combined with his lean face and woeful eyes, had a poetic look going on that made women nuts. Or so I'd heard. Impossible to tell how women felt about him on a more personal level lately since he kept everyone at

arm's length. So I'd gotten closer to Cameron, who still liked to party but kept it lower key than Bryan.

Meaning not humping chicks on stage.

"Sure. Go for it." I started to ask Myles if he was calling his Fee Fee, but the swinging door had already closed behind him. Okay then.

I set aside my old Taylor guitar and made my way over to the leather couch on the opposite side of the room from the mixing booth. We were using the space at Ripper Records, which was where we tended to do our rehearsals most days.

Back in Turnbull, we'd rehearsed at the Gallows, our name for the dank warehouse space beside the town's only bowling alley. On a good night, we'd practiced until our fingers were numb and our shoulders were sore, then we'd gone next door as the high school girls were finishing their games. Of course, back then we'd been in college, so trolling high school girls was only moderately perverted. Some of my buddies still did, but I'd moved on.

I dropped down on the sofa and slid a glance at Cam, who was scribbling frantically in his battered notebook. "Got a new idea, brother?"

"Maybe. Let's just say I don't want songs like 'Fool for You' or 'Felicity' to define our sound."

"Fool for You" was Wilder Mind's first single, and it was hitting radio in a major way just as we'd hoped. We were already in the Top 20, with solid numbers coming in daily. Lila wasn't one of those managers who fed the talent a steady stream of data to keep them pumped—or hid it to prevent depression—but she gave me more leeway than most since I'd started out on the other side of the conference table. I had a damn good idea of the units we were pushing every day and the airplay and how our social media numbers looked. We weren't headed for the stratosphere just yet, but we were definitely building.

"What's wrong with FFY?" I asked mildly, though I already knew our lead guitarist's concerns.



He didn't want to become known as a harder-edged REO Speedwagon for the current set. His desire was to leave the love songs—or songs that could be perceived that way, such as “Felicity”—for later and start off with something more anthemic, like “Welcome to the Jungle” had been for GNR. But times were different and we had our own sound and our own material. FFY was doing just fine on the charts. As for Felicity...

Well, sap had its place. Preferably off my playlist, but who was I to judge?

“Nothing. It's a solid song with a kickass bridge. Just broadening the scope a bit. What do you think of this?”

He ran through some rough lyrics for a new song he'd been working on, one much darker than either our single or Myles' creation. I was already putting the music together in my head, imagining the guitar licks and the buildup to the bridge. Figuring out how I'd shred the vocals to produce a different sound than the huskier, romanticized one I'd used on our ballads.

AJ, our rhythm guitarist, leaned over the back of the couch and knocked Cam in the head mid-lyric. “Hey, asshole. I thought you were running out for food.”

Cam ignored him and went back to scribbling.

AJ sighed dramatically and turned around, flinging himself over the back of the sofa so that he landed between us with his head dangling toward the floor. “But I'm starving.”

“You have a damn car, and I said take five not twenty-five.” Shaking my head, I finally gave into curiosity and tugged out my phone to check who had messaged me.

Cameron and AJ's bickering faded away, as did the sound of Jake tuning his bass across the room. The hum of the amps, the too harsh lighting, the vague headache brewing at the base of my skull all vanished.

*Maggie.*

My throat tightened and I gripped my cell as I fought not to immediately reply. I wasn't this guy. Even women who

hated me after a hookup said I had swagger. With Maggie, I had none. Just her words on my screen were enough to make my head light and my heartbeat roar in my ears.

As for my dick, I wasn't going there. Suffice it to say there was more than one reason I hunched over my lap.

I couldn't not answer her. Not twice. Not when every part of me was already hard and aching.

Fingers tense, I typed out a response.

### **What does a do-over consist of? Exactly.**

There. Make it about sex. That kept it in the realm that seemed logical. The one I still understood.

I half expected her not to answer. A good girl probably wouldn't. It wasn't as if I'd left much wiggle room as to the direction of my thoughts. She'd read between the lines and know I was suggesting another hookup.

She didn't need to know it already felt like so much more.

The next buzz vibrated under my thumb, still cupping the screen.

### **Whatever you can handle, Wolf.**

*Goddamn.* I went as rigid as a damn pike, just like that. Though my buddies were all around me, I was ready to go just from some words on a screen from a woman who was on the other side of the country.

### **I can't get away right now. Can you?**

### **Get away like what? You mean come to LA?**

I'd officially lost my frigging mind. So what else could I do other than to continue playing the hand I'd dealt her?

### **Yeah. Come to LA.**

### **My classes start on Monday & I'm working til Friday afternoon.**

### **So redeye Fri night. I'll send you a ticket.**

She didn't respond for long enough that I was sure she was going to say no. She might've been the one who'd contacted

me, but I was the one who sounded desperate.

I was, more than I'd ever expected.

**Okay. I'll come to you.**

“Hey, Kell, man, are we ever getting back to this rehearsal or are we just going to hold our dicks while you play with your phone?” Jake called, making me glance up from my screen and squint at him as if he were a stranger.

He might as well have been. Maggie was my reality right now. Everything else had just been marking time until I could see her again. Even if I hadn't admitted it to myself.

Christ, I was so fucked.

I held up two fingers to Jake and sent back a quick reply.

**Send me your email addy and watch for the ticket tonight. Two days, roundtrip?**

Two days where I could do every dark, dirty thing in my head to her and then let her sleep long enough so I could do them all over again.

**Yes. Two days, roundtrip. But I'll have people out looking for me if I'm not back on time, so don't get any ideas.**

I laughed out loud, well aware that my bandmates were staring. I didn't give a shit.

**You're not ready to hear all the ideas I have, Red.**

But she would be hearing them. Soon.

TWELVE

# MAGGIE

“HAVE I TOLD YOU THAT I THINK THIS IS CRAZY?”

I leaned my head against the window of the Uber bringing me to the address Kellan had given me in the Hollywood Hills.

*Holy crap.* I still couldn't believe I was doing this. Correction—I *had* done this. I was here, on the opposite side of the country, staring out the window at palm trees blowing in the breeze instead of leafless branches laden with snow.

First plane ride, first layover at O'Hare, first tropical drink in an airport lounge.

First time I'd ever traveled to meet a man for sex, never mind sex on what might as well have been the other side of the world. Definitely the first time I'd lied to my parents about my whereabouts.

Technically I didn't have to. I was a grown woman. Almost twenty-three, financially stable—ish—and in college. I paid rent, though below the going rate, and I was normally a responsible person.

Just not lately. Maybe I was overdue for a major flake-out. If so, I was going to make this weekend count.

After checking my hair in my compact once more, I sighed. “Yeah, Ken, I think you've weighed in a few times on the subject.”

She was my alibi for this weekend. It wasn't as if I could tell my father where I was going. Well, I could have. But did I

really want a lecture about going away for a cross-country booty call? Not so much.

It wasn't as if I had many illusions about this weekend. Kellan hadn't asked me how I was or if my car was okay or anything. We'd barely spoken at all. He'd asked if I would come to him, so we could fuck. And I had.

I was okay with that right now. So much.

"Just saying. If you don't call me tomorrow morning, I'll think he killed you and chopped up your body."

"See, this is why you're my best friend. You're as sick and twisted as I am."

"Not hardly. I watch *Dateline*. I've seen this story before. Younger woman gets swept away by charming older—"

"He's barely older than us, Ken. It's not like he's some geezer."

"Is he older than you? Yes. Therefore, older man. Who did not ask you anything except to visit for sex. If that's not skeezy to you, then I can't help you. Clearly Derek the Dickless did more of a trip on your head than I even realized."

"It's not like that. Exactly."

"Right. That's why when you got his text you turned every shade of red and wouldn't even let me read it for like fifteen minutes. This is after shutting me out for two weeks. You never do that."

The hurt in Kendra's voice made me tuck away my compact and stop toying with my hair. "It wasn't because of you. It's because of me."

"Are you going to break up with me next? That sounds like standard relationship-ending BS."

I laughed. "Nah, you're stuck with me. Cradle to the grave, baby."

"Just don't make that grave happen any sooner than it should. I have a shovel, a body bag, and a ready alibi if he screws with you."

“Hopefully he will screw me, and no burial implements will be needed.”

The Uber driver winked at me in the rearview mirror. I cleared my throat. Keeping my voice down would be ideal.

“Yeah, well, report back tomorrow. If I don’t hear from you by noon, I’m calling the twins and your shenanigans will be up, sister.”

The shudder of fear that ran through me was genuine. Liam and Lachlan were both incredible men—strong, loyal, smart. Devoted to family. They also had intense workout regimes and a willingness to hop any number of planes, trains, and automobiles to save their baby sister from the evil clutches of some “LA big shot” as Kendra had referred to him.

I’d told her I didn’t think he was all that big. True, he worked at a record label, but there had to be smaller ones. Surely if he had any major artists on his roster, he would’ve name-dropped. He hadn’t mentioned anyone. Most likely he was just trying to make it like the rest of us. Struggling, but on his way.

“I’ll call,” I promised before hanging up.

Good thing too, since the driver pulled up to the address I’d given him and my chin dropped to my thighs. Right about where the hem of my clingy, deep blue crushed velvet dress ended.

Yeah, so I wasn’t the best with casual. I’d gone out and bought some new clothes for this weekend. Sexy things. Including lingerie that I would probably always hide under my sweet pink and purple patterned panties in my underwear drawer. Hopefully they’d have some dirty memories attached, courtesy of one Kellan McGuire.

“Are you sure this is the right address?” I pressed my forehead against the window and bit my lip as I tried to take in the expanse of the property before me. As far as California real estate went, I was sure it wasn’t at the top of the range. Not by far. Even a cactus in LA went for more than I could fathom. But still, this wasn’t the kind of pad I’d pictured for an

up and coming record exec. Maybe he had to keep up a front for the people he worked with to prove he was making it in a cutthroat industry. He might even have wild music parties here for all I knew.

“It’s the address you gave me, lady. Guess that man you came to see is doing all right for himself.” The driver winked again and tapped his thumbs on the wheel.

Clock was running, and I couldn’t stall any longer.

I paid him, adding in my idea of a hefty tip, and waited while he deposited my suitcase from the trunk by my feet. Then as the car pulled away from the circular driveway, I pursed my lips and wondered if it was too late to run back home.

What had made me think I was equipped to handle any of this?

The house was huge and white with tons of windows. They seemed mirrored to reflect the last pink and orange rays from the sunset. Made from privacy glass, probably. I took the stairs that wound up the side, climbing to a large veranda with a killer view of the city.

I stood at the ornate iron railing, hauling in deep draughts of the ocean-tinged warm breeze. The water probably wasn’t that close, but my imagination always filled in the blanks. I tugged my short jacket tighter around my body and let my gaze soak up the lights coming on in the high rises that seemed to stretch in every direction in the distance.

This place held so many possibilities. I swore I could feel them in the air. Or maybe that was just anticipation.

The door opened behind me and I braced, not even getting a chance to turn before that familiar presence loomed behind me. I didn’t need to look to know it was him. I smelled his alpine shampoo and the clean scent of his basic, utilitarian soap, and my entire body clenched in reaction.

His big hands came up to bracelet my wrists on the railing and he brushed his mouth over my hair. “You came.”

My voice was going to shake. I just knew it.



“I said I would, didn’t I?” Through some miracle, I managed to sound relaxed. Even a little snarky. I hadn’t had to summon my bravado for most of the first night I’d spent with him, but now that I knew what being with him entailed, I was practically a vibrating wire of need.

He slid his nose through my hair, inhaling deeply, and I gripped the railing. It took so little from him to make my system rev. He tapped the pulse in my wrist and I shut my eyes.

I could play blasé all I wanted, but he already knew I was throbbing all over for him. Inside and out. Even my skin felt as if it had shrunk in the warm air.

“Is your father going to show up here to drag you home?” His warm breath skimmed over my neck, as erotic as the edge of a feather.

“No. They think I’m spending the weekend with Ken.” He growled and spun me around, and the sight of him again after the last three weeks was a punch to the chest. His hair was different. Shorter but somehow wilder, the top gelled up into a faux hawk. “My best friend, Kendra,” I reminded him.

I didn’t get a chance to say anything else or even to continue my perusal past his eyes before he dragged me against him and threaded his fingers through my loose hair. I’d left it down, hoping this very thing might happen.

He gave me *that* look, heavy and intense, an instant before his mouth came down on mine. Every time I expected rough, punishing kisses that matched his firm grip on my hair, and every time his lips were soft and gentle. They molded to mine, and he learned my shape again for several frantic heartbeats until his tongue slashed between them. Slick and hot, his kisses left no confusion about where his thoughts—and the stiff length digging into my belly—were headed.

“I have more than one condom this time,” he said between kisses, his free hand grasping my waist so he could haul me even closer.

It was never close enough. The clothes between us—hell, even the air—were simply too much.

“Me too.” I reached up, eyes still closed, and caressed his jaw. He groaned, but it wasn’t enough to cover my sound of distress. “You shaved.”

“You like the beard?”

“I did.” It was hard to get the rest out. “I liked the way it felt between my legs.”

“Christ.”

I didn’t have time to say anything else before he plucked me up into his arms. He bent us precipitously to pick up my suitcase and carted me inside, kicking the door shut. He set me down long enough to drop the suitcase and to press buttons on a seemingly complicated alarm system. I frowned as it beeped and numbers scrolled past on the screen.

What the heck was all this? He hadn’t even locked the cabin in Turnbull, but out here, he’d opted for mega security. Perhaps it just came part and parcel with living in such an expensive area.

“Where’s the armed guard?” I asked, only half kidding.

He grunted and picked me up again, this time in a fireman’s style carry over his burly shoulder. When I shrieked, he smacked my ass and I fell silent.

So much for a house tour. Apparently we were headed right to the bedroom. I might’ve protested about that if I wasn’t at the perfect angle to check out his ass.

Cradled in worn denim, his buns were spectacular. If I stretched just a bit more, I could bite one.

He toted me up a spiral staircase flanked by walls covered in huge paintings. Of the sea. And fire. And a lone snow-covered tree in the forest, shuddering in the wind. I didn’t get a good look at them despite my twisting and gyrating, which seriously pissed me off.

I enjoyed romance as much as the next person, but this didn’t feel like a sweet gesture. That wasn’t Kellan’s way of

doing things. Actually I liked that he was more straightforward.

But this? *This* felt like he was trying to keep me from seeing his place.

Halfway up the endless staircase, I slapped his back to make him put me down. He finally obliged, saying nothing as I pointed. “Who painted those?”

“Does it matter?”

I touched his cheek and made him look at me. He was very good at not meeting my eyes, and I wasn’t going to allow that this time. “Was it you?”

That muscle I remembered flared in his jaw, giving him away. “Just a hobby,” he said under his breath.

“They’re incredible. That tree gave you away.” Driven to keep touching him, I brushed a stray lock of hair out of his chocolate eyes. I didn’t like the product in his hair or the style or his new clean-shaven look.

I wanted the same Kellan back I’d had at the cabin. Rude, crude, uncouth. Raw in all the best ways. Not this slick, polished version who carried me around in a pseudo expression of romance.

“I’m the same man,” he muttered, resuming the climb. At the top of the stairs, he took a left and just kept going.

I rushed after him. Had I spoken aloud?

Knowing me, probably. But I wasn’t going to hide my feelings. At least not about this.

“You’re even dressed different.” I pulled at the sleeve of his white button-down shirt and took in the rest of his attire. He had on a black belt studded with spikes, probably store-manufactured bleached and slashed jeans, and trendy boots with a heel that had clanged on each rung of the stairs. That wasn’t all. Unless I was mistaken, he was wearing eyeliner.

Genuine panic seized my throat. “Why are you dressed like this?”

He just kept walking. Since I wasn't going to continue to yank on his clothes like a petulant child, I stopped and crossed my arms.

When he realized I wasn't following, he paused and pinched the bridge of his nose. "I told you I work with artists. You gotta play the game."

"That involves eye makeup and glitzy houses and belts that look like they were modeled on a dog's choke collar."

He walked away and left me standing there.

Eventually I gave in and followed him. What choice did I have? I'd flown to the other side of the country like an idiot, so I wasn't leaving without some sex.

*Good sex. Tear the freaking roof off and set that shit on fire sex.*

It wasn't my problem what he chose to do with his life. He hadn't even asked about mine. Forget that, he hadn't even asked me how I was. Or if I'd had a good flight. He'd just kissed my fool head off and manhandled me, just in case I had any doubts about what he had planned this weekend.

I didn't, but that didn't mean I was going to let him dominate me. In bed was one thing. Out? Nope. Not happening. Not with him or any other male again. Or female for that matter.

*Talking to you, Ken, even if it's only in my head.*

I marched down the long hallway and did my best not to notice the vaulted ceilings or the off-white walls with fancy crown moulding. This was not my suburban home where paint had been slapped on so many times that the baseboards were covered in a rainbow of hatch marks from all the different colors used over the years. The floor beneath my heels was glossy and black, mirrored just like the windows. If I dared to look, I'd probably see my reflection.

This place didn't fit the Kellan I'd come to know at all.

He leaned against the door jamb of a room at the end of the hall, arms crossed, watching me in a predatory way that made

every part of me stand at attention. But I wasn't about to let attraction silence my voice. Not again.

I came to a stop in front of him. "I think we need to get a few things straight, McGuire."

His eyebrow lifted. "That so?"

"That's so. I don't want you to misunderstand me. I might have come here for sex, but that doesn't mean you can ignore my questions and dismiss me. If you don't want me to ask anything, I understand. It's your life. Your business."

His lips quirked. "Glad you see reason." I let him drag me closer and brush his lips along my jaw. "I'm also glad you came here for sex, because I've been devising new ways to fuck you all goddamn week." I shivered as he slid his large hand down my back to cup my ass through my short dress. He stayed above the fabric for a second before dipping his hand beneath to palm one bare cheek. "Shit, a thong?" He eased back to stare at me. "You?"

I shrugged.

"Since when do you wear thongs?"

"Since I meet random men for sex."

"You better be using the plural incidentally."

Again, I shrugged.

"Playing that game, are we? I don't tell you what you want, you shut me down."

"It's not a game. I'm offering you the same thing you're offering me." I wet my lips, lingering on the gesture until his gaze dropped to them. "Your rules, but I'm going to make sure we adhere to them."

He spun me around and pressed my spine against the doorframe so fast that I didn't have a chance to counter the move. "My rules are you fuck me and only me while we're doing this. Non-negotiable. That includes any dalliances with your ex."

“Oh, you’re so lucky I don’t clean your clock for that one.” I jutted out my chin. “Besides, two-way street. You better give back what you ask for.”

“You think I’ve touched anyone else since you?” He braced his arm above my head and cupped my throat with his other hand, his thumb tracing my pulse. “You think I even could?”

I said nothing. While he was away from me, I had no clue how he lived his life. I knew so little about him. By his choice, it seemed.

God, I was so out of my depth here. True, I thought I was semi-holding my own, but it was like a goldfish trying to hang with a shark. At any time he could lean over and swallow me whole.

I wasn’t even entirely sure I would mind.

“Three fucking weeks I’ve ached for you. Then you come in here and Christ, I can’t even breathe from wanting you and you’re asking me questions. Like I can think. Like I can imagine anything but getting this dress off you and your pussy in my mouth.”

He tugged my short jacket down my arms and tossed it on a chair just inside what appeared to be the master bedroom. The room was light and airy, bigger than my mind could comprehend. Giant bed, huge windows, and heavy, expensive furniture everywhere.

*Not right now. Worry about that later.*

His hungry gaze latched on my face as he licked the inside of his lower lip. That predatory expression made my thighs quiver.

I couldn’t wait any longer. Right, wrong, good, bad—I needed this.

*Him.*

Slowly, I slid my arms up and gripped the door jamb. Not knowing what the hell I was doing or if I should be standing my ground. All I knew was Kellan’s jaw clenched as he raked

his gaze over me. Without a word, he reached behind me to drag down my zipper. The sleeveless dress slipped down my body, revealing my white strapless bra and sheer lacy thong.

I'd never worn a thong before. Definitely hadn't owned one. I wasn't sure I was a fan of the whole butt floss thing, but I was on board with Kellan's low groan as he devoured me with his eyes.

Still watching me, he crouched and closed his mouth over the wet spot on my panties, sucking me through the material. His tongue flicked hungrily while he pulled the narrow strip of fabric aside to rub my slick folds with his callused fingertips. Then he licked me without even the shield of my panties between us and I dropped my head back against the wood, seeing stars for more than one reason.

Stars? I saw a whole constellation of them at the feel of him sliding one long finger inside me where I was already soaked and clenching for him. Desperately craving what only he could give.

Even without a ton of experience, I understood that this guy was somehow the key in my lock. How I knew that with such certainty defied logic or explanation. I wasn't going to try to make sense of it, even to myself.

He gripped my leg and pulled it over his shoulder. That would have scandalized me enough, but he wasn't done. He grabbed the other one and did the same. I was held up against the wall, supported only by his broad shoulders, his face inches from my slit.

"Stay still," he murmured, and dove in.

Right. As if I could be still while he ate me as if he was dying for my taste. Fingers pumping—two now—lips and tongue working my clit, teeth grazing my swollen flesh. His groans rumbled against my skin, inflaming me even more. I arched, gripping the door frame for purchase, fighting not to panic that he'd drop me. I couldn't stop moving. Hips flailing, thighs trembling, heels beating against his back.

All the while, his mouth and fingers never stopped their sweet torment.

“I’m going to—”

“Yes,” he growled against me, and I shattered, letting out a cry as my body fisted and released. I grasped his fingers deep, bending forward to clutch at his hair with one hand while my nails scrabbled at the wood. I was losing my balance, sliding down the wall, so close to falling. Just slipping away.

He wouldn’t let me. Even as I lost track of myself, I knew he’d be there to catch me. It didn’t make sense, the trust I had in him. It was dangerous. But I couldn’t turn off my feelings in his direction.

Any of them.

I was still shaking from the aftershocks when he rose and enfolded me in his arms. “Shh,” he said against my hair while I struggled to hold on to him. My limbs weren’t functioning properly. My brain was a haze.

Orgasms weren’t supposed to leave you broken afterward, were they?

“Only the best ones, Red.”

My spine hit the bed an instant later, and he followed me down to the mattress. I hadn’t even been fully aware that he’d carried me.

“Some potent shit,” I mumbled, and he laughed, pressing his face into my hair.

I wasn’t even capable of fretting that I was saying what was in my head. So be it. He wanted the part between my legs, he’d just have to deal with the rest. As would I if I wanted that hard length pressing against my stomach.

And oh, I did.

He kneeled beside me and stripped off his button-down, each opened button revealing the tanned, muscled, inked chest beneath. My heart picked up speed at the sight of that meandering happy trail of hair that led down beneath his belly button to his unbuttoned jeans. Unzipped too. They gaped



open, the outline of his stiff cock clearly visible against his dark boxers. He stood to kick off his boots and haul down his jeans and boxers and I stared, my mouth watering.

Without conscious thought, I sat up and undid my bra, letting the cups fall away from my breasts. He swallowed audibly, raking a hand through his hair. Messing it up further than I'd already done with my hands.

Before he got out of this bed, he'd be back to the Kellan I remembered. Scruff growing back in, hair wild, no part of him slick and savvy and meant to be palatable for the masses.

*Mine.*

Slowly, I kicked off my heels and slid the panties down my hips that he'd just shoved out of his way. His gulp for air was probably the sexiest thing I'd ever heard.

No, I was wrong. When he yanked open a bedside drawer and withdrew a strip of condoms, then tore open the first, *that* was the best sound ever.

He braced his knee on the bed and rolled on the latex, his gaze intent on mine. The expression in his eyes was so much softer than the rigid planes of his face. As if he was studying my reaction, wanting to make sure I was still with him.

I reclined on the bed and reached back to grip the spindles of the headboard. Ones meant to hold during a wild fuck.

*He's had other women here. You're not the first. Definitely won't be the last.*

But that I managed not to say aloud. Somehow. Probably because some truths were too painful to deserve breath.

He grabbed my calf and yanked me toward him, spreading me open like a wishbone so he could settle between my legs. Without prelude, he captured one eager nipple, drawing it between his sharp teeth while he focused on my face. Always so careful to make sure I was right with him. The pleasure was too keen, pulling a moan from my throat. He switched to the other breast and offered it the same attention, tonguing the tip to a rigid peak. Alternating the pressure from rough to gentle. Watching me, he pinched both nipples. Again and again.

Already half crazed, I circled my hips in a vain attempt to alleviate the ache. I could feel myself readying for him again. Slickness saturated my inner thighs. I needed so much more than fingers this time. Soon I'd beg for his cock.

"So greedy," he breathed against my breast. "So am I."

He rolled me on my side and moved up behind me, cradling me close. His palm covered my breasts, trying to contain them. His hand wasn't large enough. Not even close. He grunted against the side of my neck and squeezed them with almost painful force as I threw my leg over both of his. Opening up my pussy so he was right there, the heat of his erection a whisper away.

"Now," I pleaded, beyond embarrassment.

Kellan lined up his dick with my slit, taunting me with shallow thrusts that heightened my arousal without giving me any relief. He inched inside me enough to make my walls clutch at him, shifting me half on my belly so the friction of the sheets teased my swollen clit. His lips skimmed my ear as he stopped trying to cup my breasts and strummed his thumb between my legs.

"Want to come again?"

I nodded, incapable of words. He chuckled and bore down harder with both his thumb and his cock, causing me to shake and strain for what loomed so close.

Still. Again.

"First deep stroke," he said, his thumb moving faster now. Sliding audibly in the wetness he'd created. "You're gonna cream on my dick."

I shut my eyes and rocked back against him, gaining another inch of his length. My sigh of relief made him push me harder against the mattress. I was half on my belly, half on my side, completely beneath him. At his mercy. Under his control.

Never had anything felt so damn good.

“First deep stroke,” he said again, and it sounded like a promise.

Then he pulled back on the trigger and slammed into me, so full and hard, hitting that spot only he seemed to know how to find. And I exploded around him.

“Fuck, yes. Fuck.” He rolled on his back and drew me with him, still embedded inside me, his large hands guiding my hips as he lifted me up and down. Using my body for his enjoyment while my climax spun out and went on and on.

I couldn't do anything but loll against him, squeezing him on each thrust. But then I started to push back against him, my hands bracing against his tensed abdomen as I raised and lowered myself on his thick dick. He might be using me but I was using him too, nearly drunk on the power of destroying his will.

He might have decimated me, but I intended to do the same right back.

He swore ripely against my shoulder and fumbled between my thighs to play with my clit, his caresses no longer sure. I was so slippery and he was shaking too, his big body tense and straining beneath mine. He thickened inside me and I moaned, throwing back my head as the pinprick lights in the ceiling multiplied and swam.

“Hell yes. So goddamn tight. Work me with that sweet pussy.” He shoved my legs apart and surged up into me, so roughly I feared I'd break.

I loved it. I craved it. Just like this.

Poised on the brink of another orgasm, I reached down to grasp his cock, seating it more firmly inside of me. I whimpered at the hot, hard feel of him drenched with my arousal. I'd never been so wet in my life.

He reached up to grab a handful of my hair, yanking my head back so I stretched out flat on top of him. And he finished us both off, rearing up and pushing into me at just the right angle for me to come again. That shoved him over too,

his cock jerking as he spilled himself into the condom and he roared out his pleasure into my hair.

“Maggie. Goddammit, Maggie.”

Coming with him shouting my name—and sounding so absolutely pissed about it—made me contract around him again. I couldn’t stop coming.

I might be screwed, but so was he.

Half blind, nearly deaf, I slumped on top of him. His arms came around me, banding tight. “You’re not leaving this time,” he said gruffly, and I nodded without even being fully aware of what I was agreeing to.

I didn’t know how I’d ever leave again.

THIRTEEN

# KELLAN

I'D NEVER HAD A WOMAN IN MY BED. NOT IN MY HOUSE. NOT here.

It was probably not much of a triumph, considering I'd only been renting this place for about six months. But I'd always been careful to keep the lines separate.

Women were for backstage hallways and green rooms. Add in the occasional hotel room, bar bathroom or club VIP area. I wasn't a saint, and didn't pretend otherwise.

Now there was Maggie, who'd blown every rule I'd ever set for myself to hell.

I'd also never been balls deep in a woman one minute and dreaming about her the next. Her hair clinging to my mouth, her soft breasts pillowed against my chest. Evidently that wasn't close enough. She had to be inside my head too, so I woke up with her name on my tongue.

I opened my eyes to find her asleep in my arms, her long dark hair spread all over me. Owning me just as her body did.

What the hell was happening to me?

I couldn't remember getting up to turn out the lights, but the room was now dark. A thin path of moonlight highlighted her delicate features. Her inky lashes, her freckled nose, and her soft mouth, swollen from mine. Her pearlescent skin glowed against the navy sheets, and I stroked her arm just to see the stark difference between our flesh.

She was the light to my dark in every goddamn way.

The contrast between her pale skin, bright blue eyes, and near-black hair would be gorgeous on canvas. In the picture I wanted to paint, her ruby red nipples would peek past the barely closed lapels of the silk robe I'd purchased on a whim yesterday. I'd found myself at the counter of a fancy department store, the satiny fabric clutched in my hands. I'd wanted her in clothes I'd bought and smelling like me again.

Now she did. Our combined scents mingled in the room, dirty and lewd. But her hair still smelled of strawberries, fresh and sweet.

She stirred in her sleep and I fought the urge to roll out of bed. The need to move, to escape, was nearly stifling.

I slept alone. Always.

Once was an accident. Twice was a plan.

Three times would be setting us both up for a fall.

I sat up in bed and rested my head in my hands. I had to get out of here. Just get in my car and go. She had her roundtrip ticket. If I didn't come back, didn't call or contact her, she'd get the message and leave. Go back to her family where she belonged.

She didn't belong with me. I didn't know how to be faithful, just like good ol' Dad. Sleeping with her twice in a row was the longest streak I'd been on since high school.

And if that wasn't pathetic, I didn't know what was.

The sheets whispered behind me and I braced. I still wasn't capable of steeling myself so that the hesitant brush of her lips against my shoulder didn't affect me. I knew she was uneasy, that she'd never experienced any of this before.

Only a bastard would leave her in the dark without any comforting words. Even something as simple as telling her she meant more to me than a good fuck.

Instead I told her about my father.

"My dad didn't stay with us," I said, somehow shocked to hear my voice break the stillness. She must've been surprised too, because I felt her body jolt. "Having a family wasn't in

his plans. So he pretended to do the right thing. But it was just going through the motions.”

She didn't respond right away. “Some people aren't suited for family life, I suppose. Or they won't let themselves be. Which is pretty much the same thing.”

“Your world was the exact opposite of mine.” I let out a brittle laugh. “I'm not saying I had it rough, just that I didn't grow up with the same wide-eyed innocence toward life. It changes you. Hardens you.”

Even as I tried to explain, I didn't want her to understand. I didn't want her to be harder. I wanted her exactly how she was.

I owed her those simple, sweet words about what she meant to me. Something more substantial than a random tidbit about my father that didn't matter jack shit. What mattered was how I treated her when it was just the two of us. Without the excuses and the bullshit that I thought justified me acting like an asshole.

She didn't deserve anything but the best.

But I was a bastard, and I'd come by it naturally. So I turned to her and pushed her back against the pillows, gripping her wrists in one hand over her head. My hard dick nestled between her damp thighs. In the dark, her huge eyes tracked mine.

My hips snapped back and I sank into her, one punishing thrust that ripped a breath from her throat.

Immediately, I knew my mistake. I was inside her bare, and she was like heaven gloving my dick. Slick, hot, so giving. Her pussy opening up to me the deeper I went. I drew back and slammed home again, even harder before.

I was taking her raw and I didn't even care. It didn't matter.

She yanked her wrists free and shoved at my shoulders. I thought she was trying to stop me—as she should—so I started to pull back. Both of us scarily silent except for our tortured breaths, as if even speaking required too much effort.



Then she rolled me on my back and climbed on top, her grip on my rock-hard cock so certain as she guided it back inside her. Where it belonged.

Where *I* belonged.

She rocked her hips, taking me deeper as one hand skimmed her belly and breasts. The other clutched her own hair as she rode me, her instinctual moves the most beautiful thing I'd ever witnessed. Her sexy body soaked in moonlight, her witchy dark hair tumbling over her shoulders and back.

I had to stop her. Stop this. With every flex of her pussy, my balls grew tighter, the need spiraling higher. This couldn't last forever. If she kept on fucking me, her eyes closed, her hands exploring her own curves as if they were all new to her, I'd spill myself inside her and not give a goddamn.

"Maggie." Her name tore from my lips like a curse. "We can't."

But she didn't open her eyes. Maybe she didn't even hear me.

She slid her hand down to delve between her thighs, her tentative explorations making her cry out. Making me more rigid than a damn steel beam. I couldn't stop myself from seizing her hips and driving into her. Her eyes flew open as she frantically rubbed her clit and grasped me so tightly inside I never wanted to leave. Every time I pulled out, fighting the grip of her swollen, soaked pussy, I swore and plunged in again. I couldn't get enough.

"Get me wet," I demanded, and she nodded, her fingers a blur between her legs. Her walls rippled around me and I threw back my head, powerless to stop the shout of completion that roared through me along with my release.

I came and came, filling her up until she was dripping with me. And then I flipped her over on her back and lifted her leg in the air, bending it toward her chest as I moved down to taste what we'd made.

Goddamn, she tasted sweet. Sweeter when her tight little pussy was saturated from what we'd done.

After a couple minutes, she whimpered and pushed my head away. I moved back up her body and gripped her chin, sealing my mouth over hers. She moaned at the flavor of our kisses, leaning up to chase my mouth and wind her fingers through my hair.

Sweaty, spent, we rolled across the bed, her hair tangling around us. I cupped her face and kissed her again, slower this time, my lips rubbing against hers. “Full of you,” she whispered, her eyes bright in the night.

My gut twisted.

She wasn’t just kind and smart and curious and beautiful. She was naughty as hell and eager to learn everything I wanted to teach.

Fuck if she wasn’t my perfect woman, wrapped up in a smart-assed bow.

I skimmed my hand down her damp back. “I should feed you.”

The corner of her mouth lifted and she ran her hand down my torso to grip my length, making me laugh. “Hungry,” she said breathlessly, licking her lips, and I jerked in her hand.

“Dirty girl,” I said, outlining her mouth with the tip of my finger.

She nodded. “Dirty for you.”

“Which we’ll get back to later.” Lightly, I popped her on the ass. Her giggle was like frigging music. “Now you’re going to let me feed you.”

“Grilled cheese and tomato soup?” The hope in her voice made me grin.

Especially because I’d made a grocery run for exactly that, along with a few other necessary items.

“You want that at,” I craned my neck to see the glowing lights of the clock on my nightstand, “three-eleven am?”

“Yeah.” Her belly rumbled and she glanced down at it, laughing at herself while her hair fell forward to frame her

gorgeous face. She glanced up at me and my chest tightened, so painfully that I couldn't breathe.

This couldn't be happening. Not here, not now. Not when she didn't even know who I really was.

She scrambled off me and shoved her hands through her tousled hair. "What I want most right now is a shower." She rubbed her throat and gave me a sheepish smile. "It was a long trip and—"

"And I got you dirty for real." I sat up and moved to the side of the bed, then drew her between my legs, cupping her ass in both hands. "En suite's that door over there."

"En suite too. Fancy schmancy."

Though she was only teasing, her words reminded me of the dangerous game I was playing. One we both couldn't win. As soon as she found out I'd lied to her, she'd be on a plane to New York. Exactly where she belonged. She didn't like this side of me, and this was who I was when I was in California. This had been my dream, and I had to deal with everything that came with it.

Including shielding her from a life I knew she'd have no interest in being involved with.

Hell, my lie was probably the best thing for her. Since I hadn't made a clean break the way I should have, the truth would do it for me.

She climbed off the bed, and even without seeing it, I could tell she was standing with one foot over the other. Her nervous stance, the way I'd caught her standing at the cabin more than once. "You're not going to shower too?"

That was a road to perdition. At least I could feed her and act like I wasn't a complete lech without any redeeming qualities. One who had summoned her across the country for sex without any intention of anything more.

Well, I was that guy. But I could pretend while she was here that it wasn't a complete joke that a decent woman like Maggie Kelly might find me worthy of anything but dark, delicious fucking.

“Nah, I’ll shower later. I’m hungry too.”

“Okay.” She started to search for her clothes and I stilled her with a hand on her arm. I rose to go to my closet, grabbing the robe I’d bought off a hook.

“Here.” I held it out to her, stifling my urge to help her put it on. I had to kill those tendencies, because all they would do was confuse her and muddy the waters.

She said she understood I’d invited her here for sex. If she could keep those boundary lines in her head, she was a better person than I was because I could not.

More and more with every passing moment.

Even in the pale moonlight, I glimpsed her wrinkled nose. “Another woman’s?”

“No.” I started to tell her that no other woman had been in this room and stopped. Not necessary information. “It’s just for guests.”

She arched a brow. “You, the guy who didn’t even have a spare towel at the cabin, stocks robes for guests.”

I shrugged.

“I never thought I’d say this, but I miss cabin Kellan.” She pulled on the robe and let out a purr as the silky material settled against her skin. “Oh God. This feels glorious.” She tugged on the belt, tightening it around her waist, and frowned. “This seems like it was made for me. My size exactly.”

Yes, because I’d described her as best as I could to the woman at the store. I’d gone over her measurements painstakingly, trying my hardest to come as close as possible without knowing her proportions. There might have been hand gestures involved.

I shrugged again.

“It’s so soft.” She rubbed her cheek against the fabric, her eyes narrowing. I couldn’t see that in the dim light, but already I knew her reactions. The way she’d study me when she thought I wasn’t aware, her busy brain spinning as she tried to

fit puzzle pieces into one cohesive whole. “Thank you,” she said, her voice barely a whisper.

“Yeah.” I cleared my throat and snatched my jeans off the floor. “I’ll go make us some food,” I said before I escaped.

I waited at the top of the stairs until I heard the water come on in the bathroom. I could just imagine her looking at the mirrored tiles in wonder, her eyes getting wider as she took everything in. She was so unspoiled, untouched by all the excesses I saw daily.

Who could blame me for wanting some of that purity for myself? I missed life being that simple. Black and white, right or wrong.

Back in the day, I’d been that way too. So long ago. I’d criticized my father for his fickle ways. I hadn’t understood why my mother and me and Bethy hadn’t been enough. Bethy, who’d just been an accident one night when my father breezed through town. My parents had argued like they always had and then spent the night together, and I’d ended up with the brightest, toughest little sister I’d never known to wish for. For all the years afterward when my mother found her solace in one man after another, Bethy and I been each other’s. And all along, I’d cursed my father, never guessing that I was doomed to repeat the same pattern.

Branch from the tree and all that. Maybe I’d been a fool to ever believe I could break the streak. In time, I’d stopped trying.

Not everyone was built to be faithful. Or else it was like Maggie had said. Some guys weren’t meant for family life or they believed they weren’t, which amounted to the same thing.

At least I never lied. That was the morality I clung to. It was okay that I didn’t know how to build a relationship, because I never led anyone on. I was always honest, a lot more than my father could say. But honesty could be a crutch too.

And I needed to get the food started before Red found me brooding and asked me what was wrong.

Only everything.

I jogged downstairs and checked the security system again out of habit. All was secure, each of the different sectors glowing green. On second thought, I grabbed her suitcase and ran back upstairs to leave it for her in the bedroom. As I stepped back inside, I heard her singing in the shower. I smiled, unsurprised at the tightness in my chest this time.

I'd missed her singing. All it had taken was one night for her to burrow into me in so many ways.

I was still finding new marks, little slashes I'd never expected. She'd touched me deeper than anyone. Even her preference for boy bands amused me more than pissed me off.

Feeling like an idiot, I stood near the closed bathroom door while she sang the latest hit by the Luscious Lovahboys. I only recognized it because of that stupid New Year's Eve show that had started so much.

When she shifted into another song of the pop variety, I went back downstairs to the kitchen and took out the fixings for the sandwich and soup. Her husky voice echoed in my head as I buttered bread and heated up the skillet, then dumped soup in another pan. The image of her curvy body twisting under the spray hijacked my thoughts until I was straining against the denim.

Again. Still. I was a perpetual walking hard-on around that woman.

She came down into the kitchen, humming under her breath, her long wet hair in thick ropes. Water gleamed on what showed of her legs before they disappeared under the white robe. "Your bathroom is...whoa." She blew out a breath and stopped just over the threshold. "Just like this kitchen. Oh my God. Are you filthy rich and forgot to tell me?"

I stirred the soup and adjusted the burner. With one whiff of my scent on her, my spine locked. "You used my shampoo again."

Fuck, I loved it when she smelled like me.

In every damn way.

“Was I not supposed to? I brought some in my bag, but I didn’t realize you’d brought it upstairs. Next time I’ll use my own.”

“No.” The growl left my chest and I saw her smile before she ducked her head. “Use mine.”

“If you insist. You might not like mine anyway. It’s strawberry banana like my body wash.” She moved toward the stove and stopped, frowning. “Ugh. Why does that smell like that?”

I checked the grilled cheese sandwiches on the skillet to make sure they weren’t burning. Nope, all looked good. “You bitchin’ about my cooking, Red?”

“No. It was surprisingly good last time. It just smells off.” She moved up against my side and took over stirring the soup, though I could tell she was taking shallow breaths so as not to inhale too much.

I was doing enough inhaling for the both of us. Hell, in a second I’d be burying my face in her hair.

“My best friend thought I was crazy to come out here.”

“You are.”

She shot me a look under her lashes. I was sure she hadn’t touched up her makeup since she hadn’t even realized right away that I’d brought up her bag, but her lashes were so thick, framing all that blue. “And yet.”

“And yet. Damn Turnbull girls, so wild.” I couldn’t keep the amusement from my tone. “Must be fun for your dad, trying to harness all three of you.”

She snorted. “Yeah, right. We’re past the age of harnessing. At least Maeve and Regan are. He’s given up on them to focus all his parental excesses on me. My mom tries to reign him in but it’s basically a lost cause.” She sighed and stirred. “You’d think after six, you’d loosen the strings a little.”

“I’d think after three, I’d be getting snipped.”

“Three, huh? Is that the magic number?”

“No.” I didn’t know why I’d even said that. I should’ve said before any, I’d get snipped. Why take any chances?

But I was the guy who’d just fucked a girl I barely knew raw. And she’d let me. Hell, she’d even encouraged me. That seemed about as much like the Maggie I’d met three weeks ago as buying her a robe fit me.

Screwing each other and screwed up.

“So you didn’t, ah, ask.”

“How can you afford this house? I did, slyly, through compliments. But you didn’t take the bait.” She turned off the burner under the soup.

“Not that. I mean, before. Upstairs. I’m clean.”

It was her turn not to look at me, and I found it vaguely disconcerting to be the one trying to get her to meet my gaze. “I’d hope so.”

That was it?

“You’re not going to volunteer the same?”

“I’m figuring you assumed that already or you wouldn’t have risked it.” She flashed a sunny smile. “Damn near to a virgin in your mind, aren’t I? Besides, if I could risk it with you, not like you’re in a place to judge.”

“I’ll have you know I’ve never done that before. Not even once.”

“Mmm-hmm. Let me guess. You also like long walks on the beach, making love in the rain, and drinking pina coladas too?”

“Huh?”

“Before you ask your next question, I’m on the Pill. I went off after the ex then back on after the cabin. So we’re good.”

I grunted. That was excellent news. I should’ve known better.

Maggie would never risk a baby with the likes of me. Her father would probably disown her.



Not that I could blame the guy.

“Really, I don’t need your lines,” she continued. “They’re tiresome. Not to mention Derek got there before—”

I let go of the skillet and closed my fingers around her wrist, jerking her against me as her pupils flared wide. “Don’t ever compare me to him. I know he was important to you and you were together for a long time, but I’m not that asshole. I’m not feeding you lines.”

“Oh no?” She yanked her wrist back and gave my chest a hard shove. “Don’t think you can use your strength against me. If you don’t like what I’m saying, that doesn’t give you the right to try to shut me up.”

I swallowed. “You’re right. I’m sorry.”

“And you know what else? I know exactly what I’m doing. I might not make the same choices everyone else does, but that doesn’t mean that I’m stupid and uninformed. I know coming here is a risk. I get that. I know what happened upstairs was another one. But I had my eyes wide open. If trusting you is a mistake, at least I made it myself. I’ll deal with the consequences that way too.”

“You trust me?” I swallowed again over the grit in my throat. “How?”

“I don’t know. Okay? I don’t get any of this. But that doesn’t mean I’m not adult enough to handle whatever comes my way. I might be headed for a cliff but at least I see it coming. At least I have my hands on the wheel. I didn’t do the right thing, the safe thing, and still somehow put my belief in a man who ended up treating me like trash.”

“Because I treated you that way from the start,” I said hollowly.

“You did not. You pulled me out of my car and you took me into your home when you didn’t want me there. You fed me your dinner and listened to my music and dealt with me in your space even though you were itchy to be alone. And you made me feel—” She looked away and I cupped her cheek, desperate to bring her eyes back to mine. “You just made me

feel,” she whispered. “I wanted to see if it could be like that one more time. Not thinking it really could.”

A tremor went through my hand and I curled my fingers against her soft skin. “And?” I asked, voice hoarse.

“You very well know, because you feel it too. You asked me to come here because you feel it. And it scares you every bit as much as it frightens me.” She rose on her tiptoes and pressed her forehead against my chin. “You’re not like him, Kellan. You couldn’t be. Just like I can’t be the me I was with him either. This is all different.”

I gripped a handful of her robe. “I bought this for you.” She lifted her chin and nailed me with her all too perceptive gaze. “Just for you.”

“Mmm-hmm,” she said again, but her lips curved this time.

The pan sizzled beside me and she made a face. “Ugh. Burning.”

I grabbed the pan and flipped the sandwiches, hiding the burned side from view. “Just a little charred. Adds flavor.”

“We’ll see about that. Want me to set the table?”

“Sure.” I pointed out cabinets and drawers and grinned at her expression upon discovering my plates and bowls were yet again the disposable variety. “Hey, when I find something that works, I go with it.”

She opened a drawer and slung plastic knives on the table to go with the paper plates. “So I see.”

“I always enjoyed picnics.”

“Me too, in Bailey Park. But my mom always brought her china and best silverware. No reason not to use the nice stuff even if we were eating on a blanket.”

Her smile settled inside me as I used the spatula to dish out the sandwiches. “So you lied to your parents about coming here.”

Like a cloud moving over the sun, her smile dimmed. “I shouldn’t have, but I’m still at the fledgling stages of being a badass.”

I laughed so hard that I nearly bobbed the pan of soup I’d just picked up. I turned around to find her grinning at me, her dark hair curving over her cheek.

It took everything I possessed to pour the soup into the plastic bowls she’d set out and sit down beside her to eat. All I wanted to do was to tug her into my lap and kiss her until that worry that had flitted through her expression was vanquished forever.

Worry I’d caused. Selfishly.

“Good?” I asked after she took the first bite of her sandwich. “A little crispy,” I acknowledged, grating off the burnt parts with my crappy plastic fork.

“Adds flavor.”

“Smart ass.” Once I was done with my sandwich, I grabbed her plate and shaved off the darkened parts on her bread as well. I knew she was watching me, but I didn’t glance up from my task.

Turned out I liked the heavy warmth of her stare on my skin. Liked way too much about her.

“Better?” I asked once she’d sampled the sandwich I’d returned to her.

She nodded. “Almost perfect.” Licking cheese off her fingers, she rose and went to my fridge, yanking open the door and bending over to peer inside.

I nearly choked on the hunk of bread and cheese I’d just popped in my mouth.

Damn. That ass.

She rooted around for a second, then came back out with a jar of pickles. I held out my hand so I could open it for her as requested by every woman I knew, save my little sister. Maggie didn’t even look up, dispatching the lid with an efficiency that made me shift on my chair.

Damn, she was hot.

She sat back down and pried apart her sandwich. Neatly, she placed five pickles on each side of the torn bread. Then she smashed both halves back together and took a big bite, her eyes practically rolling back in her head. “Oh yes. Yes.”

I cocked a brow. “Need a moment alone?”

“Try it.” She pushed the jar at me, waiting until I’d fixed my sandwich the same way.

I took a bite and nodded. Not half bad.

We talked about everything and nothing while we polished off the rest of our meal. Her flight, her work, her classes starting on Monday. She didn’t ask me about myself anymore, and I found myself missing her sneaky little questions that weren’t so sneaky at all.

*Your choice, remember? You wanted to keep your distance.*

Yeah, too bad I hadn’t been able to do that with her since the first time I’d seen her hanging out of her car window.

“Don’t like the soup?” I asked after she took a couple of mouthfuls, her forehead wrinkling every time. She was too polite to say it wasn’t good, but if she wasn’t a fan, I wouldn’t make it next time.

Right. The next time that wasn’t going to happen. I’d just remember that.

“Normally I do. It’s just the smell.” She pushed the bowl away. “Sorry.”

“It wasn’t expired. I don’t think.” I hadn’t exactly checked.

She grinned. “Such confidence in your cooking.”

“Well, not my best skill.”

“No?” She braced her chin on her hand. “What is your best skill?”

“Probably playing guitar.”

She blinked and I realized she’d been playing around. Great. I should’ve said eating pussy or fucking. Those were

the kinds of answers that fit the level of intimacy I wanted to exist between us outside of bed.

Leave it to me to mess up my own rules.

“Guitar? Really?” The interest in her expression made me grip the edge of my plate until it crumpled. She glanced at my hand then back at my face before she averted her focus to anywhere but me. “Is that a deck out there?” she asked, gesturing toward the French doors. A couple of floodlights illuminated the wide, iron-railing flanked space.

I nodded, the tension in my shoulders easing. It wasn’t as if I could tell her about my music without mentioning the rest. I’d lied and lies were forever. I couldn’t just magically take them back.

No matter how much I wished I could.

“Overlooks the pool,” I said tightly.

She hopped to her feet and moved to the glass doors, then stepped out into the night. It wasn’t quite morning yet, but the sky was already beginning to lighten. Her hair blew behind her in the wind as she leaned over the railing to check out the pool. As she climbed up on the bottom rung, my gut lurched.

I was striding toward the doors and out to her before sanity descended. Just like I gripped her hips and pressed my mouth to the top of her head before I was even aware of doing it.

Somewhere along the way, my instincts had gotten all wrapped up in her. The instinct to keep her close, to try to make her happy, to protect her from any threat—including me.

*Especially me.*

“Kellan, it’s beautiful.”

I nodded against her hair, saying nothing.

“I bet you could climb up on this railing and jump right in \_\_\_”

“No,” I growled, making her laugh and turn to face me. “Not on your life.”

“Spoilsport.”

“Maybe, but you’re not jumping. It’s not safe from this height.”

“I wasn’t really going to.” She reached up to feather her fingers along my jaw. “Your scruff’s growing back in,” she murmured.

“Is that an invitation?” I asked, recalling her earlier words.

I had no problem at all with living between her thighs.

Cocking her head, she pulled the tie on her robe, letting it fall open so that her sexy body was on display. Her perfect breasts, the slight rise of her belly, her mound with its arousing dark strip of curls. “Depends on if you’ve had enough time to recover.”

“Red, I was recovered before I finished licking up what I left inside you.” When she shuddered, I lowered my head to nuzzle her nipple. “Let’s see if you can say the same.”

FOURTEEN

# MAGGIE

I WAS HAVING THE BEST DREAM.

My co-star was a grouchy man who made love to me with so much hunger that I never doubted his desire.

I wasn't his first, and I probably wouldn't be his last. I might not even have been his first this week, despite what he'd indicated. But when he touched me, I knew he was all in.

We both were.

The days spun out, the hours stacking like dominoes that fell too quickly. I reached for the cell to call Kendra more than once and laughed as Kellan held my phone high above my head, just out of reach.

I understood. I didn't want to deal with the outside world either, and maybe I liked that he wanted to protect our happy bubble for just a little longer.

Ken would keep my secret. She was my best friend, and she knew I'd have to come home soon enough.

Too soon.

Even the best dreams had to end.

The pluck of guitar strings made me shift against the sheets. I didn't know the song. Didn't recognize the lyrics he sang in a low, sexy voice. That voice that skimmed over my skin as if it were a silky caress, arousing impulses I couldn't satisfy alone.



The only respite was when he was inside me. His mouth on mine, our bodies moving together.

The pinch of his fingers, the heat of his lips. The buzz of his scruff on sensitive flesh. His groans, broken and raw. As if I was laying him bare.

What I wouldn't give for just that, again and again?

I whimpered, rocking my hips, and he moved against my back, cradling me close. "Shh," he murmured, his talented hands sliding over me to quench all the needs that he'd created.

The music was gone, but I didn't need it anymore. He was singing to me, so softly I had to strain to hear the words. Catching them in mid-air like a dream as he parted my slick thighs and dipped inside me, already knowing just how to soothe the ache. His fingers slipping in and out, oh so slow. Filling me, chasing away all the cold. Replacing it with so much heat. And then before I could ask, he was pushing his thickness inside me, widening me for him the way it should be. Open and wet, my body throbbing. Offering him all of me so I could take so much more.

Going so deep that my spine arched to give him everything.

Pleasure rippled through me, starting way down low in my belly and fanning out like bubbles in the pool we'd sat beside for hours. Singing along to the radio and reading some of Kellan's many books until my skin burned. Then he'd smoothed lotion over my skin so patiently. Replacing the pain with something sweet.

He groaned against my neck, his body going still before his hips jerked. That precious liquid heat spurted inside me, making me moan. So dirty. I clenched to keep it all inside—to keep him inside—not wanting to waste a single drop.

Another groan, fractured this time as his mouth found mine. Together, we tumbled back into sleep.

The pattern repeated so many times I lost track of time. In between, we got up long enough to eat and cuddle on the

couch in front of the giant TV in the living room. Laughing as he intentionally selected the video channels and teased me about my taste in music with our feet tangled together and our hands wandering everywhere.

Showering in cool water with his broad, hard body behind me, holding me up as he gave me orgasm after orgasm. With his fingers, his mouth, his cock. Using all three in tandem to destroy me and fit me together again.

“*Don’t go.*”

Imagining the words, wondering if I’d said them myself. I must’ve, because my grumbly guy didn’t ask me for anything. Not unless I asked first.

I looped my arms around his neck and climbed up his wet, corded body as if he were my own personal cliff. Maybe he was. “I wish I could stay,” I said between kisses, not really caring if he’d actually verbalized the statement. If I had to be the brave one, I would.

I would be the one who said the words and made the plans and put my heart on the line until he was right there with me. For me.

For *us*.

“Tomorrow.” He slanted his mouth over mine and cupped my ass to lift it higher, his grip sure and true. “That’s soon enough.”

I blinked back the water starring my lashes, pushing my soaked hair back until we were nose to nose. Dark eyes bored into mine, and everything I needed to see was right there. No shields, no pretenses.

“One more day together,” he said, and I nodded, not caring about classes or work or anything but hanging on to *this* for one more day before our lives ripped us apart again.

“Yes?”

I grinned. “Yes.”

He kissed me, then furrowed his brow as we eased apart. “Red, we need to talk.”

Panic filled my chest, pressing against that perfect bubble of joy we'd created. I couldn't let it pop. Not yet.

We needed more time. Just a little more.

"Later," I whispered, using my finger under his chin to bring his dark eyes back to mine. Waiting until he nodded.

Until the ropes around my chest eased enough again that I could breathe.

Wrapped in thick towels—he had one for me this time—we stood at the kitchen counter and ate pickles out of the jar. We'd blown through most of the groceries he'd picked up for the weekend, and if I was staying one more day, we'd need more sustenance.

"Mr. Wong?" he asked, holding up a menu by the corner.

I laughed and snatched it out of his hand. My stomach was growling again. "Chinese sounds heavenly. I could eat a pint of pork fried rice all by myself. And like three egg rolls. And...Kendra."

"Cannibalism is a little extreme."

"No, I need to call her. I should have called her before." I gave him a hard stare, though he was giving me his best innocent expression.

Yeah, right.

"She would've told you to come home." He held up a hand. "Yeah, where you belong. I was being selfish—"

I gripped his towel and yanked him against me. "I like it when you're selfish." I leaned up on my tiptoes and nipped his chin. "I also like when you're beardy for me."

He grabbed me around the waist and lifted me up on the granite counter as if I were made of air. "Beardy and no makeup and hair all crazy." He ducked his head so I could push my fingers through his hair as I had all weekend, taking every opportunity to muss it up. "Anything else you like?"

"I like when you touch me with these." I picked up one of his hands, running my fingertips over the ridges of calluses

that rubbed my skin just right. “How does a pencil pusher get such rough hands?” I teased, remembering his guitar comment and the fragments of music that had wafted over me in the night when I was too disoriented to make them out.

He started to speak, then cleared his throat and begun again. “I told you I worked construction before.”

A fact he’d volunteered without prompting during our long afternoon by the pool. “Mmm. I remember you hauling around wood that day at the cabin. Being all super manly.” When he ducked his head again, from embarrassment this time, I decided to make it worse by reaching down to stroke his cock through his towel. “Though you carry around a pretty sizable piece of wood every day...”

“Nymphomaniac.” But he grinned as he tilted his hips toward me, jutting his eager dick into my hand.

“Maybe. Only for you.” I wound my legs around him, drawing him close. I brushed a kiss over his bare, damp shoulder, spying the forgotten piece of paper on the floor. “Oh, the food! Let’s order.”

He let out a deep laugh as he pinched my hip through the towel. “Love a woman with priorities,” he said, laughing again at my rumbling stomach.

“You order the food, I’ll call Ken.”

“Go for it. Just be prepared that she’ll want you to come home today like you planned.”

“She doesn’t tell me what to do. I want dumplings too.”

“Anything else?”

I found my purse and tugged out my phone. I wasn’t sure when he’d tucked it back inside. He might have adding a few extra obstacles to calling her, but the truth was I’d been the one who turned off my phone and avoided reality. I didn’t want to hear her lecture. When it came right down to it, I knew she’d be pissed at me, but she also loved me. Better to ask for forgiveness than permission, right? Besides, I’d given her the address where I was staying for safety’s sake. I was almost twenty-three. Just a couple more weeks.

It was time I started living my life for me and no one else.

A million messages were waiting for me. Deliberately, I didn't read them, except Ken's last cryptic one sent just four hours ago. What the hell? She'd been up early on a Sunday. It was only early afternoon in California and three hours ahead on the East coast, and my bestie normally loved to sleep in.

Guilt and concern battled inside me, and I bit my lip as I read her last text.

**I warned u. I hope u're okay & u know we <3 u. That's why we're doing this.**

Doing what? My mind reeled and I typed as fast as I could.

**Ken, I'm fine. I'm HAPPY. I'm sorry I didn't call, but we've been having fun. We're in love.**

I stopped there, hitting send before I could erase and retype. It was insane. I'd taken months to fall in love with Derek, and he'd taken almost that long to fall for me. At least to tell me he had. This had to be infatuation. Extreme lust combined with forced proximity a couple of times, and the excitement of the whole clandestine, secretive thing we had going.

The good girl and the wild boy. It was like a Lifetime movie waiting to happen.

Of course, I'd think I was in love, and that he might be in love with me even if he'd never, ever admit it in one hundred years. Somehow that made me believe it more.

I was certifiably nuts.

Kendra replied immediately.

**Love? C'mon. U don't even know who he is. Do u?**

I frowned, sliding a glance at Kellan while he repeated our order to the person on the phone. There was some confusion about egg rolls and combinations, but he didn't speak harshly or cop an attitude with the restaurant. His voice stayed even, polite, and patient. My grouchy guy wasn't that way all the time. Sometimes he was downright sweet.

Instead of answering her, I shut off my phone and set it down on the counter.

Was I just being crazy? It wasn't possible to fall in love so fast. My dad and mom had, but they were unusual. Maybe I'd just heard the story of how they'd met one weekend and been engaged by the next so many times that it had infiltrated my brain.

*So how come you didn't fall for Derek that fast then, huh?*

It could be a rebound thing. Stuff like that happened all the time. Maeve went through guys like tissues, so she probably got over one guy by getting under the next. Maybe I was just using Kellan.

Sure, and maybe the Pope lived in Beijing.

"Hey." Kellan touched my shoulder and I jumped, hitting my hip on the counter. Before I even said, "ow," he was rubbing my leg to ease the hurt.

Yeah, he was so badass. Such a horrible person I didn't know and couldn't love, because hey, if a person isn't a ray of sunshine and doesn't immediately tell you their life story, better run the other way.

"McGuire," I mumbled, clutching his hand at my hip. "Your mother works at Bailey High. Mrs. McGuire with the son who always skateboarded and got hurt."

He frowned. "Yeah. You knew my mom?"

"I didn't make the connection until now. You mentioned she was a school secretary." Only when I'd traded his access to my body for some details about his family, but whatever. I hadn't been trying to pry or learn all his secrets. I just wanted to get a sense of who he was when he was away from me.

Breaking his cardinal rule, probably. But he'd broken plenty of mine too.

Like the one where I didn't fall for a guy before I knew his family. I'd always been a girl who believed family gave the strongest clues to a person's personality, and without knowing them, you missed a vital piece of the whole.

“I was teased in school,” I continued quietly, staring down at the black and gold granite floor. “I wasn’t good at sports and I didn’t have a ton of friends. Just Kendra. I didn’t fit in.”

“No one does at that age. Doesn’t mean a damn thing.”

The vehemence in his tone made me smile. “I stopped going to lunch because when Ken was working on extra credit projects, I didn’t have anyone to sit with. So I ended up helping your mom with filing. Eventually we ate lunch together. She didn’t think I was a weirdo.” I laughed softly and dashed at the stupid tears I didn’t know why I was crying. “Well, I am a weirdo. But she was nice to me.” Swallowing hard, I glanced up at him and lifted my hand to his cheek. “You have her eyes. I didn’t realize until now.”

He closed his hand around mine on his face and didn’t say anything. Just brushed away my tears with his other hand.

It was all I needed. More than I’d dared to want.

“I should probably tell you I met your dad back in the day too.” He cleared his throat. “It may have happened when I was, ahem, massaging Maeve’s breast.”

I raised a brow. “You met my dad when you were massaging my sister’s breast?” That bore repeating.

“Yes. With my mouth.”

I laughed, tipping back my head while my tears changed to ones from mirth. Didn’t it just figure?

“So that explains why he thought you were the devil.”

“Well, the ramshackle cabin in the woods probably didn’t hurt.”

“Least you didn’t have the heads of your enemies on posts beside the door.”

“Hmm, might be a design aspect I should look into.”

I hooked a finger in the towel around his waist. “Perhaps save it until after you meet my parents. Both of them this time, not just my dad. You know, like a family dinner.”

Just like that, his open expression shuttered. If I hadn't been so intimately involved with the situation, I might've even found it humorous.

*Look at poor Maggie Kelly. She believes in family and settling down, yet she's mixed up with a commitment-phobe who claims to hate those things. Isn't that hilarious?*

Except it was my life, and it was harder to be amused while the tears were still drying on my cheeks.

The doorbell chimed, and he couldn't move fast enough to get away from me. I didn't follow. Suddenly my appetite for Chinese had dimmed.

*You can't blame him for this. He never lied to you or led you on. If he had, it would be different.*

The door opened, and the voices that boomed through the house had me jerking away from the counter and down the hall before I fully knew what I was doing.

Kendra stood in the doorway, her hair a mass of braids that clacked as she spoke. Low, angry words that were probably laced with threats, if I had to guess. Beside her, my older brother Liam, one of the twins, glared at Kellan as if his stare alone could kill. He might have normally friendly blue-green eyes and an easy smile, but right now his expression was pure ice.

Shock rooted me in place.

As did Liam's reaction upon seeing me. Relief came first, then joy, then resignation, each emotion scrolling across his face. He dropped his gaze to my attire, and I remembered all at once that I wore only a towel.

A towel that matched Kellan's.

I didn't have a chance to react. To insert myself between them before Liam spun back to Kellan and decided words weren't necessary since he had two perfectly good fists. He plowed one of them into Kellan's face, snapping his head back so hard that I cried out and rushed not to him, but my older brother.



Who I punched soundly in the chest, hammering at him until he stumbled back and Kendra waded into the fray.

“Enough,” Kellan roared, cupping his bleeding mouth. The sight of the red liquid squeezing out between his fingers was enough to make me rear back, nauseated, but he still wasn’t done.

“You came to take her home. That’s probably for the best.” He raised his hands and stepped back. “I’m not going to fight with you or make a scene.”

*Because I’m not worth it.*

I swallowed the bile rising in my throat and forced myself to glance at Kendra instead of the man I’d spent the weekend with. She was already watching me, her careful attention all the proof I needed that I must look like hell.

“No,” Liam said, shaking out the fist he’d used to hit Kellan as if I hadn’t pummeled him. “Why would you? There’s more where she came from, I’m sure.”

I didn’t know what he was referring to, but all I wanted to do was leave.

This gorgeous sanctuary we’d spent the weekend in now felt like a prison, the walls closing in to trap me.

“I said to just go,” Kellan snapped, his jaw flexing. “I’m not doing this with you.”

Kendra laid a hand on Liam’s arm, and for a second, surprise at how close together they stood replaced my own shock and heartbreak. Since when were they getting along? They’d been like oil and gasoline since high school. Before then, probably. If she’d gone to anyone, I would’ve figured she would have picked Angus, who was no-nonsense and didn’t say much but was the guy you’d want by your side in a crisis.

Just as I’d believed Kellan was. Forget a crisis. He couldn’t even stay by my side to face my family. Guess it took a couple times to beat that into my thick skull, since he hadn’t exactly stood firm to my father either.

“You didn’t need to come here to collect me,” I said, pleased my voice didn’t tremble. I didn’t even sound particularly affected. “I had a ticket back tonight, and I’ll use it. Alone. Thank you for coming, but I’m fine to get back on my own. I’m also old enough to take care of myself. One of these days, maybe you’ll realize that.” I looked between my brother and my best friend. “*Both* of you.”

Liam drilled me with his gaze. “You don’t even know who he is, do you? Ken said you didn’t, but I thought she was shitting me. You come to a place like this and you think you’re just dealing with Joe Nobody? C’mon, sis, there’s being naive and there’s just being stupid.”

Kellan reached out, whip-fast, and shoved Liam back. “You’re not going to speak to her like that. Say what you want to me, but not to her.”

“Oh, that’s sweet. Chivalry from the lying cheat. Now I’m touched.”

“Liam, stop it,” Kendra demanded, glancing from him to me and back again, her eyes full of an apology I didn’t understand. “This isn’t the way to do this.”

I didn’t want to ask. Didn’t want to ask *them* especially. I’d already asked Kellan so many things, only to get evasions and small truths. Nothing big. I had attributed his behavior to a personality quirk rather than an attempt at genuine secrecy, but maybe he had good reason.

*Some criminal justice student you are, Magpie. Can’t even read the clues right in front of your face.*

Pushing back my shoulders, I stepped forward and gripped Kellan’s forearm. “I’m going to ask you what they’re talking about. Not them. You don’t have to tell me. You haven’t had to tell me anything. But I’m asking you.”

For the longest moment, he didn’t look at me. As usual. His jaw twitched as he turned his head, pinning me in place with his stare. “I’m in a band.”

Liam choked out a laugh, but I didn’t spare my brother a glance. “A band.”

Kellan nodded.

That explained the guitar comment, and the calluses, and the music while I was sleeping. Probably also explained why he'd been hiding out in a nondescript cabin in the woods in Turnbull, but his home was...this.

"You don't manage bands then."

"I did," Kellan said, eyes narrowing at Liam before he returned his focus to me. "For several years. That's how I got this gig. My manager Lila gave me a chance to get the band back together I fronted in high school. A spot on the roster opened up, and she saw something in me."

"Was that before or after you slept with her?" Liam questioned.

Neither of us spared my brother a glance. "You're a singer then. A guitarist."

It made sense, even down to the pictures he'd admitted to painting on the wall. He was artistic, though he hid it under a layer of gruff. Just like the talent he buried down deep, only taking it out for those with the price of a ticket.

He'd offered it to me for free, but I hadn't known what it was. Or what it meant.

Rather than replying, he took out a crumpled piece of paper from his back pocket, smoothing it against his arm. His jaw working all the while. "Your brother and Kendra wanted you to see this, to know the kind of man I am. But you already know me, Red, better than anyone ever has." He held out the paper. "Remember that."

I stared at it, torn between wanting to see and not wanting to know. Did he really believe that I knew him that well? That what we'd experienced this weekend wasn't just a mirage?

Or worse, that I'd experienced it alone.

*Been there, done that.*

Regardless of what he meant, I couldn't deny that it *felt* true. I got him on some fundamental level, and even if he hadn't come clean with me, that truth remained.

He'd never said anything that was an outright fabrication. He didn't have to. He deflected by changing the subject or looking away or sharing things that once had been reality, so they weren't technically lies if you didn't care about little things like timelines.

Except I did. I cared about timelines, and being straightforward, and understanding what I'd dived into headfirst.

Swallowing hard, I took the piece of paper and let the headline soak in before I studied the pictures.

*New band Wilder Mind explodes on the scene in more ways than one.*

The first picture wasn't of Kellan at all. It was of a guy with crazy hair bent over a woman spread out beside a drum kit, her bare breasts and the area between her legs blurred out. Probably since crazy hair guy's hips were between them. His bare flexing butt wasn't blurred out though. Guess crack action was okay for a tabloid.

Good to know.

"My drummer, Bryan," Kellan said tightly without being prompted.

"Classy dude," Liam offered, holding up his hands at Kendra's sharp look.

The inset picture contained Kellan in a leather vest, no shirt. Hair spiked up like it had been on Friday, eyes heavy with makeup. He was smiling down at a tiny blonde who'd wrapped her leg around his thigh and flattened her hands against his chest. His name was clearly visible in black Sharpie on the cleavage revealed by her brief top.

"When was this taken?" I asked once I was certain my voice would be steady.

"A couple nights before you texted me."

"Busy weekend for you then." I folded the paper and handed it back to him. He shook his head and jutted his chin toward my brother and best friend.

Of course. The only reason he was telling me now was to get me to leave.

*Because good girls don't hook up with rockstars. We head home to lick our wounds and think about our steady, secure ex-boyfriend, who had just happened to run off with a stripper.*

Hell, I was starting to see the appeal of those in the entertainment arts, since I'd certainly done some running of my own.

I secured my towel, unable to meet his eyes. Or Kendra's. Or Liam's. "I'd better pack so I make my flight."

"So you're going then." Kellan's voice was even. Measured.

"What else do you propose I do? Maybe you'd rather I let you sign my breasts before I go?"

He said nothing.

"Mags." Kendra stepped forward, her voice contrite. "I'll help you pack."

"I'm good. Really. I appreciate the time you took to come here. Thank you, even if the effort was misguided. I hope that someday you'll learn to trust my choices," I said, encompassing my brother in my statement.

He rubbed the back of his neck, his brow furrowed.

"Not this time though," I added brightly. "Since anyone can see the colossal mess this is. But hey, lesson learned. I got a nice trip out of it, right?"

"Mags," Ken said, gripping my hand. "Let's go upstairs and talk for a few minutes. Alone."

"No, thank you." If I didn't keep this shield of politeness in place, I would shatter like china. Just break apart in Kellan's foyer like the fragile doll he hadn't trusted with the truth.

Why would he? I was the sweet, innocent girl from Turnbull he'd had lark sex with. You know, something different and easily tossed aside.

Flavor of the week. Or weekend, since I hadn't even gotten that.

"Maggie," Kellan said, and that single word was nearly my undoing. So low and raw, as if it physically pained him to say my name.

I let go of Kendra's hand and walked to the spiral staircase. I climbed to the third step, then stopped and turned. "Just tell me this. Did you lie to me intentionally? Or was it an accident?"

I didn't see how it could have been. The truth was the truth. You didn't forget it if you were tired or unprepared.

Honesty didn't happen on a whim. Either you were forthright or you weren't.

No do-overs.

Kellan held my gaze for so long I thought that was his answer. I turned to continue to climb, but his response stopped me.

Stopped everything, including the warmth in my chest that hadn't even really had a chance to take root.

"I lied to you on purpose. Over and over again."

I tore my gaze from his and ran upstairs, my only thought to escape. Until I reached the bedroom I'd shared with him and glimpsed the tangled sheets hanging off the mattress. We'd fucked like animals in that bed. I patted my ass, realizing I didn't have on my jeans. My phone was down in the kitchen.

But his was sitting right there on the nightstand, and I was willing to bet he hadn't changed the passcode from the easy one he'd had the last time I'd broken into it. And I didn't feel the slightest bit guilty for breaking in again either.

I snatched his cell and tried the passcode that had worked before. *Bingo*. I didn't go to his mail app or his messages. Instead I went straight to YouTube and typed in Wilder Mind. I had to see. Had to know.

The first clips that came up were grainy without great sound. I didn't care. I just wanted to watch Kellan at work. To

see the man I'd fallen for making thousands of women fall for him onstage.

Within seconds, I found what I was looking for.

He gripped the boxy mic and gazed straight into the audience, his hips moving as if they had a mind of their own. Truly, he had to be double or triple jointed.

Warmth scalded my cheeks. I'd thought much the same this weekend.

But there he was, seducing the crowd with that honey and gravel voice that had made me wet so many times. I wasn't the only one. Girls were screaming and crying and pulling at their clothes as if they couldn't stand the constriction. He didn't do the crazy moves some singers did, just gave his all to the song. He threw back his head, making the cords of his neck stand out in sharp relief, and he slid his hand down the mic stand as if he was caressing a lover.

Even angry and ashamed—since yet again I'd made another stupid mistake in who to trust—I couldn't help shifting on the bed. Pressing my thighs together didn't stem the ache. My nipples tightened and I sucked in a breath, holding it as Kellan onstage opened his eyes and seemed to stare right at me through the screen.

I had no defense against that look. Not on the video, and not when footsteps in the hall alerted me to his presence. Defiantly, I turned to glare at him without shutting off the video.

Barefoot and bare-chested, still clad in only his towel, he stopped in the doorway. His jaw was tighter than I'd ever seen it.

“You baited me about the music I liked. Did it bother you I didn't know yours?”

Nothing. Not even that muscle tic in his face that was his usual tell.

“No, of course it didn't.” Though it was surprisingly difficult, I stopped the clip and tossed his cell on the bed, then

I rose to look for my shoes. I hadn't had much use for my heels the last couple of days.

He remained silent. Just watching me.

I dragged them out from under the sheets dangling on the floor and slipped them on. Now what? I had to go in the bathroom to get dressed or else I'd have to do it right here.

Screw it. He'd seen me naked plenty, and I was tired of hiding.

I unwound the towel and walked over to root through my suitcase in just my heels. His rough intake of breath gratified me immensely.

At least I could take comfort in the fact that his lust for me hadn't waned. As many times as we'd had sex, that was probably a feat.

"Red."

His nickname for me was my undoing. Hot tears sprung into my eyes, but I battled them back and unzipped my suitcase.

I'd be damned if another man saw me cry anytime this century. Especially when *he* was the cause.

If only he had told me the truth. I wished like hell he hadn't hidden his true identity from me for some reason I couldn't quite comprehend. I didn't understand the whole rockstar thing, but I would have tried to. For him, I would have fought to deal with it even though that lifestyle couldn't have been further removed from my own.

He was worth it to me. *We* were worth it. Too bad those feelings didn't run both ways. To him, I must've just been a lark. Clearly he hadn't seen anything serious happening between us—even after this crazy weekend—so what did it hurt to lie? I was just his latest hookup. It wasn't as if I'd be a permanent fixture in his life or anything.

*Message received loud and clear.*

"You know me," he said again, his tone strangely hollow.



Just like I felt inside. Hulled out and empty.

Somehow those three words sliced me deeper than all the rest. Then he turned away from the door and left me alone to pack.

FIFTEEN

KELLAN

TWO WEEKS LATER

“FROM THE TOP,” CAM SAID, SHOOTING ME HIS FIFTIETH ODD glance of the night.

I wasn't leading the rehearsal. Shit, I was barely participating in it. Considering I'd nearly called out ten times before I'd dragged myself into the car and to the record studio, without showering and in yesterday's dirty clothes—hell, the same dirty clothes I'd worn all week—it wasn't much of a surprise.

Naturally Lila had decided to sit in on this rehearsal so she could report our progress to Donovan. We'd be recording another song for the EP next week if Cam's new piece came together the way it had during the first week we'd rehearsed it.

That was the week before Maggie visited, when I'd been horny as fuck and full of aggression I'd poured into the song. Anticipation too. I'd been raring to go in a million ways where Maggie was concerned.

Now? I was operating on a flatline. Just doing the bare minimum to get through each day.

I tried to lose myself in the music—the pounding drums, the shrieking guitars, and Jake's steady, rhythmic bass. Myles came into the song with a slam of the keys, rising off his bench the way he often did during shows. That they were all so into the song helped me to dig down deep and find the growl that was my signature. I cupped the microphone and bowed my head, rumbling the words that were etched into my

brain from brutal repetition. I'd probably dream about "I Can't Sleep" tonight.

You break me apart, rip me to shreds  
Ask me if it's forever  
Only to do it again  
One night with you has me on the edge  
I can't sleep  
Oh, I can't sleep  
One hour away and I'm ready to beg  
Tell you to come back  
Before I ask you to go  
Our last night together  
And I can't sleep  
I can't eat  
One more night, give it to me  
Before I learn  
Before you learn  
Before we learn  
What goodbye really means

At the bridge, Cameron and AJ went into their epic solos, both competing to prove who could climb up and down the frets faster. Cam went to his knees, throwing his head back so his long dark hair skimmed the floor. AJ was just as crazed beside him, his fingers flying as he added some unmistakable flourishes of his own. Bryan hit the skins behind us, and Jake closed his eyes while he went into his own trance on the bass. He didn't go for the tricks that AJ and Cameron did, just provided a backbone for the song so they had space for their theatrics. Myles was still jamming on the keys, hitting them with the skill and sly grin that had made me so sure he'd be

the perfect fit for the band. For him, nothing mattered as much as the music.

That had been me too. Nothing had ever come close...until now.

I came back into the song with a low vibrato that grew into a roar. I yanked the microphone stand to the side, nearly dragging it down to the floor as I worked for those last notes. Pulling them out of me as if each one was formed from my blood, sweat, and tears.

And my memories, because I sure as fuck understood not being able to sleep. Or eat. Or do anything but wonder where the hell I'd gone so goddamn wrong.

The song ended with the vibration of the amps as Cam brought the strings down from scream to mournful cry. I jerked my head up as someone started to clap.

“Finally. That’s what I’ve been waiting to see in these rehearsals.” Lila Crandall walked forward, her long blond hair restrained in a clip, her blue eyes shrewd and assessing. Her pumps clicked on the floor with every step she took toward us, her gaze sweeping over each member of the band in turn. “If I see more of that, you’ll be booking outside of California soon. Possibly even beyond the west coast.”

A cheer went up from the other guys. Bryan stomped his feet, and I rolled my eyes. Right. He was excited to sample other varieties of pussy. Midwest pussy, East coast pussy, and definitely couldn’t forget Southern pussy, which AJ claimed was the sweetest of all.

“It’s a little early to cheer, but you’re getting there. The recent press you’ve received from some of your, ahem, exploits hasn’t hurt either.” Lila held her ubiquitous iPad against her chest. “Donovan is ready to capitalize.”

“First we gotta get the EP out. Ride FFY for a while longer —” Jake said, always the pragmatic one.

“FFY is on its last gasp. We’re barely hanging on to top 50. Time to get ‘Felicity’ out there so you can keep the momentum going. Hopefully ‘I Can’t Sleep’ will be a single

too. With some of the summer festivals already getting close to capacity, having that in your arsenal would be a big shot in the arm. Donovan may even recommend pushing ICS out first. It's a more natural fit for the summer concert season at the venues we have in mind."

"Hell yeah." Cam pumped his fist, going quiet as he realized Myles was giving him some serious side-eye. "But of course, 'Felicity' would make a great single too."

"As a filler between this EP and a full-length album, yes. We always planned on Wilder Mind bringing a more harder edge to the market, and ICS delivers on that promise. So we'll see." Lila shifted her laser-like focus to me. "You've been drinking that tea and honey I recommended?"

I gripped the mic and cleared my throat. Her stare only got sharper. Even clearing the throat could be rough on the vocal cords, and that I was doing it so much meant I hadn't been taking care of my voice the way I should have been. "Not as consistently as I should."

"Get the honey drops too. You sounded amazing, but your voice was fraying at the end. It shouldn't be. We want you to work with a coach."

"What?" I gazed at her, dumbfounded. "Since when? You said you liked that my voice was raw. That the imperfections made it unique."

"This isn't about imperfections. It's about treating your instrument with care, and you are not." She gave the others a dismissive glance. "Great set today, everyone. You're all free to go. Except Kellan," she added, making me tip my head back with a groan.

Myles gave me a sympathetic glance as he filed out, and Cam patted me on the back. Jake and AJ both called out goodbyes.

Bryan was already on his phone, probably to some chick he'd picked up outside the record studio. We were starting to have clusters of fans show up now and then due to our openness on social media—something that had worked well

for Lila's other bands—and Bry wasn't wasting any opportunities to get laid.

I sprawled on the couch, sagging back until the cool leather cushioned my aching head and neck. The lack of sleep was getting to me. I hadn't been working out either and not having that outlet didn't help.

As far as sex, I wasn't going there. I'd been on an abstinence streak before she who would not be named had entered my life. I could deal.

Lila sat at the other end of the couch. "What's going on with you?"

I crossed one booted foot across the other leg. "I didn't realize you cared."

"I do, and you know better than that. Is something going on with the band?"

"No, Lila. Your investment in us isn't in danger."

"It is if you don't start taking your vocal care more seriously. You sounded crispy today."

"Fuck that. I nailed that song."

"Which would be wonderful if you were performing at a school chorale concert and didn't have to do a ninety-minute set."

Even as Lila spoke, I was thinking about Maggie. The way she touched me so gently and intently listened to everything I said. I knew if she had been here for the meeting, she'd be riding my ass about making sure I protected my voice.

If she even still cared about me. I wouldn't blame her if she didn't. I'd pretty much ground her feelings to dust with my cruelty, and I didn't even know if she had any in my direction. At least beyond what I knew instinctively when we were together, which made no sense.

None of this made sense, including the fact that I'd been like a dead man walking since she left my place with her best friend and her brother. She hadn't cried in my presence, but



her disappointment had rung out loud and clear. That I deserved it didn't make it any easier to take.

"You're right," I said hollowly. "I need to be more careful. Got it."

"You think it won't have consequences. I've seen what happens to a guy with a blown out vocal cord. It isn't pretty. We're talking likely surgery and months of—"

"I said I got it, all right?" I snapped. "I'm not your usual strung out junkie lead singer. I'm fully lucid and well aware of what you're saying. Your concern is duly noted. And unnecessary."

"It's not unnecessary until you show me I don't need to be concerned any longer." She crossed her legs and gripped her iPad in her lap. "We're friends, are we not? Come from common stock and all that."

It made my lips twitch. "Common Turnbull stock, you mean?"

"Yes."

"You think that makes a difference?"

"You'd be surprised. I've found there's a different sensibility out here." She shifted toward me on the sofa. "Just putting it out there that if you wanted to talk, I could listen. Or pretend to ignore you. Whatever makes it easier to spill your guts."

"I'm good." I heaved out a breath and stared up at the ceiling. "I'm not, but I can't talk about it. Not work-related though, I promise."

Lila nodded and stood. "I understand. If that changes, let me know." She walked to the door and paused with her hand on the handle. "Maybe there's someone else you should talk to instead."

"Playing shrink, Lila?"

"No. Taking guesses as a friend. By the way, you won't piss me off with your patented routine. You forget I am

married to the poster child for bad attitudes and not only dealt with him but married him. Mostly voluntarily.”

“Does he cheat on you?”

I hadn’t meant to ask the question, but Lila didn’t miss a beat. “If he did, he’d be missing some vital equipment and I’d be halfway to Mexico.”

Shaking my head, I chuckled. “Sorry. Inappropriate question.”

“A little, so I’ll give another inappropriate answer. No. If I truly believed he would, I wouldn’t have fallen in love with him. Granted, my judgment has been skewed before, but I’m confident in my choice this time.”

“Even though he’s in a rock band and has access to—”

“Every flavor of pussy he could ever dream of and twice on Sunday. Yes. I’m well aware.”

She didn’t blink, but I sure did. Lila was not one for that sort of language, ever.

“Yet you’re cool with it. Not worried he’ll slip.”

“He’s an adult male, not a confused toddler. Sliding between a woman’s thighs is not the same as sliding in some juice on the kitchen floor. No, I don’t believe he’ll slip, just as he doesn’t believe I will.”

“Profession aside.”

“I’m around plenty of supposed temptation too. If rockstars are so hot, well, hello, rainbow of varieties to choose from. But I don’t go there.” She held up her hand, tapping her wedding ring.

“But what if the situation was different? What if you were, let’s say, a stay-at-home mom. Or a lawyer,” I said, remembering Maggie’s biggest ambition. “Surrounded by lawyers instead of rockstars day in and day out. Would you still feel the same?”

“It doesn’t matter who either of us is surrounded by. It comes down to who we are and what we value. I could be in a

crowd of David Gandys and still not be tempted because I want that jerk, and he's mine. And vice versa." She frowned. "All right, so there would be a little temptation. Infinitesimal. But I wouldn't act on it, no matter what."

I laughed and locked my hands behind my neck. "Thanks for answering my strange questions and being cool about it."

"Who is she?"

I started to say no one. There wasn't a she. From the status of my head right now, that was more than obvious. I'd had Maggie—at least in the flesh—and I'd lost her. Big time. But she didn't have to be physically present to be a factor in my life. "She's from Turnbull."

"Good choice. Now I have to know who. I might be able to share juicy gossip about her if you give me a name. You know my parents talk to everyone who comes through Happy Acres."

Happy Acres was her parents' apple orchard, and yes, she was one hundred percent correct. They talked to everyone and knew everything that went on in Turnbull. "Maggie Kelly." I held up a finger. "If you so much as breathe a word to anyone —"

"Maggie? She's the sweetest. She used to paint faces on kids during the fall festival. I taught her myself. Passed on the baton, as it were." Lila cocked her head. "How did you meet? Did you two have one of those clandestine romances from childhood? Though you'd be robbing the cradle a bit there." She tapped her chin. "Hmm."

"Only about five years between us. Not even that. But it feels like light years, man." I scratched the back of my neck. "She crashed into my ditch on New Year's Eve."

"Now that sounds romantic."

Quickly, I told her what had happened. I left out the details, but I didn't skimp on my own assholedom. I had royally fucked up this whole situation, and I wouldn't shirk the responsibility for it, even while talking to a friend. Who just happened to be my manager.

She didn't say anything, just listened. When I finished, she tapped her nails on her iPad. "So you told her you lied to let her down easy?"

I frowned. "There wasn't a lot of easy involved. Mainly just to make a clean break. I knew it was best for her."

"What's best for you?"

I didn't answer.

"Perhaps it isn't best for her. Ever think of that? She's a smart woman who knows her own mind. If she's interested in you, she probably has reason to be. You're a good guy, Kellan. You just don't give yourself much credit for it." Lila turned the door handle. "And for what it's worth? I don't think you'd ever slip. I bet Maggie would trust you not to as well."

The door closed behind her and I reached for my phone before I could kill the impulse. My mom answered on the second ring.

"Kell?"

"Yeah. It's me. How are you?"

"Good. Everything okay?"

I turned on the speaker and set aside my phone, then reached for the guitar I'd left leaning against the sofa. I strummed through the beginning of "Turn the Page" before blowing out a breath and tapping out the beat against the body of my old Taylor. "Yeah. Everything's good. You?"

"Good. Just as it was two minutes ago." There was a smile in her voice I'd missed hearing. We didn't talk much anymore. She was actively dating and she was busy at school, and I was on the opposite coast most of the time. Bethy usually seemed to be our go-between other than on holidays.

We definitely weren't the Kellys or anything close.

"Sorry. I'm a little scattered today."

"That's all right. I'm just glad to hear your voice."

"How's school going?" I asked, deliberately picking a topic I knew would keep her talking. Once she finished,

maybe I'd have summoned enough nerve to say the reason behind my call.

Cheerfully, she told me about some of her favorite students. As I listened, I rubbed my knee through the hole in my jeans. Even that gesture reminded me of Maggie and how she'd disliked my rockstar look. *Hated* might've been a more accurate assessment. She liked me better bearded and in sweats and rough around the edges. No hair gel or eye makeup or glitz.

Me fucking too. Her preferred version of me was my true self, not the prettied-up version that sold albums. The stage look was my uniform, just a crazier one than most people had to wear on a daily basis. But when I was home, I could be me again. The me Maggie appreciated.

The pseudo rockstar was the version she had no use for, and God, I loved her for that. Just loved her period, and it scared the shit out of me.

I'd tried to talk myself out of it. Tried to ignore my feelings and bury them and pretend what I was experiencing was just lust. Except lust wouldn't make me ache like this to see her again. I wanted inside her sweet pussy, but that wasn't all I wanted. I craved hearing her laughter, her teasing, the way she laid her hand against my cheek and studied me so carefully while she tried to figure me out.

In other women, that might annoy me. Not with her. She didn't have an agenda and she wasn't looking to change me. She wanted me as I was. God only knew why.

Or at least she had, before.

"You knew Maggie Kelly," I said during a break in the conversation, unsurprised by her silence. "Years ago."

"Yes." Her voice softened. Warmed. "I remember Maggie. Such a kind girl. Easily wounded, but she hid it well if you didn't know how to read her."

I did. Somehow I did already, and knowing I'd hurt her—even though I'd tried to convince myself it was for her own benefit—was killing me.

“She told me about you.” I cleared my throat and decided I’d work on not doing that another day. I could only fix so many flaws in one goddamn week.

This week, I was working on the reason why I’d driven away the best person I’d ever known. Because I wasn’t good enough for her. Because I didn’t want to possibly harm her down the road. Because I might turn out to be just like my fucking father.

Instead I’d hurt her right from the start.

“I didn’t realize you knew Maggie,” my mom said, her pleasure evident.

“It’s a new thing. We met on New Year’s Eve. I’m probably in love with her.”

Yeah, that was me. Subtle all the way.

My mom laughed. “Wow. Well then. Are you calling to tell me you’re thinking about getting married?”

I didn’t have a reply for that one. My vocal cords had glued themselves together in sheer terror.

Married? Was that the way this had to end?

Probably. Just not right now. A guy needed some time to ease in, even if he had basically fallen in love in the course of a night.

Christ, I was so fucked.

“If so, I can’t wait to help her pick out a dress,” my mom continued. “Maggie was such a tiny thing. Big family. Big strapping brothers who grunted if anyone so much as looked sideways at her. I always thought she was a bit stifled, if you want to know the truth. Overprotected in the extreme. Why, she was practically treated like a doll in the window.”

“Yeah, just what I want to deal with. Barreling through a football squad to get to her. Oh, and the wedding thing? No. Not now. Not yet.” Any more qualifiers and I might as well cancel the whole statement.

“Oh.”

“Don’t sound like your dog just died. I just met the girl.” I shook my head, amused rather than irritated. My mother hadn’t hidden her desire for more grandchildren. She just usually harassed Bethy, not me. I wasn’t likely to produce one this century.

“Just met her and already love her. Marriage is next,” she proclaimed. “Marriage and babies, just you watch and see.”

I was not going down that road. First I had to win her back. Or at least talk to her and see if she hated me. Hate and love were supposedly flip sides of the same coin, so maybe I hadn’t been booted completely out of the arena.

“Yeah, well, don’t count your eggs yet, of the human or chicken variety,” I muttered, smiling despite myself at her delighted laugh. “I called because I need your help.”

“What can I do? Tell me.”

“Can you go check on her without letting on that you’re checking? She works at Pizza Uno on Franklin on weekends so she should be there tomorrow night if she isn’t tonight.”

“Sure, sure, I can do that. I love their pizza so it’s no hardship. I’ve been dieting for the past few months, so that’s probably why I haven’t seen her in there. I’ve been trying to limit splurges. Down twenty-two pounds so far,” she said proudly, and I felt like a jackass for not calling more often.

One more item for my self-improvement list. If I kept this up, I wouldn’t even recognize my own asshole face in the mirror anymore.

Maybe that wasn’t a bad thing.

“That’s great, Mom,” I said, meaning it. “I should do the same.”

“I could send you my diet plan—”

“Nah, I’d rather just hit it harder in the gym.”

“Really, it’s all about cutting out carbs. It’s not so difficult once you formulate the habit.”

What I was hoping when it came to not being a fuckhead regarding Maggie and relationships in general. I might suck now, but with repeated practice...

“You’ll go down to see her, right? Just make sure she’s okay. That’s all.”

“Sure. I’ll do that. I can get a slice of veggie. You know, I’ve missed that girl. So much. I should’ve contacted her before now. We see each other around town sometimes, but it’s so easy to let time get away from you. I can’t keep doing that anymore.”

“Me either,” I murmured. “Thank you. It means a lot to me.”

“No problem, sweetie. I’ll call you after I see her.”

“Thanks.” I ended the call and took the phone off speaker, then stared at the screen. Now that I’d opened the can, I wasn’t quite ready to close the lid.

Sending my mother to check up on Maggie wasn’t even close to enough. I needed to see her myself, in person, so we could talk. Openly and honestly. No holds barred.

What I needed was a plan. It wouldn’t be easy to get time off right now, but I had to try to make things right, whatever it took.

I wasn’t my father, and I was sick and tired of letting his past determine *my* future.

Before I could stop myself, I texted the number I’d done my best to forget these past two weeks. There was just one thing that mattered right now. Well, only two things. Soon enough I’d be saying those three words to Maggie too, God willing.

**I’m sorry.**



SIXTEEN

# MAGGIE

*I'M SORRY.*

Those two words replayed on a constant loop in my mind, alternating with five other, albeit more urgent ones.

*Please no more throwing up.*

The throwing up was a new thing. It had just started a few days ago. Before that I'd been nauseated for a week. It was either the slowest moving flu bug in the history of the world, my misery had a strange new physical component, or I was knocked up.

Considering the state of my life since December thirty-first, I was going with door number three.

I still held out hope I wasn't toting around a tiny human. *Small* hope. The smell of tomato sauce making me want to hurl wasn't an awesome sign, especially since I worked at a pizza shop.

The pizza shop I was currently throwing up in.

My life sucked. Hardcore.

Someone knocked on the door to the cramped one-person bathroom, and I covered my mouth with one hand while sticking my foot out to the side to brace it against the door. The stupid lock kept breaking. "Just a second, please," I called between dry heaves.

At least they weren't wet any longer.

The knock came again. “Hello?” A woman. Her voice was familiar but I couldn’t quite place it. “Is that you in there, Maggie?”

I was so shocked to be addressed by name that I stopped heaving long enough to listen more closely. Nice to know my baby wasn’t a complete ruiner. “Yes?”

“Maggie, it’s Mrs. McGuire. Can I come in?”

Sagging against the wall, I stared up at the ceiling. This could not be happening. It was just a bad dream. Had to be.

I hadn’t seen Mrs. McGuire in forever, probably not since last summer. We rarely got a chance to say much beyond *hello, how are you* as we rushed past each other. She hadn’t stopped in Pizza Uno the entire time I worked there. Now she had to use the bathroom at the exact same time I was puking from being preggo with her son’s baby.

Seriously, who had I pissed off in a past life? Maybe I needed an exorcism. What did one do to remove a curse?

I shut my eyes and prayed to pass out. The floor was beyond gross, but I wouldn’t know what was happening for those few blissful moments of unconsciousness.

“Maggie?” Mrs. McGuire repeated. “Are you all right? I’d like to speak with you, if that’s okay.”

Did she not get that I was in the bathroom for a reason? Probably one that required privacy? Kellan had a similar disregard for personal space. He’d marched right into the bathroom at the cabin and seen me naked as the day I was born, thereby inciting all kinds of inappropriate desire in me when I realized he found me attractive just as I was. Curvy some places, slight in others. A hodgepodge that definitely didn’t match Derek’s stripper.

Ah hell, who was I kidding? The inappropriate desire had stirred way before then. Probably right about the first time I’d looked into those dark chocolate eyes.

Chocolate sounded good. I was hungry now. Dammit.

Blowing out a breath, I flushed the toilet—twice—and went to the sink to wash my hands about forty-two times. I felt gross, inside and out. Not at all capable of talking to Kellan’s mom.

Not in this lifetime or any other.

“Just one second,” I called as she knocked one more time. I was probably worrying the poor woman.

God, did she know about me and Kellan? Had he told her about us?

Though that would require him acknowledging there *was* an us. I couldn’t deny that his message yesterday had made me hopeful for a good five minutes before I realized I was a dolt.

It was a realization I had often these days. The last time had been an hour ago when I pulled my hoodie over as much of my face as possible and stopped into Bailey Drugs to purchase three pregnancy tests. I would’ve driven to the next town over if I hadn’t been so desperate to find out and only had a short time before work to visit the store.

Of course, the new employee behind the counter just happened to be Derek’s second cousin twice removed, and he’d recognized me right away. His eyes had popped wide at the sight of the pregnancy tests too, but he hadn’t said anything.

So yeah, curse. It was truly the only explanation.

Reluctantly, I pulled open the door. And jumped back as Mrs. McGuire barreled inside and slammed it behind her. Then she frowned. “I heard retching.”

Thinking about curses would just be redundant at this point.

“Yes, I have a bit of a bug.” One with two arms and legs and an endless demand for sweet pickles.

Mrs. McGuire just stared.

I poured on the charm. “I’d hug you, but germs and all. It’s so wonderful to see you. Such a pleasure. How are you?”

“A bug, is it?” She crossed her arms over her chest, her sturdy mom purse sliding down her arm. “Now I understand why he wanted me to check on you. That rascal.”

“He who? What?” I grasped my spinning head. I had no idea if the dizziness was from nerves or another symptom deciding to attack me while I was at my lowest. “You don’t mean—”

“Kellan. My son. Oh, I was so happy to hear about you two. Now go on, don’t feel like you two kids have to hide anything from me just because you aren’t married yet. How far along are you? He mentioned meeting on New Year’s, but did it happen that night?”

Before I could even process what she’d said, she launched herself at me and started rubbing my belly as if I was Santa with his big bowl of jelly.

I groaned and jerked back against the sink, holding up a hand to ward her off. “I don’t want to toss my cookies again. It’s better if I don’t move. Or you move any part of me.”

Then the rest of what she’d said kicked in. “Kellan told you about us?”

Just as I was about to say what exactly I thought about that, sense kicked in. Not to mention Mrs. McGuire had once been very important to me. I still cared about her.

Treading gently was the order of the day even if I was extremely seasick and her son was a giant dickhead.

She nodded vigorously. “Yes. He asked if I remembered you. I told him of course I do, and I would even if we didn’t see each other around town now and then. We were good friends once, weren’t we?”

The hope in her deep dark eyes, so much like her son’s, made my stomach lurch for a whole new reason. Her hair was a cloud of snow white instead of dark and crazy like Kellan’s, but glimpsing those eyes was like seeing a ghost.

One who had spooked me good enough to leave something of himself behind.

“Yes,” I said quietly. It was all I could manage.

“He’s worried about you, and he asked if I would check on you here. He was playing coy with me, but now I understand why.” The smile that wreathed her pretty face made me fumble for the sink behind me. I needed to hold on to something sturdy so I didn’t hit the ground. “What did he say when you told him about the baby?”

I shifted to face the dingy window above the sink and turned on the water to splash my hot cheeks. Dripping, I stared at myself. I didn’t have an answer.

How could I lie to her? How could I tell her the truth?

We’d had a crazy one-night hookup and hadn’t spoken for two weeks, then we’d hooked up again for another wild weekend of sex. And laughing and music and sitting out in the sun and falling in love.

At least I’d fallen. He must care for me a bit if he’d bothered to send his mother to check on me. Cold comfort, however, when he’d basically ripped out my heart and stomped on it. His out-of-the-blue text had only poured more gasoline on the wound.

Especially when I’d been half convinced his message had just been a prelude to requesting my presence at his home for more sex. I was like a booty call delivery service, and my box was the merchandise.

*Wrapping paper is free.*

Worst of all? I couldn’t help wanting said sex, even now. I blamed hormones. I blamed the curse. Hell, I probably would’ve blamed the planets or the tides if given half a chance.

Mrs. McGuire cleared her throat, obviously waiting for my reply.

God, I didn’t want to put his mother in the middle or force her to take sides. There was no side. I loved him because I was a dumbass romantic, and he cared about me enough to have his mother ensure my well-being and to send two-word messages to absolve his guilt. Possibly also enough to text to

see if my pussy could make another roundtrip flight for the weekend.

The rest—yeah, I wasn't dealing with that just yet. Not until I'd had a chance to take those three tests and verify exactly how screwed I was.

Swallowing hard, I turned to face her. "I don't know if I'm pregnant," I said softly, though that wasn't at all what I'd intended to say. "I may just have a bug. I've prayed and prayed for exactly that."

It wasn't easy to deal with the pain and confusion that scrolled across her face. "But why? If Kellan loves you and I'm assuming you love him—"

"Wait. Why would you think Kellan loves me? Just because he asked you to come here?"

A knock sounded on the door and I shot the intruder a cross glance they couldn't see. "Just a minute, please!"

Distinct muttering sounded through the wood. "Not a conference room, you know."

I flipped the closed door the middle finger and glanced back at Kellan's mother, who had lapsed into silence. Whether it was because of what I'd said or my crude display or both, I didn't know. I had bigger fish to fry.

*Ugh.* No food analogies right now.

"He told me." She adjusted her hold on her purse and gave the door another quick look. "Perhaps we should go somewhere else to chat? Somewhere more private?" She brightened. "I know, you can come to my house. I don't live far from here."

"He told you what?" Forgetting my edict about staying still, I rushed forward to grip her arms. "Tell me the exact words. Please. Don't leave anything out."

"Dear, are you all right?" She reached up to touch my forehead and gasped. "You're burning up."

"It's called raging fear. It'll pass. Please, Mrs. McGuire. If you could just tell me exactly what Kellan said to you, it

would really make me feel better.”

“He called to ask me to check on you. After he asked if I remembered you, he told me you’d met on New Year’s and that he was in love with you. Probably.”

“Probably?” I screeched, unintentionally shaking her. “I’m carrying the jerk’s baby and he said probably?”

The knock at the door turned into a pounding. “Margaret, we’re going to need you to leave the bathroom. Now. Paying customers are lining up to use it.”

Oh God, that was my boss, Rick. Just what I needed. I couldn’t lose this job. Not when money was more important to me than ever.

My baby was what mattered, not his or her freaking jackass of a father.

I stepped back, cupping a hand over my mouth. Without another look at Mrs. McGuire’s shocked expression, I yanked open the door and did a doubletake at the massive line. At the front was my boss.

All those women had to use the bathroom at once? Yeah, right. More like they wanted to hear my life explode, since I hadn’t exactly been circumspect. But it was hard not to shout when your world was on the verge of destruction and the guy who’d gleefully skipped right up to the edge at your side *probably* loved you.

Probably.

God, if I ever saw him again, I was going to legit kick his ass.

I shoved my way through the throng of customers, pushing my way around the counter to grab my purse and coat from the back. I pulled on my jacket, slung my purse over my shoulder, and escaped out the back exit, stopping just outside the door to gaze up at the sky. Snow pelted my overheated face, mingling with the tears I couldn’t hold back anymore.

What was I going to do?



As if the universe wasn't having enough of a laugh at me, a new song started playing in the pizza shop. Thanks to the external speaker right above where I was standing, Wilder Mind's "Fool for You" filled the alley. Kellan's voice rasped over my skin, making me shiver inside my coat as I wrapped my arms around myself.

It wasn't half as good as having him hold me, but I'd just have to get used to self-love.

I must've been the biggest idiot ever not to realize he was a singer. His low, husky voice was made for songs like this. His rasp turned into his signature growl, the one that made my panties wet in practically a single note.

Me and how many others? How many other women listened to his music and asked him to sign their breasts? It was bad enough I couldn't scour that picture of Kellan at the show out of my brain. That wasn't even mentioning the photo of his bandmate, the one who'd been *in flagrante delicto* next to his drum kit.

*That* was Kellan's life. From everything I'd read online, Wilder Mind was just beginning their career. They were about to launch a second single, which some reports said was a love song about a chick and others said was basically a breakup anthem. They were headed for the big time, and their current antics were just the opening act.

His world didn't make sense to me. I couldn't relate. But I would try my hardest to understand if Kellan would just let me in.

Fat chance there.

God, he'd never even sang or played for me while I was awake. Somehow that seemed like the biggest betrayal of all. It was as if he'd locked away that part of himself and pretended to be someone else.

*You criticized him for looking like a rockstar, remember? You told him flat out you didn't like him that way.*

I huffed out a breath and dropped my arms to my sides. All right, fine. Maybe I'd contributed to Kellan thinking he needed

to lie. Unwittingly, I had played a role too.

Now we were apart—again—and nothing seemed any better for the distance. It seemed a million times worse.

“Maggie, honey.” The door thudded shut behind Mrs. McGuire. “It isn’t good for you to get so upset.”

“Kind of a lost cause at this point,” I said without checking my anger, because she was there and he wasn’t.

He was in California and he didn’t have to handle any of this. This problem was mine to figure out, mine to solve. While he played rockstar and ruminated on *probably* loving me, my entire life had been thrown into chaos.

In my current state, I couldn’t even happily dwell on my multiple orgasms at his hands. Now they were basically fruit from the poison tree. For every moment of bliss he’d given me, I had experienced twice as many moments of worry.

If I was pregnant, everything was going to have to change.

College was probably out for me. I got decent grades but with my work schedule, I couldn’t study as much as I wished. I was an A and B student, something I’d hoped to improve at the next level as I prepared for law school.

Instead of law school, I’d be lucky if I could take one or two courses a year in between working my ass off to support us and breastfeeding.

My breasts were already huge. With milk in them, I wouldn’t need a floatation raft when I went swimming.

My eyes pricked and I bowed my head. God, if I was knocked up, Kellan probably wouldn’t want a thing to do with me. That might be for the best—though it sure didn’t feel that way—but what about the baby? I’d helped to bring another life into the world and now my child wasn’t going to get to know his or her father. Worse, he or she might grow up thinking bad things about him just as Kellan had about his own.

The cycle was repeating again.

Mrs. McGuire stepped closer and stroked my back. That was enough to open the floodgates.

“Why did you love Kellan’s father?” I whispered.

Kellan’s mother left her hand on my back. “Because he was electric,” she said finally, and I had to nod.

I understood that all too well.

“He wasn’t looking for a home and family. I don’t suppose I was either, but I took to it better than he did.”

“You didn’t have a choice.”

“Sure, I did. You always have a choice, honey. No matter what.” She shrugged. “I loved my babies, and he did too in his own way. He loved me too. It just wasn’t enough to keep a household going, but he gave me a lifetime of memories.” She smiled faintly, shaking the snow off her hair. “He adds to that memory bank when he blows through town. He’s a long-haul truck driver now. Still plays guitar now and then. Nothing like our boy though.” Pride laced her tone.

“Guitar. Of course.” So many of the pieces were fitting into place. I just wished Kellan had told me himself.

He’d started to that night in bed in California, but I was greedy for so much more.

“Kellan always thought he was more like John than he really is. They’re so different. Kellan started looking out for Bethy when he was a youngster himself. He guarded her like a pit bull. Made sure she got her afternoon snack and that no one was bothering her at school and helped her with her homework. To be honest, he was more of a parent to his sister than I was in those days. He was so good at it too. His problem isn’t that he doesn’t care, Maggie.” She rubbed the small of my back. “It’s that he cares so much that he’s afraid to take the risk.”

The ache in my throat had grown as I listened to her speak. What she was saying wasn’t a revelation. Not really. It was what I’d felt down deep despite the lack of concrete evidence.

My intuition had guided me when it came to Kellan. I simply couldn't have been that wrong about a man twice. I didn't believe it. Just as I didn't truly believe I could fall that quickly for someone who wasn't worthy of my love. Even if he wasn't sure he wanted it.

I blinked as a memory flashed through my mind of us in the shower that last morning. How he'd begun to tell me something until I'd shushed him. I'd been so desperate to keep our protective bubble intact a little while longer.

What if he'd been trying to tell me who he really was?

He played music for a living, and he was so incredibly talented that I couldn't help watching him in all those grainy clips with a lump in my throat. Not because I was miserable. Well, that too.

Mainly because I was proud. He was so gifted, and he deserved to know I felt that way. I couldn't wait to see him perform live and to sing all his songs along with him—and yes, I now knew all the words. I wasn't mad at him for chasing his dreams.

I was hurt he hadn't shared them with me so we could chase them together.

“Maggie? Are you okay?” Mrs. McGuire asked gently.

No, not really. But I was going to be.

I made myself focus on Kellan's mother. “I realize you aren't aware what occurred between us. I was in the process of trying to forget myself when the smell of tomatoes started making me want to hurl.” I held up a hand as Mrs. McGuire tried to interject. “Let's just say we had a brief relationship that included some mistruths on his end and him finally coming clean before I left. I flew back from California two weeks ago and his only contact since then was a text claiming he's sorry. Now he's told you he probably loves me, and I can't decide what is more painful—that he has to use a qualifier on his supposed feelings for me or that he feels guilty enough to send you to check on me, but won't make the effort himself.”

“Oh sweetheart, I’m sure he will once he can get away. His job is so stressful. He can’t just get up and leave.”

“No, and I could try to understand that if he would tell me himself. If he would just say how he’s feeling or hell, if he’s feeling at all. I gotta tell you, that whole *probably* thing isn’t easing my concerns. Not when my pants are already getting tighter.”

“But didn’t you hear what I said? He’s scared to care. Scared to reach out. His father hurt him. I’m afraid I did too, unintentionally.”

I blew out a breath. I was concerned I’d done the same with my thoughtless comments about his rockstar persona. But he’d started the ball rolling by not being honest about who he was from the get-go. And until he told me why he’d behaved that way, all I could do was guess.

Unfortunately, with my past, none of my guesses were pretty.

“Oh, I heard you,” I said softly. “Every single word. I get being scared. I’m about two breaths away from a panic attack myself.” I dashed the tears gathering at the corners of my eyes. “I don’t think Kellan’s a bad person. That doesn’t mean he’s going to allow himself to be the man he could be. I don’t know if he’s ready, and I have to be. My baby deserves two parents who love him or her. He or she deserves everything, even if that means I have to be both mommy and daddy.”

Mrs. McGuire gazed at me, her throat working. Then she wrapped me in her arms, cupping my head in her hand while I cried on her shoulder like a dummy.

A dummy who was in love with a rockstar who *probably* loved her.

A dummy who was probably pregnant with said rockstar’s baby and didn’t know if her parents would disown her or worse, because she hadn’t even dared to think overmuch about their reaction yet.

I’d been too focused on Kellan. Always Kellan.

I was almost certain if he told me in person that he was sorry, I would believe him. I wanted it to be true so badly that my heart would decide it was. Just like that stupid, traitorous organ had decided it made total sense to fall in love with a stranger in a matter of days.

The same heart that loved him even still.

SEVENTEEN

# KELLAN

*THIS WAS IT.*

This trip was supposed to lead me toward winning back Maggie's heart—if I'd ever had it in the first place. If I hadn't, I was going to devise a plan to get her to fall in love with me.

You know, no big deal. Just another day in the salt mines.

Getting ditched at the airport, however, didn't make for an auspicious start.

I opened the unlocked door to my mother's house and walked inside, stomping the snow off my boots. "Hello?"

No answer. Nor had there been one when I called my mom to pick me up at the damn airport. I'd ended up taking a cab and paying out the ass. All I knew was my mother had bailed as my ride after I'd made sure she could come get me so I wouldn't waste any more time getting to Maggie.

It had taken three days to deal with the planned press and studio time on the docket, not to mention to book a flight, and I still had a rehearsal to get back for in two days. We had a big concert on Friday night. Not arena-sized, but big for us.

I couldn't bail. A band might be able to get by without one of its two guitarists for a night, but the lead singer was an entirely different animal. I couldn't ditch my band unless it was life or death. As the lead singer, I had certain responsibilities.

Whether I'd wanted to admit it before or not, I took my responsibilities seriously. Always had and always would.



Which made me a lot less like my father than I'd given myself credit for in the past.

*Thanks, Lila.*

The talk with my manager had helped me screw my head back on straight. Following it up with a chat with my mom had just emphasized what I was already beginning to understand.

I wasn't my father, and I wasn't going to use him as an excuse for shitty behavior any longer.

I'd finally made it back across the country. With every passing hour, my urgency to talk to Maggie increased. No matter how much I'd told myself I wasn't the best man for her, I knew down deep where I was beyond arguments and logic that she was the best person for me. Now I just had to become worthy of her. One way or another.

First I had to figure out where my mom had disappeared to.

Glancing around for a note, I stepped into the living room and nearly groaned. It was as if my longing had made Maggie materialize.

She was asleep on my mother's couch, her long dark hair draped over the arm, her hands curled under her cheek like a child. She was so fucking beautiful. I'd missed her as much as if someone had ripped out a vital appendage and left a hole behind.

Relief surged through me, drowning out every concern and objection I'd had left. My gut couldn't be wrong about her. I'd trusted it before, and I'd trust it now too. My only hope was she could learn to trust me as well.

I dropped my bag and worked on hinging my jaw back in place before I crossed the room. I tried to rein myself in. Really, I did. But God, I had to touch her. I crouched beside her and brushed a hand over the dark silk of her hair as my heartbeat stampeded in my ears.

Her eyes opened, surprise filtering through them, followed by something akin to happiness. What followed behind it? Fury. The blinding kind that had her pushing me backward

with both hands on my chest until I actually fell back on the rug so she could pounce. She straddled me, and it was not for sex.

More like she was using her hips to hold me down while she rained blows over my chest and arms and anywhere else she could reach.

“Didn’t you do enough already? Didn’t you? Now you come back here without warning me, without giving me time to prepare—” She continued hitting me, and for a small girl, her fists freaking hurt. “I asked you a question. Didn’t you? Answer me, you bastard!”

I let her get out most of her anger—and boy, she had a lot. It was truly impressive. Once I sensed her weakening, I reached up to grab her arms and gathered them at the small of her back, sitting up so we were nose to nose. Then I did what any guy would who’d just been attacked by the crazy woman he loved.

I kissed her.

She let out a startled *oomph* as I slanted my mouth over hers, so eager for a taste that I didn’t try to soften her up for my advances. I should have, because she deserved that and more, but fuck, fighting with her got me even hotter than I was for her to start with. I’d reached my boiling point plus some.

I licked my way between her lips, teasing her tongue with mine. She definitely didn’t respond in kind right away. But the flex of her wrists in my hold just made me more determined to remind her what we were together. What we’d been from the very start.

“Red,” I murmured, and her eyes flashed open, the blue hazed with rage and lust.

An expression that I knew matched my own.

At least the lust part. The rage? Not so much. Hard to be angry when you’re so goddamn grateful you can’t breathe.

I had her back in my arms again. Exactly where she belonged.

“I’ve missed you,” I said softly.

Her eyes narrowed. “Probably?”

I rocked my hips, driving my rigid cock between her legs. “No probably here, baby.”

“Oh, horny miss me. Got it. Well, thanks, but I have a vibrator that doesn’t piss me off half as much as you do.”

As soon as I released her wrists, she started to climb off me. So I gripped her thigh to keep her still for another moment.

“I wasn’t hard for you when I saw you. I just fucking missed you, okay? But you climb on a guy who’s already crazy for you and hey, things happen.” I dropped my gaze pointedly to her breasts, swelling against her blue sweater. “Hard nipples, case in point. And you wanted to kill me.”

Why I wasn’t completely sure. I understood she was pissed at me after my lies. I fully deserved her anger and more. But she seemed ready to fillet my ass and serve it as a garnish for her steak dinner.

“Want,” she corrected, halfway off me and half on. “And my nipples get hard from a breeze now, so whatever.”

With that kind of a lead-in, I didn’t expect her to let out an exasperated sigh. “I’m annoyed as hell at you for about ten different reasons, but I guess I might as well get off while you’re here.”

Before I could so much as catch my breath, she hauled off her thin sweater, revealing the pink sweetheart bra that barely seemed capable of holding in her tits.

Fuck. Me.

But she didn’t keep going. She just pursed her lips and stared down at me, hair all wild around her head, cheeks blazing. Nipples so tight beneath her bra that I was practically quivering. If she so much as moved against me, I was going to lose it.

“Your mother invited me over for dinner tonight and then had to run out for some sudden thing, but she didn’t want me

to leave. Was this all a set-up? Did she invite me here to meet you?”

I leaned back on my elbows in a vain effort to get some more air into my lungs. Maggie was such a frigging knockout. “I’m guessing that, yes, it was, but not at my direction. I had no idea you were going to be here. I’m happy as hell you are though. I intended to contact you as soon as I was in town. To be honest, I wasn’t sure you’d want to see me.”

Her forehead wrinkled adorably and she crossed her arms, which only plumped up her breasts even more. “For sex?”

“Can you ask me that question when I’m not looking at the hottest pair of tits I’ve ever seen? I’m dealing with severe blood diversion here.”

Ducking her head, she smiled slightly and my entire world shifted. What had been okay, even living well, two months ago was now just drudgery. I wanted that smile in my life. I wanted to wake up to it every day. Hell, I even liked when she attacked me and took me to task. Nothing would ever be boring with her, and I couldn’t think of a solid reason why we shouldn’t be together.

Okay, yes, I could. Half a dozen of them, starting with the living on opposite coasts thing and ending with the small fact that I was a musician and she was a college student with multiple jobs and a family and a busy life right where she was. She didn’t have room for me in her world, and making room for her in mine would be difficult because of the distance and our conflicting schedules. But I wanted to make it work.

“I deserve an orgasm,” she declared, and I nodded without hesitation.

Yes, she did. I’d happily deliver five of them without stopping to breathe.

“I was miserable when I came over for dinner tonight, and the bright spot in my day was spending time with your mom. She’s still so sweet to me. Even after everything.”

“Of course, she is.” I frowned. “Why shouldn’t she be?”

“But we’d barely gotten through the door before she showed me all the food she’d made for me and took off, citing this supposed emergency. It wasn’t anything for me to worry about and she wanted me to stick around. Then you show up, and you don’t expect me to be here. Seems a little suspicious.”

“What it seems like is that she’s playing matchmaker.” I leaned up to ease her bra strap down and kissed the curve of her shoulder. She shuddered as if I’d touched her with a live wire. “We shouldn’t let her down.”

“What did she tell you about the other night?” She turned her head away, offering me access to her neck, and I nipped her there, basking in her sigh of pleasure as if I’d been deprived for a lifetime.

It felt like twice that long.

“Not much. That you’d talked and you were okay. I could tell there was more she wasn’t saying.”

“Understatement,” Maggie muttered.

“I wanted to come home right away, but there was stuff going on and I couldn’t leave immediately. So I started figuring out the soonest I could get back here.”

“You’re needed there. It’s your responsibility.” Her mouth trembled. “A responsibility you are determined to fulfill.”

At first I thought she was making fun of me, but as I studied her expression, I realized she wasn’t. She worried her lower lip between her teeth and averted her gaze, avoiding mine.

“I have responsibilities to my band, yeah. We had press stuff planned and if I bailed, it would throw stuff into chaos. My mom assured me she was okay. You too. If something is wrong—” I didn’t finish the statement.

I couldn’t. The idea of something being wrong with Maggie was so abhorrent that my throat sealed shut.

Had my mother lied to me? Maggie certainly appeared whole and vital, but something was off with her. I couldn’t place what.

*You barely know her. Problem number one.*

Swallowing audibly, she nodded. “She told me how you asked her to check on me.”

The back of my neck heated. I rubbed it and the warmth grew. Jesus, were my ears pink? How embarrassing.

“Yeah, uh, I was thinking about you all the time. I didn’t like how we’d left things.”

“Hmm.”

“As much as I missed you, I kept telling myself it was probably for the best.”

“Probably,” she said, shaking her head.

“But logic doesn’t mean shit. I don’t know how we can make it work, and maybe we can’t. But if we quit before we even give it a chance—”

“I’m pregnant.”

I didn’t reply. I wasn’t even sure I was still conscious. Why did it seem like I was floating down a tunnel? Was that a white light I saw in the distance?

But she just kept talking without my input.

“Your mom found me in the bathroom of Pizza Uno, barfing my brains out. By then it was dry heaves since I couldn’t keep food down. The internet said it’s rare to have nausea before six weeks. The internet lied.” She let out a half laugh, half sob, rubbing her wrist under her nose. “I tried to tell her it’s a bug. I was still hoping, but I had three pregnancy tests in my bag to take later. Of course, I’m sure Derek already thinks it’s his, thanks to that nosy Lance at the drugstore, but he hasn’t contacted me yet. Thank God.”

“There is no chance it’s his.”

If I’d guessed what I might say first, that wouldn’t have been it. But as shocking as it was hearing her say those two words, her mentioning Derek shortly thereafter had shorted out my brain.

My only clear thought was *Mine. Mine. Mine.*

Not just Maggie, but that baby she was carrying. Hers. Ours.

*Ours.*

She balled up her fists and braced them on her thighs. “So help me God, Kellan, if you accuse me of not knowing who fathered my baby, I’m going to de-ball you right here with my bare hands.” She lifted them and I was too impressed by the glint in her eye to laugh at the picture she made. Tiny and fierce, defending herself and her child.

*Our child.*

“No.” I took one of her hands. “I just want to hear you say it’s mine. I know it’s crazy. Just say it. Please,” I added hoarsely.

Her lower lip wobbled. “It’s yours.”

Fuck, we had a baby, and I didn’t even know how it had happened. Scratch that. I knew how, but I didn’t know when. Was it at my place in California? No, it couldn’t be. It was too soon. Only two-and-a-half weeks. She might not even know yet, never mind be so sick.

But New Year’s Eve was over five weeks ago. That was enough time for her to find out, right? Hell if I knew. But she seemed certain, so that had to be it.

“Fuck, the cold car condom.” Even as I said it, I hit myself in the forehead with the heel of my hand. “I knew that was a risk, but—”

“But what?” she demanded, clearly on guard for me to say something horrible.

She’d had to worry about my reaction on top of the fear she’d endured alone for days. I hated that she’d had to face it by herself for even one freaking instant.

We’d made the child together. We’d decide the rest together too. Somehow.

“But I didn’t care.” I gripped her hands and faced her straight-on. No more evasions. “Just like the night I fucked

you raw. I didn't know then that you were on the Pill. Didn't ask. It just wasn't important."

Her eyes filled and my gut wrenched as if it was being wrung out between two fists. Hers, mine. Both of us pulling and twisting to figure out what the hell we wanted from this thing. "You don't think I was trying to trap you," she said quietly.

"No. God, no. Why would you? I've been a complete dick to you. I mean, some of that was foreplay, but—"

Her watery laughter stopped me cold.

Swallowing hard, I framed her gorgeous face in my hands. One of her tears spilled over and rolled toward my thumb and I caught it, brushing it away. "I've missed your laugh. Missed you. I don't know what the fuck I'm doing, Red. Not with you, and definitely not with two. But I know I can't let you go."

Her throat worked as she forced back a sob. "You felt guilty about me. That's not a reason to stay with a person. First I wondered if you just wanted me for sex. Now this."

"Christ almighty, I wish I'd only wanted you for sex."

The hurt that flashed across her features made me shut my eyes. "No. I'm not saying any of this right. Wanting more—needing more—out of this, out of us, is new for me. God, Red. Everything is so different with you. I have no idea what my moves should be. If it had just been about fucking you, I could've moved on. It never was, from the moment you accused me of being a possible deviant with a dungeon."

She chuckled again. "I didn't use those exact words."

"Close enough."

"All of this is nice." She pulled her hand back and circled it between us. "But how am I ever supposed to believe you truly want to be with me for real? *Probably* isn't enough, Kellan. Technically it should be. We're so new, and there's so much we don't know about each other. But for God's sake, I don't want to fall alone. And if you didn't fall all the way with me, maybe it's just better if we end this now."



The mere possibility chilled my skin and stalled my heart. Like hell.

“You talked to my mother.”

She nodded.

“She must’ve told you what I said. That I loved you, days ago.”

I shouldn’t be telling her this way. I just didn’t know if my mother already had. I was fighting to hold on to a chance with her, and that was more important than romance or any other shit I didn’t have a clue about.

Honesty was the only thing that could salvage us. Truth all the way.

“She told me you loved me, probably.” She raised her head, nailing me with that direct gaze that had slayed me from the instant we’d met. “I know I should focus on the fact you’re almost there. *Probably*. A guy like you falling for me, small town Maggie Kelly, is fictional enough. I’m sure some people would think I’m asking for too much. It’s too soon, and there’s time. Except there isn’t.” She wiped her cheeks. “Not even just because I have a child growing inside me who isn’t going to understand that we were horny and got semi-drunk one night \_\_\_”

“You might’ve been semi-drunk, but I was stone cold sober.” I wound my fingers through hers and brought them to my mouth. “I told you I lied to you, but I didn’t tell you why.”

“You haven’t told me much, including why if you suspected a cold condom might be a risk, you’d take it. Saying it wasn’t important in that moment...” She trailed off. “Have you done that in the past?”

“No. Never. I told you that before. I’m careful about protection.”

“Except with me.”

“Normally I would’ve used a rubber from a freezing cold glove compartment precisely never. But I’ve operated from instinct all my life, and this thing with you feels right. It felt

right when you helped me make dinner and just inserted yourself into my space like you belonged. Not because of what my name is or because I might be big time famous one day or how many zeroes are in my checkbook.”

“I don’t care about any of that. And what do you mean you might be famous? You are already. You’re so amazing. There’s no way you aren’t headed for the stars.”

“Besides, even if—” Finally hearing her, I paused. “Say what?”

“You heard me. You’re incredibly talented, Kellan. Your voice, your skill on the guitar—which you should play more during concerts, by the way—your persona onstage. You have genuine star quality. The kind that can’t be duplicated.”

“We already have two guitarists,” I said vaguely while my mind reeled.

Was she really saying all that? Did she truly mean it?

“Yes, I mean it, and duh, you should know better.” She smiled weakly. “By the way, handy time for you to start speaking your thoughts out loud like I do.”

Ahh fuck. Figured I’d get chatty now.

“Thank you.” I let out an uneven breath. “But all of that isn’t the real me. The music is, of course, but the rest... You saw me, Red.” I kissed her fingertips and didn’t look at her as she sniffled.

I couldn’t.

“Just like I saw you. All that bravado and love for your family. Your strength and your kindness and how you were a little bit crazy, just like me. Maybe not in the crushing-a-beer-can-against-the-side-of-your-head way like some of my bandmates, but we fit. You know it too.”

She nodded, and relief expanded in my chest like a damn balloon, crowding out the concern and the panic and everything else except the woman I loved.

“I like the man I am when I’m with you.” I gripped her hand in both of mine, focusing on the delicate twisted silver

flower ring on her thumb. “I don’t want to keep you down or stop you from living your dreams. I have some too. Wild ones, the kind most people don’t understand. You might not always understand them either, but I believe you’ll try. Just like I’ll try with yours.” I clenched her hand, only realizing I was squeezing too hard when she gasped. I forced myself to relax my hold. “Give me a chance to learn this shit. I’m smart when I apply myself. It should only take roughly fifty years.”

“Oh, is that all?” She pulled her crushed hand free and rubbed her eyes. “Wait a second. Glove compartment? The condom I meant for you to use was in my purse.”

“That’s what you got from my long ass speech? A speech I dare say was romantic-ish as well.” I crossed my arms. “Guess I’m not the only one who needs some schooling.”

Ignoring me, she rose to grab her fluffy pink bag off the floor by the couch. I was almost glad to see it. If I named that thing Marsha, it could almost serve as the family pet.

*Family.* Holy fuck. I was really thinking about something permanent with this woman. Good thing too, since baby and all.

But I was the guy who’d grown up watching his father treat the idea of family like a pair of shoes you took on and off for appearance’s sake. He’d always been on the move and settling down hadn’t been for him. I’d always assumed the same would hold true for me. Add in my career choice, and I’d never thought I would be in this situation. Caught between two coasts, and wanting to be on both at the same damn time.

“Oh my God. You took the wrong one.” Cupping her hand over her mouth, Maggie turned back to me and held up the piece of foil she’d unearthed from her purse as if it was a trophy. “It was still in the pocket.”

“How was I supposed to know where it was? You said in your car.”

“I said in my purse!” She frowned. “Didn’t I?”

I pulled myself to my feet, not even bothering to try to be discreet as I adjusted my still rock-hard dick. Her fault for

being so irresistible and also half naked. “Little late to be wondering. Besides, if the cold was the issue, it doesn’t really make much difference.”

“Um, not just cold. That condom was Derek’s. He carried it around forever before we had sex the first time. I told him to toss the stupid thing because it had to be older than dirt so he threw it in there. I totally forgot.” She shook her head, tipping it back to stare at the ceiling. “I got knocked up because my stripper-loving ex is a pack rat. Why is this my life?”

“How was I supposed to know which was the good rubber and which was the bad? Should’ve thrown it in the garbage.” I dropped down on the couch and raked a hand through my hair, holding the back of my head so it didn’t spin off my neck.

Every time she mentioned the baby, blackness encroached on the edges of my vision. Perhaps the panic would fade by the time the kid was in college.

Maybe by graduate school.

“Did you miss the part where I forgot it was in there?” Maggie sat beside me and linked her hands between her knees. “You know, we have options. It’s not like we have to stay together forever just because of this if it’s not what you want.”

“Hell no. We aren’t aborting my kid.” When she shot me a sharp look, I cleared my throat and silently apologized to Lila. I’d worry about protecting my voice later. “Look, I’m all for you making your own choice. I’ll support it even if I don’t agree. But if you think that’s what I want, it isn’t. Absolutely fucking not.”

“It’s not what I want either. I want this baby.” Her damp blue eyes glimmered. “No matter how you felt, I’d already decided to keep my child.”

“Our child,” I managed before I pressed my face into my hands.

So stupid to feel such relief when I didn’t have any right to put demands on her. But fuck, my chest was still tight.

She touched my arm and I lifted my head. “My niece is my favorite person. I don’t see her enough, but damn, I love that

kid. My brother-in-law wanted my sister to have an abortion, because he said they weren't ready for kids. She told him hell no and kicked him out and he beat her black and blue. She survived and obviously so did Rainy. They're both fine. Both so strong." At Maggie's hitch of breath, I met her gaze. "Christ, Red, I might not get this right the first or even the fiftieth time, but I know I love you. Already. Love at first sight, who knew?"

Her broken laughter was a balm to my soul. She tipped her head against mine and curled her fingers into my palm. That show of trust made me grin like a besotted fool.

Maybe I really could do this. Maybe *we* could.

"I know it's all happening too fast, and I know I have the kind of profession that doesn't exactly help with the trustworthy factor. But I won't slip."

She laughed unsteadily. "You bet your ass you won't. Me either."

"I want this. You and me and our baby." I held out my other hand to her, palm up. "For keeps."

EIGHTEEN

# KELLAN

“ME TOO.” MAGGIE GRIPPED MY OTHER HAND, SQUEEZING IT before she let go and bumped her shoulder against mine. “And FYI, every little girl dreams of meeting a rockstar. Chicks don’t usually write fanfiction about hooking up with a hot accountant and making little pencil babies, you know.”

I laughed. “The usual woman isn’t like you. At least not the ones I’ve met lately.”

“You thought I’d look down at you for being in music. That I ever could.” Her shoulders slumped. “That’s my fault. I gave you the impression I only wanted the version of you I met at the cabin.”

“You indicated a strong preference, yes.”

“Well, I can’t pretend I don’t love you all beardy and mountain man-ish. But then I saw you online at one of your shows—make that *all* of your shows. I watched every clip I could find.” Her flush was the cutest thing I’d ever seen. “So, um, I’m growing to enjoy that side of you as well.”

“That so?”

“Yes, it’s so.”

“You going groupie on me?”

She bristled until she must’ve realized I was teasing her. She dipped her head so that her hair fell across one eye. “Maybe I want to be laid out on a drum kit too.”

My growl made her giggle as I inched closer. “Only if you let me sign your breasts with my tongue.”

“Mmm.” She wound a strand of my hair around her finger. “That might be able to be arranged.”

Silence reigned between us, but it wasn't awkward. I almost hated to break it.

“Part of why I didn't tell you the truth was because I wanted you to want me for me. Just Kellan, no fame attached. The other reason I didn't tell you is because I thought you'd think the worst of me. It was easier to just fall back on the first profession I had when I went to California than to face all your questions. Questions you have every right to ask.” I rubbed my thumb over the back of her hand. “I've been with a lot of women. I'm no saint.”

“Yeah, well, I've been with one man besides you and he was a jackass. So I figure our track records cancel each other out and we should start fresh from here.” She glanced down at her flat stomach. “As fresh as we can, not counting the miniature alien invader.”

Swallowing hard, I slid my free hand over her belly and met her gaze. The hope there nearly killed me.

She wanted to believe in us, as did I. So it was up to me to ease her fears and find a way to make this work.

“I'll commute. There are cars and planes,” I said, brushing a kiss over her upturned mouth.

“You won't always be able to. I'll come to you too. You do shows all over, right?” She eased back and cocked her head. “When can I watch you?”

Waggling my brows, I glanced pointedly at my lap. “Keep sitting around in that hot as fuck bra while I touch your belly and I'm thinking three minutes or less.”

“Wow, really? You're actually getting aroused by my practically nonexistent baby belly?” Her fascination with that possibility made me chuckle. She reached over and gripped my cock through my jeans and my laughter turned into a groan. “Oh yes, you are. God, I'm so horny. I don't know if that's the pregnancy too or if you broke me or if it's due to years of deprivation or what but—”



“Jesus, woman, if you don’t sit on my lap, I’m going to do the honors for you.”

“Yes, sir.” Her breathy response as she straddled me nearly shot me over right then and there.

Luckily she had a benevolent streak and unzipped me in a hurry. She pushed down my boxers and jeans before giving my length a nice, hard squeeze. “I love how big you are. Just the size I need.” She rocked against me, pushing her magnificent tits in my face, and I nuzzled them, savoring her satiny skin and her sexy strawberry fragrance. “Like right now.”

“Fuck, yes.”

I reached behind her to undo her bra and her breasts tumbled free, practically right into my waiting mouth. After I tossed aside her bra, I sucked on her nipple and she threw back her head, exposing the long pale line of her throat.

“This time will be fast. Next time I’ll go slower, I promise. I just have to get inside you before I fucking die.”

“Oh, yes. It’s been fucking years.”

I grinned against her cleavage. I’d probably live right in that spot if I could. “Swearing? So naughty of you.”

She gripped a handful of my hair and tugged my head back until our eyes were level. “Bad influence,” she whispered, licking her lips before she kissed me. Her tongue streaked into my mouth and I gripped her ass through her jeans, grinding her against my dick. Her cries grew wilder and sharper, and I knew she was getting close.

She wasn’t the only one.

“On my cock,” I said, and she nodded, eyes bright, as I jerked down her zipper. She understood what I wanted. Probably because she wanted the same thing.

“Oh shit. No condoms again.” The realization caused my cock to jerk.

Her chuckle was dirty and dark. “No. All the coming inside me that you like.”

“Jesus. My lucky fucking life.” I cupped her breast in one hand, tweaking her tight nipple with my thumb. “These are more sensitive.”

Her lips trembled, all the answer I needed.

“Getting bigger too. Goddamn, woman, you’re a miracle.” I drew down her jeans and her panties, shoving them off and onto the floor. Then I picked her up and sat her right on my cock, shutting my eyes at the exquisite feel of her glove-tight pussy sliding down my length. Bare. So wet and hot for me already. I locked my hands around her curvy hips and drew her up and down my shaft, forcing my eyes open to watch her face as we fucked. To see the way her lashes fluttered and the flush that bloomed under her skin and how her perfect tits bounced with every stroke. Knowing she was growing rounder because of what we’d made only turned me on more.

I gritted my teeth to temper my thrusts, but going slow was almost impossible. Her body was so giving around mine. She gripped my shoulders, raising and lowering herself, her knees digging into my sides, her hair flying back with her movements.

If I hadn’t fallen in love with her before, just seeing her lose herself would’ve done it.

The familiar seizing up in my spine and tightening in my balls had me fumbling for her hand. Squeezing her fingers, I brought our joined hands between our legs. For a moment, all I could do was stare. The rosy pink lips of her pussy spreading apart to take in my darker flesh, glistening with our arousal, the fringe of dark delicate curls that barely guarded her distended clit. That hard little pearl made me lick my lips, and following my gaze, she moaned.

“Later,” I promised, guiding her fingers to the apex of her thighs. “Now I want to watch you make yourself come.”

She wasn’t shy. Despite some of her hesitation that first night, she’d lost her inhibitions fast. Keeping her gaze trained on mine, she caressed her clit. Arching up like a kitten needing to be petted, she rocked back and forth, increasing the friction between us and the liquid heat dripping down my shaft.

Goddammit, I was about to blow and she hadn't even come yet.

I tilted my hips, changing the angle enough to cause her eyes to widen. Her rubbing sped up, her whimpers increasing. I reached down and pressed her fingers tighter to her clit, helping her over. She shuddered around me, her long hair trailing silkily over my chest as she bowed her head and rode out her climax.

All I could do was clench my jaw and grip her hip in a vain effort to hold on.

“Turn around,” I rasped.

Heavy eyes opened and focused on mine. She didn't seem capable of doing what I asked so I did it myself, seating her on my cock with a long groan. She was still swollen and tight from her orgasm, but the new angle tore a moan from her throat.

I braced a hand on her spine and pushed her forward, treating myself to the sexiest view of my life as she clasped and released my dick. She grabbed my knees, using them to lift herself, working me until I couldn't stop from driving deeper and burying myself inside her snug pussy. I reached around her, grasping her hand as I pulled her back against my chest, still pumping upward. Again and again, I entered her and retreated, the sound slick and erotic, her gasps a sweet torment that extended my own.

Twisting our fingers together, I bit her earlobe as she fisted around me and let go one more time, drenching my still thrusting cock.

I couldn't wait another second.

On a shout, I yanked her against me, holding her still as I spurted my release inside her, shoving deeper with every spasm. She dug her nails into my hand and I pressed my face into her hair, brutally aware of each pulse in my dick as I emptied. Even the last flutters of her climax around my shaft were enough to make me keep coming.

*Holy frigging shit.*

It only took me five minutes to get my breath back. Maybe ten.

“As soon as I can move again,” I promised, licking a path between the strands of her hair stuck to her neck. “I’m going to tongue-fuck you so hard that you pass out.”

“About time.” She wheezed out a breath. “I was wondering when the good stuff would start.”

She laughed as I tickled her ribs. “Wise ass.”

“You know, you can have that too.” She tossed me a saucy look over her shoulder. “Just in case you think the former Kelly virgin wouldn’t be down for butt stuff...”

I kissed her hard enough to silence her giggles. Well, for half a minute until they started up again. So I just kept right on kissing her.

It was pretty much my favorite thing to do.

Once I could bear to stop, I righted us so that we were curled on our sides on my mother’s couch. Sweaty, sticky, and exhausted.

And I was happier than I’d ever been in my life.

I crossed my arms over her chest, holding her so close she probably couldn’t breathe. But she wasn’t trying to get away.

“I love you,” she murmured, craning her neck to look back at me. Joy flooded me, but she didn’t give me a moment to bask. “Fair warning though—if you decide this isn’t for you, I will probably put sugar in your gas tank.”

I laughed into her hair. “Lucky for me I know that’s not going to happen.”

“Lucky for you,” she echoed. “Do you think the baby will be artistic like you? You know, the singing, the guitar, the paintings.”

Shutting my eyes, I kissed the side of her head. “Being excessively skilled in bed is a creative talent too, you know.”

“Oh yeah?” She grinned over her shoulder. “I’ll remember that if I ever meet anyone like that.”

“Did I mention you’re a wise ass?” Shaking my head, I let her go long enough to pull up my boxers and jeans.

My mom might walk in anytime, and we probably shouldn’t be naked and freshly fucked.

“Smart thinking. Your mom could show up.”

Nodding, I helped her put back on her panties and jeans before I hauled off my Wilder Mind shirt and tugged it over her head.

“What are you doing? My sweater’s right over there. Near where you threw my bra.”

“Too far away. Besides, I like my band’s name on your tits.”

She glanced down at herself. “Hmm. That is a plus.” She traced the band’s Celtic knot logo and grinned up at me, her mouth looking soft and used. “Sure you don’t want me smelling like you again too?”

“That is a plus,” I echoed, drawing her onto my lap and into my arms where she belonged. “I might be able to let you go in a month or so.”

“I hope so, since I have to pee.”

I mock-groaned against her neck. “You suck even worse at this romance thing than I do.”

She twisted to look down at me, her sparkling eyes and flushed cheeks making her impossibly beautiful. “Guess we’ll learn together. Just like diapering and three am feedings and sneaking in quickies in between naps.”

I snagged a handful of her hair and pulled her face closer. “Gotta learn how to have quickies too.”

Her lips met mine on a laugh. “Practice makes perfect.”

After a few minutes, she sighed and gave me one last quick kiss. “Nature calls.” She pushed up the long sleeves of my shirt and hopped off my lap.

I couldn’t resist swatting her ass, and she giggled again as she rushed off to the bathroom.

She made a pretty picture from behind too.

Sitting up, I leaned forward to grab her sexy pink bra. I flipped the strap around my finger. I might bronze the thing. Or buy her one in every color, starting with virginal white. Red would work too—

The front door swung open, and a cacophony of voices filled the house. Deeper male ones mixed with my sister's and my mom's voices. We'd gotten dressed just in time.

I stopped swinging around Maggie's bra, but it was too late.

Mr. Kelly was at the front of the pack, and he'd just seen me flinging his baby girl's lingerie from my pinkie.

"You," he said, his already ruddy face going completely red as he glimpsed what I was playing with.

Naturally I was also missing my shirt. And his daughter's blue sweater was in a heap on the floor.

Our shit streak was clearly continuing.

I jerked to my feet and stuffed Maggie's bra in my back pocket as well as it would fit. Then I held out a hand. "Sir," I said. "Nice to see you again."

He did not move. Neither did my mother, the lanky guy in glasses beside her, or my sister. But Bethy was turning pink from trying not to laugh, and as had always happened since we were kids, when she laughed, so did I. It was a weird chain reaction thing I'd never been able to stop. The little pain in the ass had used that knowledge often to get me into trouble back in the day.

Looked like that hadn't changed either.

Mr. Kelly did not shake my hand. He glanced at the guy over his shoulder. "You see what she's moved on to? I hope you feel guilty, Derek."

Derek? Oh hell no.

That piece of shit was not going to be allowed to stand in my mother's house and smirk at me. I had no idea why he was

there—why any of them were, other than my mother—but that bastard was about to seriously regret his mistakes.

“So you’re Derek, huh? The one who cheated on Maggie with a stripper. How’s that working out for you?”

He pushed up his glasses, probably the nerd equivalent of bringing out a weapon. “How’s being the rebound fling working out for you, McGuire?”

That wasn’t the truth. Was it?

Perhaps it had started out that way. Derek knew Maggie way better than I did. She still mentioned him a lot, but that made sense. They’d spent years together.

And I wasn’t going to let jealousy ruin a good thing. Hell, a *great* one.

I’d be damned if I let him throw shade on what was happening between me and Maggie. I’d asked her to trust me, so I was going to do the same.

“I wouldn’t know, because I’m not.” I stepped forward, sidestepping Mr. Kelly when he tried to block me from reaching Derek. I didn’t want to have to bodily pick up and displace my possible future father-in-law, but I would if necessary. “You know what I am though?”

Derek didn’t reply, but that was just fine by me. I had a ready answer anyway.

“I’m the guy who loves the beautiful, smart, fucking amazing woman you weren’t smart enough to hold on to. I’m the one who’s having a baby with her, and guess what? I’ll probably be the guy who marries her too. So whatever reason you have for being here, hit the road because you’re not even fit to breathe her air.”

“Kellan.”

Maggie’s voice had me turning toward the hallway. She was dwarfed by my huge shirt, and she’d pulled her hair up on top of her head. Her lips were kiss-swollen, her chin pink from my scruff. Her eyes were swimming, but she was grinning.

“You said probably again.”

I moved toward her and lifted her up, not budging when she squeezed my shoulders and begged with her eyes to be put down. “That one was for you. To give you a chance to say no.”

She tilted her head, a lone dark curl falling forward. “If you ask, I won’t say no.” Her lips curved. “Probably.”

“Maggie,” Mr. Kelly said from behind us, and she stilled in my arms. “Is what he said true? Are you pregnant by *him*?”

I set her down and she brushed a shaky hand over her hair. “Daddy, I was going to tell you about the baby.”

I covered my face with my hand. Jesus, my track record with this man just got worse and worse. It had never occurred to me her pregnancy was still a secret. I’d figured she would have told her family first, right after she’d talked to my mom and taken those tests.

My deduction skills obviously were not my strong suit. Good thing I had a big cock, enthusiastic hips, and skill with a microphone.

“Honestly, Maggie, couldn’t you have chosen just about anyone else on God’s green earth to procreate with?”

My mother shot toward Mr. Kelly so fast that he stumbled back. “Wait just a minute, Kevin. I understand you’ve just had a shock, as did I when I found out the news a few days ago. No, she didn’t tell me. I walked in on the poor girl throwing up at her job, and she was a worried wreck. You’re a fine parent, and you don’t want to say things now out of anger you don’t mean.”

Mr. Kelly frowned and touched Maggie’s cheek. “You’ve been upset and you didn’t come to me? Or to your mother?”

“I was going to. I didn’t know how to tell you. I was so afraid you and Mom would be disappointed in me. This wasn’t part of the plan.”

“Oh, honey, plans change.”

“They sure do.” Maggie took a shaky breath. “I was just getting used to the idea of being pregnant when Kellan showed up tonight. It seemed important I tell him first.” She threw



back her shoulders. “I was prepared to do this myself. I lost my job at Pizza Uno due to...unfortunate events, but I still have my office job. I’m still graduating in May. If it takes me a little longer to get through the next phase of school, so be it. I’m still young and I have time to do everything.” Maggie smiled and cupped her belly. “And I’m going to figure out how to be a parent. I had the most incredible example ever in Mom, and in you, Daddy.”

“Oh, sweetheart,” Mr. Kelly murmured, enfolding her in his arms. “I’m going to be a grandfather.”

“Yes. You are.” She sniffled and hugged him tight. “The best ever.”

I couldn’t breathe past the rock in my throat.

She was so strong. So vital. A million times more amazing than I’d ever believed I deserved.

I was going to spend the rest of my life proving to her I was worthy of her. Of both of them.

“You’re going to be a wonderful mother. That baby is so lucky to have you.” Mr. Kelly rubbed her back, then shifted to point at me. His eyes narrowed. “If you hurt her or my grandchild, I will pull your limbs from your body, one by one, and leave them out in the street for the animals to feed on. Do you understand me?”

For the oddest reason, I started to laugh. “Now I see where she gets the threats.”

He was not amused. Shocker.

I cleared my throat. *Yeah, yeah, Lila, lozenges for the rest of the day.* “I’m going to try my hardest not to hurt her or the baby, I swear. I only want to take care of them.”

“Don’t try, do.” He tipped up Maggie’s damp face and wiped away her tears. “I have a shotgun, a shovel, and a passport. Just say the word, baby girl.”

“He’ll do just fine, Daddy.” She sent me a sexy look under her lashes, and I went stone hard even though members from both of our families and the biggest dickhead ever to walk the

planet were mere feet away. “I have a good feeling about him.”

“Mr. Kelly, what did you invite me over here for?” Derek asked, rocking back and forth as if he was chomping at the bit to leave.

He better go fast or else I was going to wipe the driveway with his smug little head just for fun.

“I didn’t invite you. You were the one who showed up at our house, pleading to talk to Maggie. Bad timing on your part to be there when Mrs. McGuire arrived.”

“You begged to come over when I told you Maggie was here,” my mom said to Derek. “No one invited you. You inserted yourself.”

“You mean just like you did, setting up tonight’s meeting between Maggie and Kellan, Mom?” Bethy questioned, shaking her head. “If that wasn’t enough, then you had to try to make us into a big, happy family by gathering us all in one spot. Pretending your car broke down outside Maggie’s house and calling me to come pick you up. Really, Mom?” She clucked her tongue. “Such a matchmaker you are.”

“They’d already made the match.” My mom smiled. “I just gave them a nudge.”

Bethy walked toward me and angled her head to the side to give me an exaggerated glance from head to toe. “Hmm, still looks like my big brother. Still feels like him too, but that speech you just gave sure didn’t sound like the guy I used to know. Gotta say I like the changes.” She pinched my biceps and grinned. “Stability looks good on you, Kell.”

I hugged her, resting my chin on her head while I gazed at Maggie. “You forgot happiness.”

“That too. I’m so happy for both of you. And a cousin for Rainy. She’s going to be so excited.” Bethy moved back and turned toward Maggie. “We’ve never met, but I’ve heard a lot about you. You made quite the impression on both my mom and my brother. You must be a good person, since they have excellent judgment.”

Maggie smiled and stepped away from her father. “Thank you, Beth. I’ve heard a lot about you too.”

“Welcome to the family, Maggie.” Beth held open her arms and Maggie moved into them, closing her eyes as she let out a giant sigh.

Mr. Kelly arched a brow at me. “If you’re expecting a hug —”

“Thanks, Dad.” I stepped forward and wrapped my arms around him. He was about as flexible as a board, but the women started to laugh.

I stepped back before he could deck me. If I wasn’t mistaken, there might’ve even been a glint of amusement in his eyes.

*Might’ve.* I wasn’t about to be carving the Kelly family’s turkey anytime soon. But that was okay. I was prepared to work for what I wanted. For as long as it took.

“Maggie,” Derek said. “Are you sure about this?”

Maggie unfurled her hair from its bun, twirling it out behind her. “I’m sure. I’m also sure that your dumping me for Trini was the biggest favor you could’ve ever done for me. How is she anyway?”

Derek blanched. “We broke up.”

“I’m sorry to hear that.” To Maggie’s credit, she really did look sorry.

Either she was a great actress or she was kinder than that jerk deserved.

“I came to your place to see if you might still have feelings for me, but I guess every woman has their rockstar fantasies.” Derek smirked.

“Thanks, but no thanks. As you can tell, I’ve moved on. But you have it all wrong. I had grouchy jerk fantasies. The rockstar thing was an unexpected—and welcome—bonus.” Maggie smiled at me, then glanced at my mom. “As was meeting up with Mrs. McGuire again and realizing she was the mother of the man I loved.”

“Aww, sweetheart.” My mom pulled her into a hug. “You’ve done my heart good by being with him.” My mom shifted her smile from Maggie to me. “You’ll be good for each other. I know it.”

“We already are.” I moved toward Maggie.

We’d spent way too long apart. I was done talking and ready to start getting to know every little thing about my girlfriend.

Maybe someday she’d even be my wife.

“Ahem. Remember this?” Mr. Kelly stepped up behind me and flung something over my shoulder before I had a chance to react.

Maggie’s bra hit the floor.

Without blinking, Maggie kicked it aside and looped her arms around my neck. “Think you can spring for two towels at the cabin now?”

“Nah.” I tugged her as close as humanly possible. “We’ll just share one. Worked out pretty good the first time, don’t you think?”

She pretended to consider the question as her lips twitched. “Probably.”

NINETEEN

MAGGIE

SEPTEMBER

“YOU KNOW YOU’RE NOT SUPPOSED TO GET OVERSTIMULATED at this stage of your pregnancy, right? This might be too much excitement for an old prego chick,” Kendra teased, sipping champagne.

We were in the limo on the way to Kellan’s big concert at the Allied Center. She wasn’t kidding. I’d had to get special clearance from my doctor to fly this close to my due date, and he’d basically said this was it. From here on out, I’d be on one coast until the delivery.

For any other event, I wouldn’t have taken the chance. But this was the big time and it meant so much to Kellan for me to be there. Tonight, Wilder Mind was the opening act for one of their idols, Oblivion, and we were doing it up in style for our entrance.

Hell, I did most everything in style now. Even my lingerie had changed to La Perla rather than what was on sale at Walmart.

I still wasn’t used to my new life. I didn’t know if I ever would be. Going from being a single, struggling college student with two jobs to a pregnant woman with a famous boyfriend with serious money and no need to work if I didn’t want to—which I did, absolutely—was like *Twilight Zone* time. My brain and body still hadn’t caught up.

My bestie, on the other hand, was all about this new lifestyle. She’d grown up as the only daughter of a widowed police officer father. While she hadn’t been poor, she was used

to scrimping, especially when it came to her education and working two jobs. Now she was traveling in limos with me and day drinking champagne.

The downside was that I wasn't drinking champagne, since I was oh, eight months pregnant. The other downside was that we were surrounded in said limo by my entire family, as this big concert of Kellan's was a family affair. He'd gotten tickets for all of us, and while I'd hoped that one or more of my siblings would pass on the opportunity, nope. They had all crowded into our stretch limo and were drinking and laughing and chatting enough to make my head hurt.

Maeve was wearing a hot pink dress that offset her streaked blond hair and flawless skin. She was also busting out of it up top, which meant she had to tug up the bodice every time she laughed. A frequent occurrence since she'd brought her boyfriend du jour, a landscaper named Mark.

She'd asked more than once if she could get a backstage pass, though of course that went without saying. She'd met the band before, but I swore she was a groupie in training.

Lately she'd even started playing the piano again after not touching it for years. I wouldn't be surprised if she decided to join a band or something.

Anything went with my sisters. That one, especially.

In a gorgeous plunging red dress, Regan silently sipped her own champagne and viewed the rest of us with her usual bemused expression. She was solo—a fact that “delighted” her, she claimed.

She wasn't ready to settle down. Unlike *some* of us, a statement made with a pointed glance at me.

I think she secretly assumed I planned to have a passel of Kelly-McGuire kids rather than go to law school as I planned. I didn't try to disabuse her of the idea. I wasn't sure how I'd make it all happen yet. Not having to worry about money was a big help, since Kellan's career seemed aimed for the stars.

But I wanted to work to achieve my goals. That was how I was raised. Kellan was our child's father, but that didn't mean



he was responsible for me too. Not financially. It was bad enough I wasn't working that much now since I was the size of a Humvee and way more cranky about being pushed for speed.

I enjoyed these special occasions, but I was adamant that our kid wasn't going to eat from a platinum spoon. That was why I was living happily in the cabin in Turnbull while Kellan traveled back and forth from the west coast, though he'd insisted on making more than a few updates before I could live there.

Like an upgraded kitchen and heating system, tons of security, and a part-time bodyguard who also drove me places and looked hulking if anyone eyed me sideways. I thought it was more than a little ridiculous, but Kellan's public profile had grown exponentially in recent months. With that came a bit of notoriety for me and his bastard baby, as one kind tabloid had referred to us. After that Kellan's hypothetical marriage talk had become more frequent.

I was just getting through day by day and trying to keep my life as normal as possible. Kellan had to keep up certain appearances, but baby X and I did not have to when we were outside the glare of the public eye.

We didn't know yet if we were having a boy or a girl. We'd decided early on to be surprised, though my impatient boyfriend tried continually to get my doctor to accidentally reveal the gender. I was almost certain Kellan wanted a girl so Rainy would have a playmate. All I wanted was a healthy baby and a uterus that belonged solely to me.

I'd never realized how much of a full body sport pregnancy was until I'd discovered even rolling over was a challenge at this stage. As for sex? The second trimester had been incredible, with many semi-athletic feats I couldn't imagine pulling off now. The third? Let's just say I bought Kellan an industrial size container of Vaseline and told him to have fun.

“You okay over there, Mags?”

I glanced away from my stem glass of apple juice—that I’d been staring into as if it were tea leaves—to meet Liam’s concerned gaze. He’d been even more overprotective than usual this entire pregnancy. He seemed convinced Kellan would leave me for some groupie any day now. Lachlan, being his identical twin, had immediately taken the opposite stance and decided Kellan was the best friend he’d ever had. Angus didn’t seem to be overly concerned either way, and for that, he was basically my favorite person on the planet.

My family was amazing, but jeez louise, give a grown, on-the-verge-of-exploding-with-child woman some personal space.

“She’s fine,” Kendra answered before I could, slipping her arm through mine. “She’s just thinking about how she’s going to roll on top of that rockstar stud of hers tonight while he’s all sweaty from his amazing show and—”

“Oh my God, Ken!” I smacked her thigh, unintentionally pushing her already nearly obscene black minidress higher. “Shows how little you know. I’m more for side access at this point.”

“Margaret,” my mother chided, reminding me succinctly of her presence. God forbid I forget for one eensy second that I was surrounded by *The Partridge Family*, crazy Irish 2000s edition. “Not in front of your father.”

“Or in front of me either, thanks very much.” Liam brooded into his beer, but not before I saw his gaze linger entirely too long on my best friend.

Specifically, her long, bare legs, displayed to maximum perfection in her four-inch heels.

But I wasn’t jealous, not even a little. So what if I had on mud brown Crocs under my floor-length royal blue muu-muu? In a few weeks, I’d also have a hopefully healthy baby and a vacated uterus.

Yes, I was focused on the uterus. So sue me.

By the time we pulled up to the venue and were herded into our special VIP box near stage right, I had decided three

very important things. One, I wasn't fond of crowds when they impeded my ability to quickly reach a bathroom. Two, as soon as I wasn't pregnant anymore, I was going to go out wearing only a bikini—whether or not I was headed to the beach—just to feel air moving over my bare skin. Third, I had to pee. Really, really badly.

Have I mentioned this place was packed with people?

Beside me, Kendra laid a hand on my arm. “Wiggle much? Stop moving. You're distracting me from scoping out all the hot men. I told you I came here to get laid tonight.”

On my other side, Liam coughed. Where Kendra went lately, Liam seemed to follow. I didn't know why. Nor did I know why my brother kept looking at Ken like she was a large, juicy steak. They'd been frenemies since we were kids. All of a sudden, the vibes I was getting from Liam's side were something different.

Ken, however, barely seemed to know he was alive. If he'd fallen over dead at my feet, I think she would've stepped over him and called for a clean-up in the VIP box.

“Hello, preggo bladder. I have to pee.”

“Now? The other opening act will be starting soon. The Thrashers are my favorite band ever, you know that.” I gave her a hard stare and she patted her updo. “Did I say that? Second favorite band ever. There, that sounds better.”

“Why, planning on doing one of them? Did you manage to fit condoms in that matchbox of yours?” Liam cast a derisive glance at Kendra's tiny red clutch.

“Oh, you better believe it. After this one,” she pointed at me, “I practically insist on a double layer of latex. Not taking any chances.”

I crossed my arms over my enormous belly. “Thank you, sweet godmother of my child who has ears and can hear you quite clearly.”

“Sorry, kiddo.” Kendra patted my stomach and glanced at her bangle watch. “All right, let's go now before the Thrashers start. Though we're cutting it awfully close.”

“Maybe you can hookup on the way to the bathroom,” I offered, only half joking.

When Kendra was on a sex mission, she was a sight to behold.

“Hmm, maybe.”

“If your boyfriend comes out here, I’ll tell him you’re helping Ken have sex.”

Since I was more focused on the fact that Kendra was leading me to safety—aka the bathroom—I barely paid Liam any mind. “Okay, great, thanks,” I called over my shoulder.

My thoughtful boyfriend had gotten us seats in the section nearest the bathroom. The only problem was I’d vastly underestimated the size of the crowd. My head swam just from trying to see through the sea of bodies. The bathroom doorway might as well have been an oasis in the middle of the Sahara, and I was approximately two miles away. Evidently everyone in the arena had decided to use the first opening act’s performance time to get their pee on.

And my baby was doing a tap dance on my bladder.

“Are you sure you can’t hold it?” Kendra asked, urging me forward with her hand on the small of my back as the house lights dimmed and the crowd began to cheer. Loudly. Kellan had told me the first act’s portion would only be like three songs, basically just a teaser before Wilder Mind came on.

We’d have to have made it to the front of the line before the end of the Thrashers set, right?

*Please God, yes.*

“I’m thirty-five weeks pregnant,” I shouted over the guitar licks coming from the stage. “I’m holding it right now by not peeing on your damn foot.”

“What?” Kendra shouted back.

I gave her the finger.

We shuffled forward about an inch per song. I rubbed the ache in the small of my back, shifting to alleviate the pressure.

All I wanted to do was sit down. I'd even chance it by lowering my keister onto the bathroom seat. I needed to rest that badly. Not to mention I was—

“Oof,” I muttered, gripping my lower belly. “That wasn't...” I trailed off, since Kendra wasn't listening to me and couldn't have heard me even if she tried.

Was that a contraction? I'd had Braxton-Hicks during the flight to California on Donovan Lewis's jet. Donovan owned Kellan's record company and seemed to be a pretty cool guy. He was also ridiculously rich—hence why almost everyone called him Lord Lewis under their breath—so he'd arranged for the special flight for me and my ginormous family.

I rubbed my lower back with one hand and my belly with the other as the line slowly inched forward. We could hear the band from here, but we weren't quite able to view the stage. We could see the crowd going crazy, dancing and waving their arms and shouting the lyrics to songs I didn't know. I was trying to broaden my musical knowledge because of Kell but I still tended to like the Luscious Lovahboys the best, much to my boyfriend's chagrin. Wilder Mind was up there too of course, but that was a given. I might've even gotten Kellan to sing to me a time or two during intimate acts. Really intimate, when different vibrations were a very good thing. No one growled quite like him.

God, not even thoughts about my sexy guy were enough to distract me from the clenching in my lower back and belly. My entire midsection felt like it was seizing up, and sweat dotted my brow. Discreetly, I tried to wipe it away only to feel more appear right away. It was a warm day and there were tons of bodies all crammed together in a small space, but we were standing right near a vent. Not that it was helping.

“You okay?” Kendra peered at me as the line moved forward and I sagged against the wall.

I shook my head as another odd sensation went through my belly. More Braxton-Hicks, maybe? I needed to talk to my mom. The pressure in my abdomen was growing and I wasn't certain I just had to pee any longer.

“It’s too early,” I said under my breath, and she frowned, not understanding me.

The crowd yelled as she leaned closer, and I caught a fragment of what was being said in the main bowl of the arena. The Thrashers were already finishing up their set, and we were still what felt like miles from the bathroom.

“You’re all red. Here, let me rub your back.” She moved behind me and tried to find the right spot to make me feel better.

Since that would’ve taken about sixteen hands and a miracle from on high, her fumbling touches weren’t cutting it.

“Stop it. No. *Ow*. Go away.” I flapped my hands at her and she lifted her brows.

I didn’t ever talk to her like that unless she was being super annoying and I had PMS. That clearly was not the case here.

“You’re acting weird,” she shouted back.

I swallowed, shutting my eyes. Now I was starting to feel queasy too. Had to be nerves. There were so many people around us, all pressing too close, and the only thing I wanted was my mother. She’d know what the heck was happening inside me. I sure didn’t.

“Do you want me to call Kellan?” Kendra yelled beside my ear.

“He’s about to go on stage,” I replied loudly, nudging her back. “He can’t come out here and hold my hand.”

“Fine, then I will.” Kendra gripped my hand and stared me down with her no-nonsense dark eyes. “What do you need?”

“A damn toilet and some air and maybe some water.” If I could keep any down.

“Maybe I should tell your mom to come out here. Or your dad. Or Li—”

I wagged my finger in her face. “Do not even finish that statement. I can’t give birth with my overprotective brother

and father trying to keep my vagina on lockdown.” I waved my hand in front of my face. “Too late now.”

Another wave of pain went through me, and my face must’ve gone white or red or who knows what because Kendra took one more glance at me and whipped out her phone.

“Do not call Kellan,” I said, snatching her cell. “He can’t leave the stage right now.”

She snatched it back and leaned closer so I could hear her. “I wasn’t texting him. I was texting your brother. I’d text one of the others but this is a new phone and Liam’s number is the only one I have right now.”

I angled back to stare at her. “Why do you only have Liam’s number in your phone?”

She released an exasperated sigh. “There’s no time for this. I’m getting your family or a voodoo doctor or someone, anyone, out here to help you.”

The growl that left me was entirely involuntary. Kendra just continued typing, her fingers flying fast enough to make me dizzy.

“I’m fine,” I insisted through gritted teeth. “I just need to damn pee!”

A woman a few feet ahead of us motioned us forward. “Here, ma’am, take my spot.”

“I’m not a ma’am, I’m only twenty-three!” But I didn’t hesitate to step in front of her, muttering my thanks.

“Wow,” Kendra said. “She’s done lost it. I’m sorry, ma’am,” she said pointedly to the other woman. “Think the demon’s coming out.”

“I understand. I had four.” The woman held up four fingers to go with her shouting and I grimaced.

I needed a chair, a cold washcloth, and some Xanax. Stat.

“Ken,” I mumbled pitifully, raising my voice when she didn’t appear to hear me. “Ken!”

“What, what? I’m here.” She resumed rubbing my back again, and this time it didn’t feel like she was a gnome with gnarled hands intent on bringing me pain. I leaned against her, shutting my eyes as heat swept over me again, drenching me in sweat from head to toe.

“Something’s happening. I don’t know what. I’m freaking out.” Tears sprung into my eyes and I reached for her hand. “Don’t leave me.”

“I’m not. I won’t. You’re just probably in labor.”

Kendra’s ridiculously calm voice did not ease my fears. In fact, it enraged me. Sure, *she* could be calm. She didn’t have someone about to forcibly push his or her way out of a microscopic opening so not meant for that.

So maybe it *was* meant for that, actually, but hello, design flaw. If you have to squeeze out a watermelon, make it a watermelon-sized hole. I was convinced mine was smaller than average. I probably shouldn’t be having kids. I wondered if I could halt the process now.

No? Guess not.

I peered up at Kendra as new tears filled my eyes. “I’ve decided not to have this baby. It hurts. Oh God, it hurts.”

She gripped me by my upper arms and propelled me forward. “Just pee first,” she said against my ear. “Then we’ll see how you feel. Liam is on his way. There was a commotion in your aisle and he’s having trouble getting out.”

“What commotion?” Oh shoot, was that the last minute soundcheck I could hear? The Thrashers were off stage now. I was about to miss Kellan’s performance and I still hadn’t made it to the bathroom. “I’m going back to my seat,” I decided, pushing my way out of the line.

If I was going to be in hell from the boobs down anyway, I might as well get to scream for Kellan until I passed out.

Which might be happening soon.

I’d taken two steps—more like two waddles—when Kendra grabbed hold of me from behind and muscled me back



toward the line. “You need to pee. You’ve waited this long,” she said. “You’ll drown.”

“I want to see Kellan,” I wailed.

About three-fourths of the line craned their necks to see who was scream-crying now, though for a different reason than most.

Two teenagers broke free from the pack and held up a signed poster of Bryan, the drummer. He was wearing leather pants in the shot and had signed in Day-Glo green ink right over his crotch. “Kellan’s super hot, but Bry is our favorite,” they said in unison.

Later, I would probably feel bad for my response. Then again, maybe not.

I punched through their poster and left them shrieking in my wake as I charged toward the front of the line, mumbling apologies and possibly prayers as I went.

“Crazy pregnant lady coming through,” Kendra called, chasing after me.

The first notes of “Fool for You” soared through the arena and I started crying for real. I could not believe I’d traveled all this way and endured great personal trials only to have it end here, mere yards from a row of communal toilets.

“Shh, baby girl, they’ll have it all on YouTube,” Kendra soothed.

I cried harder. That was my consolation? That JimmySucksYou in row two might upload some sucktastic footage with grainy vocals and I could watch it from the comfort of my hospital bed while I writhed in agony?

A melee broke out behind us with people scrambling and shouting out expletives, and I turned in time to see Liam jockeying for position in the line.

“You okay?” he asked, hurtling himself at me and nearly knocking me over like a giant pin felled by a wrecking ball. That I remained standing was a testament to my motherly instinct.

Kendra grappled for one arm and he seized the other, then they both pulled me forward. “Dry her eyes,” he commanded Kendra on my other side, who gave him the middle finger without lifting her hand.

It was impressive, really.

“I can dry my own eyes,” I said. “I just want them wet right now. Is that okay with you?” I fully realized he probably couldn’t hear me over the extremely noisy crowd. I did not care.

“Get her nose too,” Liam added.

“Do I look like I carry tissues?”

“In your bra, maybe?” Liam dropped his gaze to Kendra’s chest. Since he had to lean over me to speak to my best friend, I saw it all. And was flabbergasted.

“Oh, hell no,” Kendra said, swinging her tiny clutch with clear intent to do him harm.

I so did not blame her.

“Jesus, K, that’s not what I meant. You’re frigging perfect everywhere and you know it.”

*K?* Now he had a cute nickname for my bestie? What the hell was going on?

“Oh sure. Try to cover up your lame remarks now. Too little, too late, Kelly.”

I pushed up my arms between them and let out an ear-splitting screech. “Can you not do this right now?”

“Sorry.” Both looked away.

That might’ve appeased me, if the fire-clenching dragon currently shredding my abdomen with its claws had not been wreaking havoc once again. I groaned, gripping my stomach, and threw back my head as lights popped on above me. Seriously bright lights that made everyone yell out in confusion and nearly blinded me from their intensity.

“Straighten her up! Get her shoulders back! They’re about to turn on the cameras!”

I had no idea what my older brother was shouting about. I was seeing spots, doubled over, nauseated, in pain, sweating, and five seconds away from either peeing on myself or having a panic attack when the crowd started to scream and the song changed. “Fool for You” had ended and now they were playing something else, but it wasn’t either of their other two singles, “Felicity” or “I Can’t Sleep.”

Not that I could focus on what song those particular chords belonged to or even what my hot as hades boyfriend was shouting to the audience. Liquid was dripping down my legs, proving that one should never assume a day cannot get worse, because oh, yes, it surely could.

“Fix her hair,” Liam shouted, and they both started patting the sides of my head as if they were beauticians gone mad. I couldn’t even stop them, since I was now weeping tears of joy.

I hadn’t just peed on myself. My water had broken. Oh God.

Someone with a handheld camera pushed their way up to me, getting right in my face, and I didn’t yell. Somehow I could now make out the song that Kellan was singing for me—to me—though I wasn’t where I should be to hear it. The song was one of the ones we’d watched on New Year’s Eve, “Will You Marry Me?” by the Luscious Lovahboys. And I was laughing and crying as people swarmed around us and Kendra and Liam tried to fix my makeup.

All the while, the camera recorded everything, probably showing it to the crowd on one of those big screens.

I hoped JimmySucksYou was still recording. I’d definitely need to see this later, even if I wanted to die over my appearance.

But who cared about smeared makeup and messy hair and muu-muus? I was in labor and I was going to get married.

Maybe. If I lived through giving birth.

The cameraman smiled at me and flipped out his mini screen to show me Kellan on his knees onstage, singing his heart out to the song I knew he hated. More tears flowed down

my face, and I swallowed my sobs until it sounded as if I was choking.

Hey, no one ever accused me of being sexy.

Then the song ended and Kellan said a whole bunch of sweet words about how his girlfriend was here, and we were having a baby, and it had been a surprise but the best surprise ever. I was sniffing so much I barely noticed him look straight at the camera.

“I love you, Maggie, my Red Riding Hood. Will you marry me and drive me crazy for the rest of my life?”

The cameraman swung the camera toward me and Liam slapped something near my throat that was either a tranquilizer patch or a microphone. “Yes, I’ll marry you,” I yelled, and the audience screamed and cheered wildly, including most everyone in line in front of and behind me. “Oh, and by the way, I think I’m in labor!” I added, and Kellan went stark white, his grin freezing on his face.

The shouts turned deafening and I glanced at Kendra, who was screaming and crying and jumping right along with everyone else. At her side stood my stoically smiling older brother.

Out of the corner of my eye, I could see the rest of my family, all wearing smiles as they tried to reach me. It was probably the sweetest moment of my life.

Until Kellan’s eyes wheeled and he took a dive off the stage, right into the first row.

“He fainted!” a woman shouted behind me.

One thing was for sure—our life together would never be boring.

—

# EPILOGUE

KELLAN

*New Year's Eve*

“I DID NOT FAINT. I HAD LOW BLOOD SUGAR.”

Maggie adjusted the blanket around our son in his rocking bassinet then sat on the couch, crossing her jean-clad legs. This year she was not wearing only a towel as we watched that infernal New Year's show. Far from it. She had on jeans, a hoodie, and fingerless gloves and was still moaning about being cold.

I'd fetched us both a beer and she'd taken one sip before deciding to travel down memory lane. I was merely setting the record straight.

She shifted, drawing my attention to the painting I'd done of her at seven months pregnant that hung on the wall above her head. Just looking at her bare belly, full and round with our child, made me rigid. Even if Maggie in the flesh was currently smirking at me.

Ah hell, who was I kidding? Everything about the woman had me wrapped.

“Sure you did, sweetie.”

I gave her serious side-eye but she wasn't looking at me. She was focused on the screen. As if it wasn't bad enough that I had serious stylistic differences with the Luscious Lovahboys, now the mere sight of them reminded me of singing that crappy song for her, only to have the spotlight pan to her empty seat in the VIP area.

Luckily Maggie's entire family had known what was going down and Liam's quick actions had managed to avert a total shitshow. It had all ended up pretty sweet, if I noticed such things. It was just rather shocking to be notified on stage your girlfriend was in labor, that was all.

"You could've announced the news with more care." I crossed my arms. "I don't hold that against you though."

"Aww, thanks, sweetie."

"I am holding your excessive use of lovey-dovey terms during this conversation against you, however. Whatever happened to Wolf?"

Maggie toed the bassinet with her foot to keep it rocking. "Since we named the baby Wolf, it doesn't seem quite right to shout it out during sex anymore, you know?"

"That was your idea to name him Wolfgang not mine. Gotta say it's a pretty badass name."

Wolfgang Redstone—the second part had been my decision, and Maggie still hadn't forgiven me for 'ruining' Wolf with such a stuffy sounding middle name, whether it was for her or not—had been born after eleven hours of hard labor. He'd started coming, then just stopped and chilled for a while until he felt like getting the process moving again. By the time he'd decided to make his actual entrance, I'd revived enough to be pacing at Maggie's bedside. Then I'd taken up circling the waiting room after she kicked me out. My whole band had been there too to cheer us on and possibly to scoop me up off the floor if I hit the ground again.

Low blood sugar was a tricky thing. I still felt the effects sometimes when I looked at our absolutely beautiful, perfect son, with his red curls, chubby pink cheeks, and sky blue eyes. And I definitely felt it when I glanced up and realized Maggie was looking at me in that certain type of way I hadn't seen in forever.

Not since second trimester or thereabouts. I wasn't counting or anything, excluding my Google calendar app that told me how many days it had been since I'd last had sex.



I barely even cared. So what if my fiancée looked absolutely smokin' hot, even while all covered up in her sweatshirt and gloves? Paradoxically, the way we'd met made me fetishize her in layers. I saw her all bundled up and my dick tried to escape my damn pants.

“Admit it,” she teased. “You're hoping he ends up with a guitar in his hand just like Daddy.”

I stretched my arm along the back of the sofa and toyed with the ends of her long dark hair. “Right now, I'm thinking about getting something else in my hand.”

She lowered her lashes and scooted away.

I bit off a sigh. That whole screaming “Wolf” during sex thing wasn't a consideration in our lives at the moment.

After our son's birth, he had to stay in the hospital for a few weeks because he was born premature. He'd had to gain some weight and show the doctors he had good strong lungs—something that I'd known was a certainty since hey, my kid. We'd both been run ragged spending long hours at the hospital, and then after we'd finally gotten him home and were able to tuck him in his own bed, I'd been needed back in California for final touches on the album releasing in early spring. We'd also had press and shows and all the things that kept me on the other coast, far away from my family.

Among them the fact that our keyboardist had been acting seriously odd for months. Back in the day I'd felt like I knew Myles better than anyone. Now I wasn't so sure. He'd been acting especially weird since “Felicity” dropped, and I didn't know if he'd stayed in California for the holidays or gone back home to be with his supposed best friend or what.

Something was up with the dude, big time. I just hoped it didn't upset the already tenuous balance in the band.

Bryan, fucking any chick that moved. AJ and Cameron, alternating between fistfights and drunken hookups with random girls and writing kickass songs together. And then there was Jake, just doing his thing. Focusing on the music. Imagine that.

Myles was the wild card right now, and I didn't want to dwell on any of it. Not while I was spending my first holiday season with my brand-new family.

Maggie had been cool about all of it, from the band squabbles to rehearsal changes and penciled-in shows. She said she understood, and she'd brought out Wolf to sit in on some jam sessions once she'd fitted him with his own tiny pair of well-cushioned earphones. She'd also given me one hell of a Christmas present when she told me she'd gotten into UCLA and was starting in January. That meant no more bicoastal living, at least for now.

We were finally going to be under the same roof, all three of us. The way it should be.

The proper clearances from her doctor as far as having sex had finally come through a couple of weeks ago, but since she'd made no move in that direction, I hadn't either. I was no expert on pregnancy yet even I knew sometimes it took time for a woman to be interested again. That was fine. We could take as long as she needed.

Besides, I had something else to bring up tonight. Something important.

Luscious Lovahboys started the second song of their set, an ode to making love, and I rolled my eyes as Maggie inched forward on the couch. "Seriously? You know we're number two behind them and you're still all up in their business? They're all that's standing between Wilder Mind and a damn number one record."

And I wasn't the slightest bit bitter about that.

"Actually," Maggie said, rising, "I'd rather be all up in *your* business." She put the fingers of her gloves in her mouth and pulled them off, letting them fly before she tugged her hoodie over her head and dropped it behind her.

Underneath, she was not wearing a turtleneck as I'd assumed. Try a sexy purple teddy with more cutouts and lace than a horny guy who hadn't had sex with his girl for almost six months could stand.

“That low blood sugar thing is kicking in again,” I muttered, making her giggle as she undid the button and zipper on her jeans. She bent over with her ass facing me to shimmy out of them, and I couldn’t resist.

I grabbed her waist and pulled her kicking and screeching with laughter onto my lap, but we both went still when the baby started to fuss. Then I dumped her on her side on the couch and rose to check on our son.

“Hey, buddy, it’s okay. Mama’s fine.” I crouched beside the bassinette and stroked his downy hair until he settled. “See?”

Maggie sat up and flicked her hair out of her face. “I see who comes first with you, McGuire. Even the prospect of hot, dirty fucking isn’t as interesting to you as our boy.” She grinned. “That’s my rockstar daddy.”

“Don’t listen to your mama’s foul mouth.” I pretended to cover Wolf’s tiny ears as he blew spit bubbles at me.

“Oh, I can get much fouler. Want me to tell you how wet my pus—”

“We should go into the bedroom,” I interrupted.

“Why?”

“Do you want our son to end up in therapy in fifteen years?” I tickled Wolf’s belly before returning to the sofa. “Things like this can scar a child.”

She laughed, shaking her head. “Yes, so detrimental to him that his parents can’t keep their hands off each other. You’re such an adorable grouch.”

“Adorable? Seriously? You’re gonna pay for that one, Red.” I tugged her jeans down her legs before flipping her underneath me on the couch. She squealed with laughter as I tickled her ribs, but after a minute or so, we both fell silent.

We were literally in the exact same position we’d been in one year before. Except now everything was so different.

So incredible.

“Happy New Year, Maggie.” I trailed my finger over her lips. “An entire year. Can you believe it?”

“No. It feels like I’ve known you my entire life.” Her mouth curved under my finger. “I have sort of known you for most of it, by proxy anyway. You know, since I loved your mom and you loved on my sister.”

I grunted and she laughed again, tipping back her head and exposing her throat. I bit her right over her pulse, drawing that delicate bit of skin between my teeth. With my other hand, I cupped her breast and relished her moan. “God, I’ve missed being inside you.”

“That so?”

“Absolutely.” Gripping her wrists, I tugged her arms above her head, stretching her out beneath me so her glorious breasts strained against her teddy. “You’re the most beautiful woman I’ve ever seen. I’m going to fuck you so hard you see the fucking Big Dipper.”

Trembling beneath me, mirth in her big blue eyes, she batted her lashes. “Oh, baby, I already have. Sucked on it too.”

I choked on my laughter. “Goddamn, I love you. What are you doing April fifteenth?”

“Besides paying my taxes? And lighting a candle for the day I was excommunicated from church?”

My shoulders shook as I tried to hold back my laughter. “You weren’t really excommunicated.”

“Tell that to Father Wilkins of Our Holy Mother Church of The Four Corners. He still can’t look me in the eye to this day.”

Her seriousness made me snort. “Babe, I don’t believe for a second you did anything that bad. You still hardly ever even swear.”

“How about streaking through the lower church on a dare from Kendra?”

“What?”

She sighed. Heavily. “We used to play Truth or Dare all the time. I came out on the wrong end that day. Hey, that’s a great idea.”

“What?”

“I should play Truth or Dare with Ken so she has to tell me the truth about what’s up with her and my brother.”

“Which one? You have like five.”

She kneed me entirely too close to my mini mandolin. “Only three, as you very well know. There’s some serious tension brewing between her and Liam. It’s been there ever since they came me to collect me from your place in California.” She rolled her eyes. “Maybe they joined the mile-high club?” As soon as she said it, she shook her head. “Ugh no. Not them. Anyone but them. They’ve hated each other for years. Total opposites.”

“You hated me when we first met.” I nudged my cock against the satin panel between her thighs. “You see how that turned out.”

“I didn’t really hate you. You just intimidated me. So big and pseudo-mean, when underneath you’re soft and squishy like brownie mix.”

“Why do I love you again?”

She licked her lips, raising her brows.

I grinned. “Yeah. You do have your special gifts.”

“As for the fifteenth, hmm, nothing. Why?” She wiggled beneath me. “Let me guess. Huge show? Oh God, who are you opening for now? Oblivion again? No, wait. Even bigger. The Killers? 30 Seconds to Mars? Mumford & Sons?”

I stared down at her, amazed at how she’d worked on expanding her musical knowledge for me. “What if I said Luscious Lovahboys, your favorite band ever?”

She made a face. “False. I was only watching them tonight to give you better memories to associate with their music other than fainting onstage because you were such a cute, panicked

daddy-to-be.” The tip of her tongue peeked out between her teeth. “Like wild, hard, deep fucking.”

“Hell yeah. I like the sound of that. Even if you are trying to distract me from your love of my competition.”

“Is it working?”

Growling, I buried my face in the crook of her shoulder. “Let’s get married April fifteenth, smart ass.”

A tremor went through her, but she didn’t try to break free of my hold on her wrists. “Why then?”

I lifted my head. “So you have better memories to associate with that day than doing taxes?”

“Now who’s a smart ass, huh?” She slid out of my hold and reached down to pinch my butt. “Good thing I’m so stupidly in love with you I can’t see straight.”

I couldn’t stop my grin. “Yeah, good thing. And ditto.”

“I’ll marry you then on one condition.”

My heart started to roar in my ears just as it had when I’d stood on that stage and watched the spotlight bounce over her empty chair. Then again as the camera had found her in the hall outside the bathroom. Most of all, when I’d heard our son’s first cry, because I’d sneaked back into Maggie’s hospital room. Nothing could’ve kept me away from them in that moment.

Or any of the ones that came after.

“What’s that?”

“I want you to sing for me.” She leaned up to kiss me so gently I couldn’t help chasing her lips as she moved back. “To me.”

When I started to hum one of the songs on our new album, she grinned. “Love that one, but can I make a request?”

I groaned in mock distress. “Again with the Luscious Lovahboys?”

“Nah. I was thinking more like ‘I’m in Love with a Serial Killer.’”

I threw back my head and laughed.

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# ABOUT TARYN QUINN

*USA Today* bestselling author, **TARYN QUINN**, is the sexy and funny alter ego of bestselling authors Taryn Elliott & Cari Quinn. We've been writing together for years, but we have decided to pull the trigger on a combo name just for fun.

And so...Taryn Quinn was born!

Do you like ultra sexy small town romance full of shenanigans? Quirky office romances full of steam? Okay, look...we pretty much just love writing steamy stories. If you're all about that, we're your girls!

*For more information about us...*

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