



Wintry &
WONDERFUL

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

ALEXA RILEY



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For those who love to snuggle...

We've got you covered.

Wintry and Wonderful

ALEXA RILEY



Winter is the perfect time to cuddle up with a romance. Why not do it with three of our favorite wintry reads!

This book contains *Keeping Her Warm*, *Cozy*, and *The Winter Groom*. It's everything you need to heat up your snowy night by the fire.

Keeping Her Warm



Catherine has fallen on desperate times and has done some things she's not proud of.

Cole is the beloved town sheriff, but he's missing something in his life.

When a snow storm hits and the two of them are thrown together, things heat up. But when Catherine's truth is exposed, will Cole still need her warmth?

Warning: Fire ignites in this insta-love quickie, so grab a bucket of ice to go with it. Find out what happens in this small-town romance that's full of sexy snuggles and alpha ownership.

Chapter One



COLE

I take a long pull of my coffee before putting it back into the cup holder. The warm liquid helps fight off some of the bitter winter chill. I reach for my radio and clip it on to my belt as I unfold myself from the cruiser, but not before grabbing the tin of cookies I picked up at Maggie's coffee shop on my way here. I should have gotten a coffee while I was there, too, instead of drinking the shit I made myself this morning. I'm worthless when it comes to doing anything in the kitchen. Probably because my mom was so good at it growing up I never had a need to try. Then when I got in the army they fed us. I'd never had to cook until now and what I do in the kitchen should not be called cooking. Burning, maybe.

I roll my shoulder, trying to get the tightness out of it. I should have stretched it out this morning but I forgot, and I know the tightness will soon turn into a dull throb that will agitate me all day. Shaking it off I head into my mom's apartment. She's been staying in assisted living for years now. She moved in about the time I became a Ranger in the army.

It was always her and me, and I think she misses having someone around. I thought she was a little too young to be living here, but once I got a chance to visit on leave one month ago I could tell this was the place for her.

I stop at the front desk, and Chuck, the man who works it, looks up at me. He hops from his chair when he sees it's me. Chuck isn't a big guy and he still carries a lot of his baby face on him, which he tries to hide behind light facial hair. His blond hair and blue eyes only make him look even younger.

"Sheriff," he says, standing straight. I give him a half-smile to put him at ease. Chuck is always like this, well, at least when I'm around. He has put in a job request at the station a few times.

"Chuck." I nod at him. "Everything good?" It's the same thing I always ask when I come here. I want to make sure everything is on the up and up and there aren't any problems.

"Everything is great, sir." He stalls for a moment and I can tell he wants to say more as he shifts from foot to foot. I raise my eyebrows at him. "It's nothing really, we just got this odd note." He digs into a drawer and hands me the crumpled piece of paper. I take it from him and look down at it.

Sorry, I took some bread and peanut butter. One day I hope to repay you.

I study the note for a moment. The penmanship is soft and delicate and makes me think a girl wrote it.

"We wouldn't have even noticed the bread or peanut butter was missing, to be honest, if the note hadn't been left," I hear Chuck say, pulling my attention away from the note.

I slide it into my back pocket. I don't want to give it back to Chuck.

"I'll keep my eyes out," I tell him, not really worried about someone stealing food but more about someone having to. We live in a small town and there aren't many homeless people roaming around, but there also isn't a shelter for people to go

to. There's maybe one of the local churches, but I'm not sure how much they are able to help.

I go to leave and head toward my ma's place.

"I applied for the academy," Chuck rushes to say, stopping my retreat.

I look back at him. The academy will do him some good. I know he's eager and has some of the drive needed. The academy will show him more of what he's getting himself into and if it's what he really wants to do with his life.

"That's really good, Chuck. Keep me updated."

He full-on smiles at that. "Yes, sir."

I give a nod, then turn back to head to my ma's. When I get to her door I give a double knock and reach for the door handle. It's unlocked like always. I curse under my breath as I enter.

"Don't even start, Cole," my ma says before I even clear the doorway, the same fight we always have about the door being unlocked stopped before it can even start. I get that there is a guard on this place and it's safe, but I still fucking hate when front doors are unlocked.

"It was locked when I was in bed, but I stepped out to grab the paper and didn't lock it back." She shrugs one shoulder. "Besides, someone might want to pop in for breakfast."

The smell of warm biscuits swirls around me and makes my stomach rumble, reminding me I didn't eat breakfast. I don't often eat this early unless I stop at the diner or make toast at home. That's about all I can cook without burning it.

"Fresh coffee." My ma looks over her shoulder at me while standing at the stove, clearly cooking something.

Probably a million somethings.

I walk into the kitchen and lean down to kiss her on the cheek. “Morning, Ma,” I tell her before making my way over to the coffee pot and pouring myself a cup. I place the tin of her favorite cookies in the cabinet, then lean up against the counter and watch her work. My mom was always in the kitchen growing up. It was her favorite place to be. It didn’t matter it was just her and me. She cooked like she was feeding an army, which works around here. I’m sure people will start making their way into her apartment soon to dig in.

“Wish you would have told me you were coming this morning.” My mom gives a little huff as she pulls the biscuits out of the oven.

I grab one off the hot sheet and take a bite, not wanting to respond. I didn’t tell her I was coming for a reason. Whenever the women around here know I’m coming their daughters and granddaughters crawl out of the woodwork and I feel like a piece of meat being fought over.

I grit my jaw thinking about it. It isn’t that I don’t want a woman in my life, just no one has ever caught my eye. Plus, this is a small town. I didn’t like the idea of running into someone I dated after it didn’t work out. Or worse, one day I do find a woman and make her my wife and she has to run into people I dated.

I know what is coming from my mom next. She’s been on me since I healed from my injury when I retired from being a Ranger.

“I really think you and Susie would make a cute couple. Even cuter babies.” She says it dreamily, turning to look at me. She pushes her short gray hair behind one ear, giving me soft eyes while she smiles. I shove more of the biscuit in my

mouth. She rolls her eyes before turning back to the stove to pull off the eggs and dump them into a bowl, but not before giving another little huff.

“Collie, you haven’t even brought me a woman to meet.” Her shoulders drop a little as she places the bowl of eggs on the table.

I swallow the food in my mouth, feeling a little bad. “It’s not that I’m hiding women from you, Ma.” I’m not. I just haven’t dated since I left the army. I didn’t have a desire to, on top of the other things. That part of me felt like it died when I almost lost my own life. I have a whole county to look after right now anyway. I don’t have room on my plate to worry about anyone else.

She walks over to me, placing her hands on my chest. “I just want you to be happy.” She looks up at me.

I want to tell her I am happy, but I’m not sure if that’s true. I don’t feel unhappy. In truth, I don’t feel much of anything. Numb to my own life. When that bomb went off it felt like it took more than a chunk of my shoulder. Something else went missing and I can’t seem to find whatever it is.

“Ma, I’m good,” I tell her, trying to reassure her. She studies my face. “You don’t need to worry about me. Not anymore.” I add the last part because I know while I was enlisted all she did was worry. I probably took ten years off her life when she got the call that I was unconscious and in the hospital going into surgery. That’s part of why I didn’t fight to go back, and I took my retirement and came home.

“Sila.” I hear a man’s voice come from the front door and I know it’s George. My ma steps back from me to greet him. A small smile pulls at her lips before she masks it.

“Hi, George.” She says it like she’s a little irritated. “You came over for breakfast?” she asks, grabbing some plates and setting them on the table that’s filled with a bunch of other breakfast food already.

“I came for your company,” he shoots back. His eyes come to mine and he gives me a wink. I just shake my head. These two have been dancing around each other for months. I know my mom likes him, but the problem is so does every other woman around here. Though the times I’ve been here I’ve never seen him give any of them the time of day. His eyes are always on my mom. I thought maybe I should talk to him, but I think my ma has it handled, and not to mention, I like George. Have from the moment I showed up one day and he was giving her hell about her unlocked door, too.

“Always the flirt.” My mom bats a hand at him in a shooin motion. George grabs it and kisses her palm.

“Only with you.” They stare at each other for a moment. I feel like I’m seeing something I shouldn’t be.

“Morning!” someone calls from the door. *Thank fuck*, I think to myself. I didn’t want to see what was going to happen next with George and my mom. My moment of relief is short lived when I see it’s Betty coming in.

“Cole!” She almost screams when she sees me standing there. My mom tries to pull her hand from George’s. He reluctantly lets her go. “I was hoping to see you. My granddaughter gave me her number to give you.” She starts digging through her purse and I guess she’s looking for it.

Fuck. I hate shit like this. Do I take the number and never call, or do I tell this woman, “No I don’t want it.” Both seem like shitty options. I give her a smile, trying to be friendly.

My radio on my hip goes off and I reach for it.

“Bannon here,” I call back to Asher.

“Got a call from the bank. They think someone is breaking in and staying in the house on the corner of 4th and Shine.”

“That’s the foreclosed one, right?” I recall them putting up a sign on it last week.

“Yeah, I can have Sam check it out when he gets in if you’re busy.”

I glance around the room and see two more of my mom’s friends have showed up. They’re all eyeing me. The only person not watching me is George, and that’s because he’s too busy watching my mom.

“I got it,” I tell him, then clip the radio back onto my belt.

I walk toward my mom. “You haven’t even eaten yet,” she tells me. I kiss her on the cheek. She grabs a biscuit and a couple pieces of bacon and puts them into a paper towel. “Here, you can’t live off diner food,” she grumbles. I give her another kiss on the cheek.

“Thanks, Ma.” I head for the door. “Ladies.” I nod at the three older women standing there. Betty is holding out a piece of paper. I take it against my better judgment, no intent on using it but wanting to be polite.

“I’ll call you later, Ma,” I throw over my shoulder as I close the door behind me and head for my cruiser. I give my shoulder a good roll as I feel tension already building in it.

I shove the paper into my pocket and feel the other one I’d put in there earlier. I pull it out and study it for a second. I bring it to my nose for some reason, wanting to smell it, but there is no smell.

I shake my head at myself as I slide into my cruiser and take off toward 4th and Shine.

Chapter Two



CATHERINE

I tuck my hands into my sleeves, trying to keep my hands warm as I make the long walk to school. It's colder than normal today, but maybe it's the wind making it feel that way. It feels like it's cutting through me and I swear I can smell snow in the air. The thought makes my eyes water.

I don't know how I'm going to make it much longer without the right winter clothes and, well, heat for that matter. I've come so far already. Over two years I've been making it on my own. Graduation is so close, but it looks like everything is about to crumble around me.

I pull my jacket tighter, trying to shield myself as best as I can from the wind, but my old coat has seen better days and I don't have the money to spend to buy another. I barely have any money at all. I'm down to eighty dollars. I've been spreading my money thin since my dad's pension stopped coming in. I was lucky I'd had it as long as I did.

My dad disappeared over two years ago without a word, but the checks kept rolling into the bank, so I went on, paying the bills and making ends meet the best I could to keep the house, a roof over my head and some food on the table for me. I was too scared to get a job in town, worried people would

start asking questions. I tried to remain invisible as much as possible, not wanting to draw attention to myself.

Then the checks stopped coming. I don't know why and it's not like I can call and ask. In fact, I'm pretty sure it's against the law for me to have been using them. I also should have reported my dad missing. At first it was because I thought maybe he was just off on one of his benders, but as the days passed and he never came home I started to get more worried.

Then I was scared I'd waited too long to say something. Scared that I'd be taken away and thrown into some foster system again, so I just kept going, pretending everything was fine and that my dad was around but on bed rest because of his knee.

Now, with the checks not coming in, I'm losing everything. The house was foreclosed on last week. I've still been sneaking in and sleeping in my old room, living there as best I can even without running water or heat, but I have nowhere else to go at the moment. I need to find a job, and quick. Maybe I could work somewhere low key. In a backroom stocking shelves or something.

At least now that I've turned eighteen I don't have to worry about being tossed into some system. I just want to finish school and get my high school diploma so maybe I can find a half-decent job when I leave this town.

I wiggle my toes, trying to get a little feeling back in them. When I finally make it to the school I let out a deep breath as I open the door and warm air hits my face. I keep my head down as I make my way to my locker. I can hear the quiet giggles as I walk by. You think it would get old making fun of

me, but apparently it doesn't. I don't even play into them, pretending I don't hear them.

"Cat got your tongue?" I hear Jannie snicker, thinking she's clever playing off my name. As if they haven't been saying the joke forever. I guess that hasn't gotten old either.

"Don't listen to them," Ren says, leaning up against my locker. I glance over at him as I slide my coat off and put it into my locker, wondering what he wants. He never talks to me. He doesn't make fun of me either, though. In truth, I thought he didn't even know I existed. "Jannie is a bitch." He says that part loud enough for everyone to hear. I suck in a breath.

"Fuck you, Ren," Jannie shouts at him. Tension builds in my stomach. I want no part of whatever this is that is going on. My eyes are still on Ren; he's just smiling. His smile seems nice, but his eyes still hold a hardness to them. I try to shift a little away from him, but he moves in closer to me. He towers over me like everyone does. I'm barely five foot two. His dark eyes keep on staring at me.

Every girl in school has a crush on Ren and I'm wondering why all of a sudden his attention is on me. It makes me feel uneasy. I shut my locker and pick up my backpack off the ground. I don't say anything to him as I turn and head toward my class. He follows me. I know we have the next class together; he falls into step next to me.

"Not even a hi?" he asks. I glance over at him. "I know you can talk. Heard you talk to the teachers before. I don't think the cat really has your tongue." He licks his lips. I give him a half-smile. Not because I want to but in hopes that will get him to leave me alone and I can go back to being invisible.

I slip into class and head for my usual seat in the back of the room. Ren follows me, but Ben is in the seat next to mine like always. He's just as quiet as I am. I take my seat next to Ben. Ren stares down at Ben, not saying a word, but Ben gets up and moves. I bite the inside of my cheek. I want to say something to Ren. He's a freaking cocky jerk and I don't like that he keeps trying to get close to me.

I pull my book out of my backpack and fish out my glasses, then slide them on and shove my face into a book, trying to block him out until class starts. I remind myself I only have a few more months left of high school and I won't have to deal with any of this anymore.

If I can make it that long.

Chapter Three



COLE

I pull up to the old house that's seen better days. The outside is clean, but the house needs some work. I see Erica from the bank and her black Mercedes parked in the driveway. I park behind her, throwing my cruiser into park and stepping out. She hops out of her car, too.

"Cole," she purrs. I have to fight rolling my eyes. My mother has ingrained manners into me.

"Ms. Steele." I nod at her as I shut my car door.

"I was hoping it would be you that came." She walks toward me, her heels clicking on the concrete driveway.

I glance down at her shoes thinking they aren't practical. A storm is coming and there is already a thin layer of ice on the roads.

"What seems to be the problem?" I ask, cutting straight to the point. It's fucking cold out and I got a pile of paperwork on my desk that I need to get to. Plus, it might be a long night if the storm rolls in early and people don't keep their asses off the roads.

"Someone keeps breaking in." She motions toward the back. I nod, heading for the back door. She follows me as I walk to where she pointed.

“Wait here. They could be inside now,” I tell her. She stops following me, an O shape forming on her lips.

“I don’t think he really did anything besides break the lock.”

“You went inside?” She raises her chin at me. I just shake my head and push in the backdoor. I keep my hand on my gun as I move through the house. Most of it is in disarray. Holes in walls and furniture looking like it’s seen better days, but I notice the kitchen is spotless. Cleaner than it should be for having been foreclosed on.

I make my way down the hall, pushing open doors as I go. The rooms all look the same. When I get to the last door I push it open and freeze for a moment.

The room is spotless, and it’s clear it’s a girl’s room. The walls are painted a soft purple, the bed made with flower-covered blankets. I open drawers and see clothes all put away, folded and in their place. There isn’t a speck of dust anywhere. Someone has been living in here. That much is clear. I clench my fist when I think about it being a young girl who is all alone in this home with no running water or heat.

The note from earlier flutters through my mind, about stealing the bread and peanut butter. I stride out of the room and move to the kitchen. I open the fridge. The light doesn’t come on—the power is clearly out—but I can still see the loaf of bread and jar of peanut butter sitting inside. I curse and slam the fridge door closed.

“We’re going to board the place up today. No one will be able to get inside.” I look over to see Erica standing in the doorway.

My heart does a funny jump in my chest. Whoever this is will be locked out of the house with nowhere to go, but I can't tell Erica or the bank they can't lock up their own property. That means I need to find out who is staying here, and fast. If it is some young girl, she could get trapped outside in the storm tonight. Freeze to fucking death.

"Who did you foreclose on?" I ask Erica, wanting as much information as I can get.

"I have the file in my car. Maybe we could go to lunch and I could—" She reaches out to touch my chest. I take a step back.

She licks her lips and takes another step toward me before falling to her knees in front of me. I stand shocked for a moment, surprised the uptight Erica would ever get on her knees. Especially on a dirty floor. I grab her by both her arms and pull her to her feet. She stumbles a second in her ridiculous heels. I hold back the string of curses I want to let loose.

"I really need to get back to my desk," I say, cutting her off. "I just need the name and I can look into who's breaking in."

She purses her lips and I have a feeling she doesn't care about who is breaking in. In fact, I think she only called in the first place to get me out here. Why else would the owner of the bank's daughter be out here unless she wanted to be. Whoever is breaking in isn't doing any damage. I have a feeling the holes have been there since before the house was foreclosed on.

"Name, Erica," I push. She turns on her heels and stomps down the driveway to her car, pulling open her door and reaching in to grab a folder. She turns and starts to open it, but

I grab it from her hand. She starts to say something, but I give her a smile and she stops. Her cheeks turn pink. She combs her fingers through her straight long brown hair.

I open the file, ignoring her. Mark Young, the file reads as I scan it. For years he's been making payments on time and in full until they just stopped one month ago out of the blue. I close the folder and hand it back to her.

"Thanks." I jog toward my cruiser, wanting to get back to my office and do a check. I hear an, "I'll call you," from behind me. I ignore her. The name Mark Young bounces around in my head. I feel like I've heard it before, but I can't put my finger on it. It drives me crazy all the way back to the station.

When I walk into the station I see Pam at her desk. Her dark hair is up in a high ponytail and she is twirling the end of it with her finger, which she always does when she's studying the computer screen, or when Asher is near. I drop my keys on the desk. "Have them go ahead and put chains on my tires."

"Mine, too," Asher says, coming from around the corner and fishing his keys out of his pocket. Pam's eyes light up when she sees him. She sits up a little straighter. These two have been dancing around each other for months. "I'm going to be on call tonight. You did it last time."

I think about it for a moment. I normally like to be the one on call when a storm hits, but maybe it's best to let Asher do it this time. My mind is somewhere else right now. I want to find what I believe is a homeless girl. I'm worried she is about to get stuck out in a storm. Maybe I could stake out the house tonight. She might try to go back there without knowing the bank is about to board the place up.

“All right,” I tell him. Pam hands me a sheet of paper, and I take it from her, looking over the weather report. I was right. The storm is moving in sooner than had been reported last night.

“Close the schools an hour early. Town shuts down at six thirty. Get the word out. I want the streets empty tonight.”

“On it,” Pam chirps, picking up her phone to start making calls.

I hand the paper to Asher for him to look over.

“Fuck,” he mumbles.

“Mouth,” I warn him, my eyes glancing to Pam, who rolls her eyes.

“She’s got five brothers. I think she’s heard the word—”

I level Asher with a hard stare before he can finish his sentence. He puts his hands up in a *you win* motion.

“I’ll be in my office,” I tell them and leave them to it. I fire up my computer and pull out the note from my pocket. The number Betty gave me comes with it and I toss it in the trash. I stare at the note for a minute as my computer loads, running my finger across it before finally putting it into my wallet. I want to keep it close to me for some reason.

When my computer finally loads I search for the name Mark Young. Multiples pop up, but I click on the one that has the address on Shine listed as their home address.

The basics come up first. His last known address—Shine Street. His age. It says he’s fifty-five, but the picture of him makes him look older. It also says he’s married, but no children are listed. Retired from army.

I keep clicking, and arrest reports pop up one after another. All the arrests start off with him having too much to drink, which leads to either a fight or trespassing after being told to leave.

The reports don't have enough information for my liking, reminding me why I got elected to sheriff so fast. That last one half-assed everything and the county was all too happy to be rid of him. I didn't even have to do anything when I ran for the position. It was pretty much handed to me. I've always been known as the town's golden boy. Even more so after all the medals that got pinned to me when I was in the Rangers.

I know who will have all the information I'll need. I push up from my chair and head back toward the front of the building. Pam is clicking away at her computer. I lean up against the wall, and she stops typing and looks over at me.

"Sheriff?" She tucks a piece of loose hair behind her ear.

"Mark Young," I say simply.

She shakes her head, a sad smile pulling at her lips. "Haven't heard that name in a while. He up to no good? I thought Tom banned him from the Snowdin?"

I don't answer her question but ask one of my own. "When's the last time you saw him?"

Pam's eyebrows scrunch together like she's thinking. "God, it's been a while now that I think on it. I've seen his daughter at the store a few times. I'd heard something about him being laid up. That his leg finally gave out on him."

"Daughter?" My mind gets stuck on the one word. I knew he had to have a daughter, with that bedroom, but the question is, where are they? Because my gut is telling me that girl is still staying in that house. Living in her bedroom.

“Yeah, pretty little thing. Looks just like her mama.”

I feel a little relief at the mention of a mother. Maybe the girl is with her. “His file said he was married, but I couldn’t find anything on the wife.”

“You probably won’t. She disappeared about ten years ago. Just up and left. Guess she got sick of Mark’s shenanigans. Still, how could a mother leave her little girl like that? Especially with a father that couldn’t even take care of himself.”

“How old is the daughter?” I ask.

Pam ponders for a second. “I think eighteen now. Pretty sure she’s a senior over at the high school. I see her walking to school sometimes. See her over at the grocery store every now and then picking stuff up, but that’s about it. Real quiet girl. Keeps to herself. Heck, most of the time she’s got her head down and her hair in her face so you can’t really see her.”

I breathe a little easier knowing she’s eighteen. The idea of having to call social services put a pit in my stomach. We don’t have anything in our county to handle that. Our town isn’t tiny, but it isn’t big either. It’s just big enough to see new faces pass through but small enough that people still get into everyone’s business and gossip spreads easily.

“His record had a long list of arrests. How’d he keep custody of the daughter?” One would have thought someone would have called child services before.

Pam gives a little shrug. “They did get called. She got pulled in once and was gone for about a month. Mark got his crap together and got her back. It didn’t last long, though. He was back off the wagon pretty soon after, but child services could never catch her. She wouldn’t let them, and after a while

they kinda gave up and, well, you know how Sherriff Frank was.” She rolls her eyes as she says his name. Yeah, I know how the lazy fuck was.

I run my hands through my hair trying to take this all in.

“Catherine was the only one who could really get her father under control. She’d often come down to the bar to get him to calm down and leave. Even the sheriff would call her to come get him sometimes, even when the girl was only, like, thirteen.” She shakes her head in disgust. “It wasn’t right, but like I said, she was the only one who could calm him down.”

I bite back the string of curses I want to let loose.

“Catherine Young, I take it, is her name?”

Pam nods. “Did something happen? Are Mark and Catherine okay? Crap, I feel bad I haven’t thought about them in so long.”

“Not sure yet, but if you see the girl walking around, you call me,” I tell her. She nods again at me. Maybe I could go up to the school and check on her. I glance at the clock and see with the early dismissal school has already let out. Fuck.

Pam reaches in her drawer and pulls out my keys.

“Chains are on.” She hands them to me. I put them into my pocket. “I think I’m going to stay here tonight, too. Field any calls.”

I raise my eyebrows at her, because Asher could handle it if need be. Her cheeks turn a light shade of pink.

“All right,” I agree. Maybe these two will finally get on with it and become a couple and stop skirting around each other.

“Oh!” She reaches for a sheet of paper and hands it to me.
“Mrs. Lemon called.”

Now I have to fight an eye roll. “She said she can’t find Fluffy and she’s worried the cat will die in the storm if he’s not found.”

Mrs. Lemon calls at least three times a week about something. From people driving down her street too fast, to someone walking on her lawn, to even a car she’s never seen before being parked on her street. Half the time when I get over there she brushes off whatever reason she called and then makes me do some kind of handiwork around her house. Most of the time I don’t care. If we’re not busy, that is, but right now I don’t have the patience for it.

“She called five times already.”

I let out a deep breath, knowing she will keep calling until I come. It has to be me or she won’t answer the door. I glance at the clock again.

“I’m going. I won’t be back tonight unless you call me in for something,” I tell Pam. I need to head over to Mrs. Lemon’s then drive around to make sure everyone is shutting down. Maybe I’ll get lucky and run across Catherine. I can’t stand the idea of this girl not having somewhere to go. Maybe my gut is wrong and she is staying with a friend. I don’t think I can wait for the schools to open back up before I can talk to her. I need to know she’s okay. Something is clawing at me deep inside, a need like I’ve never felt before to know this girl is okay, taken care of and warm for the night.

Chapter Four



CATHERINE

I sit in the gym waiting for everyone to clear out of the girls' locker room. Dread swirls around in my stomach that school got called out early today. Even the library is closing down. The whole town was. I prayed the snow storm wouldn't last long. I knew all I had left at home was half a loaf of bread and a jar of peanut butter. It would have to hold me over until the town opened back up again. There was no way I could make it to the store before they closed. Not to mention it was too cold to even try. The walk home was going to be hard enough.

When I see another girl leave the locker room I slip in. Looking around, I make sure everyone is gone. I dig through my bag, finding my shampoo and soap before slipping off my clothes and getting into the shower.

I've been using the school's showers since my water got turned off. So far I haven't been caught. I didn't have gym, so there's no reason for me to be down here. I wash myself as quickly as possible, sad that I can't linger in the warm water a little longer. I'm almost done when I hear giggling behind me. I turn to see three girls standing there in their cheerleading outfits.

I know who they are. They couldn't be more cliché if they tried. They are the mean girls and I cringe when I see them all staring at me.

I turn the water off, grab a towel, rush past them to my backpack and hurriedly get dressed.

“Let me guess. Your drunk of a father couldn't pay the water bill?” Jannie laughs as she says the words. The other girls laugh with her. “That's why Ren was hanging out with you all day. He feels bad for the poor girl. Maybe thinks it would be easy to get between your legs.”

“Maybe he likes that she never talks,” Beth adds.

I bite the inside of my mouth as I pull my shoes on and tie them up. I just want to get out of here. I need to let my hair dry, but I can see that isn't going to be an option. I should have gone straight home, but I was worried about how long I'd be stuck there without getting a shower.

I use the towel to dry my hair a little before grabbing my stocking hat out of my backpack. I try and get all my hair under it, worried about the cold with my damp hair.

“Does Coach Snow know you're down here using the showers?” Kim chimes in.

I don't answer her. I pick up my coat sliding it on before grabbing my backpack. I go to move past them but they block my way to the door. My heart starts to pound. I'm not a confrontational person. Nor am I a fighter. I've never been in a fight in my life. In fact, I've spent most of my life trying to cool down my own father when he goes into one of his moods.

“Girls,” I hear called. We all look over to see Coach Snow standing there. “You should be getting home. The school is locking up in ten minutes.”

“Coach Snow, Catherine was—” I push past Beth, not wanting to hear her finish telling Coach Snow I was using the school shower. My cheeks are already burning with embarrassment. Beth huffs as if I hurt her but I barely touched her. I rush out and don’t stop running until I clear the school doors and make it a good few blocks away.

I stop for a moment, bending over, trying to catch my breath. My nose burns and I can feel the tears wanting to break free, but I push them back. I really don’t want to face Coach Snow when I go back to school and answer why I’m using the school showers. I push those thoughts away. I have other things to worry about. Like the fact I forgot to fill up my two water bottles before I left school. I groan. Maybe I can put snow in them and it will melt.

I start walking again. My toes are already numb from the cold. I should have put on extra socks, but my shoes would have been too tight. I tuck my hands into my coat and pick up speed. I want to get away from the harsh wind, and the snow has already started to fall.

Each step seems heavier and heavier and I almost cry out in relief when I see my house. As I get closer the hair on my arms stands up at what I’m seeing. Boards cover all the windows and the front door. I rush around to the back as fast as my body will let me and see the back door is boarded up, too.

I reach for the boards, trying to slide my fingers in between them to pull at them. I pull as hard as I can and I hear a creak, but the board doesn’t budge. Tears start to leak down my face. My fingers feel numb as I still try to pull at the board. I give another hard tug and I slip, falling onto the hard ground.

The air leaves my lungs and I can't find the will to pull myself
off the cold hard ground.

Chapter Five



COLE

I only get one knock on Mrs. Lemon's door before it's flying open. She stands there with Fluffy in her arms and a scowl on her face. Her lips are clenched together. She's clearly annoyed.

"He could have died with how long it took you to get here!" She holds the cat closer to her. The cat tries to break free, but it's no use.

"Sorry about that, ma'am. The roads are a little messy and I had to stop to pull a few people out of some ditches. Don't want any of the citizens of Aurous freezing to death in their vehicles." I smile at her as I say it.

"Well then, I guess you don't want any of your elderly citizens falling down either then." Her eyes go to a bag labeled SALT that's sitting on her porch. I have a feeling Fluffy was never lost at all. She called to get me to come salt her sidewalk.

"I sure wouldn't, ma'am." I let my grin widen. When I first started getting calls from Mrs. Lemon I was annoyed. She would only let me come out when she called. I think it's because the other men on our force would play into her games. At first I thought about not doing it, but I saw past her little games.

Mrs. Lemon is alone. Has been for years since her husband died. They didn't have any kids and I could tell she was lonely and sometimes just needed someone to help her out a little here and there, so I played into her games because really it didn't hurt anything. Normally I wouldn't mind salting her driveway, but today I've got a young girl on my mind.

I pick up the salt bag without another word and quickly get to work on her driveway and sidewalk. It doesn't take me but a few minutes. I drop the bag back on the porch. Her door opens back up and she's got a coffee in one hand and a small tin in another.

"Thanks, sheriff." She hands me the tin and coffee.

"Anything for you, Mrs. Lemon. You got everything you need for a few days? Town is going to lock up tight."

"I'll make do."

I give her a nod, heading back down her sidewalk hoping into my cruiser. I say a small prayer there isn't another reason I need to stop. I drove through town once on my way to Mrs. Lemon's and I'll do it again now on my way over to the foreclosed house.

Main Street is clear as I drive down. I pull out my radio and call in to the station. I'm happy when I hear that everything is looking good and the snow trucks have already salted the roads twice now.

When I get to the house I pull into the driveway. A track of footprints on the pathway are already being covered by fresh snow. I glance to the front door and curse when I see the boards covering it. I walk over to my cruiser and turn on the headlights since the sun has almost fully set.

I follow the prints to the back of the house. All the air leaves my lungs when I see a young girl lying on the ground, snow starting to cover her. I rush to her and lift her in my arms, breathing a sigh of relief when she wraps her arms around me, burying her face into my neck. A jolt rushes through my body as I pull her close to me, almost knocking the air out of my lungs.

I rush back to my cruiser and open the passenger door. I practically have to pry her off me. I don't want to let her go either. Her little body fits perfectly up against me, but I need to get her warm.

"Sweetheart. You have to let me go. I have to get you warm."

"No hospital," she whispers softly into my ear. Her voice is silky sweet, making all the hairs on my body stand up.

I hadn't planned where to take her, but the hospital is twenty-five minutes away and that's with good weather.

"No hospital. I'm going to take you home with me and get you warm," I tell her. She still doesn't let me go.

"Please, baby," The words slip past my lips. I have no idea why I called her that, but it came so easily. It felt right. Like I was supposed to call her that.

She finally releases me and I buckle her in. I turn the vents to face her. Her head drops back and I get a clear view of her face. Her thick, long eyelashes rest against her milky skin and her cheeks are red and rosy, her lips full and plump. Almost as red as her cheeks. She looks like a porcelain doll. I've never seen something so beautiful in my life. She's breathtaking.

I shut her door, run around to the driver side, and hop in. I turn the heat on full blast. Her hand slips out of her coat and I

see she doesn't have gloves on. I pull mine off. Reaching for her hands I curse when I see her fingers are raw. I can tell she tried to pull at the wood boards on the door.

She flinches at my curse but her eyes don't open. I want to kick myself. I never curse in front of women. Ever. My manners never let me, but I'm on edge. Normally in the heat of a moment I'm calm and collected, but I'm anything but that right now with her.

I lean over and kiss her right next to her ear. "Sorry, baby," I tell her. Her body relaxes. I lift her hands, sliding them into the gloves before throwing my cruiser into reverse and heading toward my house.

My home isn't far from town but sits on a nice piece of land surrounded by trees, which means I have total privacy. I like to be somewhat isolated but not too far out that I can't get to town fast if I need to.

Catherine doesn't move or make a sound during the whole drive, but I can hear my heart pounding in my chest. Fear and something else I can't place rush through my body. I jump out of my car and race to my door, unlocking and opening it before running back to my cruiser.

I open her door and have her in my arms instantly. I kick the car door closed with my foot and make my way up the stairs and into my home. I go straight to the living room. I lay her down on the sofa and arrange a blanket over her before I start a fire in the fireplace and turn the heat up on the thermostat. Grabbing blankets from the closet, I throw them and pillows down in front of the fire, making a little pallet.

I pick her up and carry her over to the makeshift bed. I know what I need to do, but my hands start to shake, something that has never happened to me before. Fuck, I've

stared down the barrel of a gun, unarmed and unprotected, and my hands didn't even shake in that moment. But here I am thinking about having to remove her wet clothing and my hands are fucking shaking.

I slide off her sneakers, thinking that I need to get her some winter boots to keep her feet warm and dry. Peeling off her socks, I see her tiny little toes are red. I wrap my hands around them, easily engulfing them. Who knew toes could be fucking cute? After a few minutes I pull my own shoes and socks off and slide my socks onto her feet.

With shaking hands I reach for her jeans. It takes me a second to get the button undone. I slide them down her legs and freeze when I see she doesn't have any underwear on. I try to keep my eyes from drifting between her legs, but I lose the battle when I see a light dusting of dark hair on her mound. My cock instantly hardens. I curse myself, pull her jeans the rest of the way off and toss them aside.

Moving up her body, I remove her coat. Her stocking hat comes loose as I move her around. Thick black hair comes tumbling out. The smell of strawberries fills the air. My cock jerks in my pants as I stare down at what looks like a dark-haired angel.

I've never had a reaction like this to a woman before. Fuck, she isn't even a woman. She's a girl. A young helpless girl that my eyes are eating alive. I try and push dirty thoughts of her aside. Thoughts that, since I found and saved her, tell me she now belongs to me. I could keep her here. She'd belong to me and me alone.

I shake my head and go back to undressing her. Removing her shirt. I curse again when I see she doesn't have a fucking bra on either. Her tits aren't huge. Maybe a handful at most.

Everything about her is small and delicate. Her nipples are tiny and hard, I'm sure from the cold. They are a rosy pink and I think how my mouth could warm them up. My mouth waters at the idea.

Making myself get up, I strip myself of my own clothes, leaving my boxers on. I lie down next to her, pulling her toward me—to give her my body heat—and yanking the blankets over us. Her cold skin against mine does nothing to stop the lust coursing through my veins like hot fire.

She snuggles into me, burying her face in my neck, throwing one of her legs over my thighs. The slight shiver that wracked her frame slowly leaves her body and she melts even more into me.

This is going to be the sweetest torture of my life.

Chapter Six



CATHERINE

I'm wrapped in warmth. A comfort like I've never felt before tingles all over my body. My eyes feel heavy as I slowly open them to see my head is resting on a man.

My breath hitches for a moment as the night before floods through my mind.

Sheriff Bannon.

That's who saved me. A man I've been avoiding like the plague. Now I'm wrapped around him tightly and I don't want to let go. He feels too good. I feel safe in this moment and I don't want it to end.

I let my eyes fall back closed, breathing him in. I've had a crush on Cole Bannon since he came back to town. I don't remember him from when I was younger and he was in school here, but we are ten years apart in age. By the time I was old enough to start noticing boys he was gone and in the army, but I still heard people talk about him.

The town's golden boy. The town practically had a parade when he'd come back and it wasn't long after he took over as sheriff. Which scared the heck out of me.

The last sheriff didn't give me much mind, but I had a feeling Bannon wouldn't be the same way. He followed the

rules and was strait-laced. Or so I'd heard.

You hear a lot of things when you don't do a lot of talking. After a while people pretty much don't even notice you anymore. You're almost invisible, which was what I wanted to be. Slide under the radar. No one to catch on that I was a sixteen-year-old girl living on her own. Stealing her father's checks to make ends meet.

I let his warm, earthy smell fill my lungs. He smells like a man, and I want to be even closer to him. Keeping my eyes closed I slide over him a little more, even though I've already got one leg thrown over him. When my chest rubs against the hairs on his I realize that I'm naked, which wakes me up more.

Bannon grunts. His hands go to my hips. His rough fingers dig into my hips and a muttered "fuck" leaves his lips. I keep my eyes closed, pretending to sleep, but I can't get my breathing to even out. I rock my hips a little and feel his hardness rub between my legs. A delicious chill runs through my body.

I freeze for a moment. I can't believe I'm doing this. Maybe that's because part of me thinks this really can't be happening. There is no way I'm naked on top of Sheriff Cole Bannon. It doesn't seem possible. Maybe I died out in the snow storm and this is my heaven. It's too good to be true and I want to steal this moment.

I rock myself again, wanting that sweet chill to roll through my body, and it does.

"Catherine, baby. You're killing me." My breath hitches when he calls me that. Once again the night before flutters through my mind. He called me that then, too. Maybe he calls everyone baby? I thought baby was a term of endearment for a lover.

I let my eyes open and brush my nose against the stubble on his neck, before I place a soft kiss there. It isn't enough. I need to know what he tastes like. I kiss him there again, only this time I let my tongue dart out a little. His cock jerks against me and I have to fight back a moan.

I've turned him on. It makes me feel like a woman that I've gotten this rise out of him. Almost powerful. I'm not used to feeling that way.

"You're going to kill me," he growls. The sound vibrates through his chest and against mine. I have to hold back a giggle.

I let my hand slide up the side of his chest, feeling the hairs there against my fingertips. His chest is hard like the rest of him. I run my fingers up but stop when rough scars greet the tips. I want to pull back to see what is marking his skin, but before I can move I'm flipped. My back hits the soft blankets, and Bannon looms over me with a look I've never seen on his face.

No, every time I've seen him in town he's had soft smiles and warmth to him. The things people said about him rang true. I only got quick glances of him before I slipped away, trying to stay off his radar. I didn't want to draw his attention to me because Bannon tries to know everyone in town. He takes his job as sheriff seriously. I wonder if he'll arrest me when he finds out what I've been doing.

I stare into his deep gray eyes. I never knew what color his eyes were. I've never been close enough to get a look. I didn't think eyes this color were real. It's hard to focus on the hard look on his face when all I can do is get lost in his eyes.

"Hi." It's all I can think to say. His face doesn't change and he still doesn't say a word. His eyes are still locked on mine.

He shifts a little and my legs open a little more, letting him slide deeper into me. His eyes closed as if he's in pain.

I reach up and wrap my arms around his neck, scared he's going to pull away from me. I don't know how I'm so bold. Maybe because this feels right. Or maybe because so much has been taken from me I don't want this taken, too. I'm latching on and not letting go.

I'm worried of what he's going to say or what he might ask me, and that fear of him pushes me away. I just want to lie back down, fall asleep on him and not think about anything.

He opens his eyes and he looks a little more in control. He takes a deep breath and his face softens. "How are you feeling?" he asks. His words come out gruff, and I don't know why, but my cheeks pinken.

"I'm naked," pops out of my mouth, and my cheeks heat even more.

"Yeah, sorry about that. I needed to get you warm, and the hospital was too far away, so I brought you home." He delves a hand into my hair. He softly brushes some of it away from my face and strokes it. "You look like a little doll. Your cheeks are still pink. Are you cold still?"

I shake my head. My cheeks aren't pink from the cold. In fact, I'm quite warm at the moment. I don't know if it's because of his body heat or the feelings that are coursing through me in this moment. I've never felt like this before.

"Hungry?" At the mention of food, my stomach growls and Bannon smiles.

I close my eyes in embarrassment. Of everything—my nakedness, our closeness, my pawing at him... I feel him chuckle against me.

“How about you take a nice warm shower and I’ll make us something to eat?” I nod my head in agreement. “Open your eyes, baby. I like seeing them.”

I do as he commands. Something inside me wants to please him. “You’re safe here with me. I’m the sheriff,” he tells me.

“I know who you are, Sheriff Bannan.”

“Cole,” he corrects. “Call me Cole, sweetheart.”

“Okay, Cole,” I agree.

“How is it you know who I am but I’ve never seen you before?” he asks.

“Everyone knows who you are, sheriff.” His eyes narrow on me. “Cole,” I amend.

“I don’t think I would forget seeing you. Your eyes...” He stares at them. My eyes are a deep green like my father’s. In the light they change to a softer green, but I know right now they are dark. I bite my lip, unsure what to say, but he pushes. “How have I not seen you?”

“I made sure you didn’t,” I finally admit after a beat, knowing he isn’t going to let it go. “Am I in trouble now?”

“No,” he snaps. “If anyone is in trouble it’s me.” He mumbles the last part so low I almost don’t hear it. I start to ask what he means, but he’s pulling me to my feet before I can get the words out. My knees give out a little and he catches me before I can crumple to the floor. I wrap my arms around his neck tightly, scared I’m going to fall. Scared that I’ll never get to be this close to this man again. Scared to lose all these things he’s making me feel.

He pulls me into him, lifting me a little. Instinctively I wrap my legs around him. It’s hard to get my legs all the way

around, but he slides one of his hands under my ass to keep me in place. I feel a soft squeeze on my bare cheek, reminding me once again I'm naked. I bury my face in his neck.

"I'll help you into the shower," he tells me before kissing my temple. Then we are moving through the house and down a hallway. We enter a room with a giant bed in the center of the floor. The place is beautifully furnished, with two nightstands and a dresser with a TV mounted over it. Everything is clean but simple. No color really touches anything. Everything is in tones of black, brown and white.

We enter a bathroom and I expect him to put me down, so I hold him tighter in a silent plea. I don't know why I'm latching on so hard to this man, but I know I don't want to let go. I can't.

"I've got you," he reassures me. I hear the water come on, then we step in. Warm water greets my back, and I let out a relieved sigh at the feeling. "Feet down."

I slowly let my feet drop and toeing off the socks he put on me. I slide down his body until my feet touch the floor of the shower. One of his arms stays locked around my waist as he reaches for a bottle of body wash. He squeezes a little into a loofah ball. The fresh smell of the soap reminds me of him.

He starts to rub the loofah all over me. I let my eyes fall closed, enjoying being taken care of for once. He starts with my shoulders, working his way down. The loofah brushes across my nipples, making them harder. I hear him moan and mutter my name. I want to open my eyes but I don't. I'm too shy to bring myself to do it.

I feel the loofah drop to the floor, then his hand is there.

“Tell me to stop,” he says in a low gruff whisper that almost sounds pained.

“Hmm,” is all I utter. I love the feel of his hands on me. I can’t remember the last time someone even touched me, let alone held me close. I’ll never tell him to stop. If I could speak right now I would likely ask for more. It feels too good to want it to stop.

I push into him, silently encouraging him. He slides his hand down my stomach. My breath hitches when it slides between my legs. I part them for him, wanting him to touch me there, too. My whole body is throbbing with a need I can’t place. I wiggle against him and let out a little desperate cry.

“I got you. I know what you need and I’ll take care of it. Take care of you.” My heart starts to pound at his words.

I want him to promise me that.

“I promise,” he tells me with so much sincerity in his voice it makes me realize I said the words out loud. My eyes finally open to meet his as his finger slides across my clit, making me gasp. He steals the moment to take my mouth in a deep, hungry kiss.

His tongue sweeps into my mouth. I fall into him, letting him take what he wants and soaking it all in. He sucks and nips at my lips. “Kiss me back. Show me that you want this,” he growls against my lips before taking them again. I part my lips for him, and when his tongue sweeps into my mouth this time I slide mine to meet his.

I moan into his mouth. His lips are softer than I thought they would be. All thoughts leave my mind when his fingers between my legs move faster. I cling to him as I rock my hips a little. I hate that he still has on his boxers. I want us to be

completely skin to skin. I want to feel every part of him as I come undone.

The pleasure is building. I forget about the kiss and throw my head back in bliss. He moves his mouth to my neck and sucks and kisses me there, taking little bites as his fingers bring me closer and closer to release.

“Cole,” I moan.

“Let go, baby. I got you. Cum for me.” And I do. My body jerks against him as I cry out his name. My body goes lax as the most intense pleasure washes through me. His arm around me keeps me from falling as he holds me tight, still giving soft strokes to my clit, getting every bit of the orgasm out of me.

Slowly he turns me until my back is to his chest. I feel him move around, then one of his hands is in my hair as he washes it. We’re both quiet. I moan again as he massages the shampoo into my hair. He washes it out and follows it with conditioner. I feel taken care of and I almost want to cry.

All too soon the water is turned off. He wraps a towel around me and I finally open my eyes again. His face is unreadable and I begin to feel uneasiness creep up my spine. He lifts me into his arms and carries me to the giant bed, where he pulls back the covers and lays me down before covering me back up.

“I’ll make you something to eat.” He turns away from me and walks over to his dresser. I watch as he pulls down his wet boxers, tossing them into a hamper, before pulling out a pair of flannel sleep pants and putting them on. I curse them for blocking my view of his firm ass that I only got to see for a moment. He turns to look at me. My eyes goes to the scar over his shoulder and he mutters something I can’t hear before

walking into his closet. When he comes back out he has a tight black shirt on that covers up the scars.

I want to say something, but no words will leave my mouth. I'm used to that. Normally it doesn't bother me, but right now it does. I want to say something. I want to know what he's thinking.

"Eggs and bacon okay? All I can really make without burning the house down." He gives a shrug, his face still not giving anything away.

I just nod at him. He gives me one last look before turning to leave the bedroom. When he disappears out of sight the emptiness I'm used to settles inside of me, loneliness I hadn't even noticed had been gone since waking up in Cole's home.

I slide from the bed and hop down. I use a towel to dry my hair and go to his closet to find a shirt I can wear. I grab a gray one that reads Army across the chest, slipping it on over my head. It falls almost to my knees.

Making my way out of the room, I head down the hallway looking for the kitchen. I pause in the living room when I hear him on the phone.

"Hey, Lauren, I just got your message." There is a long pause. "Yeah, I can check into it. Is it not normal for some of the girls to shower at the school?"

My stomach knots at his words and I know that reality is now crashing in. I glance over to the window and see the snow has stopped. The sky is still gray, but I can tell it's early morning. I don't want to have this talk with Cole or admit all the things I've been doing. I know he said I wasn't in trouble, but I don't think he knows all I've done.

I don't want him to look at me differently. He made me feel desired. Wanted. Even if I can't have him I want to protect this morning. Not have it crushed. I need to get out of here, but I have no idea where I'll go. Maybe I should try the church. I start looking around the living room for my jeans. I see my coat, backpack and hat but nothing else.

"Let me call you back," I hear said behind me. I turn to see Cole staring at me.

"Where's my stuff?" I blurt out in a rush.

"Why do you need it?" he questions, taking a step toward me. I take a step back.

"I should go," I tell him. I try to raise my chin, putting some force behind my words.

"Fuck!" he yells, making me jump, as he runs his hands through his messy dark hair. With the lights on in the living room now he looks even fiercer. You'd think being pressed against him I would have felt how big he really is, but standing back and taking him all in, I realize just how much bigger than me he is. He's a bit more than a foot taller than me.

It's clear he hasn't let up from his workouts since leaving the Rangers. Every part of him is hard muscle and angles. His mouth is set in a firm line. The usual easy smile he has when I see him in town is long gone. I wonder if he's pissed about the phone call. Pissed about learning more about who I really am.

I turn and half run down the hallway. My eyes start to fill with tears. My nose burns. Before I make it to the bedroom, where I plan to lock myself inside to get myself under control, Cole is on me, pinning me to the wall.

His big hands and arms cage me in. His breathing is heavy. He drops his forehead down to mine. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't

have touched you. You were vulnerable and I took advantage. I don't know what came over me. I don't seem to be myself around you," he says, completely misunderstanding why I'm upset.

Chapter Seven



COLE

Let my hands drop from the wall and cup her face I don't want to overwhelm her with my size. She's so fucking small compared to me. She needs to eat and I want to be the one to feed her. Take care of her.

She belongs to you now. The thought crashes through my mind. A deep longing takes hold. I want that to be true. I feel protective of her. I know what I did in the shower was wrong. I don't know what came over me, but I had to touch her. She makes me feel alive again. As if I've been numb and she's brought me back to life.

The need to have her come undone in my arms clawed at me like nothing ever had in my life. I wanted to make her feel good. I wanted her to become addicted to me and all the things I could do for her so she'd never want to leave. I saw the need in her and I wanted to please her.

But when I laid her down on my bed, guilt rode me hard. Or I thought that was what it was, but the more I thought on it the more I think I felt guilty about not feeling guilty. If that even makes any fucking sense.

Her hands go to my chest, her fingers digging into my shirt. For once I wish I didn't have my shirt on, which hasn't

been normal for me since I got my scars. I wanted her hands on my bare skin. To feel the warmth of her.

When she said she thought she should go I'd almost lost it. My razor-thin control almost snapped. If some of the men in my squadron could see me now. They used to call me Mr. Control. Now I have none when it comes to her. She shattered it the minute I saw her lying in the snow. I knew in that moment my life was about to change.

"I wanted you." Her words are low. Almost a whisper. I tilt her head up, wanting to have her eyes on me. Eyes like nothing I've seen before. The deepest green I've ever seen. Such a contrast with her rich black hair and porcelain skin.

"Wanted?" I ask. Has something changed?

"Want," she admits. I watch pink deepen on her cheeks. The sight makes my dick leak cum. I've been so fucking hard. Even after I came all over myself in the shower when she orgasmed for me. The water thankfully covered the evidence of my cum. I came like a teenager watching his first porno. It was almost embarrassing.

I haven't had any interest in sex since before that bomb blew the hell out of me. I haven't even taken myself into my own hand. There hasn't been a drive. My focus has been on this town, cleaning up the mess the last sheriff left behind, taking care of my ma. All of those feelings and needs are now crashing down on me and driving me to her.

I suck in a breath.

"You're so young," I tell her. She's barely eighteen. She has the whole world in front of her. But I've seen the world. So has she. It's not all pretty. Monsters wait in the dark.

She needs you.

The thought pounds in my head. She's already seen too much harshness and cruelty. She's so small and innocent. I could shield her from it all. Take care of her.

"Do you not want me anymore?" I can see the vulnerability written on her face as she says the words.

"More than my next breath," I admit easily, wanting to take the look off her face. I don't ever want her to question the need and want I have for her. I want her to know I'll always be here for whatever she might need. She'll never find herself out in the snow all alone again with nowhere to go. Not as long as I breathe.

"Even after what Coach Snow told you? About me—"

I growl, cutting off her words. She widens her eyes. I want to tell her to fuck what Coach Snow has to say. I'll be having a talk with the principal about her in the very near future. I knew she only used my Catherine as a reason to call me. We weren't two minutes into the call and she was edging for a fucking date. She never should have been the one to call me in the first place. She should have reported concerns to the principal, then he would have reached out to me if need be.

I don't like the thought of anyone using my Catherine. It pisses me off. It didn't help when I walked into the living room and saw Catherine gearing up to leave. I'm sure the look on my face scared her. I never want her to fear me in any way. I want her to run to me, not from me.

"Coach Snow only made it clearer to me that you need someone to look after you. To take care of you. I'm going to be that someone. I want you, Catherine. I want you more than I've ever wanted anything."

"You don't even know me," she whispers, disbelievingly.

“I feel it. If I’ve learned anything in my life it’s to trust my gut. That feeling brought me to you yesterday. I knew you were going to go back to that house. Knew that you would be locked out and I was going to be there to make sure you were okay. I obsessed over it all day.”

Her mouth parts a little. “I feel it, too. When you picked me up, I wasn’t scared. I felt safe. Then when I woke up in your arms that feeling was still there, only I felt it even deeper,” she confesses.

I smile at her. God, she’s so fucking beautiful. Earth-shaking beauty mixed with a sweet innocence. How could I not want her? Need her?

Her arms slide up my chest and lock around my neck.

“Kiss me again.” She tilts her head back a little more, offering me her mouth. My eyes go there, remembering the sweetness of her kiss before when we were in the shower. When all my control snapped.

“I don’t think I should right now,” I tell her. I’m on a razor’s edge after her saying she should leave, and I think if I kiss her now I won’t stop until I’m buried deep inside her, claiming her in the most primal, basic way. Marking her inside and out.

Her lips pull tight into a line. Her eyes drop away from mine.

“Baby,” I plead as I stroke her soft cheek with my thumb. “It’s not that I don’t want to kiss you. I want that more than anything. I just don’t think I’ll be able to control myself if I do. I barely held on in the shower.”

“What if I want you to lose control?” Her eyes come back to mine. She bites her lip. I pull her lip out from between her

teeth. “I want you, too. I love when you touch me. The things you make me feel. I want more.”

I growl at her words.

“Please,” she adds.

I let go of her face, and bring my hands under her ass, picking her up, feeling her bare skin against my fingers. “You don’t have to beg me for anything, Catherine. I wasn’t lying when I said I was taking care of you. That means with anything and everything you might want. You want this. I’ll give it to you without question.”

I carry her the rest of the way down the hallway as my lips find hers. When her tongue touches mine it’s like coming home. A peace that I haven’t felt since before I became a Ranger slides over me. All the noise and worry that always ride on my shoulders fade from my mind and there is only her.

I lay her down on the bed, pulling my mouth from hers. We are both breathless. “Let go for a moment, baby.” She releases her arms from my neck. I stand up beside the bed, looking down at her.

Her black hair is spread across my pillow. Her lips are swollen from me devouring her mouth. Her eyes are only half open, brimming with lust. She looks like a wet dream come to life and I fucking love that I’ve made her look like this. Not only that, but she’s stretched out only wearing my shirt.

My whole body feels like it’s buzzing with a primal need. I take deep breaths, trying to get myself under control. I want to make this good for her, not fall on her like some animal between her thighs and rut until I find release. No, I want this to be perfect for her. Make her body crave mine. Wash away any memories she might have of a past boyfriend or lover.

My body clenches at the idea of her having been touched by another. I know the thought is fucked up and barbaric, but I can't help but want to find anyone who ever touched her and rip them to shreds. I don't care that I've sworn to protect. I don't think anything in the whole world would ever come before her to me. Not even my badge.

She reaches for me and I fall onto her. My body blankets hers as I take her mouth again. She wiggles under me, rubbing herself against me, and I'm pissed I didn't undress before I fell onto her.

I reach over my head, pulling my mouth from hers, and grab my shirt, ripping it over my head and tossing it away. She leans up this time and takes my mouth—she clearly doesn't like us being separated for even a moment. Her hands run all over my body and I swear I think I'm shaking. I dig my hands into her thick hair, deepening our kiss.

She starts to jerk against me. I can feel her need growing as she mewls into my mouth. The sound is more than I can take and my cock jerks and cum starts to leak out. The sounds are so sweet and innocent.

I pull my mouth from hers, knowing she must need release, and I don't want to torture her little body with need. I want to give her what she craves. I move my mouth down to her neck, kissing and sucking as I go.

When I get to the shirt shielding her from me, I reach for it and rip it down the center, never letting my mouth leave her. She gasps. "Oh God!" I smile against her skin but keep moving down her body and take one of her hard little nipples into my mouth, sucking and licking while she wiggles under me. I move to the other, giving it the same attention.

Her fingers slide into my hair. The simple touch has me moaning against her nipple. I release it and keep moving down her body. Her legs spread wider for me, making room for my broad shoulders.

I wrap my fingers around her thighs, pulling them even farther apart. My eyes lock on her center. I lick my lips when I see her glistening pussy. She lifts her hips a little and I glance up at her. She's looking down at me, and our eyes connect. Her mouth is parted and she's breathing as heavily as I am.

"Cole," she moans. "I...I—"

Without taking my eyes off her I give her one long lick, dragging my tongue right across her clit. Her head falls back and she drops back down onto the pillow. Releasing her thighs, I spread her plump pussy lips, wanting to suck fully on her clit with nothing getting in my way. I try to slide a finger into her, but she's so fucking tight I can only get my pinky in.

It's a bittersweet feeling, having her tightness wrapped around my pinky. She's so small and tight I don't think I'll ever be able to get my cock inside of her, but in this moment I don't care. I'd gladly eat her pussy for the rest of my life and be content.

I suck her clit into my mouth, swirling my tongue around it as I move my pinky in and out of her. Her pussy clenches around me and her body jerks. I feel her legs start to shake as she screams out my name. Wetness floods her and I drink it up, but I don't stop. Her body relaxes for a moment and I'm able to slide two fingers into her now.

"Oh God, Cole." Fuck, I love how she moans my name. I feel more cum leak out of my cock. I pull back from her for a moment but still keep working my fingers in and out of her.

Trying to get my cock under control, I take a deep breath, but it doesn't help as the smell of her fills my lungs.

Instantly my mouth is back on her. I ignore my cock and focus only on her and making her cum again. I want to feel it all over again. Drink her down. I find that special place inside her and move my fingers against it.

“Cole.” She says it with a wobble in her voice and her body tenses.

“Let go, baby. Take what I'm giving you. Trust I've got you.” She relaxes at my words.

“I trust you,” I hear her say, making warmth fill my chest. I latch on to her clit and move my fingers inside her. Her legs shake all over again. She chants my name as she comes undone, and a scream leaves her lips as her pussy clamps down on my fingers. I lick and suck, wanting to get every drop from her, wanting to wring out the orgasm.

When her body goes completely limp. I give her clit one last kiss and move back up her body, kicking my pants off as I go. Her eyes are closed as I lick and kiss at her lips. They slowly part for me and I slide my tongue in, wanting her to taste her own passion. What I did to her.

“Hmm.” She moans and kisses me back lazily.

After feeling her tightness around my fingers I ask her what has been lingering in the back of my mind since I slid my finger inside her.

“Are you a virgin?” Her eyes flutter open. She bites that lip again. I move my hips a little, my cock rubbing against her clit. She jerks, and I know she's still sensitive from the two orgasms I gave her.

Releasing her lip, she licks it before finally giving me a small “yes.” I stare down at her. A swirl of emotions moves through me. I like the idea of no one ever having her like this, that she will be mine in all ways, but I dread pushing inside her and causing her any pain. The thought of hurting her burns deep in my gut.

“We can stop now if you want. We don’t have to do more.” I have to pull the words out of me. As much as I don’t want to hurt her, I still have the primal need to claim her in all ways. To bind her to me in the most barbaric way.

“I want all of you. I want you to be my first.” She cups my face with a gentle hand.

“Only,” I correct. There isn’t going to be another after me. I’ll be her first and last. “Say it, Catherine,” I command.

“Only.” She smiles as she says it. A tight band in my chest releases. I kiss her deeply, pouring everything I can into it. I want her to know how much this means to me.

I use my knee to push her legs apart a little more as I rock back and forth, mimicking sex. It doesn’t take long until her hands are everywhere on me, her little fingers digging into my back, her hips matching my rhythm.

I slide down a little, the tip of my cock breaching her opening. She gasps a little and I freeze. My eyes stay locked on her. “More,” she tells me, and I give her what she asks for, sliding in a little more. A small moan leaves her lips.

“You’re the most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen in my life,” I tell her as I thrust all the way into her. I take her mouth in a kiss, and a little yelp escapes her mouth into mine. I don’t move. I just keep kissing her. Letting her body get used to the feel of me.

I pull from her lips and kiss her face all over before moving to her neck and up to her ear. I tell her how perfect she is, how I've been waiting for her, how she belongs to me now and I'll spend my life giving her everything she will ever want or need. I slide my hand between us and stroke her clit.

Those little heavy breaths are coming from her lips. Her hips rock. My cock leaks cum inside her, wanting to move so bad, but I hold still for her. I'd do anything for her. I feel it all the way down to my bones. She's my one. For the first time I'm thankful for the bomb blasting my shoulder to hell. It sent me home. Sent me here to her. Where I needed to be. To protect and care for her, that most precious thing in the world.

Her pussy begins to clench over and over again as I stroke her. Her back arches as her hard nipples graze my chest. More cum leaks out of my cock and it jerks inside her. I firm my jaw, using all the power I have inside me to keep from rutting inside her little body.

"I need you to move." She's trying to move her little hips back and forth, and my own have her pinned to the bed now. I pull out a little and thrust back inside her. Her full lips part into an O shape.

I stroke her faster with my fingers, needing her to get closer to her orgasm because I know I'm not going to last long. Fuck, I haven't even masturbated since I came back home. Sex hasn't been on my mind, anyway. In fact, I was even more turned off to the idea when I got home and every woman, single or not, was trying to get into my fucking pants.

I don't seem to have that problem with Catherine, though. I'm ready to go off any second. I could spend a week inside of her and still not want to pull out of her, but I don't think her little body could handle that.

Yet, my mind whispers.

I move a little faster and Catherine's eyes are falling closed. "Eyes, baby. I need them on me," I grunt as I move. Her eyes slowly open. They are filled with so much passion it almost knocks the air out of my lungs.

Tilting my hips, I hit the perfect spot inside her, and she moans out my name. Over and over again I thrust in and out. My balls are growing tight and I'm about to burst any second. "Baby, please, I need you to cum for me. Give it to me. I need to feel that pussy of yours lock down on my cock. Claim me."

At my words her whole body jerks. Her pussy latches down on me. I grunt as cum spurts from my cock and I feel like I'll cum forever. I fill her up as I keep thrusting, the cum already sliding out of her pussy and between us. When I'm finally emptied my body goes lax, melting into her. I bury my face in her neck, feeling like I can't move.

She strokes my hair tenderly, and I kiss her neck before I pull up and look down at her. She has the biggest smile on her face. I know that I'm going to spend my life making sure that smile never leaves her face.

Chapter Eight



CATHERINE

“I need to feed you,” Cole says. I’m lying on his chest and he is playing with my hair. He has some sort of fascination with it. I shake my head and latch on to him harder. I am hungry but I don’t want to move. Not yet anyway. “Baby, you need to eat.”

“We will. Just a little longer. I don’t want to move yet,” I admit. I love when he calls me baby. Every time he says it butterflies take flight in my stomach. I love the feeling. He only grunts a response, which makes me smile. I don’t know why, but when he grunts it makes my core clench. I love the sound.

I think I love him. I’m not really sure because I don’t think I know what love is, but whatever he is making me feel makes me think this might be it. I don’t want to let him go. The things he whispered to me when we made love almost made me cry. No one has ever said such sweet things to me before.

My eyes water as I think about it and a tear slips free, running down my cheek, and it hits his chest. Cole’s stops moving.

“Baby, are you crying?” I look up at him. He moves before I can stop him. His body comes over me, caging me in. His eyes are filled with concern.

“You said I was beautiful.” The words rush out.

“You’re more than beautiful. You’re perfect.”

My cheeks heat at that. “That blush.” He moves against me, and his hard cock rubs against my clit. I wiggle under him. I loved being connected to him when we had sex. I’ve never felt so close to someone in my whole life. As if we were one.

Cole growls, getting up from the bed and bringing me with him, putting me on my feet. He walks over to his closet and I’m disappointed when he comes out with a pair of jeans on. They aren’t buttoned and my eyes follow the trail of hair that disappears beneath the waistband. I can’t stop looking at him. He’s all man. I’ve never seen someone built like him before. Even the scarring on his shoulder makes him even more masculine somehow. Like a warrior who has gone to battle and won.

“Stop looking at me like that,” he says, closing the distance between us. He slides a shirt over my head. This one falls almost to my knees as well. It’s another army shirt.

“Did you get this in the army?” I ask as I touch the scar on his shoulder. I know he’d gotten medals, that he’d come home because of an injury, and I’m thinking this is that injury.

He flinches. “Got it when I was a Ranger.”

“Sorry,” I say, dropping my hand, but he grabs it and brings it to the scar.

“Not used to people seeing it or touching it.” His voice drops a little. “You can touch it, baby. You can touch me anywhere you want. I’d hate to think I couldn’t touch you anywhere I wanted.”

“You can.” I give him a small smile as I run my fingers over the scar. “Will you tell me?”

“We were about to raid a house and I heard a click as one of my men entered. I grabbed him, pulling him back. I wasn’t fast enough.” He lets out a deep breath. “The bomb went off. I was turning and it got part of my shoulder.” I trace over a few deep gashes. “Shrapnel. They had to dig it out. Field doctors aren’t always going for pretty when they are trying to get you to stop bleeding.”

I get on my tippytoes to kiss it. “My dad was hurt in the army. He wasn’t a Ranger like you. Took a bullet to the knee.”

“I’m sorry to hear that.” His hand tangles into my hair and he pulls me to him. I rest my head on his chest.

I have to fight to roll my eyes. “He shot himself while cleaning his gun,” I admit. Cole doesn’t say anything. “He’s kind of a hot mess,” I add.

“I’m seeing that.”

“Did your friend live?” I question, wanting to change the subject from my father. He’s hard to talk about sometimes. He was a good dad at times and terrible at others. I didn’t know if I hated or loved him. It’s just a jumbled mess inside me. One I don’t want to touch at the moment.

“Yeah, he lived. He retired soon after. He has a couple of kids and a wife. He didn’t want to chance never coming home to them after that day.”

I nod in understanding. If I had a family I wouldn’t want to do anything that could harm it in any way. I’d protect them and want to always be with them. It’s something I’ve always longed for.

“Come on, baby. Food, then you need to soak in a warm bath. I’m sure you’re going to start aching soon.” I don’t tell

him I already am a little bit, but I don't care. It's a delicious ache that I wouldn't change for anything in the world.

He pulls me with him into the kitchen. He picks me up and sits me on the kitchen counter, giving me a kiss on the end of the nose.

"I'm not a great cook, but I can make some eggs and bacon," he tells me and shoots me a smile before he starts pulling stuff out of the refrigerator.

"I can cook," I tell him. I swing my legs as I watch him move about the kitchen. He starts up the stove then moves over to me. I part my legs so he can slide between them. His hands go to my neck, his thumbs under my jaw, tilting my head back so I'm looking into the deep gray eyes that make it hard to look away from him.

"You like to cook?"

I give a little shrug. "I love to cook. When I have the stuff to do it." He clenches his jaw at my words.

"You make a list, baby, and I'll get anything you need from the store. Okay?"

I smile up at him. "I'd love to cook for you." I love the idea of taking care of this man. Thoughts of him coming home from work float through my mind. I would have dinner ready for him. He would be my home.

"All right. Make the list and I'll get what you need. But today, today I'm taking care of you. Deal?" He raises his eyebrows at me. God, he's so handsome and somehow I have all of his attention. I'm not sure how or why, but I don't want to question it or think about it. I don't want doubt trying to make me run with fear of getting hurt.

"Deal."

He leans down and kisses me deep and slow before pulling away.

His words float around in my head. He's talking like I'm not leaving here. That I'll be staying. I know what he'd said when we made love, but I didn't know if those were just things men said when they made love. But I'm not sure that's true with Cole. I have a feeling everything this man says, he means.

For the first time in a long time I feel a weight of worry lift off my shoulders and I know that this feeling I am feeling is love.

Chapter Nine



COLE

“Fuck,” I grunt as I clench my teeth. I can’t stop cursing around her. All the shit I give other people about doing that shit in front of women and here I am doing it. No control. She does that to me and I kind of like it. Only her. Because I belong to her.

“Cole.” Her head falls back. Her fingers dig into my chest. Her hair is everywhere as she rides my cock, her little hips moving back and forth. I dig my fingers into her hips, helping her move. I can feel she’s getting close with those little breathy sounds she makes. Her pussy clamps down on me, trying to suck the cum out of me. Her pussy is greedy, something I’ve learned in the past few days.

I woke up to her sliding herself down on my cock. She was greedy for it. I thought our last bout of sex at two this morning had knocked her out, but clearly I was wrong, because it’s five thirty now and she’s wanting more. Taking more. I don’t know how her tiny body is doing it, but it is.

I look at the space between us and I watch my cock slide in and out of her pussy. Her little clit is hard. I slide one hand from her hip and between her thighs to stroke her.

“I love that, Cole. Don’t stop.”

“Never,” I grunt, unable to really talk in this moment. I’m too transfixed on this goddess over me.

“I’m gonna cum,” she moans as her head falls forward. My eyes lock on hers. I love watching her face as she finds her release. Her pussy clamps down on my cock and I jerk, cum shooting out of my dick deep inside of her. I don’t know how I have any cum left in me, but she can suck it out of me every damn time.

“Catherine,” I groan, thrusting up, wanting to make sure her pussy is taking every drop of me, wanting it deep inside her, coating her.

She digs her nails into my chest as her pussy clenches over and over, the orgasm rolling through her until she collapses on me.

I run my hands up and down her back. I hate that I have to go to work today and that schools are open. I don’t want to part from her, but I know this is life, what we have to do. I’m going to have to get used to being apart from her for a few hours at a time.

She kisses my chest, making me smile. “I don’t think I can go back to sleep,” she mumbles against my chest.

“Let’s get up then. Get dressed. I want to take you somewhere before I have to drop you off at school.”

“Mmkay,” she mutters but doesn’t move. I roll us so I’m over her. Pushing her hair out of her face, I kiss her. The kiss is slow and lazy, like we’ve been doing this every morning our whole lives. It’s so natural.

“I don’t have anything to wear,” she sighs.

“We’ll see about getting your clothes from your old house,” I tell her. I don’t care if I have to break into that house.

I'm getting anything she wants from there out. Also I'm going to be ordering her some shit, too. She needs boots and proper winter clothes. "Up," I tell her, pulling her from the bed with me.

She scurries off to the bathroom, shutting the door behind her. "No shower," I shout. I hear her giggle. The sound hits me right in the chest. Fuck, I didn't want to be without her today.

I head to the bathroom in the hallway and do my morning routine before going to the dryer and pulling out Catherine's clothes. When I get back to the bedroom I toss them on the bed and start putting on my uniform.

She strolls out of the bathroom as I'm lacing up my boots.

"Your clothes are clean," I tell her. "I don't like the idea of you going to school without a bra and panties," I tell her. She didn't have any when I stripped her that first day.

"Oh!" She darts from the room and is back a few moments later with a bra and panties in hand.

"Kinda got dressed in a hurry after my shower in school," she says sheepishly, reminding me about the call I need to make to the school.

"No more showers at the school," I tell her. "You shower with me. At home." She smiles at my words.

She walks over to the bed and starts getting dressed, putting on her bra, panties and jeans.

She goes into my closet and comes out a minute later with another one of my Ranger shirts on. She takes a hair tie and wraps it around the bottom, doing some weird loop and making the shirt short to fit her better. I grunt, liking that she's going to school in my shirt today with my cum covering her

pussy. That makes me feel a little better about being apart from her.

“I like it, baby.” I grab her hips and pull her to me, giving her a kiss before steering her toward the front door. She puts on her socks and sneakers, then grabs her coat. I’m thankful it’s Friday and after today I can keep her locked in my house for the weekend. It will also give us time to go shopping to get her some shit she needs.

I slide her coat off her and grab one of mine that I know will give her better protection. She lets me put it on her. The back of the coat reads Police across it. It’s big on her, but it’s better than the one she has. Next I find some gloves and put those on her before pulling her from the house.

“Where are we going?” she asks as we pull out of the driveway.

“Breakfast,” I answer. It’s the truth. I don’t want to scare her, but I don’t want to ambush her either, so I tell her the rest. “At my mom’s.”

I glance over at her. Her eyes are big. I reach for her hand and slide mine into it. “She’s going to love you. I promise. Trust me. She’s going to be over the moon to meet you.”

I give her hand a little squeeze. I don’t live far from my mom. I could walk it if I really wanted to. When we pull in and I park, I look over at her. Bringing her hand to my mouth, I kiss it.

“Moms don’t like me,” she whispers, looking down at her lap. Her words make me feel like someone sucker punched me in the gut.

I put my finger under her chin, making her look at me. Her eyes are filled with worry and I fucking hate that, but I push

on, knowing that she's going to love my ma. That my ma will be good for her. I'll show her not all parents are shit and my ma will soon be hers, too.

"You trust me baby?" I ask her.

"Always," she says instantly.

"Then trust me that I wouldn't bring you here unless I knew it would be good for you. My ma is going to love you. You're hard not to love."

Her breath hitches a little at that.

"You got dealt shitty parents and that has nothing to do with you. You're fucking perfect. They are the ones who lost out."

She gives me a small smile. I lean over and kiss her. She melts into me and I feel the tension leave her body. I hop out of my cruiser and go around to her side of the car and open the door. I give her my hand and help her out.

When we walk in the door I give Chuck a head nod. His eyes go a little wide when he sees Catherine. I pull her into my side. I don't like any man looking at her and I want to stake my claim on her. I need to get a ring on her finger. Maybe even a baby in her belly. My mind goes to all the times I took her without protection and I smile, thinking maybe that will come true soon enough.

I move my mind to something else because my dick hardens at the idea of my rings on her finger and her belly swollen with our baby. I know these things will happen. This girl was made for me. The past twenty-four hours have been the best of my life and I don't fucking care if I'm moving too fast. Fuck, I wish I could move even faster.

I kiss her on the top of the head when we reach my ma's door. I reach for the knob and am a little shocked when it's locked. I smile at that. She's finally listening to me. I knock. A few moments later the door opens and George is standing there. I shake my head.

"About time," I tell him. I'm not talking about how long it took him to answer the door. I'm glad he and my ma stopped pussyfooting around their attraction. Well, I guess it was more my ma.

George smiles. "Finally got her to break." He shrugs. "Okay, maybe I broke when that new prick from apartment 9A tried to hit on your ma."

I laugh at that.

George's eyes move over to Catherine.

"Catherine?" he says.

"Hi, George," she says back. She tries to move a little more into me, but I already have her fully against me.

"Come on in." George steps out of the way and we walk into the apartment. My mom comes out in a robe. She smiles when she sees me, then her eyes go to Catherine and her smile gets even bigger. Her whole face lights up.

"Collie! Who is this?" she gushes, rushing over to us.

"This is my girl Catherine," I tell her. I glance down at her and I see her cheeks are pink.

"You've been hiding this precious thing from me?" My ma smacks me on the arm and she grabs Catherine from me and pulls her in for a hug.

"Oh my goodness, you are tiny. Come, I'll feed you." Ma pulls her from the living room toward the kitchen. Catherine

looks over her shoulder at me, her eyes big with a what-is-happening look. I give her a wink.

I turn to George when I think they are out of hearing distance and drop my voice down low. “You know her?” I ask.

“Small town. I knew her dad. Everyone kinda does. Town drunk is hard to miss.”

I run my hands through my hair. I hate this shit—that she had to put up with this crap. “Don’t bring up her father,” I tell him. I felt Catherine lock up next to me when she saw George. She was probably sure he was going to ask about her father, and she doesn’t like talking about him. I still haven’t gotten much out of her and I’m not going to press. Not yet anyway. I want her to tell me on her own, to open up about it, and I know with time she will. Just like she talked a little about her mom in the car. She mentioned yesterday that her mom had left when she was young but not much else. She hadn’t said it with much emotion, but it bled through today and I vowed to myself that I would work at stopping that shit from bleeding.

“All right,” he agrees easily. “She’s a sweet girl.”

“I know,” I clip instantly.

George smiles at me. “Glad you found her.”

“Me too.”

“Town is going to talk,” he adds, and I know he’s right. She’s still in high school. Ten years younger than me.

“Don’t give a fuck,” I admit. Because I don’t. Nothing is going to stop me from having her. Not even being the sheriff. They don’t like it then they don’t have to elect me again.

George laughs. “Good.”

“Gonna go check on my girl,” I tell him as I head for the kitchen. I don’t want her to think I abandoned her. I stop in the doorway when I see her laughing at something my mom said. She’s standing next to her, helping her cook.

I lean against the doorframe and watch them. Catherine turns to look at me, a bright smile on her face. I smile back at her thinking life can’t get any better than this.

Chapter Ten



CATHERINE

I look over at the school, not wanting to get out of the car. I can't untangle my fingers from Cole's. When I step out of this car I know I'm stepping back into reality. No more Cole to shield me from my life.

"I'll pick you up after class," he tells me. I look over at him. I can tell he doesn't want me to go either. He gives my hand a little squeeze. "I'm going to pick you up a cell phone today. I don't like that I can't reach you whenever I want."

"Okay," I tell him. I don't like it either.

"You don't want to go, do you?" he asks. I shake my head. "I won't make you."

My eyes stay locked on him. "I have to. Only a little longer and I'm done."

He lets out a deep breath before pulling me toward him. His mouth takes mine and I melt into him. I forget about everything else. All too soon the kiss is over. "Go, baby, before I drive off with you still in the car."

I smile at that. Grabbing my backpack, I slide from the car. I look back at him to see he's watching me.

I feel myself blush. I turn back and make my way inside to my locker before I head to my first class. I slip into my chair

moments before the teacher starts his lesson. I don't hear a thing he says. My mind is still on this morning and yesterday.

I was so scared when Cole pulled up to his mother's building. Not only was I worried to meet his mother but also that I'd stolen food from there once. I wonder what Cole would think of that if he knew. I wonder what he would think of a lot of the things I've done. The town's golden boy. The sheriff with a thief and a liar.

Maybe he'll never find out. My stomach cramps a little at the thought. I don't like the idea of keeping things from him, but I fear losing him, too. He's been so good to me. Not only that but this morning with his mom was so freaking wonderful. She acted as if I was a long-lost daughter, doting all over me, gushing about how pretty and sweet I was.

I ate up her attention and melted when she told me how happy she was that Cole had finally found someone. Then she started talking about grandbabies. At first my face had turned cherry red, but the more she went on and on about it I couldn't help but smile and want that, too.

Cole and I haven't been using protection and he hasn't brought it up. Maybe it slipped his mind. It hadn't slipped mine, but I couldn't bring myself to say anything. Does that make me terrible? I welcome the idea of having his baby. Then I would always have a piece of him, even if he doesn't want me after he finds out more about my past. I try to push the thought away. I'm in no place to have a baby on my own, but still the thought lingers. My hand drops to my stomach and remains there.

When the bell finally rings I head to my next class, floating through the day, my mind never really leaving Cole. I wonder what he's doing. If he's thinking about me.

“Catherine, a moment please.” I glance up from my book to see Coach Snow standing in front me in the library. I prefer to come here during lunch instead of the cafeteria. Dread fills me at seeing her.

“Of course,” I say, moving to stand, but she motions for me to stay and comes around to lean against the table I’m at. She rests a hand on the desk as she looms over me. Her blonde hair falls forward. She’s wearing one of the cheer shirts the other girls in school do. It’s tight on her. They must have a game tonight or something. She coaches the varsity cheer team, and I heard that she was once a professional cheerleader in the NFL.

“I’m going to be frank with you, Cat,” she says. I try not to flinch at her using the same name the kids call me at school, a name that stuck because I don’t talk much and the cat-got-your-tongue line never seems to get old to them. “Are you fucking the sheriff so you can have a place to live?”

I can feel the blood drain from my face. Her gaze goes to the shirt I’m wearing and I watch anger take over her face.

“Yes, I saw him drop you off today and after the little shower incident I drove by your listed address. I saw the foreclosed sign and it’s all boarded up.” She smirks as if she’s happy I don’t have a place to live. “If I were you I’d stay away from the sheriff. If this gets out, that he’s fucking a high school girl, letting her shack up with him, it would ruin him. He’d be run out of town. Lose his position as sheriff.”

A lump lodges in my throat at her words because I know she’s right. He’d never get re-elected if people found out we’re together.

“Besides, you don’t know what to do with a man like Cole Bannon.” She fires her last shot before turning to leave. I stand

up, wanting to get out of here, only to bump into Ren.

“Where you off to so fast?” His hands lock on my shoulders, keeping me in place. He licks his lips. “If I’d known giving you a place to stay got between those thighs I would have put you up in my parents’ guest house months ago.” His grip on my shoulders tightens. He starts pushing me backwards until my back hits a wall. I curse myself for picking the back table in the library. No one is around.

“Let me go.” It comes out as a whisper, even though I tried to make it sound forceful.

“Did he take your cherry? I had a thousand dollars on me getting it. Now I’m out that money. But you could make it up to me. I bet he broke you in really good. Did he teach you how to suck a cock?”

A chill runs down my spine and my fear spikes. I try to push against him, but he doesn’t move. His mouth goes to my neck and he starts pulling at my clothes. I try to fight him off, but he’s too strong.

I bring my knee up and nail him right in the balls. He drops to his knees. I see a girl standing behind him with a shocked look on her face.

“Are you okay?” she asks. I shake my head and rush out of the library, leaving my stuff behind. I run out of the school, with only one place in my mind. I could go to the police station to find him, but then Coach Snow’s words remind me that me doing that will let everyone know what we are. I know if I walk in to that station he won’t hide what we are. It will be clear to everyone.

I keep moving, headed to his house. I pause when I see the front door is cracked open. A black little sports car is parked in

the driveway. I debate what to do for a moment, but the cold moves me toward the door. I push it open but don't see anyone. I hear movement toward the master bedroom.

“Cole?” I call out. Maybe the black car is his, one he drives when he isn't driving his cruiser. Though the car doesn't seem his style.

A woman steps out into the hallway. I recognize her from the bank. We only have two in town. I stand frozen as I see she's only in panties and a bra. “Oh sorry, I thought you were Cole.” Her eyes narrow on me. “What are you doing here?” she adds, snapping at me coldly. I take a step back. I feel like I should be the one asking that question, but instead I turn and run.

Chapter Eleven



COLE

I glance down at my phone from my computer screen and see my ma's name light up. I'm shocked it took her this long to call me. I grab it.

"Ma," I say easily.

"Don't you 'Ma' me! She's precious," she gushes, making me smile. I've been doing it all day. I can't stop. The only thing that has been bothering me is her not wanting to go to school this morning. I saw the dread all over her face. It took everything in me to let her out of the car.

"I know. Why do you think I snatched her up so quickly?" I tell her. "What about you? I see you finally gave in to George." She huffs a little. Love seems to be in the air this winter. First me, now my mom, oh, and when I walked into the station this morning Pam and Asher were going at it. Clearly their snowed-in night together at the station moved things along. Finally.

I don't get how people hold back. Both my ma and Asher had been dancing around the people they wanted. With Catherine, there was no dancing around it. I was more like a bulldozer. I'm just thankful she's eighteen. I don't know what would have happened if she'd still been seventeen. I push the thought away because deep down I already know.

“You think she’s a little young? She ready for what you want? Because I see the look in your eyes, the way your eyes never left her.” I know my ma isn’t telling me not to be with Catherine. She’s worried that I might get hurt.

“I’ll do whatever it takes to have her. Anything.” I add the last word so she knows how serious I am about her. Catherine might want to wait for us to push this relationship further down the path. If that’s what she wants I’ll do it. Even if it almost kills me. As long as it keeps her in my bed and in my house I’ll do whatever it takes.

“I know you will. I just don’t want you to get hurt. This is the first time you’ve ever shown interest in someone before or brought a girl around.”

“She’s my one,” I admit. “When I saw her I knew it. It was like something clicked into place in that moment. It felt as if I already knew her. Knew she was mine.”

“Good, because I want to keep her.”

I can’t help but laugh at that. “Thank you for being so good to her today. She doesn’t have a family.”

“She does now,” my Ma says. My attention goes to my office door and I see Pam standing there.

“Yeah she does,” I agree. “Ma, something has come up at work. I’ll call you later.”

“Okay, sweetheart. You be careful and bring that girl over for dinner Sunday.”

“Will do. Love you, Ma.”

“Love you, too.”

I hang up my phone and Pam enters my office fully. I normally leave my door open so people feel free to walk in

whenever they like.

“Got a call from the high school. Seems a boy attacked a girl.”

“Jesus.” I stand up, pulling my coat off the back of my chair. “Tell Asher to meet me there.”

Pam nods. I grab my radio and clip it to my belt. Maybe I’ll get to see Catherine while I’m there.

It doesn’t take long for me to get to the school. I walk in the front door and the woman at the front desk motions me toward the principal’s office. I step in to see a boy sitting in a chair, his head down.

“How old is he?” I ask. I need to know if we’re obligated to call his parents.

“Eighteen,” Principal Hall says.

I let out a whistle. “That makes you an adult...” I trail off, looking at Principal Hall.

“Ren Collor.”

Fuck. Collor. “Ren Collor,” I intone.

“I want a lawyer and I want to call my dad.” No shock there. Collor is a big name in our little town. They own a lot of land round here, but that’s about it. They have old money and I don’t think anyone in the family really works anymore. I know who Ren’s father is without having to ask. Like father like son. I shake my head.

“Stand up,” I order. He does as I command. “Hands behind your back.”

“Are you fucking serious?” he says in a cocky voice.

“I’ll tell you one more time. Hands behind your back.” He does it and I can tell he’s pissed. Well, that makes fucking two of us.

“The girl he tried to assault took off, but a witness came forward and told us what happened and we pulled Ren out of class and called you guys.” I nod, then start reading Ren his rights.

“The witness is in the room next door.” Principal Hall points to the room. Just then Asher walks in.

“No one knows where the victim went?”

“She wasn’t a victim. She wanted it,” Ren says.

It takes everything in me not to smack him in the back of the head. “If I were you I’d keep my mouth shut,” I growl in warning.

“No, home would be my guess,” Asher replies, ignoring Collor. “I got her address out for you.” He hands me the info. “Her name is Catherine Young.”

My body stiffens. My hands, which are still on the cuffs around Ren’s hands, tighten, making the metal dig into his skin. He yelps in pain.

“My cuffs are too fucking tight!” he screams, but I don’t give a fuck. All I see is red.

“Cole. Cole!” I hear someone barking at me. I look at Asher, who is standing in the doorway, breaking me from the red haze I was under.

“Interview the witness. She’s in the next room. I don’t want to drag her down to the station.” I nod toward the room she’s in. “I’m putting him in your cruiser. I’m going to go find the girl.”

“All right,” he agrees, but he stares at me for a moment.

I yank on Ren’s cuffs, making him yell in discomfort. “Move,” I bark, pulling him toward the door. I push him in front of me as we walk out of the school. I kick out my boot and Ren trips. He hits the ice-covered concrete and I hear a crack. I smile at the sound.

“Careful, it’s slick.” I reach down and pull him to his feet roughly.

“I didn’t trip, you—”

I cut him off. “Shut the fuck up or I’ll shut you up,” I tell him. I stare him down and he goes quiet. “Move.” I push him again toward Asher’s cruiser. I open the back door to guide him in but grab his head and slam it on the side of the car. “Watch your head.”

A string of curses leaves his mouth in a whisper. I slam the door closed behind him and lean up against the cruiser, trying to get myself under control. I want to open the door and beat this boy until he can’t move or even breathe.

Catherine, I remind myself. I need to find my girl. Make sure she’s okay. I take off for my cruiser and hop in. I turn on my lights and race home, praying that she’s there. I narrow my eyes when I pull down my drive and see Erica’s car parked in front of my house.

“What the fuck?” I mutter as I jump out of my car and head for the door. When I open it I see Erica standing there in nothing but a bra and panties. I ignore her. “Catherine!” I yell, storming through the house.

“Cole!” Erica calls after me.

“Where is she?” I snap at her. She jumps back.

“Who? The young girl? I thought she broke in. I tried to call you but you didn’t answer.”

“Where is she?” I repeat, taking a step toward her.

“She ran out of here,” Erica rushes to say.

“Get the fuck out of my house, Erica. This is breaking and entering,” I yell over my shoulder as I rush out the door and hop back into my car. “Fuck!” I hit the steering wheel hard thinking about all my girl has been through today and what she must be thinking. First this shit with Ren, then running home and finding a half-naked chick in our fucking house. I grip the wheel hard as I race over to her old house.

When I pull in I barely have my cruiser in park before I’m jumping out and running toward the back door. I see a crowbar on the ground and a few boards have been pulled away. The hole isn’t big enough for me to fit through, but my little Cathaine could have.

I give the boards one hard kick and they crumble and shatter apart. I go straight for her room. I stop when I see her running around the room packing a bag, her face soaked with tears.

“Baby.”

She whirls around to look at me when she hears me. A sob escapes her lips.

“I’ve never touched that woman in my life. She’ll be lucky if I don’t press breaking and entering charges against her.”

She lets out a little sob before she runs at me and jumps in my arms, wrapping herself around me. I hold her tightly to me. I don’t think I’m ever going to be able to let her go again. I walk over to the bed, grab the bag she was packing and head out of the cold house with her still wrapped around me. I toss

the bag in the back then push my seat back and slide into my cruiser.

I rub her back as quiet sobs wrack her tiny body. “Baby, you’re breaking my heart,” I whisper in her ear. “I’ve got you. You’re never going back to that fucking school again. I’m going to lock you away in my house.” I’m only half joking. Or maybe I’m not joking at all. Not with the way I’m feeling right now.

“We can’t be together,” she sobs.

“Over my fucking dead body we aren’t going to be together,” I snarl. She leans back a little to look at me. I cup her face and kiss her all over, stopping the tears in their tracks.

“They won’t let you be sheriff.” Her bottom lip trembles as she says it. “They’re going to say terrible things about you being with me and you don’t even know it all.”

“I don’t care what anything thinks and I could give up this job in a second to be with you.”

“Not if you knew everything.” She wrings her hands. “I’m a thief and a liar!” She throws herself at me again, wrapping her arms around me.

“No, baby, you’re a survivor,” I tell her in a soft voice. “I’m a cop, Catherine. I’ve put some things together and I know what you’ve been up to. The way I see it, you were surviving and no one is going to hold that against you. No one ever even has to know. I told you, I’ll take care of you. Nothing is going to touch you.”

She leans back again to look at me, her tears finally stopping. I pull her back to me and take her lips in a deep, hard kiss, reminding her that she belongs to me.

“You want to talk about the other stuff?” I ask her. I don’t want to push too much and upset her more when I just got her calmed down.

“I hate all these women. They all freaking want you,” she growls, like a little kitten, and my mouth twitches in a smile. She smacks my chest, but I grab her hand, pulling it to me. “It’s not funny. It’s going to drive me crazy.”

“Then let it be known we belong to each other.” She looks at my through her lashes. Her attention is drawn to her finger as I slide a ring on it, one I picked up this morning.

She gasps when she sees it clearly. It has an emerald stone in the center, surrounded by little diamonds on a platinum band. When I saw it, it made me think of her eyes and I had to have it.

“We don’t even really know each other.” She bites her lip, but I can tell she wants this.

“I knew from the moment I picked you up you were the one for me. My soulmate. I felt it in my gut. I know you want this, baby. I love you more than anything in the whole world and I’ll fight this whole fucking town to keep you. Say yes. Tell me you’ll be mine. That you belong to me and only me.”

“Yes!” She throws herself at me again, holding me close before she starts peppering kisses all over my face. “Yes, yes yes yes yes,” she chants. Her mouth finally comes to mine and she kisses me. This kiss goes on forever and she starts to wiggle in my lap.

“Take me home. Make love to me,” she moans. I growl at her words. I know we need to go to the police station.

“I love you, too,” she adds. Thoughts of going to the police station leave my mind. We’ll do it later. Right now I’m taking

my fiancée home and making love to her. I take her mouth again, wanting another kiss before I have to move her from my lap.

She starts pulling at the buttons of my uniform, then pulls my shirt out from my pants. “I can’t wait,” she cries. I slide my hand under her shirt, grabbing a handful of her tit. I don’t think I can wait either and I can’t believe I’m debating taking her here in the car. She tries to pull her shirt off, but I stop her.

“No, baby, if someone sees you naked I’ll fucking lose it,” I say darkly. She stops pulling at her shirt but her hands go for the button of my pants. She wastes no time pulling my cock out, wrapping her tiny hand around it. She starts to stroke me.

I’m shocked I’m even doing this, having sex in my cruiser outside where someone might catch us, but when it comes to her I can’t say no. She wants me here and now, and I’m going to give her that. She’ll never question my need and want for her.

“In me,” she demands in the cuttest voice I’ve ever heard. “Pants,” I tell her. She wriggles around and we get her jeans off her and she’s back in my lap. I slide my hand between us, wanting to make sure she’s ready to take me. I groan when I feel how wet she is.

“Fuck, baby, your pussy is begging for it. You need my cock?”

“I need you.” Before I can respond she is on me, sliding down my cock. I almost cum on the spot when her silken heat wraps around my cock.

“God, you’re so tight,” I moan. I grip her hips and move her. I find her mouth, but we are so lost in passion our kiss is wild and untrained. When I move her I make sure her clit

drags against me as I hit her G-spot. It doesn't take much. I don't know if it's what's happened today or having been away from each other for a few hours, but we both are already cumming.

My cock jerks inside her and I spill into her womb. I hold her tight to me, wanting to cum as deep inside of her as I can.

My name spills from her lips over and over and I swear it makes more cum leak from my cock. Her pussy clamps down and it's as if it's trying to make sure it sucks every drop from me. Her pussy is greedy and I fucking love it.

“God, I love you,” I tell her.

“I love you, too. Never knew what love was until you. You make me feel safe, whole, cherished.”

“I'm going to spend my life making sure you feel all that and even more, baby.” I rest my forehead against hers.

“How did I get so lucky?” she asks. She rest her head on my chest.

“I'm the lucky one. Come on, baby. Let's go to town so I can show you off and you can keep me from killing that Ren boy.”

“You can't kill him. I need you with me. Besides, I already kneed him in the balls pretty good,” she giggles. That puts me at ease.

“He hurt you?” I hold my breath.

“No, like I said, I kneed him in the balls and ran. I just wanted to get to you. I hate that school.”

I kiss the top of her head. I don't tell her she isn't going back there. We'll get to that later. Probably when I have her naked and in an orgasm coma.

I bring her hand to my lips and kiss her ring. I'll be shocked if I make it through tomorrow without binding her to me fully.

I have a feeling that won't even be enough to cool the driving need I have to make sure everyone knows she's mine.

Epilogue



CATHERINE

Six months later

I stroll into the police station and stop at the front desk to set down a basket of muffins I made for the station and a cup of coffee for Cole.

“Hey, Catherine.” Pam beams up at me.

“Hey,” I chirp back. “Slow today?”

“Yep. Can you man the desk for a moment? I need to use the bathroom.”

“Sure can.” I come around and take her chair. I’ve been working at the station a few days a week, helping out. I get bored sitting at home and I can only cook and take care of the house so much. I’ve been extra bored now that school is over.

After the incident with Ren, and after I told Cole about what happened with Coach Snow and how some of the girls treated me at school, he worked it out so I could finish my classes from home. I emailed all my stuff in. To top it off, Coach Snow got fired. It wasn’t long after she moved from town. Whenever she’d see Cole and me around, her face would turn cherry red with embarrassment.

Ren didn’t make out so lucky either. After what happened to me a few other girls came forward with their own stories

about him. He ended up taking a plea deal and won't be seeing the outside world for a very long time. I was worried about the power that came with his family name, but after everything came out the Collors sold their land and hightailed it out of town, wanting to escape the gossip.

I look up when I hear someone enter the station. A man wearing a suit strolls in and approaches my desk.

"Hi," I say, smiling at him. I've never seen him before and not many people roam around these parts in a suit.

He shoots me a smile as he leans up against the counter. I have to look up at him. "I think I'm a little lost. I was hoping I could get some directions."

"I'd be glad to help," I tell him. "What are you looking for?" I open the drawer to my left, reaching for a map I know is tucked inside.

"You off soon?" he asks me, throwing me for a loop.

"Hmm. I'm just filling in for a moment until Pam gets back." I busy myself with unfolding the map.

"How about I take you to that diner next door, than you can show me personally." He throws me a wink. I stare at him for a moment a little shocked. I'm not used to getting hit on, not when my husband is the sheriff and all. Plus, he growls when men get too close to me. I smile thinking about that growl.

A hand slams down on the counter, making me jump.

"Cole! You're going to break my water doing that." I clutch my chest. Cole draws his other hand around my shoulder. I look at the man at the desk. His eyes are round and big now. That smile is gone from his mouth.

“You not see the ring? See the belly?” I cup my belly at Cole’s words. It isn’t big, but there is a bump. I’m pretty sure the counter is hiding it from view, though.

“Sorry, man.” He holds his hands up.

“Not man. Sheriff,” Cole corrects. I have to bite back a giggle. I know I probably shouldn’t like it, but I love when Cole gets possessive and jealous. It makes me feel special and important. I’ve never had someone love me like he does. He treats me like I’m the rarest thing in the world. I eat it up, even if it’s barbaric and crazy.

“Sheriff,” the man says as he backs up a few steps then turns and half runs out of the station.

“Fucking hell.”

“Heard that,” I hear Asher yell from his office. This time I do giggle. Everyone gives Cole crap about his mouth—something about how he used to never curse in front of women—but when I’m around, Cole doesn’t have much control of his mouth or some of his actions.

I like that I bring that out in him. That he’s different with me. That I can test that control he has.

“Here we go.” I look over my shoulder to see Pam standing there. Cole pulls me from my chair and drags me toward his office. He slams the door behind us and flips the lock. Before I can react he has me on his desk, my dress pulled off over my head. Next my underwear goes flying.

One of his hands goes to my belly as he drops to his knees in front of me, spreading my legs with his broad shoulders.

“Going to remind you who owns this pussy. Who you belong to.”

I bite my lip. Like I could ever forget. I don't tell him that, though. I just spread my legs and let him spend the next thirty minutes reminding me.

Epilogue



COLE

Five years later

I watch my wife waddle around the building we bought three years ago, proud of all she's done as she talks to Mrs. Lemon. I hold my sleeping daughter, who looks just like her mother with her black hair and green eyes, in my arms as our son runs around putting canned goods away where they belong.

I don't know how she does it but my wife is a ball of freaking energy. There is no stopping that woman when she puts her mind to something. Not only does she take care of our two little ones and me, but she runs this place all while being pregnant.

She got the idea to open a food pantry when she found out some of the families in the community were struggling. Having gone hungry herself when she was younger, it was driving her crazy that other people in our little town might be going through the same thing she did.

It wasn't long until she came up with the idea to open a food pantry—a place where people could come down and get food. They even pack lunches and after-school snacks for kids. It wasn't long before she was having weekend boxes delivered to the families, wanting to make sure no kid ever went hungry.

It's grown even more over time. Now she makes sure the kids have proper winter clothing and toys for Christmas. It didn't take much for her to get the pantry started. She was worried what the town would think when they found out about us. The first few months were a little rocky, but over time I think people started to see how much we loved each other and their views began to change.

Catherine came out of her shell, and like I knew people would, they fell in love with her. She's hard not to love with her sweet innocence. She'll do anything for anyone and the town loves her for all she's done. Even Mrs. Lemon loves her and spends most of her days up here helping out. I think she likes my wife more now than she does me.

"You going to let me take these babies tonight?" My ma comes up to stand next to me. She and George got married a few years ago. The kids even call him Papa. I smile at her.

"Yeah, Ma, you can have them tonight." I like the idea of having my wife to myself tonight. We can be as loud as we want and I plan on making her scream. I've been fighting a hard-on all day watching her waddle her sweet ass all over the place.

I hand my daughter over to my mom. "Going to get my wife," I tell her. I lean down and kiss my daughter on the cheek, then my mom, before heading toward my woman. She's been here for five hours already and her time is up.

I come up behind her and wrap my arms around her. "Baby," I whisper in her ear. She turns and twines her arms around my neck. "Time to go. Ma's taking the kids tonight."

"Hmm." She gives me a look that tells me she likes that idea.

“Going to make you dinner and give you a nice long rub down. How are your feet?” I ask her. They always swell when she’s pregnant.

“They’re fine, but I’ll still take my rub.” I lean down and kiss her. “But how about I cook or we pick something up?”

I throw my head back and laugh. “Whatever you want, baby,” I tell her before sweeping her up into my arms and carrying her out to our SUV.

“All I really want is you,” she says, laying her head on my chest.

“No need to want that because I’m never letting you go.”

THE END!

Cozy



Timber Grayson likes living alone in his castle far from people and crowds. So when a company wants to use his place for some corporate party, it's a flat-out no. That's until she comes knocking...and suddenly he's changing his "no people" rule.

Pippa Michaels has been recruited by her sister Myra to get a castle secured for an event space. Pippa would do anything for her, but after meeting the hulking lumberjack, she's having second thoughts. When Timber tells her she can have it if she stays for the duration of the planning, she's making promises she's not sure she can keep.

Warning: Cuddle your cute butt up with this billionaire recluse who chops wood with his bare hands. Once he meets Pippa there's no going back...but you wouldn't want him to anyway! Get ready because things are getting cozy. See what we did there?

Chapter One



PIPPA

“*S*ooo.” Myra drags out the word to get my full attention.

I gaze up at my sister who’s still dressed to kill. I don’t know how she does it. Every morning she gets up, does her hair and makeup and puts on a kickass suit or dress and rolls around in heels like they’re slippers. I look at her now with her blond waves up and not a hair out of place. Her makeup from this morning is still flawless and you’d have no idea the woman ran her butt off at work all day. Myra is one of the hardest working people I’ve ever met in my life, but too bad she has a jerk of a boss that has no clue how much she does. He works her too hard.

I heard her come in a few minutes ago, but when she first gets home I always give her a moment to unwind. But this time she comes straight to the living room to find me and her “*sooo*” puts me a little on edge. Something is up.

“So?” I prompt her to continue because I know she wants something from me.

She’s acting as though whatever it is she wants me to do, I’m not going to say yes. When it comes to my older sister there isn’t anything I wouldn’t do for her. She’s more than a sister to me; more often than not she slips into the mother role. We’re only seven years apart but for as long as I can remember

she was the one who took care of me. She graduated top of her class in college while working all the way through. She made sure the bills were always paid so the power wouldn't get turned off on us because we all knew Mom wasn't going to do it. Our mom wasn't there most of the time anyway and it was always Myra and me. She's the one person I can always count on and if there's ever anything I can do for her, I will. Without question.

On my eighteenth birthday we were out of my mom's apartment the second I opened my eyes. That morning Myra pulled me from my bed and packed our bags. She already had us a place and we were leaving the past behind. That was over two years ago and it's been just the two of us since.

"I need a favor." She steps out of her heels as she says it and lets out a soft sigh.

"I'll do it." I put my knitting needles down to give her my full attention.

I'm almost done with the mittens, and unlike my sister, I'm not a busy body. She constantly needs to be moving and doing something while I could sit on the sofa all day and knit. At the moment it's because I have four applications in for jobs and I'm waiting to hear back from one of them. There isn't anything else for me to do, so why not pass the time crafting winter accessories?

Her shoulders drop and her lips purse. "Don't agree to things before you know what they are," she scolds. I do have a bad habit of agreeing to do just about anything. If someone asks me to do something, I can't help myself. I'm always eager to help my sister, as long as it isn't against the law.

"If it's you asking, I know it's fine." She gives me a smile and I can tell she's tired. "Sit."

I move my knitting stuff and pat the sofa next to me. Our very nice sofa at that. When Myra graduated from college she got offered a job at Cox Investment. She went in to interview to be a secretary but somehow she ended up getting the job of executive assistant to the CEO, Mr. Cox. I've never met the man but he keeps my sister busy. I swear the man never wants her to come home. He's always trying to keep her at the office, and then other times I think he's trying to get her to quit. I swear I don't know if he likes her or hates her. Men. This is why I stay away from them. It probably doesn't help I saw way too much of my mom's dating life growing up and I've decided dating isn't for me. What is for me is knitting.

Myra sits down next to me, letting out a long sigh. "He's asked me to do the impossible." She drops back onto the sofa.

"I don't believe there is a thing you can't do." I raise an eyebrow at my sister. The woman is unstoppable. I wish I had half her drive. She's always known what she wants and goes for it. I'm a drifter who sort of lets things happen. My job applications range from vet tech to working in a library. I have no idea what I want to do in life, I just know it's not working in a restaurant. The poor owner of 68 Diner tried me as hostess, server, busser, dishwasher, and even doing some prep cooking. I failed at them all because high-stress situations and I do not mix well. I explode under pressure and make things ten times worse. When too many things are on my plate I fold like a cheap chair.

"The party." She closes her eyes for a second. "Mr. Cox picked a venue that I can't get. I've tried a dozen times to talk to the owner of the estate but he won't take my calls and I've been stonewalled."

Now I know the problem. My sister has a little bit of the same problem I do with saying no, but hers is only with her boss. If Mr. Cox asks her to do something she always comes through. Always. She doesn't want to go back to him and tell him she can't get something he asked for.

“Why won't they talk to you?” I'm sure Mr. Cox would spend whatever amount of money he needs to in order to lock down the venue he wants. My sister throws a handful of parties a year for his company and they're never small. The events are extravagant and I could tell money wasn't a thought when they were pulled together, but if you're Mr. Cox I guess money is never a thought.

“The owner apparently doesn't like people.” Myra shakes her head. I want to laugh because Myra doesn't like people either but she pretends to because it comes with her job. I love people. I might not want a man but I always enjoy company.

“He doesn't like money either?” I tease. I don't want to know what she's offered already. I still cringe sometimes at how nice our place is. It's so different from how we grew up. With Myra's fancy job came a fancy condo and a fat paycheck each week. At least I'm guessing it's big because we no longer struggle like we once did.

“He's got his own.” She rolls her eyes.

“You want me to talk to him?” She's actually had me do this for her a few times when she can't get someone to bend to whatever it is she needs to be done. That's when she sends me in.

“Maybe.” She gives me a pleading look.

Myra is convinced I have a way about getting things I want. She said it's why I didn't get canned from the diner

sooner. People have a hard time telling me no. Actually I don't think I got fired from the diner. I took pity on the owner and stopped showing up to do everyone a favor. Myra often jokes it's my dimples, that when I flash a smile people melt. I think I'm just good at talking to people and it comes easily to me.

"Give me the address." I pick up my phone off the coffee table as she goes for hers to text me.

She nods when my phone pings and says, "Look at this place." She shows me a picture. She flips through a bunch of them and my eyes widen.

"Wow." I stare at the breathtaking stone castle in wonder. It's beautiful but a little bit creepy with some of the overgrown ivy that goes up the sides. I could see the appeal of having a party there. The castle has a history to it and I'm dying to know what it looks like inside.

"I guess the owner is a recluse and doesn't like people, from what I've found out." Oh, I'm sure Myra has done all the digging.

"How do you think I'm going to get past those gates?" I ask.

Sure I can talk to the guy, but the bigger problem looks like getting to him. A giant stone wall protects the home and no one is getting in without being let in.

"Flash those dimples to the guard at the gate."

"Okay." I shrug. I'll give it a shot. What's the worst that could happen?

Chapter Two



TIMBER

“Excuse me, Mr. Grayson, there’s someone at the gate.”

I sink the axe into the wood one last time before I turn to face Simon. Sweat rolls down my face and I use my forearm to wipe my brow. I feel the dirt and bits of wood abrade my skin, but I ignore it.

The sun is beating down on me and I feel the sting on my shoulders and back. It doesn’t feel like October because the slight chill in the air isn’t enough to cool me down. I probably shouldn’t have taken off my shirt, but I got so damn hot I soaked through it within seconds of working.

I admit, though, that maybe it has less to do with the temperature outside and more to do with my size. I’m not in the best of shape, but when my parents named me Timber they must have known I’d grow into it. I’m tall and solid like a sequoia with strong arms and legs. I can chop wood and haul lumber all day long, but I’ll never have a six-pack to show for it. I’m heavy when I walk and can’t run a mile, but I can bend a crowbar in half and lift a car if I need to.

“Who is it?” I grumble as I walk over to the nearby trough of water.

Leaning over the huge basin, I use both hands to splash my body and clear the dirt off of me. I scrub my beard, and I’m

reminded that I need to give it a trim at some point. I've been working on clearing out a section of my land and I've been putting it off for too long.

“A young lady by the name of Pippa Michaels.”

I grunt as I splash more water on my chest. The cool air has chilled the water and it feels good. “Don't know her.” I've never heard the name in my life.

Simon lets out a small chuckle like it's a private joke. “Neither do I, but she was very persuasive, so I've asked her to wait in the lounge. I think you should speak to her.”

I grab my worn shirt from the side of the basin and use it to wipe my face and arms before I drag it over the hair of my chest. As I clean myself off I glance over to the windows at the back of the castle that face out to where I'm standing.

The castle has been in my family for hundreds of years, but since my parents died, I'm the last one left and the sole heir. All of my best memories were made in and around these walls even though we only visited during the holidays. I moved up here permanently after they died, and I've isolated myself. I don't like going out in the world and being surrounded by people. I prefer the woods and the quiet escape that the castle brings. I've got plenty of staff and security that stay here full time, and even though they usually leave me alone, it's still almost too many people here with me.

Simon was my parents' butler and when they died, he asked if he could remain living in the castle and act as my butler. I didn't know what to do with him at first, but then after a while I realized he did his own thing and only came to me when the staff needed something he couldn't do for them. I honestly don't know what I'd do if he left, so I should probably stop acting like an asshole around him.

“Send her away,” I growl. Guess today isn’t the day that’s going to change.

“I believe you might need to do that for yourself.” He steps to the side and I see in the distance a woman on the patio next to the lounge. The large doors that lead onto the patio are behind her and wide open.

“Fuck,” I mutter, shaking the dirt out of my shirt, and begin stomping towards the castle. “Guess a little privacy is just too much to ask for.”

I can almost hear Simon rolling his eyes behind me but I don’t care. Can’t he see I’m busy?

Scowling at the ground in front of me, I make my way towards the house. I’m already coming up with exactly where I’m going to tell this woman to stick it when I look up and come to an abrupt stop.

“Hi.”

Her voice is soft and it catches me off guard, and I realize I wasn’t paying attention to the fact that she walked off the patio and across the garden to meet me halfway. Her wavy blond hair cascades over to one side, exposing her bare shoulder on the other. Her thick woolen oversized sweater is swallowing her, and it makes her look so small and slight. But as my eyes move from her neck to her bust and down to her waist, I can only see thick curves hidden under there.

“I didn’t mean to interrupt you.” Her words bring my eyes to hers and it’s then I look into soft brown eyes the color of maple syrup. Without thinking I lick my lips. “I see you’re busy, but I did try calling first.”

“I don’t have a phone.”

“Really? I called and talked to someone named Simon who told me to drop by.” She looks over to my butler, who decides now is the perfect time to walk away.

“I think it’s time for tea.” He quickens his pace to move out of my reach.

“Did he?” I glare over her head to Simon’s retreating back. “I’ll have to speak to him about that.”

“I’m Pippa.” She juts her hand out and it hangs there between us as I stare at it.

I sigh, wipe my palm down my jeans and take her hand. It’s so small and soft and pale compared to mine. Her fingers are cold, and just then a cool breeze blows against my back and I realize I’m still shirtless. As if she is reading my thoughts, I watch her eyes move down my chest and to my stomach. I have the sudden urge to suck in and flex all at once, but when I see the edge of her tongue on the side of her lips, I wonder if she might just like what she sees.

I gently squeeze her hand and the pressure gets her attention. For a second I feel a smile tug at my lips and the feeling is so strange and foreign I’m shocked that it’s been so long since I’ve done it.

She tugs slightly on her hand and I let it go, although for a second I don’t want to. It’s like being in kindergarten and having a toy taken from me. A surge of anger flashes through me but I ignore it.

“Timber,” I say, and I have to clear my rough voice. “Why are you here?”

Her smile widens and I see the dimples on either side of her cheeks. My eyebrows pull together as I stare at them and I decide I don’t like dimples. They’re too goddamn sweet and

innocent. I bet men fall all over themselves at the sight of them, and that thought makes me angry too. I need to go chop some more wood.

“I’ve come to see if I can rent your castle.” She shrugs that one bare shoulder and I decide I hate that too. Doesn’t she own a sweater that can cover her whole body? It’s October, for Christ’s sake. I don’t bother to look down at my own hypocritically bare chest.

“I don’t rent out my home.”

She cocks her head to the side and I wonder why she doesn’t have her hair pulled up. Seeing it down like this is obscene. Any man could reach out and run their fingers through it. I should find her some string.

“What about a trade? A favor?” she offers.

The images that flash in my mind at her giving me a favor should be illegal. I have to blink a few times and tighten my lips before I blurt out something I’ll regret.

“Such as?” I meant to say no, but the goddamn word didn’t come out. I clench my fists at my side as I move closer to her.

“My sister’s company wants to rent your castle for a party, and I know she’s offered you any amount of money you want.”

I recall a very tenacious woman coming by repeatedly to ask the very same thing and I’m wondering if this is the sister.

“But I can see that money might not be what you’re after.” Her eyes quickly glance down my body and back up in a flash as her cheeks heat. “So name what you want, whatever it is, and I’ll make sure you have it.”

My treacherous feet move closer to her and I curse under my breath as a mixture of heat and anger swirls inside me. They're fighting to see which one takes control and even I don't know which one will win.

"Whatever I want?" I confirm, and I think about how long it's been since I've had a woman.

Her tongue darts out on her bottom lip and the sight of her wet mouth makes a groan form low in my stomach.

"Tea?" Simon asks from directly beside me and the moment is shattered.

I take a breath and then a step back to see him holding out a clean shirt for me. I yank it from his outstretched hands and tug it on, then turn and stomp towards the house. When I don't hear her footsteps behind me, I call over my shoulder.

"Are you coming or not?"

Chapter Three



PIPPA

I stand there for a moment watching Timber stomp away from me. He's asking if I'm coming with him but he doesn't actually seem like he wants me to follow him.

"Go," Simon whispers to me, and I jump, realizing I was staring at Timber's backside and thighs. Normally I'd think someone behaving that way would be rude, but his grumpy attitude is kinda cute.

I speed walk to catch up with the man; he moves pretty quick for a giant. "Timber!" I shout his name so that I can catch up to him. This house is so massive I could easily get lost, and just as my thoughts begin to wander he turns around and I run right into him.

My small body bounces off his and I squeeze my eyes tight and brace to hit the floor. But to my shock, strong arms wrap around me to keep me from going over. My face presses against his solid chest and I kind of wish he hadn't put his shirt on. Embarrassment at my dirty fantasies heats my cheeks and I tuck my chin so he can't see. His chest is so broad and thick he won't be able to tell. He really does live up to his name.

"You should watch where you're going," he tells me, but he doesn't release me from his hold.

When I finally summon the courage to look up at him, I have to crane my neck all the way back. He's got the most beautiful green eyes I've ever seen and they're framed with dark long lashes I would pay good money for.

"Thanks," I manage to get past my lips. My backside would have hurt for a few days if I fell on the beautiful marble flooring.

When I take a deep breath, his scent invades me. He smells like hard work and a man, not a boy with body spray on. It is outdoors and oak, and I had no idea it could be so hot. Watching him do manual labor has my body in overdrive.

I didn't know what to expect when I came to talk to Timber Grayson, but this is far from what I was thinking. I thought for sure it was going to be some old curmudgeon that didn't much care for people. While Timber might be less than inviting, he's far from old. He's in his prime and looked like a freaking lumberjack out there chopping wood. I bet he doesn't even need that axe. He could rip the logs in half with his bare hands like Captain America. Those strong hands are holding me in place ever so gently at the moment, but I can feel the power radiating in them.

"I have short legs." I smile up at his grumpy expression. "It's hard to keep up."

He lets go of me and practically jumps back to keep from touching me. I think my sister is wrong about my dimples having special powers. The more I smile at Timber, the grumpier he seems to get. At least I'm getting somewhere. Myra couldn't even get on the property so I guess this is progress.

He turns and stomps off again and I notice this time it's at a slower pace.

We enter what looks like a sitting area near the patio. I've never been in a house big enough to have all these different fancy rooms. This place really would make a wonderful venue for a party, so it's a shame he wants to hide the home away. Maybe it shouldn't be filled with parties but a family of some kind. This place is so remote that I wonder why Timber chose to isolate himself from the rest of the world. It really is a castle out of a fairytale, but it could be so much more if it was filled with life.

"This place is really something." I turn in a circle, taking all the history in.

An old painting of a woman in a beautiful ball gown hangs over the fireplace. I'd guess the picture to be over two hundred years old and likely Timber's great-great-something because they have the same green eyes. A man stands behind her and he has his hand on her shoulders and she's reaching up to hold it. The beautiful ring on her finger makes it clear they are husband and wife.

Timber doesn't say anything at my comment and I turn to see he's taken a seat. He picks up the teapot and I watch as his giant hand engulfs it. I have no idea how he's going to hold one of the little cups. I don't wait for an invitation because I don't think I'm going to get one, so I walk over and sit down in the chair next to his.

"For me?" I ask, motioning to the cup. It looks so delicate and I'd bet that's real gold that lines the top.

"I guess. Simon's never done this tea shit before."

I bite my bottom lip to keep from smiling. Ah, Simon. I don't know how I talked him into letting me in but it might have had something to do with me standing in front of the gate until someone tried to pull in. I'd stolen the moment to corner

Simon, though I don't think it counts as cornering him. He'd looked me over and told me to come back in two hours. It was as easy as that.

"Sugar please." I point to the little cubes stacked in a neat pile. He doesn't use the tongs to place one of them into my teacup. Instead he picks it up with his fingers and tosses it into my cup. This time I can't fight the laugh that bubbles up from me and I don't miss how his jaw tightens. "Why are you so angry?" I think it's endearing he isn't being proper and it puts me more at ease.

"I'm not angry," he huffs, suddenly reminding me of a giant teddy bear.

"Fine. You're not angry." I roll my eyes before I stand up and walk over to the bar on the other side of the room and grab an empty glass. I bring it back to pour another cup of tea in it. There's no way he can drink out of that tiny teacup and he isn't even going to attempt it.

I add sugar and milk to make it the way I like it and then hand him the glass. He stares at me for a moment before taking it from my hand. Our fingers graze one another for a brief moment and I can feel the rough of his hands from the manual labor he does.

"So." I sit back down in my seat and cross my legs as I pick up my tea. "What is it that you want?"

"I don't like people," he says before throwing back his tea in a few gulps.

"I don't think I can get you to like people." I take a sip of my tea to hide my smile.

"I like you." His eyes flick to my bare shoulder.

I notice they keep going there, but what I'm wearing isn't exactly sexy. With the way he looks at me you'd think I was in a tiny little dress, but he's quick to hide his desire.

"You like me? I find that hard to believe." His eyes like me but his words say otherwise.

"If you want to have a party here, you will host and coordinate it. I would have to make an appearance and you would be my date."

I stare at him. I don't know how to host or coordinate anything.

"Your date?" I ask, and I don't know why that is the first thing that pops out of my mouth because there are so many other things he's said that are problematic.

"Yes. You would stay at my side. You could talk to people for me; that way I wouldn't have to."

It only takes me a half a second to think it over because I know Myra can walk me through the rest of it. All that matters is that he says yes.

"I can do that," I agree, but I have no idea why he's okay with all of this. He could shut it down and just say no since he isn't getting anything out of it. He turned the money down so why is he saying yes now?

Me going as his date is not what I thought he'd go after. What if he demanded I have sex with him? The thought should send me into a rage but my body tingles with the idea of him having his way with me. In all my life, I've never had thoughts like that, but with him they come flooding in.

I don't want to stay any longer and embarrass myself, so I stand.

“I’ll be in contact. The party is only...” My mind blanks as I try and think of how many days we have left. I’m terrible with the details, so this should be a total disaster.

“I’m not finished.” Timber breaks me from my concentration as he leans back in the chair.

His dark hair is a mess and his beard really needs a trim. I can’t help but wonder what he looks like under all that scruff.

“There is something else I want.” Heat floods my body once again as I wait for him to continue. My heart races and I’m not sure what I want him to say. He could probably get me to do just about anything in this moment.

My dimples might have superpowers but his green eyes are my kryptonite.

Chapter Four



TIMBER

“You’ll stay here for the duration of the planning.” I set my glass down on the side table and watch her mouth fall open.

“B-but that’s weeks away.”

“Then I should have someone sent to your home today to get your things. I’ll have Simon send a team.”

I stand up and she holds out her hands. “Wait a second, you can’t just tell me I have to stay here as part of the deal.”

“Yes, I can.” I take a step closer to her, and to her credit she doesn’t retreat. “You want something I have and there is a price to pay for it.”

“They’ve offered you any amount of money you want.”

A wicked smile tugs at the corner of my lips. “Money is the one thing I don’t need.”

“I don’t think you know what you’re asking.” She huffs as I turn around and walk out of the room. Her heeled boots follow me at a quick pace. “Mr. Grayson, Timber, please let’s work this out. There will be a lot to coordinate and I’ll need to speak to my sister.”

I stop abruptly and once again she runs into my back. I turn in time to steady her and then let out a quick breath.

“You’ve either got to stay a few feet back or walk beside me,” I say sharply, even as my hands linger on her arms a bit longer than necessary.

“Listen I’m going to be honest with you. I can do this, but I can’t do that if I stay. This is all the way out here in the middle of nowhere and it is going to take a ton of coordination.”

“Exactly.”

“Ugggrr,” she growls, and it’s kind of cute.

“You just said I’m in the middle of nowhere,” I say, and she nods. “Which means that there will be a lot of trips out here for people to look at the space and location. You’ll need to measure off distance for planning out tables and catering. Am I right?”

“Um, yes?” I cock my head to the side at her unease but she straightens her shoulders and gets a serious expression on her face. “Yes, of course we would need to do all of those things.”

“Which is why I will need to have someone here full time. I’m allowing your sister’s company to use this space, but I won’t be inconvenienced. I’ve got enough work on my hands as it is that I don’t want to be distracted with whatever soiree you’re planning.”

I begin to walk again and this time she’s right beside me, practically skipping to stay in my line of sight.

“I just don’t understand why I should be here full time in order to do that. I can make whatever trips are necessary and be here anytime someone needs to show up.”

I sigh and stop once more, pinching the bridge of my nose, reaching for patience. I take a second, and when I look up at

her maple honey eyes, my muscles soften and I want to give in. I really do. But I won't let her go.

“Exactly how long did it take you to get here today from the city?” She furrows her brows and begins to object, but I hold my hand up to stop her. “Let's ballpark it at over an hour. That's two hours of commute for you every day and that could mean either multiple trips out here each day if you have more than one crew coming at a time, or late-night driving through the woods, which isn't exactly safe.”

She opens her mouth but then closes it quickly as I continue.

“I've made it perfectly clear that I don't like people, so having a bunch of them in my space is going to put me in a really bad mood.”

“I can't imagine what that's like,” she cuts in, but I keep going.

“The more likely I am to deal with your vendors, the more likely I am to call this whole thing off. Is that what you want?”

“No.” She's quick to agree and I see her realize she's got hardly any options on the table. Good.

I cross my arms over my chest and cock my head to the side. “Then this is how it's going to go. You're going to live here full time while this planning takes place. You will deal with everyone and keep them out of my hair. The upstairs to the castle is private and I aim to keep it that way. No guests or anyone else who visits the property is allowed up there. Is that clear?”

“Crystal.” She nods with wide eyes.

“Simon!” I call, and like he’s made of thin air he appears. “Have Miss Michaels’ things brought here.”

“Pippa,” she says, and I look over in time to see her cheeks flush as she tucks her chin. “I guess if I’m going to be staying with you for a while we should be on a first-name basis.”

“I know, Pippa.” I take a step towards her and lean in. Damn, why do I like the way her name sounds on my tongue? “But the staff will refer to you as Miss Michaels because that’s what pleases me.”

“I’ll make sure it’s done,” Simon agrees.

“Today,” I say, looking over at him, and he nods.

“Of course.”

“Pippa will give you the details. I’ve got to finish the wood before the storm rolls in.” My muscles protest as I take a step back from her and it’s got nothing to do with being sore.

“It’s not supposed to rain,” Pippa calls to me as she looks out the window.

I turn around one last time and shake my head. “Don’t let the sunshine fool you, princess. There’s a storm coming.”

Chapter Five



PIPPA

The rain pours down as I stare out the window into the darkness. A flash lights up the back of the house and it's eerily beautiful here. A few seconds later thunder rumbles and I pull my sweater around my shoulders. The house has gotten a little colder since the sun went down and the storm Timber said was coming rolled in fast. The movers barely got my belongings into the house before the rain started to pour down.

Letting go of the heavy curtain so it falls back over the window, I turn to look at what will be my new home for the next few weeks. Boxes fill the space in front of me and it looks like they brought everything from my bedroom but the bed. My things look out of place in the beautiful room with rich colors and heavy drapes. The crown molding alone likely costs more than everything I own. The bathroom is bigger than my freaking bedroom, which is just nuts. I really don't think I need all this stuff for only a few weeks, but what am I supposed to do? It wasn't as if I had much say in the matter.

There's a knock at the door and I tell whoever it is to come in. I'm surprised when I see Timber standing there in the open doorway with his knuckles still resting on the solid wood. He fills up all the remaining space in the room with his presence alone.

“You don’t invite people into your room without knowing who it is first.”

God, why is he always so grumpy? My eyes roam over him, and he might be a grouchy butt, but damn he’s handsome. He cleaned up from his day out chopping logs and even though he’s still in jeans and a shirt, he looks like he belongs here. My eyes flick to the fireplace that’s going and I wonder if he used the wood to light it himself.

“I knew it was you.” I smirk. “No one is allowed upstairs in the castle but you and Simon,” I remind him.

I remember him saying it and I knew he wasn’t joking because I watched as the two of them lugged all my boxes up to my new room and neither of them let me help. I was told to have a look around, which I did, and it worked out because my sister wants as many pictures as possible. She wants to see the first floor so she can start preparations for the party.

I’m lucky she’s out of town at the moment because she’s not going to be down with me staying with Timber. Her boss took her on an unexpected business trip and I’m hoping that when she gets back she’s okay because she sees I’m alive and kicking. At that point, she can see that Timber hasn’t kidnapped or harmed me and she’ll be okay with me staying until the party. We don’t have much of a choice if she wants this to happen.

“It could’ve been Simon.” He stands a little taller as he steps inside the room.

“So? What does that matter? The door is open and it’s not like I’m running around naked.” I left the door open because this place is so big it’s kind of scary, and more so with the storm.

I watch as his eyes narrow on me and he clenches his jaw.
“No one is allowed in your room.”

“Simon helped with the boxes,” I point out.

“He brought them to the door.” His tone is flat.

“And you brought them inside?” I laugh, not really understanding.

“Yes.”

“Just like no one is allowed in the upper part of the estate but here I am.” I motion around the beautiful room. It’s not going to be a hardship staying here. It feels like a fancy hotel.

His only response is a grunt and we stare at one another.

“You’re always smiling.”

“What’s wrong with smiling?” It’s actually hard not to smile when he’s being so grumpy. It’s kind of adorable but I’m not telling him that. “I’m sorry that bothers you. Is there something you need?”

“Why haven’t you unpacked?” He looks to my boxes. “What’s in all these?” He walks over to one and rips it open easily.

“Hey!” I march over to the box as he opens the lid and luckily it’s filled with yarn. He reaches in, picking some of it up and inspecting it like he’s never seen anything like it before.

“What is this?”

“Yarn.” This time I make my tone as flat as his.

“I meant what’s it for.” He looks from the yarn filling his hands to me.

“I knit.”

“You knit?” he repeats, his eyebrows furrowing together as he looks confused.

“You’re lucky that box wasn’t full of my panties.” He drops the yarn and steps away from the box. I have to fight a laugh at the look on his face. “Yes, I have panties in here,” I tease.

“Someone packed your panties?” His face changes and I swear his eyes darken.

“Let’s hope so. I can’t wear the ones I’ve got on now the whole time.” I try to tease him again, but the man is really on edge.

“I told them not to touch them.” His voice is low as he starts ripping open each box. “I’ll have them fired.”

I watch him with shock as he goes through all of them. He told the movers to not touch my underwear? I hadn’t given it much thought but I guess it’s a little weird for someone to pack those private things. I should stop him from ripping open each box but it really does save me from having to do it later.

“I don’t see any.” He’s breathing heavy like he just ran a few miles. Chopping wood didn’t wind him, but somehow this has.

“I’m glad you solved that riddle. Now you don’t have to fire anyone,” I say happily, not wanting anyone to lose their job over my underwear. “I guess I’ll go without or maybe I can knit some.” I laugh. “Is that a thing? Knitted undies? I’ve never tried that before.” I laugh harder at the thought, but when I look at Timber he isn’t finding this so funny.

“Dinner is in ten minutes,” he says before he stomps from the room and slams my door behind him.

I cover my mouth to keep the bubble of laughter inside of me because I really wasn't trying to poke him. The reason I'm here is to make his life easier for the event planning. I think I might be more than he bargained for.

Chapter Six



TIMBER

It's been two solid weeks of hell on earth, and I don't see an end in sight.

"Timber?" Simon's voice is tentative and I can tell he's standing back farther than he normally does.

"What." I don't even say it like a question, because I don't want to be asked anything.

He sighs as he walks closer and grabs the plate of uneaten food beside me. "You need sleep."

I clench my jaw because he's right but he's clearly stating the obvious and it's irritating.

"Is that all you came up here to tell me?"

I stare down at Pippa in the garden pointing to people and calling out instructions on the walkie talkie in her hand. I got her that last week when I noticed her voice was hoarse from having to call out so loud all the time. I gave them to every person who comes on the property so she doesn't have to be next to them to tell them what to do. Myself included. I reach down and touch the device next to me and turn up the volume so I can hear what she's saying. That's another thing I didn't like. She would go talk to people and I would be so far away I wouldn't know what she was saying.

“I heard Miss Pippa tell you to come up here and I was checking to see if you’re all right.”

“Of course I’m all right!” *I’m not all right.*

Two weeks of being around her every moment of every day. Two weeks of eating meals with her and reading in the library together at night while she knits. Two weeks of memorizing every curve of her body and every fleck of gold in her eyes. Two weeks of agony and need that I have no outlet for because my body has betrayed me.

My cock is in a perpetual state of frustration with no sense of relief in sight. I’ve tried jerking off, but I can’t ever get to completion. Maybe if I could release some of this weight in my cock I wouldn’t be in so much pain. Maybe if she wasn’t so goddamn beautiful I wouldn’t pine after her like some starving puppy begging for any scrap of attention she gives me.

Why does she smile so much? Why is she so damn happy every day when she walks into the kitchen?

When I see her long tousled hair and rosy cheeks, it’s what I imagine she’d look like after I made love to her and every morning my day starts off in frustration.

“Enough,” Simon says sharply, and I turn around to look at him with wide eyes.

“What do you mean *enough*?”

“Do you think I’m blind?” When I raise an eyebrow at him he rolls his eyes. “Do you think I’m stupid?”

I sigh as I push away from the window. “No,” I admit, because Simon is one of the smartest men I know.

“You will never win her over with the way you’ve been acting around her.”

“I don’t want to win her over.” I walk past him to the other side of the study and sit down at my desk. The lie hangs between us for a moment but he doesn’t call me on it.

“The party is happening in two days, and she doesn’t have a gown yet.”

“Have some dresses brought in,” I answer as I immediately click away on my keyboard looking for a personal shopper.

“Timber, this is an opportunity for you.” Simon talks to me softly as if I’m a child.

“An opportunity for what? The party is almost here which means she’s almost done and I can finally have my life back to the way it was before she walked into it.”

The words taste bitter on my tongue and I hate how they make me feel.

“You can never go back to the way things were before you saw her and the sooner you realize that the better.”

I grumble as I look past him and to the window, desperate for him to leave so I can go back over there and watch her again.

“I’ve already taken the liberty of having some options brought in for her tonight.”

“Thank you.” My voice is low, and although I should be grateful, I’m jealous he’s done something nice for her.

“I’ve asked that the gowns be presented one by one for your viewing,” he says as he turns away from me and grabs my tray of food.

“Why?” My heartbeat begins to speed up with the anticipation of seeing her model clothes for me.

“Because like I said, this is an opportunity for you, Timber. This is a chance for you to compliment her and let her know that you find her attractive. Give her praise and make her feel special. You don’t have much more time.”

I press my lips together tightly but nod at him in answer.

“I’ll have dinner served in the parlor while she’s trying on clothes. It will be more intimate in there.”

I run my tongue along the edge of my teeth as I think about the word “intimate” in relation to Pippa.

Simon walks to the door, but before he leaves he turns back to me one last time. “Don’t fuck this up.”

I sit there stunned as he walks out without another word. He’s never spoken to me like that before and I don’t understand why he’s doing it now. Maybe he knows just how much this woman has affected me. Or maybe he’s tired of my bad mood.

Either way, he’s right.

Chapter Seven



TIMBER

“I didn’t realize the event was so formal,” I comment as I look down the rows of dresses. Simon clears his throat behind me as he oversees the food being brought in and I remember what he told me. “It will be nice.”

I chance a glance up at Pippa and see her looking at me with wide eyes. “I’m surprised to hear you say that.”

“You’ve done a nice job on the place.” God, how many times am I going to say *nice*?

The lady who brought in the dresses has another lady helping her. The older woman is in charge and a tall woman with strong arms is carrying most of the clothes. I assume she’s the assistant. The two of them are working to set up the racks of clothes with the accessories on a side table while Simon and a few of the staff arrange the buffet nearby. Pippa and I are meant to look over the dresses then dine in here afterwards to discuss her options.

Why anyone thought that I would be a good choice for this task is beyond me, but I can’t say I would have let anyone else do the job.

“Coming from you I’ll take that as an Oscar-worthy performance.” She smiles at me over her cup of tea, and

although I could kick myself for not being nicer to her, the praise warms me inside like I'm the one drinking the hot tea.

"We'll leave you to it," Simon says as he checks over the covered dishes and leads the staff out of the room.

The older woman introduces herself as Claire and then steps forward like she's ready to give a speech. Everything inside of me is screaming for me to hold my hand up and tell her I don't need the song and dance. I just want her to show us the damn dresses, but Simon's words about not fucking this up keep ringing in my ear.

"With your gorgeous coloring and curves I've selected a few key pieces and one or two rogue options." She winks at Pippa, who beams up at her, and I'm thankful I've kept my mouth shut.

"Thank you so much, I'm really excited." Pippa does that thing with her lip where she bites on it for just a second then runs her tongue over it.

She does that when she's eager, and my mind has thought of all the ways she'd do that while underneath me.

"We've set up a privacy screen over here." Claire indicates to a small rack of silky things next to it. "You'll have to change undergarments depending on the cut of the dress, but for the first one a silk slip will do."

Images of Pippa covered in expensive silk flood my mind like a waterfall and I want to blurt out that we'll take everything, but I don't. I grip the armrests of the chair so hard my knuckles turn white and I remind myself to breathe.

"Perfect." Pippa gets up and goes behind the partition that separates her naked body from everyone in the room. "Panties might be a nice change since I haven't had them in so long."

I don't know if I'm strong enough to make it through this. All I want right now is to scream for everyone to get out, Hulk smash that thing keeping me from seeing her, and take her to the floor. My cock throbs in time with my heartbeat and I can feel the heat creeping up my neck. Why can't I control myself around her? Why do I keep my distance when I'm so damn desperate for just a shred of her attention?

"Oh, this is so soft," I hear her say and I close my eyes.

The wood of the chair groans and I look down to see I've put a crack in one of the arms. "Shit."

Claire looks over at me and I pretend to crouch to cover it up. I have to get it together, but the thought of something against her bare skin that isn't my hand is making my body uncomfortably tight.

I look up in time to see Pippa walk out from behind the screen wearing a deep purple gown. It's nipped at the waist and flares at the hip, but the strapless top is too low. I can see the rounded swells of her breasts and suddenly my mouth is as dry as a barren desert and I thirst for the dew of her flesh.

It takes me a moment to clear my throat as I sit forward and try to hide the obscene outline of my cock in my jeans. "The color is beautiful." I try to keep my comments brief because I want to scream at her to take it off and never let the light of day touch that dress, but I can't dim the smile on her lips. I can't be the one to take away the light in her eyes as she faces the mirror and turns.

"It is, but the shape is all wrong," Claire says, and I want to pay her double and kick her out at the same time.

Pippa narrows her eyes at the dress and then cocks her head to the side. "You think so?"

“We need to show off your figure down below.” Claire winks and motions for her to move back behind the screen. “You’ve got an incredible shape, and we don’t want to lose that.”

I’ve spent hours of my life getting to know Pippa’s shape, and I don’t need a dress to tell me where her lines begin and end. But once again I bite my tongue and try to breathe.

“For this dress you won’t need the slip. Just put on the silk thong and garters,” Claire calls out. “If you need help attaching them let me know.”

My heart stops dead in my chest as I lean forward and put my face in my hands. I’m not going to survive this. My beauty in silk and garters? The fantasy of her in that almost brings me to my knees.

After a moment of indulging in the dream of undoing her garters with my teeth I sit back in my seat and grab a pillow off the chair next to me and put it in my lap. There’s no other way to hide this monster trying to burst through my denim.

This time when Pippa walks out from behind the screen she’s in a deep green dress the color of evergreens in the winter. The material goes over one shoulder and clings to her body all the way down and then flares out at her knees. When she turns around to face the mirror, I see that it’s completely backless all the way down to the top of her ass. If she bent over, the dress might burst in two, giving me a view of her tiny thong.

“Oh, that’s lovely,” Claire coos, walking around Pippa.

“Really?” I look up to see Pippa’s brows furrowed as she looks down at herself and smooths out the dress.

“It’s not the one,” I say gently, and Pippa looks in the mirror and finds my eyes in the reflection. She smiles softly and then nods a little.

“I don’t think so either.” Her smile grows in approval as she walks back behind the screen again and I’m left sitting here like I’ve been run over by a tank.

Having her look at me like that while I’ve made her happy is almost too much. It’s like a drug and suddenly I want another hit of that. I want to do something else to make her happy and have her tell me what I’ve done was right.

“For this next dress you won’t need undergarments. It’s made to your measurements and I don’t want to disrupt the fabric.”

Claire grabs the dress off the hanger and passes it to Pippa. Meanwhile my world has just been hit by a nuclear explosion at the thought of her naked under her dress.

When Pippa walks out she doesn’t go to the mirror right away. Instead she takes a few steps closer to me and waits for me to tell her what I think. The dress is the color of dark raspberries and has fragile lace that scoops over her breasts and down her body. It’s molded to her figure like it was indeed made for her. I’ve never seen anything more beautiful. It’s delicate and soft just like her curves, and the way she’s looking at me right now, it’s like she’s begging me to let her have it.

“She’ll have it,” I say simply and feel the power of her once again as she smiles.

Chapter Eight



PIPPA

I take another bite of my steak as I watch Timber angrily cut into his own out of the corner of my eye. It's hard to smile and chew at the same time but he has this effect on me and he's not doing it on purpose. I don't know why I find his grumpiness so adorable but it does something to my insides. The more he bristles, the more I want to get closer and that's not good. I'm not trying to chase after him, but when I find myself seeking him out he's never far away.

"I don't think you need a knife." I take another bite. The meat is so tender you can cut it with your fork, and chef Celia is worth her weight in gold. I have no idea what it costs to have a chef on staff but damn that woman can cook. I've probably gained a good five pounds since I moved in but I don't care. Every bite is worth it and I know I'm never eating this good again.

"I know how to eat," he grumbles.

I think he wants to sound angry but the words come out like he's frustrated. Everyone else has this weird fear of Timber and they all jump when he barks or says something. I just smile and shake my head at him. How can anyone be scared of him? He's this giant bear that I've been having one

too many dirty dreams about. I'm in full-blown crush mode and I don't think he has any idea.

He demands we eat every meal together but I'm the one who rattles on with conversation. I barely get anything out of him and he knows almost everything about me. He sits and listens and will randomly ask a question. When I get one it feels like a small victory. God, that sounds so pathetic when I think about it.

"Yes, I agree. You know how to show that steak who's boss." I laugh. "At the party you might not want to stab your food. You might scare the guests."

He stops sawing at his steak to look up at me. It's the first time he's looked at me since I sat down at the table with him tonight. Something is off and it feels a little awkward now. Our eyes lock and I see that same look he got when I came out in the last dress. The one he decided was the right choice. My breath catches and I will him to say something.

I've caught him watching me over the past few weeks, but I didn't know if it was him checking out the planning and what was going on or him checking *me* out. In my head I pretended it was me that kept his attention, but then today with the dress I saw something in his eyes. I was sure of it but brushed it aside because he stomped from the room the second after saying *that was the dress*. Either he really liked it or he was over the whole dress show. What man wants to watch a woman try on dress after dress? He was probably bored out of his mind even though I thought he enjoyed it.

I wasn't about to argue with him. The dress fit me perfectly and I felt sexy, yet refined. I've never been big on dressing up, but with a gown like that I'm really getting excited for the party.

I completely forgot about having to attend even though Timber told me I was his *date*. I've been in party planning mode and forgot to think about what I'm wearing. I've ended up having to plan most of the event on my own, which was not part of the plan when my sister sent me out here. Now she sends me emails and texts but her boss still has her away for work. At least I haven't had to tell her I'm living here. Who knows how that would go over? It's been two weeks and I'm still alive and Timber hasn't so much as touched me. I have to actively make that thought not bum me out.

"I'm not used to people," he finally says, but he doesn't take his eyes away from mine like he normally does.

"You've been pretty good with me." I wink at him, trying to fight wiggling in my seat under his stare. My whole body is starting to tingle again after it took me ten minutes to get it together after the fashion show.

He opens his mouth to say something then closes it and my heart drops. I must be making things up in my head again. How come I'm so good with other people but with the one person I really want to like me, I can't get him to crack a smile?

"Or maybe not," I mutter, dropping my gaze back down to my plate.

"Two more days," he sighs and I nod.

Yeah. Two more days and I'll be out of his hair. Will I ever see him again? It's not as though I'll run into him since he never leaves the house.

"There's still so much to do." I take another bite of my food and go back to idle chat. I ramble on about the party, not wanting the silence to make things weird. It should be easier

by now since we always eat together. This should be second nature but something is in the air. There's unease in Timber tonight and I can't get a read on why.

"You stopped talking." I look up at Timber and he actually looks worried.

Thoughts of never seeing him again have taken over and my heart grows heavy. I've grown attached to his grumpy ass.

He pushes back from the table. "Are you okay?" He stands up and walks around the table, then comes over to my chair. I have to tilt my head back to look up at him as he towers over me. He almost looks panicked and I'm not sure what to do.

"Why don't you like people?" I ask.

I know after this is over I'll go home to my sister. I won't be locked away from the world like Timber does to himself, but being locked away with him wouldn't be so bad. Being here with him hasn't been bad at all. I can't imagine what it would be like if we were a *we*.

"Why aren't you smiling?" he asks, and I wonder if he even heard my question.

"I'll miss you," I admit and drop my head back down.

He doesn't move from my side and I can feel the heat from his big body next to me. He doesn't say anything either and I don't know how long we stay like that.

"I know you won't miss me." I try to make my tone light and teasing but it doesn't come out the way I want it to.

I freeze when his finger comes to my chin and makes me tilt my head back. His eyes search mine and his lips part. My heart pounds in my chest at his soft touch. I know this is his way of letting me down gently, or maybe he's admitting that

there's something here. That he feels this chemistry between us and that two days doesn't mean the end of us.

"Dessert?" Celia chirps as she comes into the parlor. Timber's hand drops from my face and he takes a step back from me. "You need something, sir?" Celia asks, looking at him curiously as she puts down the two desserts.

It's her homemade German chocolate cake and normally I'd already have my fork in it before it hit the table, but my stomach turns with unease.

"I'm sorry. I'm stuffed." I make the feeble excuse as I push back from the table and stand up.

"It's your favorite," Timber says. "She'll want milk with it too." He looks to Celia to go and get it for me, but I shake my head no.

"I have some things I need to check on for the party. Only two days left and lots to get done," I remind him as he'd reminded me not minutes ago.

I have to force a smile. Two more days of dealing with me and he's done. It doesn't make sense the way he struggles with himself. It's like he wants me here but doesn't. Why make us have dinner together every night? Why be there almost every time I turn around? For almost two weeks I've done everything to get closer to him and to break through whatever wall he has up.

"But—"

I shake my head, cutting him off. He reaches out for me but I step back out of his reach. I feel as though I'm all over the place and I need to get it together.

"I'll see you in the morning." I give him a tight smile as I turn to leave.

“You’re not going to knit in the library later?” he asks, and it sounds like an accusation.

“No,” I say simply and it’s a word I know he’s not used to.

If he doesn’t like me then I’ll make sure to stay out of his way. I can sit in my room and knit and he can be alone like he wants.

Chapter Nine



TIMBER

Thunder rolls in the distance and there's another storm on the horizon. I looked at the weather patterns earlier and this is going to be a rough one.

I pace outside her room arguing with myself. I can't believe I let her walk out of the room and away from me when all I wanted was to hold her close. Why do I do this? I push everyone away from me, but the moment Pippa walked into this castle, everything changed. Suddenly I'm making excuses to follow her around and have formal dinners when that was never the case before. Celia has been over the moon with all the things she's prepared and even Simon has a spring in his step with more things to manage.

It's like this place was asleep until she woke us all up, and the thought of her disappearing in two days' time is something I can't wrap my head around. And I don't want to. I won't face the facts and I know that's not how this should work, but I'm selfish and I don't care.

I'm doing this on the pretense of telling her about the storm, but I know deep down this has nothing to do with that. Lightning cracks and I know what I have to do.

"Fuck it," I say as I pause in front of her door and knock.

I wait for a moment but I don't hear anything and I knock again. This time when there's nothing I press my ear to the door, and I can hear what sounds like soft singing on the other side of it.

Gripping the knob, I chance a turn and see it's unlocked. I open the door slowly as I peek inside and glance around the room.

"Pippa?" I call out but don't see anything. I hear the humming again as I step inside and then realize she's in the bathroom.

I should turn around and walk out right this second, but I tell myself I'm just checking to make sure she's okay and letting her know about the storm. Thunder gets louder and then lightning follows it quickly enough to know it's almost on us.

My feet sink into the plush carpet as I walk slowly towards the bathroom door. It's slightly ajar and as I get closer I can smell the scent of rose petals. I swallow hard and my heart hammers in my chest as I move even closer to the door.

Steam seeps out of the bathroom and onto me and the scent of fresh roses is making me dizzy. Or is it the anticipation of what I might find on the other side of the door?

Her voice is soft and sweet as she sings, and then I hear the sound of water. I swallow hard and I know that I should turn around, but goddamn it, I can't. I have to see what's in there. I have to know.

I peek through the crack and see her bare leg on the edge of the tub as she drags a razor over it. I can't see her because she's facing away, but the smooth skin of her leg and the bubbles clinging to it have me bringing my fist to my mouth to cover my groan. Just the tease of what's between them is

almost too much and I have to close my eyes. There's a pounding in my ears as the thunder hits hard this time and then there's a loud pop.

With a flash of light, the power goes out and suddenly I'm plunged into darkness.

"Timber!" Pippa screams, and I burst through her bathroom door.

"I'm here," I call out, but I can't see a hand in front of my face let alone where she is. I hear water splashing and I feel for the edge of the tub. "I'm right here, Pippa. Follow my voice."

My hand dips into hot water right before I feel the softness of her slick skin. I wrap my hand around it as I hear her intake of breath.

"What's happened?" Her words are breathy as I slide my hand up and feel what can only be the swell of her ass. "I-I'm naked. I was in the bath."

"I can feel that." My voice is so low it sounds like the thunder outside. "Come closer to me."

I hold her steady as she steps out of the tub and rain drowns out any other sounds in the room. My now slick hands move over her ass as I pull her against me. I feel her wet body soak my clothes and the heat coming off of her matches my own.

Her hands plant against my chest, and I slide my hands up her waist and to the swells of her breasts. My breathing is coming fast and I know I should stop touching her but I can't. For so long I've wanted this and in the dark it feels like a dream. Like I can do anything I want.

“Timber,” she whispers. I can feel her breath on my lips as I lean closer to her.

“Don’t make me stop,” I say, brushing my lips against her. “Don’t tell me not to.”

She moves her hands to my neck, and to my aching surprise she pulls me down and opens her mouth for me. I don’t hesitate as I delve inside, tasting her tongue against mine. She’s hot all over and my fingers move to her slick nipples as I pinch them slightly. She moans into my mouth and I do it again, feeling the pucker of her tits under my touch.

My mouth moves lower, needing to taste every inch of her as I kiss my way down her neck. I lick a path between her tits before I hold them up and then suck on one of her nipples.

“Oh God!” she cries out just as another crash of thunder fills the room and I keep going.

I get on my knees in front of her and lick a trail down her belly to the warm wet softness between her legs. I can smell her desire mixed with roses, and the scent of her pussy is driving me mad. I put one of her legs over my shoulder and grip her hips, licking between the petals of her sex.

“So long,” I groan, shoving my tongue over her clit and massaging it. “I’ve waited for you.”

Her fingers tighten in my hair as a flash of lightning lets me see just a hint of her body. I bury my face deep into her softness and smother my mouth with her need. She’s slick and not just from the bath. I slide a finger into her and I’m rewarded with a sticky sweet release as she moans into the darkness. Her hips move and I grip her harder, thinking she’s trying to get away, but to my delight she moves closer and

opens for me. I feel her fingers on either side of her pussy lips as I lap at her clit.

“More,” I beg as I do everything I can to get closer, deeper.

“I-I think...” She gasps just as her pussy clamps down on my finger and I feel the pulses of her orgasm.

I cover her pussy with my mouth and suck on her, feeling the waves of pleasure rock her body. It's strong and intense, but it goes on for a long time and I do everything I can to draw that pleasure out of her.

Just when the last wave of her desire flows through her, the lights come back on.

She's standing above me with her eyes closed and cheeks flushed. Her body is wet and the bubbles still cling to her as I drink in the sight of her.

I'm on my knees with my face on her pussy and a grip on her hips that is unbreakable. And as if she's just come back to reality, her eyes slowly open and she looks down at me in shock.

Chapter Ten



PIPPA

I stare into Timber's dark eyes and see the desire he had when he saw me in the dress. At the time I hadn't been sure if that's what I saw but now there's no doubt. He wants me and I don't think he's done with me yet.

His hold tightens and his fingers dig into my soft flesh. This is not one of the many dreams I've had about him. He's really here and he just— My mind blanks for a moment as our eyes stay locked together. I can't believe what just happened. If it wasn't for his hold on me, I think I would've fallen over because my whole body is still reeling from the orgasm.

I place my hands on his broad shoulders, reminding myself this is real. My face warms as the lights illuminate just how completely naked I am.

"Hi," pops out of my mouth and I want to facepalm myself.

Timber's lips twitch into a smirk and I bite my lip to keep from smiling. The look on his face is almost as good as the orgasm he rocked me with.

"Hey," he says and licks his lips.

They're already slick from me, and my core tightens at how intimate this is. He kissed me *there*. The man who doesn't

like or want to be around people is closer to me than anyone has ever been before.

“I...” For the first time in my life I don’t know what to say. It wasn’t ten minutes ago I was so sad and mad over him and now I’m buzzing with excitement and need. My heart thuds and right now I’m hoping for so much more.

“Don’t tell me to go.” His words come out hoarse and I shake my head. I don’t want him to go anywhere. “I thought I was the one who never talked?”

He rises from his knees and picks me up with him. I wrap my legs around his waist as he carries me from the bathroom. I know I’m getting him soaked but he doesn’t seem to care.

“Did you make a joke?” I tease. He lays me down on the bed and my legs and arms drop away as he stands at the side of the bed looking down at me.

“I’m doing a lot of things right now I don’t normally do.” His eyes roam over my naked body appreciatively.

“Don’t stop.” My voice is soft as I lift up on my elbows.

I know I was the one who’d bolted from the room before, but now I’m scared he’s going to do the same. Some things are easier said and done in the dark but now light floods the room. I’m bared before him and I want him to do the same.

“I wasn’t planning on it.” He reaches up and behind him to pull off his wet shirt. He tosses it to the ground and goes for his jeans next. I bite my lip as I watch, waiting for him to strip off the rest, but he leaves his boxer briefs on. I want to protest but my eyes are too busy taking him in. I knew Timber was a big guy, but seeing all the thick lines and ridges of his muscles with no clothes on is something else. “I want another taste.”

Before I can ask what he wants a taste of, his mouth is on mine. Thank God, because that would've been a stupid question. His mouth fits me perfectly and he doesn't wait for me to part my lips. He takes me like a starved man as his fingers dive into my hair and he groans. The sound moves through every inch of me and desire burns between my legs. I try and tilt my hips up in search of relief but he has me pinned to the bed. The weight of his body keeps me from going anywhere so I wrap my legs around him.

I taste myself on his lips as I kiss him back. I have no idea what I'm doing but I match his hunger and need touch for touch. I can feel the need building deep inside of me and trying to get out. We've been on the way to this moment for weeks and now it's bursting to get out.

He pulls his mouth from mine as I gasp for air. He doesn't stop and I feel him everywhere all at once.

"I want a turn," I whimper. I want to kiss him all over but Timber is in control. I'm pinned beneath him and he's taking what he wants.

"I can't stop." His words come out as a plea and he moves down my body once again.

His tongue makes a trail as he goes and he pulls me with him. His knees hit the floor as he grips my hips and slides me to the edge of the bed. He moves me around like I'm nothing more than a doll for him to play with. Why does that turn me on?

I drape my legs over his shoulders as he drags his lips over my lower stomach. He moves so damn slow that it makes me wiggle and beg while my throbbing clit screams for his touch. I can feel him whisper words of praise across my skin and it ignites a fire inside of me.

I stare down at him while his mouth moves lower, wanting to see him kiss me there this time. I need to watch Timber do this to prove that he's really here and this isn't the best dream ever in the history of the world.

His hands and mouth are everywhere all at once and desire and hunger flash in his eyes. I have no idea what this might mean for us, but I want this even if it's only for tonight.

"Timber." I bring my hand to his short hair and his gaze flicks up to mine. He smirks again and the small act sets off a sensation deep in my stomach. I don't know what it is but it feels warm and fuzzy and I never want it to go away.

"Here?" he asks, brushing his nose against my clit. My hips jerk under him and my stomach tightens. He smiles bigger and I see he likes to tease me. My heart melts because I know I'm seeing a side to Timber no one does.

"Yes, there." I try to lift my hips but again his hold is too strong.

"I've got you now. No more getting away from me." He kisses my clit and it's like a shock to every inch of me.

"I don't want to get away from you." His tongue rolls over my folds and delves in between, once again giving me that shock of pleasure.

"Hmm." He hums against me as his tongue circles my clit.

"Timber, please," I beg as I feel like I'm going to come out of my skin.

"You don't pull away from me when I reach for you."

His tongue stops teasing me and I'm so close to cumming it's painful. It wouldn't take much to send me over the edge

again but my mind blanks. I have no idea what he's talking about.

“What?” I dig my fingers into his hair and try to shamelessly push him where I need him most. But a man like Timber is immovable.

“Say you won't run from me again and I'll give you what you want.”

“I'm not running,” I blurt out.

His eyes lock with mine and his face is as serious as I've ever seen. My admission must give him what he wants because all the tension leaves him.

He looks as if he's won some battle and something wicked crosses his face. I didn't know we were at war, but if Timber is battling with anyone, it's himself.

His big hands lift my ass off the bed and bring my pussy to his mouth. My nipples tighten painfully as I watch him lower his mouth and suck on me like a piece of ripe fruit.

I close my eyes tightly as the orgasm rolls over me and he doesn't stop when I cry out his name. Every part of me tingles with sensations and I've never felt more alive.

It goes on and on until it's too much and I can't take any more.

“Please,” I beg.

I feel him smile against me before he pulls his mouth away only to give me another long lick. I jerk again and my legs tighten right before my limbs give out. My eyes flutter open and I watch him as he slowly lowers me onto the bed. I can tell he doesn't want to stop and if my body could take it he would

still be going to town on my pussy. From the glint in his eyes I'm not sure he'd ever get enough. At least not tonight.

I reach for him and my arms feel heavy. I'm worried he's going to leave but the next thing I know he's moving in to lie down beside me. His big body spoons against mine and he holds me in a tight embrace. Sleep tries to take me but I don't want to close my eyes. I want to stay in this moment forever because who knows what tomorrow will bring?

Two more days, I remind myself, and I bury myself into him further. The storm is still going but it's quieter now and I wonder if it means it's moving away from us.

I don't know why Timber is the way he is, but for these next two days I'm going to cover him in affection if he'll let me. I won't chase him but I'm not going to hold back even if he thinks the storm has passed.

Chapter Eleven



TIMBER

Thwack.

The blade of the axe wedges into the wood and I curse. I let go of the handle and grab the log with my hands. I pull it apart and toss the pieces to the ground, then pick up the axe once again.

“I was under the impression the woodshed was overflowing with enough to last us several winters.” Simon’s voice is calm and soothing behind me but it still grates on my nerves.

“A tree fell down in the storm last night.” I raise my chin at the wood I’ve already cut through with the chainsaw earlier this morning.

“And you had to rush out and get to it before the sun was even up.” He sounds skeptical but I don’t acknowledge him. “Perhaps there was something you were running from after last night?”

“That’s none of your business,” I say matter-of-factly as I stack up another log to split.

“I think after the sounds the staff and I heard last night, it’s the whole castle’s business.”

I turn around to glare at him but he has an eyebrow raised and he's smirking. "Rest assured, it wasn't Miss Pippa we heard."

My face heats as I turn away from him and go back to the axe. I knew I was enthusiastic last night but I had no idea I'd been so...vocal. I didn't mean for it to happen. I just couldn't help myself.

"It doesn't matter," I mumble and swing the axe again.

"I think you'll find that the lady of the house doesn't agree with you."

She was wrapped around me so tight this morning when I woke up I wasn't sure where she ended and I began. Warmth went to parts of my body I didn't know were still alive and all I could think about was keeping her. Then the thought of her leaving in just two days washed over me like a cold shower and I had to get out of there. I couldn't pretend to play house with someone that would never stay with me. It's not like I could ask her to give up civilization for this life I lead out here in the middle of nowhere. As much as I want her, I can't pretend that she's mine.

"She's not the lady of the house." The words taste like dirt in my mouth. "She's a guest and nothing more. She'll be gone the day after tomorrow."

Simon sighs and I can feel his eyes on my back as I ignore him. I think about last night and what I did to her. The thoughts flash in front of me and they're brighter than the sun. I'm blinded by images of Pippa standing above me dripping wet with her soft pussy in my mouth. The tang of her juices on my tongue as she came apart in my arms. It hits me so hard I have to squeeze my eyes shut to try and ignore them. But it's useless.

“Miss Pippa has left.”

I swing around so fast that I almost trip over my own feet. “What?” The word echoes through the trees, and before I can wait on Simon to tell me why, I’m in motion.

“There was a mix-up with the floral deliveries and she was asked to go directly to the shop without delay.”

“And you just let her leave?” I roar. I curse myself for being so far out in the woods instead of closer to the castle. “She was supposed to stay on the property the whole time. That was the deal!”

“She did spend a great deal of time waiting for you to come back to the castle before she left.”

His words are like salt in the wound and I grit my teeth. “I can’t believe you let her go.”

“If I recall, I wasn’t the one who snuck out on her at first light.”

When I turn around to face Simon, I’m ready to knock his ass to the ground. But the stern look in his eyes anchors me in place and the feeling of father and son passes between us. He might not be my biological father, but Simon is the last tie I have to my parents and I know he cares for me. He looks out for me like a father would and I respect him. It’s the reason I let him so close to me and allow him to run the place. He has my best interest at heart, so even though his words sting, they aren’t wrong. There’s no use denying it and we both know it.

“I…” I open my mouth to say something, but how do I even begin to defend my actions? I let out a deep breath and he steps closer.

“I made sure Celia went with her. They should be back in a couple of hours.” I feel his hand squeeze my arm and I nod. “I

think you should go and get cleaned up, and while you do, think of something nice to do for her.”

“Like what?” I sound defeated even to my own ears.

“You’ll think of something.” He gives me a soft smile before he walks away towards the castle.

How do I apologize for leaving her bed after what we did last night? I’m not good with words and Simon knows it. That’s why he’s telling me to think of something I can do. I wrack my brain as I go inside and already I can feel that the castle is different.

She’s done something in the short amount of time she’s been here and I can’t put my finger on it. Pippa has a light around her that makes these stone walls feel warm and loved. Is that why I don’t want her to leave, because she’ll take the feeling with her? Or is it because she’ll take the feeling from me?

As I climb the stairs to my room I think about how she’s changed me and shaped a future I never thought possible. Thoughts of her and a life together form and suddenly I know exactly what to do.

Chapter Twelve



PIPPA

“He’s going to be pissed.” Celia sighs from the passenger seat of my car and my hand wraps around the steering wheel tighter.

He’s going to be pissed? I’m the one that’s pissed. I never get mad but it’s been a crappy day. From the moment I opened my eyes and found Timber gone, it’s been one thing after another making my day worse and worse.

“I don’t care,” I snip, letting my anger get the better of me. “Sorry,” I add quickly.

This isn’t her fault. She got volunteered by Simon to come with me when he saw I was leaving. The flowers had to be handled and the stupid internet was knocked out in the storm last night. I couldn’t get any of the pictures they were trying to send me to load, so I said I would go see them in person.

I needed to get out of the castle anyway. Every second that I sat there and Timber didn’t come for me, the more upset I got. If I wasn’t there then he couldn’t find me and I wouldn’t have to think about how he wasn’t even trying to. I refuse to chase that man. He willingly got out of bed this morning and left me alone after he all but demanded I never run from him again the night before. What a jerk. He doesn’t make any

sense. I was so sure he'd be there in the morning and it hurt when I saw how wrong I was.

What I hadn't counted on today when I left was another small storm and a nail in my tire. Not to mention the flowers look horrible. I had to cancel the whole order and now I have none. I don't know what I'm going to do but I have to figure it out. I won't let my sister down. I need to get it together because all I want to do right now is cry. I have to focus on the anger but I think I might be one of those people who cry when they get mad.

"Take a deep breath, honey. You got this." I nod in agreement at Celia's encouragement. I can do this. I couldn't change a flat tire but I can deal with some flowers.

I tried with all my might to get that damn tire off but it didn't budge. I'm so thankful some nice man stopped and helped us because my phone was dead and Celia hadn't brought hers.

I loosen my hold on the wheel and my hands still ache from the tire iron. I didn't know changing a tire would be so hard, but those stupid bolts were stuck. The man changed the tire in only a few minutes but not until I'd spent an hour trying in the pouring rain.

The gate to the castle opens before we even get to it. I pull up the long gravel driveway just glad to be back home. Okay. Not home, but where I'm living for now. I see Timber pacing back and forth until he spots my car. Then he's stalking out into the driveway and blocking the path for me to pull around to the side. Fine. I'll park right out front I guess.

"Just remember he's all bark," Celia says out the side of her mouth, but I'm not sure if she believes her own words judging by the look on her face.

Timber looks more than pissed, he looks livid. “I’m not scared of him.” I throw my car into park and he’s at my door pulling it open.

“Where have you been?” he barks, just like Celia predicted.

“Shut up,” I bite out, taking myself by surprise. Oh wow. I must really be mad.

I take off my seatbelt then get out of the car, ready to go. He reaches for me but I bat his giant hand away as I walk past him. I give myself a mental pat on the back as I hold my chin high.

“Shut up?” he repeats from behind me.

“Yeah. Shut up. Has no one ever told you to do that before?” I shout over my shoulder. “Oh wait. You’d have to talk for someone to tell you to shut up.”

Ha! I’ve never done anything like this with someone before but I think I nailed that one. Usually I’m a sweet talker according to my sister. But if that were true I’d have nice flowers instead of the shit ones they tried to give me today.

“Can I get you anything?” Simon asks as I enter into the house. He’s smiling so big at me that I can’t help but return one even in my anger.

“I need a hot shower and food,” I admit. “Then bed.”

“You do the first, and I’ll handle the second.”

“Thank you,” I tell him, ignoring the shell-shocked Timber beside me. “And thank you for coming with me, Celia.”

“We’ll find flowers, sweet girl. Worry about it tomorrow; today is done.” I smile and nod in agreement before walking up the stairs quickly to my room.

I try and slam my door, but when I don't hear it bang shut I look over my shoulder to see Timber caught it. He stands in my doorway, unmoving with an expression of shock and anger.

“Go away,” I tell him. I pull my wet shoes and socks off and toss them on the bathroom floor. He remains where he is, silent and unmoving. “Isn't there a tree you need to go murder?”

Still he says nothing.

I go for my shirt next and start to pull it over my head. Now he moves into my room and closes the door behind him. I take it off and toss it with my shoes and I watch as his eyes fill with heat and his jaw tightens. I know that look because I saw it in his eyes last night. I'm not looking for a repeat because I know how that turns out.

“Shocker. You can't speak.”

I roll my eyes as I bend over and take my jeans off next. Those are a fight to get off with how soaked they are. I start to fall over but his strong arms catch me easily. Against my better judgment I stare up into Timber's deep green eyes. My own eyes begin to water as emotions swell in my chest.

“You should have been there today. It should have been you changing my tire, not some random man,” I shout at him. His eyes soften but he looks almost pained. “Say something!”

“You told me to shut up.”

I almost laugh at his admission, but I guess that's better than crying. This is never going to work. He doesn't get it and he's breaking my heart. I wanted to be here for him but I'm not sure my heart can take it. I didn't realize how much of it he

held until today when he was gone and the ache was so deep and heavy.

“Timber, I think—” His mouth crashes down onto mine before I can tell him that maybe it’s time I go.

Chapter Thirteen



TIMBER

She smells like rain and flowers and I can't get close enough to her. Seeing her body slick and chilled called me and I had to go to her. Then when she started to fall over, I had no choice but to take her in my arms.

"Timber, I can't do this." She pushes against my chest and the hollow of my heart aches.

"I'm so sorry, I should have been there." I press my forehead to hers but I can still feel her tense body trying to reject me.

"It's fine. Someone came to help us." She looks away and I can't take it.

"No." I take her chin in my hand and turn her to face me. "I should have been there when you woke up this morning. I shouldn't have gotten scared and left."

"What were you so afraid of?" I can see the outline of hope in her eyes and watch as she cautiously stops trying to move away from me.

"I've never done this before, never felt this much before. I don't know what I'm doing and I know I screwed it up but you have to stay. I could see the idea in your head even before you

got out of the car. You want to get away from here, and I don't blame you."

"Timber, I—"

"I'll follow you," I say, cutting her off. "If you want to leave, I won't stop you, but I won't leave you again. I know this castle is in the middle of nowhere and I don't have much to offer other than money. I'm quiet and grouchy, but there's nothing I love more than seeing your presence fill these cold rooms."

She softens against me as I place a kiss on her cheek.

"You've come in and scared the hell out of me with how much I need you. You've turned everything I had upside down and the thought of you being miserable here made me run away this morning. I don't want to hold you back and I don't deserve you. But goddamn it, I won't let you out of my sight ever again and if that means moving to the city and following you around like a dog, then so be it."

"I was so mad and hurt this morning when I woke up. After all the promises you made me last night you just disappeared. How do I know you won't do it all over again?"

"Because I can't put either of us through that again." I get down on my knees in front of her and peel the wet denim off her feet. I toss it aside and curse myself once again for letting her out of my grasp. "I was a fool to convince myself I could let you go. But there's some kind of magic you've brought to this castle and suddenly we're all awake." I take the small box out of my pocket and open it while I stay on my knees. "My heart beats because I've fallen in love. I'm alive because of you."

She gasps as I open the box and reveal the diamond ring nestled inside.

“Holy cow,” she whispers, putting her hand over her mouth.

“I know this may seem sudden but you don’t understand what you’ve done to me. When I heard you’d left today I thought I’d lost it all and I vowed to never let that happen again. So that’s what this is, Pippa. It’s my vow, my promise to never ever leave you again and to always take care of you. To keep you, and cherish you, and love you. Forever.”

“Timber.” More tears well in her eyes as I slip the ring on her finger.

“You don’t have to answer yet, and you don’t have to say it back. I love you, so let me prove to you that I’m telling you the truth. Let me gain your trust and your love while I give you all of mine.”

Before she can answer I’m off my knees and pulling her into my arms. I might not give her a chance to answer me, but her legs wrap around my waist and her fingers dive into my hair and that’s good enough for me. When her mouth opens and her tongue searches for mine, I know I’ve got her at least interested in the idea of being mine forever.

Maybe Simon didn’t intend for me to go this overboard on doing something nice for her, but I have two speeds: fast and fucking fast. I know myself and my own mind well enough to know when I want something to go for it. I had planted my own seeds of doubt last night while holding her in my arms, but I won’t allow that to happen again. Pippa is the one for me and in the time we’ve spent together I’ve fallen in love with her. Everyone here could see it except me, and although it

might have taken me a hot second to catch up, I'm here and I'm not moving.

I lay her down on the edge of the bed with her ass hanging off just slightly. I don't break the kiss as I reach between us and grab the edge of her wet panties. I give them a hard tug and the material snaps at her hips, baring her pussy for me. I kiss down her body, kneeling on the floor, and hold her ass there with both of my hands. I lick the slick seam of her puffy lips and taste the now familiar tang of her desire on my tongue.

"Timber," she moans, raising her hips, begging me to lick her where she needs it most.

I'm in no mood to tease as I flick my tongue across her clit and then cover her with my mouth. I suck on her greedily while I grip her ass tight and move her pussy against me. I need her pleasure, I need her release because otherwise I might go insane without it.

When she begins to climax, I double my efforts, desperate to have the taste of it in my mouth. Her body tightens and she moans louder as I growl encouragement against her. My cock is weeping in my jeans and I'm so eager to be inside of this sweet warmth that I don't know how much longer I can stand it.

Her pussy is like a ripe peach, slick and sweet as she falls over the edge of pleasure. I lap at her like a kitten with cream and don't miss a drop. She purrs and I smile against her, thinking how appropriate that response is.

When I look up I see her playing with her nipples and the sparkle of the ring on her finger catches my eye. She's mine now and I'm going to make certain of it in every way possible.

I jerk open the front of my jeans and push them down just enough to free my cock. It juts out thick and proud between us with the rounded head dark and desperate. I grab the base and slide it through her honeyed lips, feeling the heat of her pussy wrap around it.

“I need you,” I manage to choke out as I slide in just a few inches. Her tight channel barely lets me in and I groan, making her take more. “Please.”

“It’s too big.” Her hips struggle against my hold and I slide out a little as she tries to back up.

“It’s not too big, I’ll be gentle.” I hold her hips steady as I sink back into her and feel her hot sheath squeeze me. “That’s it, good girl.”

She moans but doesn’t fight me, and I keep going a few more inches at a time.

She cries out just when the barrier of her virginity breaks and I thrust all the way inside. When I do, I gather her against me and pull her to my body. I kneel down on the floor so she can straddle me as I wrap her in my arms. She pulls at my shirt and I take it off so we can be skin on skin in every way imaginable.

I kiss her everywhere my lips can touch as she settles onto my cock. I hold her ass and rock her slowly and gently until she can get used to it. I had a feeling my sweet angel would be just as sweet and innocent as she is and my cock is bigger and harder than ever before because it’s inside her.

“I love you,” I whisper against her neck as I lift her a little and then slide her back down. She might be on top of my cock, but I’m still the one in control. I can tell from the way she

moans and the way she grips me tight that she doesn't have a problem with it.

She cries out as I slip a finger around the back of her and against her ass. I press it there and tease her as she wiggles on my cock. Her pussy tightens and I swear to God if she does it again I'm going to lose control. It's taking everything in me to not cum just like this and she's making it more difficult by the second.

Her breath catches as I lift her and then slide her back down. I make sure my cock glides over her clit with every thrust, and before she knows it, she's riding me.

"It's so deep inside me, I can feel you everywhere."

I kiss her breastbone then lick my way up her neck. I pinch her nipple and bite the shell of her ear at the same time and she cries out.

"I'm not going to last but you keep on going, sweet girl. He's not going anywhere any time soon."

I hold her against me just as the dam breaks and I can't hold back any longer. She wiggles her hips as my heat floods her body and a rush of hot pleasure shoots through my veins. It's heavy and even though I know my cock is drained, the feeling of cumming goes on and on.

It's so hard that I see spots on the edge of my vision and I'm glad I'm already on the ground or I might have hit the floor. Her tight wet heat grips me and her own orgasm is triggered by mine. I hold her steady as I thrust into her, unwilling to let her take over. It's my honor to make her cum and I'll be damned if she takes it from me.

I'm still hard and throbbing inside of her even when the last of her orgasm has run through her. I move my hands

slower now that we're both not in a frenzy of need, but I don't want her any less than the second I walked in this room. I don't think there will ever be a time when I don't ache for her like this.

"Now this time I want you under me," I say, standing up with her still on my cock.

"Again?" Her eyes widen in surprise. "I thought you'd need a second, or..." She looks down to where we're joined as I flex my cock inside her.

"I'm just getting started."

Chapter Fourteen



PIPPA

I let out a small surprised scream when my feet leave the floor as Timber picks me up and sets me on the kitchen counter. It's probably the only empty space at the moment since the food is over-flowing in here and everyone is getting ready for tonight.

"Got you," he says with a grumpy look on his face. "You move fast for someone so tiny." I laugh because I don't think I'm tiny. Short maybe, but not tiny. Besides, to Timber everyone is small.

"I'm busy."

I've been going since my feet hit the floor this morning. Time is ticking until not only the party, but until my sister gets here. I want her to see that I have everything under control. That we are ready to rock and roll and all she needs to do is ready herself. I'm sure she'll be wound up because she wasn't able to be here to make sure everything is perfect. She can be a bit of a perfectionist and I want her to relax for once and enjoy herself tonight. She's been working too much and I'm going to have to bite my tongue so I don't say something to her boss.

"I miss you," he whispers against my neck, and I melt into him.

I thought he was grouchy because he's going to have to go to a party tonight. Nope, it's because the party was keeping me too busy to shower him with attention. How quickly things have changed in such a short time.

"I miss you too," I sigh, enjoying his warmth and how easily this came for us.

He wasn't joking when he said he wanted me and that he was sorry for pushing me away. He's spent every moment proving that. He's even been pitching in with helping with the party. He has to because he's usually distracting me and I forget what I'm doing and end up back in bed with him. Okay, it isn't always a bed but it's always with my back pressed up against something while we find pleasure in each other.

I pull back from kissing him and I hate that I have to, but after tonight this will all be over with. We're not doing any more crazy party-planning because I don't want to feel like I'm about to pull my hair out. Who knew planning a party could be so freaking stressful? If it were up to me it would be Timber and me alone to enjoy each other with no interruptions.

"I didn't come to steal a kiss." He smirks and the look is killer. I have to stop myself from pulling him back down to me and kissing him all over again.

"Oh, I know what you want." I wiggle my eyebrows playfully, then I hear Celia clear her throat, reminding us we're in the kitchen with other people. There's a full-on cooking crew around us and I swear I forgot about everyone else with one look from Timber.

"I always want that, but the flowers are here."

I told Timber about the whole flower mess the next morning when I woke up and he told me to let him handle it. So I did. If he wanted to handle the flowers then so be it; I knew that he'd make it perfect.

He pulls me off the counter and my diamond reflects in the light. Timber hasn't brought up the ring or the fact that I haven't answered him. He still says he loves me but I find myself scared to say the words back and to tell him I'll marry him. I think I still have a tiny fear that he could change his mind and go running for the hills. That I'll wake up one morning and he'll be gone even though nothing he's done since he put the ring on my finger has shown me otherwise. I can't believe that I've somehow tamed the beast inside the castle and now he's all mine.

He guides me towards the front of the house and everyone moves out of the way. There are people everywhere and they're all in a hurry. They're either decorating or getting the chairs and tables set up. It's organized chaos and I can't believe I've done it.

"I hope our wedding isn't this big. I think we should do something smaller," Timber says as we walk out the front door. I almost trip over my own feet because it catches me off guard, but his arm comes around me and keeps me from falling.

He lets out a deep laugh so loud that Simon turns around from where he's standing to look at us. I can't help but smile because I adore the sound of his happiness.

"Are you excited about the flowers?" I nod, thinking *yeah, we'll go with that for now.*

"I told you I'd take care of it."

I stop and stare as thousands of beautiful flowers come flowing from a crew of white vans in the driveway. People bustle past us carrying bushels inside and every one of them is breathtaking.

“There are so many,” I say in awe. Did he get every flower in the city? He plucks one from a giant vase passing by and gives it to me.

“This one smells like you. It’s why I picked it.” I stare at the beautiful white flower before bringing it to my nose. The smell of sweet creamy peaches fills my nose as the soft petals brush against my skin. “It’s called a frangipani.”

“It’s perfect.” I tilt my head back, offering Timber another kiss.

I’m going to marry this man. I love him and I think I have since that very first day. It was too easy to give in to living with him. I gave him crap about running from me but now here I am hiding behind fear.

“Timber,” I say against his mouth. Should I tell him now or wait until we’re alone?

“Pippa!”

I turn my head at the sound of my sister’s voice. She’s practically running up the long driveway since the white vans have blocked the path. She can freaking move for a woman with heels and a tight pencil skirt on. Her eyes are wide as they bounce between Timber and me.

“Hey!” I raise a hand, giving a little wave, but drop it quickly when I see my engagement ring. This might not be the time for her to learn about all that. She could blow a gasket. She has a party to focus on and we can talk about that later because I know she’s going to say we got engaged too quick. I

put my hand behind my back as casually as possible. I can at least wait until the party is over. She'll find out when she sees I won't be coming back home with her. That thought sets me off kilter for a moment. *I won't be going home because this is my home now.* Warmth blooms inside me and excitement bubbles up.

Myra stops when she reaches us and I go in for a hug because she just stands there looking between us.

"You were kissing him," she says in my ear while she hugs me back.

"Yeah, sometimes people kiss," I tease and pull away. "Timber, this is my sister Myra. Myra, this is Timber Grayson." He holds his hand out to shake my sister's and her mouth falls open.

She recovers quickly like she always does because this is what she's good at. "The same Mr. Grayson who wouldn't bother to answer a call from me?" She raises one of her perfect eyebrows at him while keeping her voice soft.

"The one you sent me to come talk to," I slip in, and she drops his hand. Timber only shrugs like he doesn't have a care in the world and then she's the one to chuckle.

"Thank you for letting us use your home for the party." She smiles, but it doesn't meet her eyes. "If you don't mind, I'd love a moment alone with my baby sister."

"Of course," Timber agrees, but he doesn't look like he wants to. "You can use my office." He wraps an arm around my shoulder as he guides me back into the house.

I have to fight not to laugh because I know neither of them will find this funny. Timber wants me back in the house and I

can feel the tension in his body. The sound of my sister's heels on the marble floor alerts me that she's following us.

"I'm not going anywhere," I whisper to reassure him. I feel a trace of tension leave his body and he kisses me on top of the head. As he opens one of the doors to his office, he ushers me in and holds the door open for my sister too.

"I'll make sure everything is going as you instructed," he says with his eyes locked on me.

"Thank you." I smile brightly to try to reassure him that everything is going to be fine.

My sister might lose her cool when she finds out everything, but she'll have to learn to deal with it. I know she wants to say something but we are in his house, a house he's letting us use for a party. She'll bite her tongue for now or at least until the door closes.

"Give me a kiss," I say to Timber as I tilt my head back and rise up on my tiptoes. After he does as I ask, I pat him on the chest. "I'll be out in a few. I still need to get ready." I wink at him, letting him know he can help me get ready. He lets out a long sigh before stepping back and letting the door close. When I turn to face my sister she's got her hands on her hips.

"Is that a ring on your finger?" she asks.

I look down at my beautiful engagement ring, knowing now that Timber put it there, it's never leaving. I have no idea how I thought I was going to hide it since it's unmissable. I shouldn't have tried to hide it to begin with and it's probably what put Timber on edge. He doesn't miss anything when it comes to me.

"Looks like we're planning another party!" I smile at her at my desperate attempt to lighten the mood. She shakes her

head no. “Myra.”

I walk over and grab her hand and then pull her onto the sofa. I’m going to have to talk her down.

“I’ve only been gone a few weeks and you’re getting married?!” she shouts.

I don’t know if she’s trying to reason with me or process the news herself. I want to tell her I love him, but Timber will be the first person who hears that. I should’ve said it the first time we made love.

“When you know you know.” I nudge her shoulder with mine.

I was never one to date and knew that when I found the one I’d likely fall head over heels. It’s how I am and I know that about myself.

“You always lead with your heart. I just don’t want you to get hurt.” She reaches out and grabs my hand.

It’s too late for that. The man already has my heart whether we’re married or not. I have a feeling my sister knows that too and it’s why she’s not totally losing it. There’s no going back.

“I’m happy here. This is what I’ve been searching for.” It’s the truth. I was drifting with no idea what I was going to do with my life. Now I feel at peace inside and I’m no longer looking for what’s coming. Timber is it.

“Okay.” She lets out a long sigh. “We have a party to finish getting ready for before my asshole of a boss shows up.” She smiles as she says it and I laugh and hug her.

“You should quit,” I tease her.

“I’m going to.” Now I’m the one to stare in shock. “I think I’ll live it up tonight and go out with a bang.”

She smirks and I know she's not joking. She's got that look in her eyes. The one she gets when she's done. For the first time I actually feel bad for that jerk. He's not going to know what hit him.

Chapter Fifteen



TIMBER

I'm on the stairs near my office waiting for Pippa to come out. I don't know why I'm so nervous, but maybe it's because she still hasn't said *I love you* back. I know she does, I can see it in her eyes, she just has to be brave enough to say the words.

There's a noise behind me and I turn around thinking I must have imagined it. But after a second I hear something again. I glance at my office one last time before curiosity gets the better of me and I climb the stairs away from Pippa and towards the sound.

The last time I saw Simon he was dealing with the florists. He's the only one besides Pippa and me allowed up there and the sound has the back of my neck tingling.

"Hey, in here," I hear someone hiss.

My brows furrow as I climb the stairs faster. Did someone sneak in here without us knowing? I shove my phone in my jeans and hit the number on my cell. It sends a signal to the security who have been watching the outside of the house all day. I don't know how long it will take them to get here but I'm not taking any chances.

"There's got to be something we can grab," another voice says from the end of the hall.

I slow my approach, the carpet cushioning my steps, and get closer to the bedroom I put Pippa in when she first got here. Most of it has been moved out and it's in my room now. The one we call ours.

“This place is a fucking castle. There's probably gold bars laying around.” I hear a shuffle and then someone else talks.

“She must not suck dick because I don't see any jewelry.”

My vision turns red and I ball my fists up as I move right outside the door. I raise my foot and with one swift kick, the ancient dark wood splinters and it disintegrates. The air is filled with dust and debris as I stand there fuming and waiting for it to clear. Once I can see through the cloud of wood, I see two young shitheads standing in our bedroom with wide eyes of terror locked on me.

“You two fuckers are dead!” I bellow and I can hear it echo off the walls. That's when I hear the pounding of footsteps behind me as my security team no doubt got the page.

“Oh shit!” one of the little bitches cries as he's frozen in place.

“Mr. Grayson?”

I hear the security guard behind me as I walk slowly towards the guys who are wearing shirts that have the logo for the chair rental company on them. I grind my teeth knowing they should have been long gone but must have stayed behind to snoop.

“We're sorry, mister, we were just—”

“Lost,” the other guy finishes, but he knows I'm not buying it.

“Take the young men into custody. I’ve called the authorities,” Simon says in his cool calm voice. “Just as they were leaving the flowers were delivered and the headcount was miscalculated. These were the two that were unaccounted for.”

“Please arrest us,” one of them calls over my shoulder to Simon as I stalk closer.

“You’re smarter than you look,” I growl low in my chest.

I want to beat on these little shits for breaking into my house and thinking they could take something. I want to turn them into pulp for disrespecting my woman and coming anywhere near her possessions. I want to get out all of my fears and frustrations on them, so that I can feel better.

I grab the closest one by the collar of his shirt and lift him off the ground. His face turns white as a sheet and I toss him over to where the security is standing and he crumples to the ground, moaning.

The other guy stupidly tries to run and I grab him by the scruff of the neck and haul him up in the air. I toss him into a pile with his friend and he hits the other one with his face and I hear a crunch. When security pulls him off the floor, his nose is bloody and I do feel a little better at seeing it.

“Timber.”

The sound of my name on those lips would call me back from the dead. I turn around to see Pippa rushing towards me just as the guards take the proverbial trash out. I wrap her in my arms and hold her close, breathing in her scent. A calm peace washes over me—the effect her touch always has on me.

“Can you handle everything?” I ask Simon, who is looking at the busted door frame.

“Don’t I always?” He smiles at me and I nod.

“Where’s your sister?” I ask as I carry Pippa out of her old bedroom and down the hall to our room.

“She’s checking in with the caterers in the kitchen and going over the seating charts. I came to find you and get ready.”

I bury my face in her neck as I walk into our room and kick the door shut behind us.

“Timber, what the hell just happened?”

“I can’t lose you,” I say as I kiss down her throat and walk towards the bed.

“Lose me?” I can hear the smile in her voice as I put her on her back and start to unbutton her shirt.

“The thought of someone coming in here and trying to take you from me—” I grit my teeth because I can’t finish the sentence. I’m so angry again at just the thought I rip open the front of her shirt. Buttons fly as material rips and the sight of her pink lacy bra covering her breasts does little to calm me.

“Hey.” She cups my cheek and I look into her eyes. “I love you, Timber.”

I still at her words and blink to make sure I heard her right. “What?”

“I said I love you. I should have said it the first time we made love, but I was scared.”

“And you’re not now?” I lean into her touch and move between her legs.

“Never when I’m with you.”

She pulls me down to her and I press my lips to hers. The kiss is gentle at first, but the moment I feel her tongue slide against mine, all bets are off.

“Yes, I love you and yes, I’ll marry you.”

“You will?” My heart swells as I stare into her eyes and see my future before me. It was unknown for so long, but now that I have my Pippa my path is clear.

“I will.” She nods and I kiss her again.

Her body wraps around mine as I reach between us and unbutton her jeans. I push them over her hips and down her legs until I can yank them off of her. She’s not wearing any panties because I still haven’t replaced the ones I got rid of when I moved her in here. As I drag my hand between her legs and her damp slit, I’m thankful I never did.

“Fuck, I need to eat it.” I lick my lips as I move down her body and onto my knees.

She spreads her legs wide and without shame as I grip her ass and bring her pussy to my mouth. One long languid lick between her soft lips and I can taste her desire. She’s rich and tangy and oh-so-fucking sweet as I suckle on her mound. My cock was here not more than a few hours ago, and I’m desperate for it once again.

“Goddamn, it’s like a drug.” I lick her again and she cries out as she grips the sheets. “You’ve made me addicted to this. It’s your fault I can’t have you without the taste of this sweet cunt on my tongue.”

“Timber, don’t tease.” She wiggles and raises her pussy to try and get closer to my mouth.

“You tease with the way you keep this between your legs and don’t share it with me,” I grumble as I eat her like a ripe peach.

“I never tell you no,” she moans, her breath catching.

“And you never will.” I slide two fingers into her tight little pussy and it grips me as I rub her sweet spot inside. “That’s it, right there.”

“Timber!” she shouts, and her body has no choice but to fall over the edge and cum for me.

I lap it up like the greedy bastard I am and hum my appreciation. “There’s nothing sweeter.”

When the last of her orgasm has left her I move up her body and undo my jeans. My cock falls into my hand, thick and swollen with need. It’s hot and the end of it is wet with cum so I smooth it down my shaft and slick it up. I jack it off a few times right before I line it up at her entrance and slide it all the way home. Her wet hot heat squeezes me tight and I have to force myself to stay calm and not cum right that second.

“Always so perfect,” I groan, lying on top of her.

Her lips find mine and I love the taste of her being shared between us. It’s dirty and yet so fucking intimate. I crave this closeness and don’t know if I’ll ever get enough.

“I love you,” she says against my mouth and it’s enough to undo me.

“Again,” I grit out as I pull out and thrust back in. “Say it again.”

“I love you.” She arches her back and closes her eyes while I sink deeper and deeper into her.

“I get bigger every time you say it.” Her body is slick with sweat and I slide over it as I enter her with my heavy cock. It’s so full and tight that I know I won’t last much longer.

“I love you!” she cries out and I feel another climax rock through her as her pussy pulses and slicks my path.

“Fuck,” I groan as I hold myself deep and the rush of my own orgasm hits me. Hot cum fills her pussy and leaks out between us as I empty every drop of myself into her. “I love you.”

She moans and rubs my back, her legs falling limp on the bed. I can hear the hum of appreciation as I lie on her and try not to smother her with my weight. I should roll over or pull her on top of me, but I’m not ready to leave this embrace. I love being on her like this and having her under me. It feels like I’m protecting her and keeping her safe.

When I feel her lips on my cheek I turn my head to the side to meet them. Our kisses are slower now and not as rushed, but I know we don’t have much longer.

“I need to get dressed. People will be here soon.” She rubs her nose against mine to soften the blow and it works.

“You’re lucky you agreed to let me be your date.”

“I wonder what would have happened if I hadn’t said yes?” She smiles at me as her hands rub across my chest and I see the diamond on her finger flash.

I snatch her hand and kiss the ring as I look into her eyes. “We’re never going to find out.”

“Never,” she agrees, and I lean down and kiss her once again.

Epilogue



PIPPA

Six weeks later...

I wiggle around because I'm too excited to sit still.

"You got ants in your pants?" my sister teases me. She's smiling and her pink lipstick is flawless. We're both all done up but there's one thing left to do. I have a feeling I already know the answer, but I want to be sure before I get Timber's hopes up.

"No pants," I remind her as I point to my robe.

I'm not putting on my big fluffy dress until after, because who knows how hard it's going to be to pee with that thing on. The dress is only going on and off one more time and the last time it comes off will be when Timber is my husband.

"She's almost here."

Before Myra can finish her sentence there's a knock at the door. My sister darts over towards the door and for a moment looks almost as excited as I am about this. She can be hard to read sometimes but I saw it in her eyes just now. She hides things all too well. She opens the door and reaches out to take the bag from someone before turning and shutting it behind her so we're alone again.

She holds the bag out, letting it dangle from her finger. I run over to her and then remember that my hair is styled and I can't mess it up. I snatch it from her before taking it over to the bed and dumping it out.

"How many did you get?" I laugh. "I only need one."

I grab one and Myra picks up another. She licks her lips, suddenly looking nervous. I already told her I'm pretty sure I'm pregnant. She was excited for Timber and me, but like me she wants a test to be sure so we don't get worked up before we know for sure. She probably wants to know if she should start planning a baby shower and she'll want all the time she can get.

"I'm going to take one too," she finally says and my eyes almost pop out of my head.

"You little sneak. Who have you been giving it up to?" I playfully smack her on the arm with the pregnancy test. How the hell is she pregnant? She's spent all of her time here planning the wedding after she quit her job. I tried to talk her out of it because I wanted something small. It was going to be small but Myra insisted she make it perfect for us. I let her because for the first time in a long time she wasn't working herself to the bone every second of the day. Not only that, she's been here getting to know Timber. I want them to be close so I let it go. Timber didn't seem to mind her running around the castle barking orders. I think he was happy someone else was doing the event planning this time and he had me all to himself.

"Wait." If she's taking a test now that means this likely happened before all this wedding stuff started. I try to think back but I can't think of anyone because she never dates.

“Stop trying to guess.” This time she hits my arm with the test. “I should have kept my mouth shut. Besides, you’ve kept enough from me.” She points the test at me and raises one of her perfect eyebrows.

“I wasn’t really keeping Timber a secret,” I defend. She was busy, plus I knew she’d lose it if she found out I was living with a man while she was away for work. She would’ve been back on a plane home and that’s why I don’t know who it is! It happened when she was away.

“Let’s just take the test.” I know she’s not going to tell me. I can see her mind is made up and she’s freaking out on the inside.

“You’re right. Let’s take the test,” I agree. I lock my arm with hers. “I’m here for you.”

Myra and I have done a lot of things together, but I never thought peeing on a pregnancy test would be one of them.

“I know.” She pushes me towards the toilet area. “You go first.” I rush over and do mine then move out of the way for her to take her turn.

After we both clean up we stand there and wait together.

“You going to tell me who?” I ask as hers comes up pregnant before mine. It almost appears immediately, which makes me think she’s further along than I am.

“Not today.” I can tell she’s freaking out but she’s smiling too.

Mine starts to slowly show two lines next and relief and excitement build inside me.

“We’re pregnant,” I say out loud.

I turn to face my sister, who had a giant role in raising me and is going to walk me down the aisle today. But oddly enough I know it's her who needs words of encouragement right now. Between her and Timber, I know my life is going to be wonderful. I will have everything I could ever dream of.

I grab her hands and look into her eyes. "You'll make a wonderful mom. I know that because you've been one for me." Her eyes begin to water and she pulls me into a hug.

"We're having babies together." She squeezes me tighter and I can't help but smile so big it hurts my face.

"It's crazy but this was meant to be." I pull back to look at her. "You sent me right to my happily ever after. You're going to get yours too."

"Not everyone gets a happily ever after, Pippa." She plays with the end of my hair and I realize I'm not used to seeing her look so uncertain.

"You will," I reassure her.

I can feel it and she deserves it. She's spent her whole life worrying about everyone else. I can't believe fate wouldn't give her someone like Timber for her very own. I know he would argue, saying I was brought to him, but I need him too. We fit together perfectly and my sister is going to have that one day.

"Let's get you married."

"I get to tell Timber." I buzz with excitement. "Help me put on this thing." I pull her from the bathroom and strip out of my robe. It takes the two of us to get me into it, but once I'm there it fits perfectly.

"You look beautiful." I know the dress is a little extra but I'm getting married in a castle. I had to pick out a dress fit for

a princess.

“You don’t look so bad yourself.” I nudge my sister. She always looks killer in any dress. She can roll around in heels all day and not be fazed. I have no idea how she does it. I’m happy my dress covers my feet and I can rock flats. Plus I’m going to dance tonight and it’s going to be a party. It might be a small one, but it’s going to be the best one ever.

My sister picks up her phone and is texting to tell them we’re coming down. “They’re ready,” she confirms.

“They must be tired from holding Timber back,” I tease as we lock arms and leave the room together.

“He’s been a handful today.”

I snort because I’m sure he has. If Timber can’t be next to me he’s like a bear with a thorn in his paw. We thought he was grumpy before but it’s worse when he goes a few hours without kissing or touching me. The man is starved for me and I eat up every bit of his affection and give it back with all I have in me. I want to shower him in love and I will for eternity.

We stop at the top of the stairs and I smile down when I see Timber at the bottom. The whole entryway is covered in frangipani flowers and my eyes well again. His whole face lights up when he looks up to see me standing there.

I’m coming, I mouth to him, knowing he’s about to bolt up the stairs to get me. I nod towards my sister so he knows it’s important that she does this. I peek over at her as the music starts but she doesn’t move and looks almost shocked. I follow her line of sight and see her boss. What the hell is he doing here?

“Is that—” I start to whisper.

“Let’s do this.” She takes my arm and finally starts to move. We descend the stairs together.

When we reach the bottom I turn to her and we share a moment. She kisses both my cheeks before passing me over to Timber, who pulls me into his arms. He lifts me off my feet and makes me laugh just before it’s silenced with a kiss.

“We’re not there yet,” the officiant cuts in with a laugh and everyone else cheers.

I pull back a little to whisper in his ear. “I love you,” I tell him.

“I love you too,” he says instantly.

“Now put me down so we can get married.”

“I don’t have to put you down for that.”

I laugh harder in his hold and kiss him below his ear. “Well, I’m pregnant so I guess you might want to enjoy being able to lift me while you still can,” I tease. I could be twenty months pregnant and Timber could still lift me, but it’s my way of telling him.

His hold on me tightens a little as he leans in. “Give me another kiss.”

I do as he says and kiss him deeply, not caring everyone is watching us. I slide down his body as he puts me on my feet and kisses the tip of my nose.

“You knew, didn’t you?” I say, scrunching my nose. He smiles so big my heart grows three sizes. His smile kills me.

“You’ve been knitting baby clothes.” I bite my lip. Busted. I was just preparing, but with the way we’ve been going at it this was bound to happen sooner or later.

“Are you two ready?” The officiant breaks us from our little whisper fest.

“I’ve been ready since I got here,” I admit.

“That’s good because I’m not letting you go.” Timber pulls me into his side and I lean into him while he becomes my husband.

I’m never going anywhere because I’m home.

Epilogue



TIMBER

Ten years later...

My oldest son helps me stack up the wood we chopped earlier this morning. He's getting so big and when I look at him I can see he's growing up. He's not my little guy anymore and it makes my chest hurt. I love seeing him becoming a young man, but I miss him as a baby. He was the first to make us parents but certainly not the last.

Just as soon as I have the thought my wife comes out of the house bouncing our two-year-old on her hip. I smile at the sight, how beautiful she is and how she still takes my breath away. Even after having six kids she still looks as beautiful as the first day I saw her standing in the same spot. I knew I'd never not want her, and even now I ache to have her in my arms.

"Is this enough, Dad?"

I look at the pile we've just made and then out to the woodshed. "I think that's enough for today. Good work, son." I pat him on the back and he takes off to go join his other brothers playing basketball. Or at least attempting to. As the oldest, I'm sure he's about to go tell them exactly what they're doing wrong and how they need to do it his way.

Pippa brings our baby girl over to me and I meet her halfway with a kiss. I reach around to squeeze her ass and she pretends to be shocked and smacks my hand away. It's this cute thing she likes to do where she pretends she doesn't want me to do it. But I'll never quit because of the way she cuts her eyes at me after I do it. We both know she still loves it.

"It's nap time, Daddy," she says softly to me before she leans up and gives me another kiss. "Just thought I'd tell you."

"My favorite time of the day." I wink at her as I take the baby and hold her high in the sky before I blow a raspberry on her belly. She giggles and I walk her around the garden a few times before she begins to yawn.

Like clockwork Celia comes out and takes her from me and she and Simon bring out snacks for the kids. I slip away back inside the castle in search of my wife.

It doesn't take me long before I hear the water running. I move up the stairs and down the hall to find her in her old bathroom. The one where I tasted her for the first time. This room is a special place for us and one we like sneaking off to. With six kids we usually get company throughout the night so our own bed has become the family bed. But this room will always be our sweet escape.

When I walk in, I see her soaking in the tub with a smile on her face. I immediately strip off my clothes and get in, needing this time to reconnect with her. We're pulled in so many different directions each day that we have to carve out this time for ourselves. It's important to us and to our kids that they have parents who are connected and in love. Even if it's just for an hour a day, I get Pippa. Not my kids' mother, or soccer coach, or girl scout leader, or all the other amazing

things she does. For a small time every day I get her. This is the woman I fell in love with and who I want by my side. Seeing her eyes soften when she looks at me recharges my own soul and reminds me how goddamn lucky I am.

“No nap today?” I tease as I pull her onto my lap.

“I wasn’t sleepy.” She wraps her arms around my neck and her legs encircle my waist.

“Me either.”

She raises her hips and slowly lowers herself onto my waiting cock. It’s hard and ready for her and she isn’t afraid to take it. I lick my way down her neck and to her breasts where her nipples are tight and wet. It’s been a few months since she stopped breastfeeding but she still lets me play with them enough so that I can taste her when I want to. She’s sweet and supple as my tongue drags along the bud and I growl my appreciation.

“You drive me wild,” I groan. Her hips rock against me and my cock slides deeper.

“That’s the idea, isn’t it?” Her smile is evil as she works her pussy to take more of me.

My head falls back and I feel like she’s everywhere all at once. It’s pleasure and love and something so deep I can’t put a word to it, but it’s ours and it’s forever.

“Mine,” I say, gripping her hips and taking over. I slide my thumb over her clit and her legs open farther so I can play with her like this.

“Yours,” she agrees, leaning back and letting me do the work.

Her body is so attuned to mine after all these years that we can do this in the dark and just by touch. I know every secret place that she likes to be touched and exactly when to do it.

“Wait on me.” I use my stern voice but I can tell by the color of her cheeks she’s close and she’s not going to stop. “Pippa,” I scold, but she whines as she grinds down on my cock.

“I can’t.”

Just then I feel her pussy tighten and she falls over the edge and cums hard and fast. I have no choice but to go over with her and hold her close as hot waves of pleasure take over. I kiss her neck and then her lips while we both come down from our quick high. She smiles against me because we both know that once is never enough.

“How about you let me take you in the shower and you can try out that new setting I put on for you.”

Her eyes widen and she wiggles on my hard cock. I groan.

“I think I can handle that.” She kisses me and it’s always so damn perfect. Just like she is.

The day she walked into this castle she forever changed my fate. She made these walls of stone turn into something more than just a home. It’s now a place filled with love and laughter and so much noise. But in the best way possible. She’s my warm fire on a cold winter night. She’s a good book in my favorite chair while the leaves change colors. She’s warm cinnamon and pumpkin and every other thing I love all rolled into one.

She’s cozy and she’s mine.

THE END!

The Winter Groom



Curt Adler was told to take the young woman home. Nothing more. But when he sees her living conditions, he can't in good conscience leave her behind. Also, he might be falling in love with her.

Demi has been left behind, forgotten, and tossed aside her whole life. But when Curt turns his protective gaze on her, all she wants to do is stay safe in his arms forever.

Warning: Can the two of them keep their hands off each other? Why would you want them to!? Kick off this wintery mix of sugar and spice in Hollow Oak!

Chapter One



DEMI

Run.

That's what my mind screams as I stand at the bar waiting for the man that hired me for the night to come back and collect me. I'd been dismissed from the table before I could even get the meal I'd been promised. Everyone should get a last meal. I was hoping to get that before I tried to make some kind of escape, but it might not even be possible now. My eyes flick to the emergency exits around the restaurant to find the closest one.

My plan was to get Sherman Hawthorne drunk. He's already downed three whiskeys but is still coherent. I was hoping whatever that white powder I'd found in my mom's nightstand drawer would help at some point. I was going to try and slip it into one of his drinks, but the two guards he had with him made it impossible.

One of them looms close to his table, their attention no longer on me right now. This is my chance. I could escape, but then where would I go? I don't even have a dollar to my name. All I have is a fake ID that was thrust into my hand hours ago after they'd taken my real one.

How the hell did I get here? I thought I'd made all the right decisions in life. At least the best I could with what I had. Now

I'm at some fancy restaurant being sold off for one night to some man that's old enough to be my father. Hell, maybe even my grandfather. Not that I've ever met either of those men. It's always been my mother and me, off and on over the years. Sometimes I'd get tossed into the system, but then she'd get clean, and they'd release me back to her. I'm not going back into the system now that I'm days away from turning eighteen. If I make it to that birthday.

"Can I get you something to drink?" the bartender asks, stealing my attention away from the table. "I'll need an ID." His eyes roam over my face before they trail down the front of the dress I was ordered to wear. I feel practically naked and exposed.

"No thank you." I lick my lips, my attention going back to the table where the two men are still arguing. Sherman is clearly losing it over whatever the fight is about. The man in the fancy suit showed up pissed about something and is getting in Sherman's face. My feet stay glued to the floor because I know there's no running. I'd be found in no time.

I was so stupid. I knew better, and I never should have tried to steal from the Shapovals. In my defense, I had no idea they owned the little corner store. At the time I hadn't been thinking about who owned the place. All I could think about was it had been five days since I'd seen my mother, and I was starving. Of course they own it. They own everything in the area of the city I live in.

I thought I'd gotten away with it too. They'd let me leave the store, walk all the way back home, and even eat a few bites of the premade sandwich before they came knocking. Then I couldn't beg for forgiveness and give it back. Now they're collecting. I have a feeling they'd been watching me long

before I tried to steal from them. They knew too much not only about me but my mother too.

Another man joins Sherman's table, and I watch as he nods in agreement with whatever the first guy said. Sherman shrinks down as they get in his face, and my fear starts to grow. Sherman is going to take his anger out on me when these men are done with him.

When I decide I have no option other than to run, Sherman beats me to it. He bolts toward the front of the restaurant and out the double doors. His men follow him, leaving me standing at the bar alone.

"Oh god," I whisper.

I could not be this lucky. Then again, I'm guessing Sherman isn't going to pay whatever price it was to have me and my virginity. I don't even know how much he was paying for it. I'll likely be shoved on to the next man they put me with, or worse. I could be in trouble for not following through with it. That I didn't somehow seal this deal or something.

After witnessing this, I know I have to get out of here. I take a step toward the sign that shows where the bathroom is because there's no way I'm making my escape out the front. What if Shapoval's men are out there? I freeze when the two men who sent Sherman running both glance at me. I think they might be brothers. They're of a similar build, which is massive. Especially compared to my short ass.

"What about the girl?" the one who only just walked in a few moments ago asks loud enough for me to hear, and then he nods in my direction. With their eyes on me, I notice they're the exact same shade, but something about this one's stare is more intense. It keeps me grounded in place.

“Take care of it.” The first guy sighs. “The last thing I want for my wife right now is a scandal.”

“It’s done.” He nods and makes his way toward me. His eyes never leave mine, and I back up a step until I run right into the bar. When he gets to me, he takes my purse right out of my hand without asking and opens it up. He grabs the fake ID and scowls at it.

“I’m Amanda Tomsan, and I’m twenty-two.”

“What’s your real name?” he asks, and I swallow. “Answer me, little girl.”

“Demi.”

“Demi,” he repeats before putting the ID back into my purse then fishing out the little bag of white powder I’d taken from my mother’s bedroom.

“What is it?” He holds up the plastic bag.

“I don’t know,” I answer honestly, and he puts that back too. He tucks my purse under his arm and then looms over me.

“How much was he paying you for the night?” He looks like a pissed-off father, and his eyes cut right through me down into my soul.

“I don’t know,” I repeat.

“I’ll double it.” He grabs me by the arm and hauls me from the restaurant.

“Double it?” I squeak and try to yank my arm away. He only holds me tighter until I fall into his side and his arm wraps around me.

“Don’t fight me or you’ll regret it.” I stare up into his eyes, and he waits for me to challenge him. I only nod, knowing I’ll never win against a man this big. “Good girl,” he praises before he takes me for himself.

Chapter Two



CURT

“I’m guessing this fake ID doesn’t have your real address on it?” She nods as the valet hands me my keys, and I walk her over to the passenger door. Once she’s inside, I get behind the wheel and drive away from the restaurant, putting distance between us and Sherman Hawthorne’s mess. “Then you’re going to have to tell me where you live.”

“Why?” She looks over, her beautiful honey-colored eyes blinking up at me.

“What do you mean why? So I can take you home.” I glance down at her dress that’s basically a Band-Aid on her body and shake my head. “How old are you really? There’s no way you could pass for twenty-two.”

“I’ll be eighteen in two days.”

“Don’t lie to me.”

She shrugs her shoulders. “Believe what you want, it doesn’t matter anyway.”

“What do you mean?”

“Nothing. Are you really going to take me home?”

“Yes, if you tell me where you live.” She gives me directions, and it’s not far from here.

“What did you mean by ‘doubling the price’?” Her voice is soft, but it’s sweet and tender like she’s afraid. I don’t want her to be scared of me.

“I’ll pay double what he did to keep your silence. Just tell me how much and I’ll make sure you get it.”

“I wasn’t lying when I said I didn’t know how much.” She looks out her window and tells me where to turn up ahead.

“I don’t get it. You were a paid escort, right?” When she doesn’t look at me, I let out a long sigh. “Listen, I’m not judging, I just want to make sure you don’t talk about what happened today and that you’ve got enough to keep you out of doing this shit. Shouldn’t you be in school?”

“I graduated already.” She points to a street up ahead. “I’m down this one at the end.”

The neighborhood is run-down, with dilapidated houses and trash in the streets. “You live here?”

“It’s my mom’s place.” Her hands shake as she folds them into her lap.

I pull up to the house at the end, and it’s one of the worst. There are boards over the windows, and the porch is falling in. There’s knee-high grass in the front yard and a rusted car in the driveway.

“Your mom makes you live in that?” I can’t keep the horror out of my voice.

“Some people don’t have a choice. And she doesn’t make me.” She looks down at my expensive suit, and I feel like an asshole. “If she had her way she’d be alone with her boyfriend of the week. But it’s not exactly like I’ve got a lot of options.”

She's right. I shouldn't judge, and I feel like shit now. As much as I get what she's saying, I can't in good conscience leave her here.

"Do you have anything in that house that's yours?" She looks down at her empty hands and shakes her head without looking at me. "All right then." I put the car in reverse, and her head snaps up.

"What are you doing? You said you were taking me home." Fear flashes in her eyes, and I clench my jaw. Who made her so damn afraid?

"I'm taking you to a safe place until we can figure something out. You said you're eighteen day after tomorrow?" She nods. "All right then."

"I don't have any money. Even when I turn eighteen, my situation isn't going to change."

"I told you I'd cover it. Just let me take care of this and sort out a better situation than that." I glance around the neighborhood as we leave and try not to think about what I'm doing and how this could be a terrible mistake.

It's a quiet drive back to Hollow Oak, and when we get to the gate, I put in my code. She watches me as they slowly open and sits up a little in her seat to look around.

"Where are we?"

"My house."

"What?" The panic in her voice is clear.

"Listen, I have plenty of room, and you can stay here until we figure things out, okay? It's obvious that whatever was about to happen today wasn't your choice."

She presses her lips together, not admitting to anything.

“Fine, you don’t have to tell me, but I can’t fix it if you don’t.”

I park the car in front of my house and go around to her side. When I open the door, she hesitates but finally steps out of the car and stands there expectantly.

“Come on in. I’ll show you around.”

I don’t have as many on my household staff as Boone does, and my property isn’t as luxurious. But I have a gate, and I like my privacy.

“This is Pierce.” I introduce Demi to my house manager, and he nods. “He can get you anything you need. All you have to do is ask.”

“Pierce, this is Demi...” I pause, not knowing her last name.

“Slater.”

“Miss Slater will be staying with us for a little while. Can you please make up the guest room upstairs?”

“It’s lovely to meet you,” Pierce says and nods. “I’ll go do that now.”

One thing I love about that man is he doesn’t ask a lot of questions. Showing up with a half-naked minor isn’t exactly an ideal situation.

“Let’s get you some clothes first.” I try not to look at her dress and the curves that are nearly spilling out of it. “I’m sure I’ve got something you can wear.”

I hear the click of her heels behind me as we walk upstairs and down the hall to my bedroom.

“This is all yours?” she asks.

“Yeah, I’ve lived here for about three years now.”

“It’s empty.”

I let out a laugh. “Yeah, I haven’t really gotten around to decorating. My room is just down the hall from yours if you need anything.”

We walk into the master, and she stops in the middle to look around the large space while I go into the closet. I grab a couple of T-shirts and a sweatshirt, then a pair of shorts that I know will be too big but she can probably roll them at the waist. Once I’ve got a couple of things, I come out of the closet and see she’s gone.

“Demi?” Worry spikes, and I wonder if she got scared and ran.

“In here,” she calls and I follow her voice to the bathroom. “Sorry, just checking out your swimming pool.”

“Yeah it’s a pretty big tub. I’ve never used it.” I shrug.

“Seriously? I’d never get out of it. I lived in a foster family that had a tub one time. It was awesome.”

“Do you want to use it?”

“Now?” she asks, her eyes wide and maybe even a little hopeful.

“Why not? Here are some clothes; go for it. I’ll be downstairs in the kitchen when you’re finished, and you can come eat.” It looks like she might cry as she looks down at the ground. “Hey, are you okay?”

“You’re just being really nice to me.” She sniffs, and it breaks my heart.

I clench my fists at my sides because I can't hold her. Instead I take a step back and nod at the tub. "Take your time. I'll be in the kitchen when you're done."

Chapter Three



DEMI

I fall back onto the softest bed I've ever felt in my life, and the scent of Curt surrounds me. It's intoxicating yet comforting because he's being so damn kind to me. I can't remember the last time someone was nice to me for no reason at all. I want to cry but I fight the tears. I'm scared that if I start I might never stop. I'm also not sure what kind of tears they will be. I'm a crazy mix of emotions right now.

I'm scared, happy, and a whole lot of other things I can't explain. There's also a chance I'm in a heap of trouble right now. No way Sherman is going to pay, which means I still owe the Shapovals. How could I ever ask Curt to hand over the money he offered me? Not after he saw my place and then brought me back to his because he didn't think my home was safe.

Reluctantly I pull myself from the bed and head toward the giant dream bathroom. I want to get out of this damn dress and rub this makeup off my face. I turn on the water before I undress, and to my surprise, the thing fills quickly.

A moan pours from me when I slip into the warm water. I lay my head back and close my eyes. I tell myself I'm not going to fall asleep because I want the food Curt said would be downstairs, but damn. All the muscles in my body are starting

to relax, and for a moment all the fear and worry leaves me. If only for a few hours I'm safe, and I allow myself to live in the moment as I push all the fear and worry in my life away.

"Fuck," I hear someone hiss, and it jolts me out of a dream-filled daze.

My eyes fly open to see Curt standing in the bathroom. He closes his eyes and spins around to give me his broad back. I sit up and pull my knees to my chest but realize there's no way he could even see anything with all the bubbles.

"I called your name."

"Sorry. I must have dozed off."

"That's dangerous. Get dressed. You need to eat," he says before he makes a quick exit from the bathroom. He sounded pissed. I jump when I hear a door slam closed.

"Damn it," I sigh, getting out of the tub. The last thing I want to do is piss him off. He brought me to his home to try and help. I hadn't meant to fall asleep in the tub. No matter what I do, I'm always doing the wrong thing to get myself in trouble.

I drain the tub before I wash my face in the sink and dry off. I try to clean up, leaving everything as I found it. I want to be as little of a bother as possible. For most of my life, I've found it better to try and be invisible.

The shirt Curt gave me falls off my shoulder when I put it on, but at least it's better than the dress. I stare at myself in the mirror and wonder what the hell I'm going to do. I can't stay here for long because I don't want to bring trouble to this man's door. He's already done more for me than anyone else ever has.

I'll eat and maybe sleep here for the night, but then I'll leave. It's the best and only plan I can come up with.

When I leave the bedroom, I follow the scent of food. I think it's been almost two days since I last ate something beyond a few crackers.

The second I step into the kitchen, Curt turns my way. His eyes go down my body and slowly venture back up. I swear every time he looks at me he sees deep inside my soul. I wonder if that should scare the crap out of me or not. I'm not even sure who I am under the surface.

"I gave you pants." His words somehow sound thick, and I glance down at my bare legs.

They aren't long and sexy like I think most men desire. I've always been on the shorter side, but it bugs me that he doesn't like what he sees. All I have on is the shirt he'd given me, which falls almost to my knees. It's longer than the dress I had on before. I didn't want to put my dirty panties back on. They might not have actually been that dirty since I'd only had them on for a few hours, but they felt that way because of what I'd been wearing to begin with.

"I couldn't get the pants to stay up," I admit.

"Right." He grabs one of the tall high-top chairs at the kitchen island and pulls it out. "Come eat. You clearly need it." I drop my gaze as my insecurities start to rise at my small size. "Demi, come here now," he orders. My feet move on their own, drawing me closer to him. "You're not allergic to anything, are you?"

"No." I go to grab the back of the chair to climb up but Curt beats me to it, lifting me by the hips and setting me down into it.

“Let’s get you a bit of everything.” I watch as he starts to pile food onto the plates in front of me. How long was I out for? It looks like he pulled together a feast while I was in the bathroom. There’s a mix of all kinds of things from pasta to steak to even grilled cheese and fried chicken.

“This is a lot of food.”

“Pierce keeps things ready to make in the fridge for me. You can help yourself to whatever, whenever.” He says it like I’m going to be hanging around beyond this meal.

“Thank you for all this.” I pick up the fork and take a bite of the pasta first. A small moan leaves me, and Curt stops pouring me a glass of water. His eyes once again stare into mine, and he looks pissed-off again.

“No one should go hungry. Especially a girl who should still be taken care of by her own parents.” He places the glass in front of me before he picks up a knife and starts to cut the steak he’d given me.

“She needs help.” I swallow my food and take a drink of the water. “My mom, I mean.”

“Don’t make excuses for her. It’s bullshit.” Easier said than done. Especially from a girl starving for attention and affection from the one person who is supposed to give it to her.

“Still, thank you. I won’t stay long.”

“You’re not going anywhere while you’re not a legal adult.” He pushes the plate with the steak on it back toward me. Then he picks up a fork and stabs a piece of it before bringing it to my mouth. I open it and take a bite and try not to look at him as I chew and swallow. “I’ll take care of you.”

“For now,” I agree.

Maybe that's not a terrible idea, and I can stay here until then. It might be nice to be taken care of for once. I can pretend this is a small birthday gift that I'll let myself have.

For now, I remind myself. Things like this never last, and it's always better to remember that.

Chapter Four



CURT

After we have dinner, Demi is practically falling asleep at the table. I'm careful to touch her as little as possible to help her up the stairs and into her room. Once she's tucked into bed, I go to my room and have a fitful night of sleep.

The next morning I'm up with the sun after only a few hours of rest. I checked on Demi three different times to make sure she was okay, and each time she was sleeping like a rock. When was the last time she had a safe place to lay her head?

After checking on her once more, I softly close the door and decide to get a jump on the day. Pierce has coffee ready for me when I get downstairs, almost like he knew I'd be up early. When I got into my office, I begin looking into Demi Slater and why she's in this situation.

At one point I need some help with the research, so I wake up the guy I use for surveillance. Tim has been useful with information for Boone and me before. He's helped us check in on people and find out secrets that we could use to our advantage in business. I like to think we use his powers for good instead of evil, but right now, I need to know all of it.

"And her birthday is tomorrow?" Tim asks, and I nod. We're on video chat now and he's typing on his desktop while I drink my coffee and look over the notes he's sent me.

“She said she’ll be eighteen.”

“Got it,” he says, not looking at me. “Demi Renee Slater, no priors, but there is a record of her entering the foster system over several years off and on.”

“Shit,” I say, mostly to myself.

“Looks like she’s gotten into something sticky with Shapovals.” This time, Tim turns to look at me and raises his eyebrow. “What the hell have you gotten mixed up in, Curt?”

“I’m not sure, but I know that I didn’t have a choice.” There was no way I could have let Demi go after I saw her place. Or after I looked into her eyes. “Tell me what you know.”

“There’s a bounty out for her on the black market. It doesn’t say why, but they’re looking for her.” He sighs as he shakes his head. “You need to watch your ass. These guys don’t play.”

“What about her family? Will they be targeted if they don’t get her?”

“Looks like there’s no known father, and the mom is already in debt to them for drug money.”

“Fuck.” This is going from bad to worse.

“How much to buy out the bounty?”

He lets out a humorless laugh. “There’s no price.”

“What?”

“Something really fishy is going on, but the way the bounty is listed is that she’s wanted and they’ll pay to get her back. There’s no debt listed to pay off and buy her out.”

“Then it’s not really money they’re after.”

“That’s what I’d assume too,” Tim says as he leans back in his seat. “Either she’s being used as leverage, which I honestly can’t see because her family doesn’t have any assets. Or she’s a hot commodity they think they can make a fortune on.”

I clench my coffee cup so tightly I’m afraid it’s going to shatter. “Thanks.” The one word comes out sharper than I intended it to.

“My advice to you is to keep your distance.” When I don’t answer right away, he sighs. “Look, Curt, I know you, and whatever you’ve gotten yourself into is probably something I don’t want details about. But I also know that you’re stubborn as hell and won’t be told what to do.”

“What’s your point?” I’m trying to rein in my anger, but it’s not working.

“My point is, if you’re going to try and save this girl, you’d better watch your back. When they find out you’ve got her, there’ll be a giant target on your back.”

“You mean *if* they find out.”

He shakes his head. “Not with these people. It’s only a matter of time before they’re going to come for you. I suggest you keep a low profile down in Hollow Oak and stay off the radar.”

“I plan on it.” I reach up and rub the place between my eyes where I can feel a headache forming.

“In the meantime, I’ll ask around quietly and see what else I can stir up. Maybe someone out there is willing to make a deal.”

“I’d appreciate anything you can do, Tim.”

When we end the video call, the sun is finally up, but I'm left with just as many questions as when I started this search. At least it confirms what I already knew about her family. Although she was right that her mom needs help. If she owes money to the Shapovals for drugs, they're going to collect one way or another. Maybe that's what taking Demi was really about.

How can I convince her to stay here long-term to offer her protection? How much longer can she stay under my roof without me giving in to temptation?

I push away that last thought because she's not legal yet. Her birthday is tomorrow, but I won't go down that path until she's eighteen. I've done a lot of things in my life that I regret, but touching her too soon won't be one of them.

Now all I have to do is figure out how to keep my hands off of her until then.

The door to my office creaks open, and then I see Demi standing there looking sleepy and soft. Every part of my body comes to attention as my eyes rake up and down her small frame.

"Everything okay?" I swallow and clear my throat. "Did you sleep all right?"

"Yeah, I just got scared." Her smile is shy as she shrugs. "It's the biggest house I've ever slept in and when I woke up, I was worried you'd left."

"Let's get you something to eat." Her hair is a mess, but somehow that tousled look makes her even sexier. I immediately chide myself for thinking about her being sexy and focus on feeding her. "Pancakes?"

"Really?"

“Why do you sound so surprised?”

She bites her bottom lip and looks down at the ground. “Those were for special occasions like Christmas when I was growing up.”

“Well, it’s not too far off, but around here you can have special things every day if you want.” I walk around my desk, and she looks up at me with bright eyes. “All you have to do is say the word.”

“Thank you,” she says quietly as I take her by the hand and lead her into the kitchen.

Chapter Five



DEMI

He's so dang nice that it's almost overwhelming. It puts me at ease until I remember I'm going to be indebted to him too, which means my debt is stacking up. Too bad my body isn't opposed to the idea of owing Curt.

There had only been terror at paying back the Shapovals, and I was trying to find an exit plan from the start. With Curt, I'm sitting here letting him make me breakfast, not wanting to go anywhere. When I think about how he might want to demand payback, my face heats, and a rush of heat floods through my body, pooling between my thighs. Something is seriously wrong with my head.

"Bacon?" Curt asks, placing a plate full of fluffy pancakes in front of me.

"If there's extra..." I lick my lips as he pours the syrup.

"There doesn't need to be extra, angel." My heart does a silly flutter at him calling me that. It's sweet, and I enjoy it way too much. He's going to make it hard for me to leave.

"Thank you."

"You're a guest. You don't need to thank me for feeding you." I open my mouth to say thank you again but quickly

close it, making him smirk. He's a bit more relaxed today, and it makes him even sexier than I already thought he was.

When I woke up this morning, I was sure I was in a dream. My first thought was to go find Curt when the reality of what really happened yesterday came flooding back to me. Anxiety made me want to panic, but for some reason I knew if I got close to Curt, it would fade away.

I can't hold back a moan when I take a giant bite of the pancakes. The second the sweet taste hits my mouth I'm done for, and I don't stop eating until I clear my plate.

"Careful, angel. I want you to eat, but don't make yourself sick."

"Oh gosh." I cover my face with my hands, not wanting to know what I looked like when devoured my plate in a matter of seconds.

"Don't get embarrassed. I'm happy you're eating. Someone needs to do a better job of taking care of you." When I drop my hands, I see a scowl on his handsome face.

"I'm an adult. I should be taking care of myself at this point. I've been doing it for a while." Really it's been most of my life. I can remember being four and making my own meals. The idea of someone taking care of me sounds almost ridiculous.

"And how is that working for you?" He turns the scowl on to me.

"I'm trying."

"Getting involved with the Shapovals isn't trying." My heart drops, and all the air leaves my lungs. How does he know that name already? "Fuck." He grabs my face with both

hands, tilting it back to look up at him. “Breathe,” he orders, and my body follows his command.

“I have to leave.” I try to push back from the kitchen island, but he doesn’t let me go. “I have to,” I plead with him, and he finally drops his hands from my face.

“You’re safer here.”

I’m not sure I’ll be safe anywhere, but the more distance I can put between the Shapovals and myself, the better.

“Did you tell them I was here?” Tears form in my eyes. I know I shouldn’t have this sense of betrayal, but I do.

“No.”

I slowly start to relax, but it doesn’t last long. “Me being here could put you in their sights too. I can’t stay.” I try to push back from my chair again, but his hand comes down on the back of it. He’s done so much for me that I hate the idea of bringing any kind of trouble to his door.

“And where would you go?”

“I don’t know. Maybe I could get on a bus or something. Go to another state and find a women’s shelter?” His eyes roam my face. I’m not sure what he’s looking for.

“You’d never make it. Someone would snatch you up.” I swallow, not sure if he means the Shapovals or someone else altogether.

“I don’t have much of a choice. I can’t go back to them.”

“Why is it that they have their hooks into you to begin with? How long have you been...” He trails off, his face hardening with anger.

“I stole from them,” I admit. “I’m not blameless.”

“How much?” he grits out between clenched teeth. I hate his anger because when he’s sweet and trying to take care of me, it makes me feel precious.

“I don’t know. I stole some lunch meat and a few cans of food from one of their stores.” He’s silent for a long moment, his eyes never leaving my face.

“You stole food?” he finally asks, looking confused, and I nod.

“From one of their stores. I’m not sure if they actually owned the store or if the store falls under their protection or something.” I don’t know how all that crap works.

“They turned you into a hooker over ten dollars’ worth of fucking food?” he booms. I jerk back in the chair. It probably would have fallen over if he didn’t still have his hand gripping the back of it. “I’m sorry, angel.” He closes his eyes, taking a deep breath. “I didn’t mean to yell at you. Don’t be scared of me. I’d never hurt you.”

“I’m not scared of you,” I whisper. Not physically, anyway. I am, however, noticing my emotions are all kinds of wrapped up in this man.

“Maybe you should be,” he says under his breath.

“Why?” He’s been one of the kindest people I’ve ever met.

Before he can answer, his phone starts to ring. He pulls it out and clears the call, but then it starts to ring again.

“I have to take this.” He slides his finger across the screen before putting it to his ear. “What’s up?” He goes quiet for a long moment. “Are you fucking kidding me? I’m coming over.” I watch as he starts to pace. “I’m coming over, and I’m not fighting with you about this on the phone.” Curt’s eyes cut

back to me. “I won’t be alone,” he says into the phone before he ends the call.

“Something wrong?”

“My brother had a problem at his place last night. I need to go check on him. He’s not really been himself lately.”

“Okay.” I fidget with my fingers in my lap, unsure what I’m supposed to do.

“I had some clothes picked up for you this morning. Change and you’ll come with me.”

“You want me to come with you?” I ask in surprise.

“I’m not leaving you alone here.” I nod in understanding.

He probably thinks I’m going to steal something, and I fight back the hurt. I can’t blame the man. I’m in this whole mess because I’m a thief.

I hate that Curt knows that about me now. I enjoyed being his angel a whole lot more.

Chapter Six



CURT

When I get to Boone's, I take Demi by the hand and help her out of the car. She's got on an oversized sweatshirt and leggings. Thankfully I remembered to order shoes so she doesn't have to be barefoot. I ordered what she might think is an unnecessary amount of clothes, but I wanted her to have everything. And okay, maybe I'm thinking ahead.

"You want me to come with you?" She looks uncertainly up at the house.

"Of course I do. Why else did you think I asked you to come with me?" I look down at her in confusion, and she shrugs.

"Maybe you didn't trust me alone at your house."

"Demi." I touch the bottom of her chin so she'll look at me. "I didn't trust leaving you at home because I can't keep you safe if I'm not by your side. I'm not worried about you taking something from me."

"But I'm in this mess because I stole from the Shapovals."

I shake my head at her. "You stole food because you were starving, and that's not a crime. At least not to me. There's more at play here, but we'll talk about it later. Right now I need to make sure my brother is okay."

“Are you sure you want him to meet me?” She looks down at her clothes, comfortable and soft like she is.

“I would never be ashamed for anyone I know to meet you, angel.” That makes her smile, and I remind myself to say more things that give her that look.

We walk into Boone’s house, and security is right at the door. I nod to Roger, their head of security, and the other men on the way inside.

Boone and his bride Phoebe are in the family room at the back of the house, and when I walk in, I find them cuddled up on the couch together. Phoebe is in Boone’s lap, and she looks tired and there’s a bruise on her cheek, but otherwise she seems okay.

“Are you all right?” I ask, because I’m still a little shaken from the call I got from Boone earlier.

“I’m fine.” Phoebe looks at her husband. “Don’t listen to Boone. He’s being extra protective right now.”

“You were nearly killed,” I say a little too loud, and Boone nods to agree with me.

“Great, now I’ve got bossy in stereo.” She shakes her head and then finally sees Demi move out from behind me. “Oh hi, I didn’t see you there.”

“Hi,” Demi says when I pull her around.

“This is Demi, Demi, this is my brother Boone, who you might remember, and his wife Phoebe.”

Boone’s eyes widen, and he softly places Phoebe on the couch beside him as he stands up. “It’s nice to meet you.” He holds his hand out to Demi and then looks at me again. “Can I speak to you in my office, Curt?”

Without waiting for me to agree, he walks past me and out of the family room.

“We’ll be fine in here, Curt,” Phoebe says as she pats the seat next to her. “Come sit down, Demi, and we’ll gossip about them. I’m sure they’re going to the other room to do the same with us.”

Demi smiles as she lets go of my hand and walks away from me. I decide that this is probably the safest place for her at the moment, so I hurry to follow my brother and get this over with.

When I get to his office, he’s pacing, and as I close the door behind me, he stops and looks up.

“What the hell are you thinking? How old is that girl?” His eyes widen, and he puts his hands in front of him. “You know what, maybe it’s better I don’t know.”

I shake my head as I tuck my hands into my pockets, trying to go for relaxed instead of adding to his stress.

“She’s eighteen tomorrow.” He turns to me again, and his eyes narrow. “Don’t look at me like that. I haven’t touched her.”

“You were supposed to take care of her.”

“I did.”

“Not like that,” he snaps. “This is not what I need right now. I’m trying my best to keep from coming apart because I almost lost my wife. And now you come over with someone that’s tied to all that bullshit.”

“That’s enough,” I say firmly, and Boone blinks at me. It’s not often I’m serious with him, but I’m not about to have him drag Demi. “She was in the crossfire of that whole shitstorm,

and now I'm just as worried about something happening to her.”

“Why? What’s going on?” Now there’s concern in his eyes, and I know my brother. He might be a hard man, but he would never allow a woman to be in danger.

I take my time explaining to him my conversation with Tim this morning and how she’s tied up with the Shapovals. I’m irritated all over again thinking about it, and the need to keep her safe is bearing down on me.

“Do you think they’ll come after her?” Boone asks like he’s reading my mind.

“I don’t think they’d let something as precious as her go. Especially if they used a few dollars’ worth of food as an excuse to whore her out.”

My jaw clenches just thinking about it, and I have to remind myself that she’s here and she’s okay. I got to her in time, and now I’m going to make sure she’s protected.

“I’m sorry, I wouldn’t wish what I went through on anyone.” He comes over to me and squeezes my arm. “Are you okay?”

“I should be asking you the same.” Reaching out, I give my brother a hug, and he stiffens at first before he relaxes and hugs me back. “I’m glad Phoebe is okay.”

When we release, he nods and lets out a deep breath. “I’m okay now. I’ll just feel better when she doesn’t have that mark on her face. Every time I look at her it reminds me of almost losing her.”

“Give it some time and I’m sure it will be better. In the meantime, I need your help.”

“With what?”

“Can I get your contact at the Feds? I need to point them in the direction of the Shapovals so I can keep Demi safe.”

“Absolutely. I’m sure they’d be thrilled for a chance to take them down.”

“My only hope is that they don’t expect me to use Demi for bait,” I say, and the look Boone gives me tells me he’s on my side about this one.

“Let’s make some calls.”

He walks over to his desk, and I take a seat as we get to work on keeping Demi out of harm’s way.

Chapter Seven



DEMI

“Tomorrow’s your birthday!” Phoebe claps her hands together.

She’s been peppering me with questions since the guys left and has been extra kind even with everything that’s gone on. Especially with what went down with her father and me. Not that anything happened, but still. I’m sure it could be strange to her. Hell, it’s strange to me.

From the excitement in her eyes, you’d think it was her birthday and not mine. She’s really chipper for a girl that was attacked only yesterday. I suppose having someone in love with you the way her husband seems to be with her could put anyone on cloud nine. I know I would be.

I couldn’t help but be a bit jealous of the two of them together. He was so worked up over his wife, and I was even a bit jealous of how Curt was worried over his brother too. They all care for each other, and I long to have something like that one day. No one has ever worried about me like that.

“Yeah, but it’s no big deal.” I try to brush it off. I know birthdays are big for a lot of people, but they never have been for me. I don’t want to get myself excited over nothing. Expectations only ever bring disappointment. I learned that

very early in life, and now I expect nothing. It's probably why I'm surprised when someone is kind to me.

"No big deal? You better have cake at least. How old are you turning?"

"Eighteen." Her brows lift all the way up her forehead at my response.

"Why the look?" I try not to fidget as she stares me over.

"Nothing. I thought maybe you and Curt might have something going on?"

"What?" I shout a bit too loudly. "Why would you think that? He's been nice to me. It's nothing more than that."

There is no way someone of Curt's caliber would ever be interested in me. We're from two different worlds, and I could never belong to him. I'm sure people would judge him if he was with me. I mean, I was technically a hooker, and I might still be for all I know. I have no clue where I'll end up tomorrow or the day after that.

"Nice?" She lets out a small laugh. "He was a bit of a dick when I met him. He didn't want me marrying his brother, but he came around pretty quick."

"Why didn't he want you two to get married?" It's clear the two of them are madly in love. What more could you want for your sibling?

"Well, in all fairness, my husband did kind of bribe my parents to marry me." Now she's the one shrugging like it's no big deal. I guess we all know her father is a jerk at this point.

"I'm not shocked since your father tried to buy my virginity." Phoebe's mouth falls open, and I quickly realize I might have gone too far.

“Gosh, he’s gross. I’m so sorry.” Her whole face softens.

“Why are you sorry? I think it was your husband and brother-in-law that got me out of that mess.”

“Same.” Phoebe shakes her head. “Who knows what my father might have done with me if not for my Boone.” She lets out a dreamy sigh. “So you’re a virgin.” She smirks mischievously.

“I...ahh...” Heat rushes to my face. Why did I blurt that out?

“Angel.” I jerk my head around at the sound of Curt’s voice. I didn’t know it was possible to blush more, but my face is now on fire. He stares at me from across the room. “Are you a virgin?” he asks, and I nod my head yes. “Fuck.” Curt runs his hand down his face, and his frustration is clear.

“That explains why they want her back so badly,” Boone says from beside Curt.

“Wait. Someone is trying to take her?” Phoebe jumps up from her seat to stand beside me protectively. It’s sweet. She barely knows me, but none of them really do.

“No one is taking her,” Curt growls. The sound should be scary, but my body has a whole different kind of response. “I can’t take her home with me.” Curt turns to face his brother, and my heart sinks.

I drop my head, not wanting to stare at Curt while he and Boone talk, but now in hushed angry-sounding whispers.

“Hey, everything is going to be fine,” Phoebe tries to reassure me.

“He doesn’t want me to go back home with him.” I fight back tears.

“They want you safe.” She grabs my hand, giving it a squeeze.

“Angel,” Curt calls, and I bite the inside of my cheek so I don’t snap at him to stop calling me that. I like it entirely too much, and now he’s talking about leaving me behind. “Shit, you’re crying.” He walks across the room to me.

“Please don’t leave me here,” I blurt out when he stops right in front of me. Phoebe releases my hand and eases back a few steps.

“Angel.” I jump up from my seat and launch myself at him before he can tell me a list of reasons why I should stay here.

“Please,” I beg as I cling to him.

“I’m not leaving you anywhere. I was going to stay too. At least for tonight.” I lift my head from his chest.

“Why?”

“You have no idea.” His eyes search my face.

“Maybe we should give you a moment,” Phoebe says as she goes to her husband. He takes her hand and guides her out of the living room.

“Sit.” His hands wrap around my wrists, lifting them off his chest, and I release his shirt that I had a death grip on. “Sit,” he orders again, letting my wrists go. He takes a few steps back and sits across from me. I plop back down, not wanting the space between us. “You can’t jump on me. In fact, I need you to give me space.” He reaches up and undoes the top few buttons on his shirt then pulls at the collar.

“Okay,” I agree, my heart starting to ache.

“Don’t do that, angel. I want your touch more than I should.” He lets out a long sigh.

“Is this because I’m a virgin or something?” Why has everything changed since we got here?

“You’re not eighteen.”

“Ohhh. Right.” I lick my lips. Why do I suddenly want his touch even more? Is it because I know he can’t? “The Shapovals said seventeen was an adult in—”

“Don’t.” He lifts his hand, cutting me off. “I don’t give a fuck what those lowlives said.”

“Fair point,” I agree, because they are terrible people.

“You being a virgin changes nothing for me, angel. I need you to know that. You’re still the same girl to me.” I nod in understanding. “That said, you being a virgin is why I think the Shapovals want you back so badly. They can put a bid out on your virginity and sell you to whoever pays the most.”

That sounds like an easy enough fix. We only have to take away the thing they want.

“What if I’m not a virgin anymore?”

Chapter Eight



CURT

“Demi,” I groan, burying my face in my hands. “Sweet angel.”

Sighing, I look up at her innocent face and try not to lose control. She looks so sweet and earnest that it’s all I can do to keep my hands to myself.

“I’m just saying that if you took it from me, then you’d be saving me, right?”

“Please don’t talk about me taking your virginity.” I have to reach down and adjust my cock because it’s become painful.

“Sorry, I’ve never done anything before, so I’m not exactly experienced, but if you tell me what to do, I’ll try my best.”

“I’m dying.” I rub the heel of my hands against my eyes. “This can’t be happening.”

“Are you worried about hurting me?” she asks softly, and I shake my head.

“No, I would never hurt you.” I swallow hard at the soft smile she gives me.

“I know I’m small, but I’ve touched myself before and—”

“Enough!” I have to stand up and take a few steps back.

“Did I say something wrong?” She bites her bottom lip, and my knees nearly buckle at the sight of it.

“Not by a long shot,” I whisper and run a hand over my face. “Why am I sweating? Are you hot? I’m hot. Maybe I should open a window. I know it’s snowing now, but I don’t care.”

“Curt, are you okay?” I hear her say as I walk over to the French doors and fling them open, silently begging the freezing air to cool me down.

When the icy wind hits my face, it helps, but only a little. It’s not enough to get my cock under control, but I’m not sure that will ever be possible. After I take a few cleansing breaths, I close the doors and go back over to take a seat across from Demi.

“Angel, we’re going to stay here for a night or two until my brother and I figure things out. He’s got better security here than I do at my house, and we’re having a meeting tomorrow with some important people that can help us. I need to be here for that to take place.”

“Okay,” she says softly, and I want to hold her so badly.

“Will you hold me?” she asks, like she’s reading my mind.

I can’t speak, so I nod, and before I can get up and join her on the couch, she’s crawling into my lap. I have to close my eyes right when her bottom pushes against my aching cock and the need to rub against her is almost unbearable. She’s soft against me, and I have no choice but to wrap my arms around her so she doesn’t fall.

One hand goes around her back and rests on her hip while the other goes across her thighs and rests just below her ass. Her hand is against my chest, and I feel her fingertips at the

collar of my shirt, right where a bit of skin is showing. She touches me there, and it feels like she's burning me when she does it. She's marked me all over my heart, why not on my skin too?

"Are you afraid?" I ask, then swallow the lump in my throat.

"Yes," she answers softly. "But I feel less afraid when you hold me."

"Then I'll keep on holding you until the danger has passed." I rest my cheek on the top of her head, and we sit like this for a long time. It's comforting, and it goes a long way to make me feel better too.

"Will you hold me tonight too?"

Boone said that we could take the guest rooms on the other side of the house, but only one is furnished. He never got around to putting furniture in his house, but thankfully that one has a place for us to sleep.

"If that's what you want."

She looks up at me, and when our eyes meet, she's so damn close I could lean forward and kiss her.

"I want you," she says, and it nearly breaks me.

Leaning forward, I press my cheek against hers and absorb her softness. She's warm and sweet and smells like vanilla cake. My mouth waters, and I have to shove my desire down once more.

We've been here so long the sun is beginning to set, and I hear someone come into the room. When I look up, I see Boone and Phoebe there, and she's smiling brightly.

“Sorry, we lost track of time.” She blushes as she looks up at her husband, and I don’t want to think about what they’ve been up to. “We’ve had dinner prepared if you want to join us in the dining room.”

“Sure,” I say. “Give us just a second.”

“We’ll meet you in there,” Boone says and tucks his wife close as they leave.

“Are you hungry?” I ask, and Demi nods quickly.

“Starving, actually.”

“Then let’s get you fed.” I hug her close and then put my lips to her ears. “Let me hug you a little before we go.”

My hands go to her ass, and I turn her so that she’s straddling me. Her knees go up, and her sex moves flush against my cock. Her arms go around my neck, and she squeezes me tight while I do the same against her ass. Her heat sits right over my cock, and I soak up how good she feels. This is so close to crossing the line, but god, do I want it.

“You’ll help save me?” she asks as she rocks against my cock.

“Fuck,” I hiss, almost going off in my pants. “Careful, angel.”

“If anyone is going to take it, I want it to be you.” She does it again, and I have to grab her hips to make her stop.

“I know, sweetheart. I know.” I place a kiss on the top of her head and close my eyes to try and catch my breath. “Just not yet.”

When I glance down, I see a wet spot on my pants and I don’t know if it’s from her or me, and I nearly lose control.

My hands are shaking as I slide them down her legs and lean back in the chair.

“Okay, that’s enough hugging for now.” She looks at me with hooded eyes and licks her lips.

“Can we hug again after dinner?”

“Maybe,” I say softly and tuck her hair behind her ears. “You’re too tempting.”

That makes her smile, and the sight of it lights up my soul. How has she come to mean so much to me so quickly? And how can I tell her that I’m never letting her go?

Chapter Nine



DEMI

“Don’t you think so, Demi?” Phoebe asks.

“What?” My fork full of creamy carrot cake pauses before it reaches my mouth.

I really am terrible at paying attention to what people are saying when I’m eating. Between the yummy dinner and my body still humming with desire from Curt, my head is all over the place.

“We could make your birthday cake ourselves.”

“Oh, you don’t have to do that.”

“I mean, we could order one, I’m sure, but it might be fun to make.” Phoebe is all smiles from across the table.

“We can do both if you want, angel,” Curt suggests as he drapes his arm casually over the back of my chair.

“Why? Do you think we’ll mess up and might need a back-up cake?” Phoebe narrows her eyes on Curt.

“Everything you make is perfect.” Boone is quick to defend his wife.

“I don’t want her to have to make her own birthday cake if she doesn’t want to.” I lean in closer to Curt. He did put his

arm around my chair, so I think that's an opening to get closer. I might be wrong, but I'm still going to do it.

Phoebe's mouth forms a perfect O shape. "Oh."

"I would love to bake a cake. I'm just not sure I'll be the best at it. We only ever used the oven to heat up frozen things like pizza and fish sticks." That's as far as my oven knowledge goes.

"We don't have to. It's your birthday, and I thought it would be fun." She shrugs, trying to hide her disappointment. Phoebe is trying really hard to cheer me up. I think she's carrying a little guilt over the fact that it was her father that bought me. Or tried to buy me.

"I think it would be fun too," I agree. "I've always wanted to try and bake before. I'm happy to do it. If it's not too much trouble." I add the last part quickly.

"Nothing is too much trouble. Stop thinking about that, angel." Curt's thumb starts to drift up and down my shoulder. I think he's trying to soothe me, but it only has that rush of heat forming between my legs again. For such a big man, his touch is always so gentle.

"Then we'll make a cake. Let's do a test run!" Phoebe jumps out of her chair, not waiting for me to agree. She grabs me by hand and pulls me out of my seat and toward the kitchen.

"We didn't finish our dessert," I point out.

"I've got you, angel," Curt says as he and Boone come into the kitchen, each carrying the carrot cake we'd left behind at the table. "Eat every bite," he orders as he sets the plate down on the kitchen island for me. My breath catches when he leans

down and kisses me on the top of my head. “Have fun.” With that, he turns and leaves me in the kitchen with Phoebe.

“Come on, I promise baking isn’t torture,” she laughs.

“I know,” I respond, my eyes lingering on the doorway Curt left from. I want to chase after him but I don’t want to be too needy. My mother used to tell me all the time I was too needy. I always try so hard to not be.

“Then why do you look like you want to cry?”

“I don’t.” I spin back around.

“Would you rather be with Curt?” She gives me a knowing smile. “I don’t blame you, but I think you need a bit of a distraction for now.” She hands me a pink apron. I put it on, and when she ties it for me, I do the same for her.

We spend the next few hours baking in the kitchen. I realize that Phoebe and I might come from two different worlds, but when it comes to our parents, we actually have a lot in common. Both of us lacked any real guidance from them. I also point out to her if not for her father trying to buy me, who knows where I’d be right now. In a way he might have saved me.

“How is it going, ladies?” Boone asks as he comes into the kitchen. He goes straight for Phoebe and wraps his arms around her. When he pulls her in for a deep kiss, I look away.

“You tell me,” Phoebe says. We just tried the test cake. I loved it but I’m not sure I’m the best tester at this point. I love anything when it comes to food.

“You always taste sweet, but let me have another bite to be sure.” He kisses her again, and I glance at the doorway, wondering where Curt is.

“We’re going to make two cakes tomorrow. Demi loved the vanilla and strawberry so we’re doing both. Why choose when you don’t have to?”

“I love your logic,” I say with a laugh. “Where’s Curt?” I can’t help the small fear I have that he might up and disappear on me. It’s what my mother always did, and she constantly reminded me that no one stays around for long.

“Getting your room ready for the night. It’s late,” Boone answers, and I glance at the clock on the oven to see it’s already eleven.

“Angel.” I spin back around when I hear Curt’s voice, and a pressure I didn’t realize I felt leaves my chest. He’s still here.

“You stayed.” I rush over toward him.

It’s not until I’m launching myself at him do I remember him saying we need to keep some space between us. I’m also trying not to be too needy, but I’m terrible at this. It’s too damn hard. Curt is like water to me after spending an eternity in the desert. Sometimes I think I might have even dreamed him up. That this all could be fake because right now it’s too good to be true.

“Angel, I’m not going to up and leave you.” He brushes my hair back away from my face. “You’ll see with time.” He doesn’t sound annoyed or tired of me. “Let’s get you to bed.” He takes me by the hand, leading me out of the kitchen. “Did you have fun with Phoebe?”

“Yes, she’s sweet.”

“She is,” he agrees.

“She told me you didn’t want her to marry your brother.”

“It wasn’t anything against her. Boone wasn’t acting like himself, so I was worried.”

“But not anymore?”

“No, not anymore.”

“What changed?” I ask as he opens a door, revealing a bedroom. There isn’t much to the room but a bed. One that’s not as big as the ones at Curt’s place.

“I have a better understanding of what my brother went through.” I turn my head to look up into Curt’s eyes, and my breath catches at the hunger I see there. “Now I’m going to tuck you into bed.”

“You’re not coming to bed?”

“Soon,” he promises as he guides me over toward the bed. “Very soon.”

Chapter Ten



CURT

“I don’t have any pajamas.” Demi looks up at me as she sits on the edge of the bed.

“I didn’t think to bring clothes, so we’ll have to make do tonight.”

I reach for the buttons on my shirt, and she watches me as I do the cuffs first and then down the front. When my dress shirt is off, I place it on the chair by the bed and reach for the white shirt I’m wearing under it. It’s simple and thin but should be enough to cover her while she sleeps. At least for now.

“Here, put this on.” I hand it to her, and she brings it to her face.

“It’s still warm.” She smiles, and god, I love how she looks at me.

Her eyes move across my bare chest, and I wonder if she likes what she sees. “You can go into the bathroom and change.”

She practically skips to the bathroom, and I sit on the edge of the bed with my head in my hands. I talked to Boone about this earlier and he did his best to distract me. I wasn’t lying when I told Demi that I understood better what he was going

through with Phoebe. Ever since I first saw her, I've been fighting with myself, and I'm ready to have control of the situation.

“Are you going to sleep with me tonight?”

I look up when I hear Demi's voice, and my mouth goes dry. She's standing there in only my shirt and nothing else. Her hair is down and over one shoulder, revealing the soft skin of her neck. All I want to do is put my lips there and taste her. My eyes roam farther down her body, and I have to look away because it's too much.

“I'll sit with you for a bit.” I check my watch and reach a hand out to her. “Come here, I'll tuck you in.”

She takes it without hesitation, and we walk around to the side of the bed. When I pull the covers back, she slides in and scoots down. When she does, it reveals the soft skin of her thighs and I'm not sure she's wearing panties. I quickly cover her up and then take a seat beside her. I place my arm over her body and look down at her while she smiles up at me.

“Comfortable?”

“Almost.” She wiggles. “I thought you said maybe we could hug some more before I go to sleep.”

“I did.” I clench my jaw, knowing my control is hanging on by a thread.

She sits up and crawls out from under the covers to straddle my lap. I lean back against the headboard and try to control my breathing as she touches my bare chest. The shirt she's wearing has ridden up, but I don't look down. I stay still as a statue as she lies on me like a blanket.

“Aren't you going to hold me?” she whispers in my ear, and I try to swallow the brick lodged in my throat.

“I’m not sure I can yet.”

“Why not?” I feel her lips against the shell of my ear, and a hot shiver goes down my back.

Lifting my wrist, I check the time and see I’ve still got a few minutes. “Because you’re not eighteen yet.”

“I’m almost there.” She lifts up just a little and then snuggles closer to me. The heat of her body burns me like a brand.

“If I make you mine, angel, there’s no going back.”

She pulls back to look me in the eyes. “What do you mean by ‘there’s no going back’?”

“I mean that I’m not going to let you go. Ever.” Reaching up, I cup her cheek, and she leans into the touch. “I mean that I’m claiming you, and there’s no way you’ll ever be free of me. I’ll tie you to me with an unbreakable knot.”

Her eyes widen, and she smiles so brightly I’m almost shocked. “I like the sound of belonging to you.” She leans in close and rubs her nose against mine. “That’s all I want for my birthday.”

“For this birthday and every one after I’ll own you, but I’ll treat you like the most precious gift on earth. You’ll forever be my angel. The one that saved me, and the one I protect.”

“No one has ever wanted me before.” Her eyes search mine, and I tuck her hair behind her ear.

“No one will ever get the chance once you’re mine.” There’s a sound in the distance like the clock struck midnight, and Demi and I both look at my watch.

“It’s my birthday.” She smiles brightly, and I sit up.

“So it is.” Wrapping my arms around her back, I pull her against me and then swoop down to claim her mouth.

The kiss is searing hot, and when she gasps, I take the invitation and sweep my tongue inside. Without pausing, I turn and pin her to the bed as I use my knees to spread her legs.

“Did you take your panties off?” My mouth moves to her neck, and I suck on the tender skin, leaving my mark behind.

“Yes.” She lifts her hips, and I growl as I grab the edge of her shirt and yank it all the way off.

She’s completely naked under it, and the sight is enough to make me nut on myself. “I need to taste you everywhere.”

My mouth goes to her breasts, and I lick over her tight nipples, loving one after the other. When I suck on them, she cries out, and I feel her nails on my back. I love her touch, and if she wants to mark me too, she can have at it.

I slide my hand behind her knee and pull it up so she’s open. Then I kiss over her soft belly and to her hips as I inhale her sweet scent. She smells like cupcakes, and my mouth waters. Her pussy is so pretty, I rub my face against it before I use my thumbs to spread her lips.

“Look how pink you are right here.” She moans when my tongue slides between them and over her clit. “So fucking sweet.”

Her hips wiggle, and she squirms under me so I have to drape my arm over her waist to keep her still. My tongue dips lower to where she’s wet, and I lap at her entrance. She’s so damn tight, but I know getting her ready is going to be a delicious hell.

“I’m going to save you by taking this.” I lick over her opening again and then slide one finger inside her. “When I

get this little cherry, you'll belong to me.”

“Curt, don't stop.” She grabs at the sheets, and I feel how hot and slick her body is.

“Already so close?” I kiss her clit and then trace it with my tongue. “I'm going to love getting you off.”

I wonder if she'll sit on my face while she's wearing her wedding dress. The thought of her as my bride flashes in my mind, and I growl possessively as I slide my finger in and out of her opening. When she's nice and soft, I slide in another and feel her tight channel squeeze around me.

Her body is wound tight, and when I suck on her sweet little pearl, she screams my name and cums all over my fingers.

Chapter Eleven



DEMI

I gasp for air and try to catch my breath. This can't be real. My whole body tingles with pleasure unlike anything I've ever experienced, but it's more than that. It's Curt. He's given me this pleasure and is offering me so much more along with it. He wants me to belong to him, and I want that more than anything else in the world.

Curt places kisses along the inside of my thigh, but his fingers stay firmly inside of me. Slowly, I open my eyes, already thinking about how to give him the same pleasure, but my mind blanks when he starts to pull his fingers out and then thrust them back inside of me.

"You cum so beautifully, angel. I want to see it again."

"I don't think—" My words are cut off when his mouth descends on my clit yet again. The man is relentless.

"You don't have to think when I've got my hands on you," he says against my sex before he's licking and sucking all of me.

This time his fingers work faster, and at times I can feel him spreading them apart, stretching me. It's a sweet burn that has me wondering if it will be the same when he slides his cock deep inside of me.

I moan thinking about him taking me fully in that way. I bet I'll feel him there for days to come. Curt is a big man everywhere, and I've felt his cock pressed against me. It should scare me, but fear is the last thing I feel when it comes to him.

I pray it happens tonight. He said once he has me there will be no going back. I want that too. He thinks he's tying me to him, but I don't want to get away. The longer we wait, the more time he'll have to change his mind. Now I'm afraid because I don't want him to let me go.

"Angel." I gasp when his hand comes down on the top of my thigh. "Stay with me," he orders, pulling me back to the moment. "There you are." He smiles against my clit before his tongue comes out and swirls around it. "You're going to cum for me again, aren't you." It's not a question, but I answer it nonetheless.

"Yes." I nod. I think I would give this man anything he asked for.

"Good girl," he praises me, and a whimper leaves me as tears burn my eyes. I love his approval, even though it's something I didn't know I needed until he gave it to me.

When he sucks my clit back into his mouth, I'm done for. I cry out his name as another orgasm rushes through my body. My sex locks around his fingers, and my orgasm keeps going. He draws it out, his tongue flicking back and forth on my clit. My legs start to shake, and I'm not sure I can take much more, but I don't want to tell him to stop either. So instead I start to beg.

"Curt. Please." I shake my head. "It's too much." He pulls his fingers out of me before he crawls back up my body.

“It can’t be too much, angel. I’m always going to want more when it comes to you.” He always knows how to say the exact right thing. “And you’ll always give me more, won’t you?”

“You can have everything.” I wrap my arms around his neck, pulling him down for a kiss. I moan into his mouth when I taste myself because it feels like I’ve somehow marked him. I love it.

It makes me understand more why people wear wedding rings. I never really understood the concept of marriage. My mother went through so many men over the years, and I never cared for any of them. In fact, I told myself I’d never want a man. That’s laughable now because I can’t think about not having Curt.

I love the idea of putting a mark on Curt to show the world he’s taken and he’s mine. Everyone would know with one glance that he had someone he adored and maybe one day loved. I want to mark every inch of him before someone else thinks they can try to take him from me.

I lift my hips, rubbing myself against him, and a small growl leaves me when I realize he has pants on.

“Angel,” he groans against my mouth.

“Take them off,” I huff between kissing him. I want to make more demands, but I enjoy my mouth pressed against his too much.

“Maybe we should wait.” Everything inside of me freezes, and a rush of panic floods through me. Is he changing his mind?

“Did I do it wrong?” I suppose I didn’t really do anything but lie there. Why did I just lie there? I should have tried to

touch him more or been sexier.

“You didn’t do anything wrong.” He shifts and moves me with him. I’m back to straddling him while he’s leaning against the headboard. “I don’t want to take advantage of you.”

“What if I want you to take advantage of me?” He closes his eyes at my response, then takes a deep breath.

“I’m trying to do what’s right.”

“You don’t want me anymore. I get it. Fine. I’ll leave.” I fight back tears. I should be used to this. People always change their minds, and I’m left behind. This is nothing new.

When I try to push away from him, I don’t even get an inch of space between us. His hands grip my hips, keeping me in place.

“I never said you could go anywhere.” A darkness I’ve never seen from him rises to the surface. “I meant I was going to give you time to get used to me. I don’t want you giving me this gift because you feel you have to. That you owe it to me.”

I melt against him because of course that makes more sense. “I’m sorry,” I whisper. “I never should have doubted you.”

“You’re killing me, angel. Fuck, I love that you don’t doubt me, but you’re far too trusting with other people. That’s another thing I’m going to have to teach you. I’m never going to give you a reason to doubt me, and I’ll earn your trust. Even if you already do.”

“How can you say things to me like that and not want me to have sex with you?” A deep sexy chuckle comes from him, and the sound rumbles through my body. I push my sex down onto his erection, and he instantly stops laughing. “Sorry.”

“I warned you about the sorries,” he reminds me.

“Okay, then I’m not sorry.” I wiggle on his cock. “How much does a virginity go for?”

“Far more than Sherman paid, I can tell you that.” I see his anger start to come back, and as sexy as he looks pissed off, I enjoy him turned on more.

“How much would you give me to suck your cock?” Curt’s fingers dig into my hips in an unbreakable hold, and his cock jerks against me. “I’ve never done that before either. It would be another first for me.”

I lick my lips, and Curt’s eyes widen. I know I’ve shocked him and that had been the plan, but now I’m the one shocked by my body’s reaction to thinking about him paying for me. There’s something wrong with my vagina, but I could care less.

I want to make Curt snap, and I want to get him to claim me in every way. I don’t want to wait, and I’m willing to do whatever I need so that happens.

Right now.

Chapter Twelve



CURT

The little smile she gives me is going to bring me to my knees. How can I tell her no when she looks at me with those big doe eyes?

Her hands move down my bare chest as she starts to slide off my lap. “Demi,” I warn, but she smiles innocently.

“I’m only going to look. I’ve never seen one before.”

I have to close my eyes because I’m pretty sure all the blood in my body rushed to my cock. I nod and swallow hard, doing what I can to keep myself in check.

Her fingers go to the buttons on my pants, and I lift my hips a little and help her push them down. When I’m sitting there in only my boxer briefs, her eyes widen at the bulge and how most of the head is coming out of the top.

She licks her lips, and my cock throbs in invitation. Damn my dick and how it’s ruling every thought I have right now.

When she reaches for the band of my boxers, I grab her wrist until she looks up at me. “You don’t have to do this.”

“I know.” She smiles so damn sweetly, cum leaks out of the tip.

I can still smell her on me, and it’s making me so hard it hurts. Reaching down, I pull her shirt the rest of the way off so

she's completely naked. Then I lift once more as she pulls my boxer briefs off of me, and we're both stripped bare.

"You really are an angel," I say as my eyes travel over her body.

Without hesitating, she bends down and takes my cock into her mouth. I cry out at the shock and the heat of her tongue as she licks over the tip. She's so fucking eager, and it's like electricity is going straight to my dick.

"Angel." My head falls back against the headboard, making a loud thud as she sucks me farther into her mouth. "Fuck!" My hands go to her hair, and I don't mean to hold her still, but I'm dying. "You're going to kill me."

Her mouth comes off my cock, and she looks up at me with worried eyes. "Am I doing it wrong?"

"Wrong!?" I shake my head and try to catch my breath. "Sweet girl, no. You're doing it too well." I rub my thumb across her lip where some of my cum has dripped. "Your mouth was made for sucking my cock."

She grins, and when she dips her head, I'm once again sent to heaven and hell at the same time. Her hands grip the base of my shaft, and her tongue swirls around it like a lollipop. I can't help but wonder how many sweets she ate to get this good.

"Goddamn, that mouth of yours." This time when I hold her by the hair, it's to guide her gently up and down. "You're going to finish me off too soon."

She responds by moaning, and the vibration goes all the way to the root of my cock. I cry out, and my hips thrust up on their own. She's taken me to the breaking point, and I'm going insane.

“Enough.” When I pull her off my cock, her mouth makes a loud popping sound, and she looks up at me with wide eyes. “I can’t take it anymore.” I flip her back on the bed and pin her down as I push her knees up and slide my cock against her pussy. “I’m going to have you, whether I should or not.”

“I’m yours.” She rocks her hips up, and the head of my cock slips into her opening.

“How are you so fucking wet from sucking my dick?” I push in a little, and she squeezes the tip.

“It turned me on,” she whispers, and her cheeks burn with embarrassment.

“You can’t say that.” I kiss her mouth and then move down chest. “It drives me wild.”

“I loved it,” she says and raises her hips, bearing down on my cock.

I sink deeper into her, and when my mouth latches on to her nipple, I thrust all the way inside. She cries out and squeezes her legs around me, but I stay deep in her tight heat, trying not to move.

“Curt, it burns.” She wiggles under me, but I hold her steady.

“I know, angel.” I move to her other nipple and suck on this one too. I lick the soft underside and then kiss my way back up her neck and to her lips. “It’s okay. I got your cherry now.”

Pulling out a little, she whines, but she’s so wet I slide easily back in. I glance down between us and see my whole cock disappear inside of her again, and I throb.

“Fuck, I can’t wait to fill you up with cum.” I watch the veins on my cock stretched tight as I move in and out of her soft pink lips. “You’re going to look so pretty with it on your pussy.”

“It feels good now.” She begins to relax, and the nails she dug into my shoulder begin to release. “So good.”

“That’s because you’re mine.” I hold her hips as I slowly thrust, giving her long, deep strokes. “I want you to cum for me again so you open up.” I move my fingers over her clit, and she moans. “Can you do that for me, angel? I want to make sure I get it all the way inside.”

She nods quickly and rubs against my hand. She might be new to this, but her body was made for me.

Her pussy squeezes me, then she stills as her mouth opens, and she gasps. She cries out my name as I thrust deep one last time, and her body gives in to the pleasure. My cock swells bigger than it ever has, and I release into her. Waves of cum pour from me as she milks my dick of every drop. It feels like I’m cumming for the first time, and my vision blurs.

It takes everything inside me to roll us over so I don’t collapse onto her and crush her body with mine. I’m careful to still keep us connected as I pull my knees up and make sure she’s seated all the way to the root. She’s on top of me trying to catch her breath, and I let out a small laugh.

“My god,” I breathe, kissing the top of her head.

“Is it always that good?” she asks, her own giggle coming out.

“Never.” I tilt her chin to look up at me. “You’re the exception to every rule, angel. Nothing has ever felt so good before, and I’m not sure I’ll ever get enough.”

When I touch my lips to hers, I thrust in again, more gently this time. Slower and easier than before. This time I want to take my time and enjoy her heat wrapped around me.

“Does this mean we can do it again?” Her eyes widen, and I smile.

“This means we’re going to do it as many times as you can take it before I let you rest.”

“I guess it’s a good thing I’m not tired.” She smiles, and then I kiss her once more.

Chapter Thirteen



DEMI

The way Curt stares at me across the dining room table has me blushing. I didn't know someone could actually look at you with hunger in their eyes, but he does. I've never felt so wanted in my whole life, and it's not only been about the sex. He held me close to him through the night and kept saying the sweetest things to me. No one has ever treated me the way Curt has.

I'm sure both Boone and Phoebe know what happened last night. The only reason we'd actually left the room this morning is because Curt insisted on feeding me. I would have been happy to lie in bed with him all day.

His hands hadn't left me until we came to the table for breakfast. I think he sat across the table from me so he could better control himself. Even now I can still feel him between my thighs. It's not only the ache from him taking my virginity but from my thighs having been open for so long. There are tender muscles I didn't know I had before this morning, and I also had no idea that an ache could be so sweet.

"So, any big plans for your birthday today?" Phoebe asks.

Her eyes bounce between Curt and me with a knowing smirk. I'm not sure why I'm blushing. Boone has Phoebe in his lap as she eats her breakfast. Every now and then he feeds

her a bite himself, and she does the same to him. They are both so adorable together, and I never would have thought Boone would be this type of husband when I first met him. It goes to show you appearances mean nothing.

“I’m going to be taking Demi back home with me today. I have a few things planned.” He winks at me.

“Really? You don’t have to do anything, it’s so last minute.” He’s already done so much, but he never seems to stop.

“Of course I do. You’re my girl, and it’s your birthday, angel.” I think this might be the first birthday in a very long time that’s actually been celebrated. The last one I can recall is with my grandma before she passed. I was so little at the time that the memories are a bit fuzzy.

“Maybe we could go buy her a pretty dress for the occasion. I know a cute dress shop that’s not far from here.”

“I’m not so sure about that.” Boone wraps his arm around his wife and shoots Curt a glance. I’ve noticed the two of them can speak without words.

“Do you want to get a dress?” Curt asks.

“We can make a day of it. A dress and maybe get our nails done,” Phoebe pushes for more.

While all of this does sound wonderful, I’d be happy spending my day with Curt. I don’t need all that.

“The security guards are arriving in an hour.” Boone glances at his watch.

“Guards?” I whisper, suddenly remembering the mess I’m in. How could I forget? I’d gotten lost in my own little world with Curt there for a moment. “I don’t want to put anyone in

danger.” Phoebe has already been through so much. She doesn’t need any more trouble.

“Honestly I don’t think anyone would try and find her in Hollow Oak,” Curt finally says after a long pause. I can tell he’s having an inner battle with himself. He is always trying to do what he thinks is the right thing as opposed to what he greedily wants. I enjoy his greediness over me, so I don’t mind one bit.

“I suppose you’re right. It’s been quiet,” Boone responds, giving Curt another look.

“So we can go?” Phoebe perks up.

“Do you want to go, angel?”

“I don’t want to cause any problems.” Part of me wants to, but another part doesn’t. I’m truly on the fence. It would be nice to get dolled up for Curt and get to know Phoebe more. If things go as Curt says, we’re going to be in each other’s lives. Curt and Boone are clearly close.

“That’s not what I asked.” He stands up and comes around the table to me. “Come with me.” He offers me his hand, and I take it. He leads me back toward the bedroom we’ve been staying in and once inside, he locks the door behind us.

Before I can say anything, his mouth is on mine. My feet leave the floor as he pins me to the door, and I wrap my legs around him while I kiss him back. He kisses me like he hasn’t seen me in months. When he told me that he’d never get enough of me, I thought it was only sweet words lovers say to each other in bed. I’m starting to believe them. Curt wasn’t lying when he said he would prove things to me. That I’d see he meant every word he’s given me.

Last night, he told me that I was far too trusting with him, but I'm not so sure that's true. I think it's more that I'm willing to lock on to anything he gives me, not caring that he might break my heart in the end. I know that I may be pathetic, and it's why I didn't admit that to him.

But the truth is that the thought of him walking away right now is terrifying, so there is nothing to lose. He'll think I'm crazy if I tell him I might already be in love with him. I still have this fear that this all will be ripped away from me, but with each second I spend with him, the more I believe he won't let me go. So maybe he's right, and in time I'll have full trust.

"Curt," I moan when he releases my mouth and starts to trail kisses along my neck where he's left a small love bite already.

"I want you to go and have fun, but thinking about you being away from me has me wanting to mark you all over again."

"You can mark me all you want." I dig my fingers into his short hair.

"You need time to heal." He gives my neck one last nip before he lifts his head and his eyes lock with mine.

"But I soaked in the tub and took the Advil," I remind him.

"You tempt me, but I won't cave on this. I'm not going to put you in more unnecessary pain. I'm supposed to be taking care of you." My heart flutters every time he mentions taking care of me. It makes me fall even harder for him, and he has no idea how much I crave something like that. I need it. I

know I'm an adult now, but I've been an adult when I shouldn't have been one. I want to relish this while I have it.

"Fine," I huff. If I want him to take care of me, then I need to let him.

"You not being near a bed and out in a shop will help me keep my hands off you. For now." He leans in and brushes his mouth against mine.

"It doesn't look like you need a bed right now." He gives my ass a squeeze before he puts me down on my feet.

"You're right. I know I could have you anywhere, but if people are around, I'll be good. No one sees you naked or hears you cumming but me." There is a warning in his tone.

"Good, because I feel the same."

"I'm all yours, angel," he responds, giving me the best birthday gift ever.

Him.

Chapter Fourteen



CURT

Part of the reason I'm not more upset about Demi going into town with Phoebe is the amount of security they're taking with them, and also that we're meeting with the Feds here this afternoon to discuss what the plan is about the Shapovals.

Boone and I say goodbye to them, and soon after, a couple of dark SUVs are pulling in after them.

"Didn't think we'd see you again so soon," the agent says to Boone as they shake hands. "But I hear you've got something for me."

"That's where my brother Curt comes in," Boone says and introduces us.

Once we're inside, I go through the whole story about Sherman trying to buy Demi from the Shapovals and how they've put out a bid to find her. As he listens, he takes notes, and when I'm finished he nods.

"We've got Sherman in custody after Boone's tip, so we'll follow up with him first." He sighs as he places his notepad on the table in front of him. "The problem is going to be getting them to come out in the open. From what I've heard, they've gone underground."

“My source says there’s an open contract on Demi’s head. They want her back, and they’re willing to pay for it.”

“What does she have that they want so badly?” the agent asks, and I look over at Boone.

He casually puts his hand in front of his mouth and I know he’s trying to hide a smile.

“It doesn’t matter, she doesn’t have it anymore,” I answer, trying to steer him away from that questions.

“Well, where is it? Maybe we can get it and use it to make a deal.”

“Yeah, Curt, where is it?” Boone asks, and I swear I see his eyes nearly water as he tries to keep from laughing.

“Fuck off,” I whisper under my breath at him.

He leans in so only I can hear him. “You know I’m pretty sure that’s how she lost it.”

“Is there someone we can send to look for it?” the agent asks innocently, and I scowl at Boone as he chuckles.

“No.” I grind my teeth as my brother’s shoulders shake.

“We’ve got lots of resources at our disposal.” The agent looks at me hopefully. “Maybe you’re not comfortable finding it on your own.”

“Oh, he found it.” Boone falls into peals of laughter, and I stand up.

“That’s enough.” I push back from the table to get up, but Boone holds up his hand.

“I’m sorry, I’ll be good.” He smirks, but I narrow my eyes at him, and he stops.

“She was purchased as an escort, I’m sure you can figure out exactly what Sherman was paying for.” I hate saying the words, but this needs to stop.

The agent nods as he makes another note, and thankfully he doesn’t say another word about it. “I think the best thing to do is to set up a meeting with them through our contacts and use her as bait.”

Boone glances at me, and I clench my fists at my side. This is exactly what I said I didn’t want to happen. “No, I won’t put her in harm’s way.”

“It might be the only way to lure them out of hiding.” The agent looks at me and spreads his hands out on the table. “From what I’ve heard, the only thing they want is Miss Slater. I think we should give that to them.” When I go to interject, he holds his finger up to stop me. “But what about if you’re with her when we make the exchange? I’ll have my men waiting, and we can grab them before they have a chance to get their hands on her. And with you by her side, you’ll be there to make sure nothing happens to her.”

I think over his offer and try to figure out if this is the only way or if there’s something else we can do. “There’s too many scenarios that could go wrong. What if your men don’t get to her in time? What if they try to kill me to get to her?” I shake my head. “It’s too risky.”

“We have a small window of opportunity to flush these men out and put them behind bars for good. I haven’t had a shot at them as good as I do right now. I’m not sure we have a choice.”

“Curt,” Boone says from beside me. I hear the slight plea in his voice.

“What would you say if this was Phoebe?” He snaps his mouth shut, and I see his jaw tic. “Exactly.”

“Why don’t you talk to her about it and let her decide?” the agent suggests.

“It doesn’t matter what she wants.” I hear myself say the words even though I know I should give her the chance to turn this down.

Somewhere in the background I hear a phone ring, but I ignore it. I’m ready for this conversation to be over, but nothing has been resolved. I won’t put the woman I love in the line of fire. The thought is sobering because I didn’t really put it into words before now. I love her—that’s why I can’t stand the thought of losing her.

The phone rings again, and I see Boone look into the other room. “Can someone grab that? I keep forgetting Mrs. Birch is still in the hospital being treated for her injuries.”

A moment later, a man in uniform walks in holding out what looks like a burner cell phone. “Whose is that?” I ask Boone.

“No idea.”

“This was sitting on the front steps,” the security guard says and hands it to me. “They want to talk to you.”

“Me?” A shiver of cold dread shoots down my back as I take it from him and put it on speaker phone.

“Hello?”

“Curt, don’t—” Demi’s voice is cut off, and it’s silent before a man comes on the line. “If you want her back, it will cost you.”

“What have you done with her?” I don’t even recognize my own voice as a rage like I’ve never felt comes over me.

“I’m the one making the rules now, and if you want to see her alive again, you’ll do exactly as I say.”

Chapter Fifteen



DEMI

I should have known because nothing ever lasts for me. If I didn't have bad luck I'd have no luck at all. This time, though, I'd really let myself believe I could keep Curt. So much so I'd let all the girls talk me into trying on wedding dresses. No matter how badly I try to hang on to something, it's always yanked away from me. Only this time it's far worse than it's ever been before. I've gone and pulled so many others into my mess.

I watch as the driver tosses the phone he called Curt from out the window. He speeds onto the highway to get out of Hollow Oak, taking me farther away from Curt and back to the world I actually belong in.

"I'm so sorry." I swipe at my tear-covered cheeks with my bound hands. They duct taped them together in front of me.

"This isn't your fault," Gracie tries to reassure me, having no idea this is actually my fault. My decisions led to this. How Gracie manages to give me a smile as she says it, I'll never know.

She's been smiling since I met her at the bridal shop that her sister-in-law Val owns. Gracie, Val, Phoebe, and I had been hanging out together in the store. Val actually closed it for the rest of the day so we had it all to ourselves.

Thankfully, Val was in the back of the shop with Phoebe looking for a new dress that came in a few days ago when the Shapovals came rushing in. They forced Gracie and me out and into the back of their van. It happened so quickly and in broad daylight. I'm still dressed in a beautiful wedding gown, which makes this even more dramatic.

Val mentioned she is newly pregnant. It's a miracle she hadn't been in the front with us. I don't want to think what could have happened if she'd been taken with us or the stress it would have put on her and the baby. The thought alone has me wanting to throw up.

"It is my fault." My tears spill down my cheeks. "I'll try and get them to let you go." Gracie leans over to whisper into my ear.

"I'm the best person to be kidnapped with. My husband always knows where to find me." She winks at me when she leans back. I have no idea what that even means, but she seems pretty dang confident.

"Shut up back there," the man in the passenger seat shouts from the front of the van.

The driver says something in Russian as he takes a sharp turn, and I tumble into Gracie. I bite the inside of my cheek to keep from crying out when Gracie's elbow gets me in the side. She gives me an apologetic look like she caused it. Could she be any sweeter? I know she means well, but my guilt keeps on growing.

I'm surprised when we get off the highway only a few exits later. We pull into a residential neighborhood and right into a driveway, and I notice a for sale sign posted out front. The passenger, whose name I think is Igor, jumps out and opens the garage door for the van to pull in.

My fear skyrockets when the garage door closes behind us, and then I hear Gracie suck in a shallow breath, showing the first sign of distress.

The back doors swing open, and Igor is standing there.

“Out,” he orders, and I scoot to the end of the van. It’s harder because I can’t use my hands to try and help me balance. Gracie does the same, and the second our feet hit the concrete, he’s shoving us toward the door to get into the house and down a hallway. “Ivan. Get that door.”

Ivan opens a door and turns on the light. “In,” he orders, pointing for us to go into the bathroom. We do as we’re told, and they close the door behind us, leaving us alone inside. I see quickly why they put us in here. There are no windows.

“This is good,” Gracie says, again trying to reassure me. Maybe she’s trying to reassure herself too.

“How is this good?”

“They’re leaving us alone.” No sooner the words are out of her mouth than the door flies open again.

“You’re stupid. You didn’t even check her!” Igor shouts as he makes a grab for Gracie. I scream, trying to jump between them, but he easily shoves me away. I fall backwards, crying out when my back hits part of the sink before I slide the rest of the way to the ground. There is no way to brace myself with my hands still tied.

“Leave her alone!” I beg when he starts grabbing at her and his hands go to her ass. “Take me!”

“*Zamolchi*,” he shouts, telling me to shut up. I don’t speak Russian, but I recognize some words from the neighborhood. He pulls a phone out of Gracie’s back jeans pocket. “Fuck.” He drops it on the ground and stomps on it.

“No one even knows the girl is gone. They wouldn’t be tracking her,” Ivan rushes to say, looking a bit scared himself.

“You better pray.” Igor kicks the scraps of the phone back out into the hallway and grabs Gracie’s wrist. He looks at the diamond on her finger as he lifts her hand. “This real?”

“Do you think my husband would tell me if he got me a fake ring?”

“It is a big diamond. You must be a very good wife.” He pulls it from off her finger. “What’s your name?”

“Gracie Combs.”

“I’m guessing he will pay too.”

“He would,” she agrees before Igor turns his attention back to me, and I sit up on the floor.

“Are you still a virgin?” He licks his lips. I nod my head yes, thinking if he thinks I am, maybe he’ll keep his paws off me. “Call the doctor, Ivan.”

“Why? He’s buying her back.”

“In case he doesn’t come through. I want to know what we have.”

“All right.” Ivan pulls his phone out. “She’s not a virgin.”

“Do what you’re told,” Igor snaps at him. “Don’t make me come back in here,” he warns before he steps back out of the bathroom, closing the door behind him.

“I’m so sorry.”

Gracie ignores my apology. “Are you okay?” She drops to her knees beside me.

“I’m fine. He knocked the wind out of me more than anything.”

“Our men will come.” Gracie slips in next to me to lean against the sink counter.

“Your phone, is that how he would have tracked you?” I ask. I know Curt will come for me and pay or do whatever it is they are asking for. I have faith in that. I was only hoping that if Gracie’s husband is looking too, maybe they’ll find us sooner, and the Shapovals won’t see it coming.

“Nah.” She reaches inside of her shirt and pulls out a locket, showing it to me before she quickly puts it back under her shirt. “My husband is a retired FBI agent.”

Oh shit.

“Between yours and mine, these men are already on borrowed time.” She smirks.

I pray she is right.

Chapter Sixteen



CURT

We're in a large SUV with eight of us packed in, and you can practically snap the tension in half. They all arrived at the house within a matter of minutes of me getting the call, and I jumped in. A man named Donovan, who looks like was on the wrong end of the fight, is leading the recovery plan.

"They've stopped here." He touches the map on the screen in front of him and checks the tablet in his hand. "Her tracker is still on, so they haven't found it yet. Her cell went out not long ago."

"Tracker," I hear Boone say. "That's a smart idea." He nods like that's the first thing he's doing when he gets home to Phoebe.

"Can this thing go any faster?" I look out the window, and panic feels like black ink crawling up my skin. I'm so close to losing it.

"I've got it on the floor," Tidas says as his hands tighten on the steering wheel.

The rest of the SUV is packed with agents that are ready to jump into action. The whole ride has been tense, and all I can do is pray. The second I have Demi back in my arms, I'm going to tell her how much I love her. I'm going to marry her,

put a baby in her, and damn it, I'm going to put a tracking device on her too.

"It's just up ahead," Donovan says. "Pull over here, and we'll come in the back."

"I know it's not the time to make jokes, but *that's what she said*," Donovan says as he pulls over and behind the row of trees.

"Dumbass," his brother hisses.

When we're all out of the SUV, the agents suit up. Donovan looks at them and then at me. "Are you sure you want to do this? There's no shame in hanging back."

"If Demi is in there, then that's where I'm going." I take the gun he holds out to me, and he nods.

"All right, Tidas and Boone are staying with the vehicle." Donovan nods to the men behind me. "We're going in hot, safeties off."

I check my gun and turn to my brother. "Be ready."

He nods as he gives me a quick hug. "Be safe." When he releases me, he looks into my eyes. "Get your girl and get the fuck out. Don't be a hero."

"She's the only thing I'm after."

"Let's move," Donovan says, and I see a glint in his eyes.

"How are you so calm?" I ask him as we circle through the woods.

The smile he gives me is chilling. "I was trained by the best on how to kill with my bare hands. It's been a long time since I've had the practice." He cracks his knuckles, and it's then I notice he's not holding a gun. "I'm going to enjoy this."

In this moment, I realize that Donovan Combs is exactly the man you want on your side when going into a situation like this. His strength is giving me my own, and I'm ready to go in there and rip out someone's throat.

"There." Donovan crouches down, and we follow. He points to the back, and we see the light on.

"No blinds?" I look at the people walking around in the kitchen, and Donovan shakes his head.

"The house is empty; these dumbasses probably didn't even check it first. This was a dump and dash plan from the start."

"What do we do now? They'll see us coming."

"I'm going to the front to create a diversion. You four sneak in and get them. From the heat signals I've got, it looks like we've got two stationary bodies in the middle. Probably a closet or a bathroom."

"Done," one of the agents behind me says.

"Meet you in the middle," Donovan says and winks at me before he's gone. As he leaves, his footsteps are silent, and I can't help but think I would never want to be on his bad side.

It doesn't take long before we hear the sound of a horn blaring, but it's not just a couple of times. It's like someone sat a brick on the wheel, and it's a loud siren screeching through the quiet.

Just like Donovan planned, we see the men in the back of the house rush to the front to inspect. The four agents and I crouch down low as we quickly creep to the house, and one of them puts their hand on the door. They count to three, and I swing around, gun pointed ahead. There's no one in this room, but I keep my gun straight ahead of me as I go through the

kitchen and dining room to find the spot where Donovan got the heat signals.

In the distance, I hear a man shout and then cry out. His screams are cut off abruptly, and the sound of something crunching fills the almost pitch-black hallway. There's a gunshot that sounds close, but I can't focus on that right now.

When I turn the corner, I see a door and grab the handle. Slowly, I turn it open and when the door is cracked, I kick it open and point my gun straight ahead.

"Curt!" Demi shouts, and I'm both relieved and terrified at the same time.

She and Gracie are huddled together on the floor of the bathroom and I immediately go for them. Turning around, I look at the agents, but there's only one left.

"Go help Donovan. I'm getting them out the back.

"I should stay with you," he says.

"I know, but none of us will get out of here if you're with me when you could be helping take those guys out."

He nods, not wanting to argue with me. I'm not sure if this is the best idea; I just know I have to get them out of here.

"Come on, angel. We'll untie your hands in the car." I grab her face and look her over to make sure she's not hurt. "Can you do that for me?"

"Yeah." I see the tears in her eyes, but she doesn't let them fall as she gets up from the floor with the help of Gracie and me.

I keep reminding myself that I'll worry about everything later. I have to get her out of here first, and then I can worry

about all that's happened to her and how to help her. Right now, the only thing I can do is make sure she stays alive.

"Get behind me," I say to Gracie as she wraps her arms around Demi.

With them tucked close behind my back, I take the gun, and we exit the bathroom. I look down both ends of the hallway and don't see anyone. The sounds have gone quiet, but it could be because it's happening outside.

Retracing my steps through the house, we make it back to the kitchen, and I'm relieved when no one is there. Just as we exit through the back door, I hear the sound of a gun being cocked.

"That's far enough," I hear someone say, and I turn to face the leader of the Shapoval mafia, Boris.

He's the one the feds have been after all this time. He uses his men to do his dirty work while he hides in the shadows.

"Must have been an important exchange to bring you all the way out to the suburbs," I say, stalling for time.

"You took my crown jewel." He glares behind me at Demi, and I move a little to cover her.

"She doesn't belong to you."

My hackles rise, and my hand on the gun tightens. I'd pull the trigger and shoot him right now, but I'm worried it wouldn't be enough to take a big fucker like him down, and he'd get a shot off first. I can't chance a bullet getting my Demi or Gracie either. I know how much Donovan loves his wife, and I would risk my life to protect her.

"I heard you spoiled her." He sneers at me. "Don't worry, there's plenty of her left to be had." The smile he gives me is

greasy.

“When I kill you, I’m going to kick in what’s left of your teeth.”

He lets out a small laugh. “Kill me? I’m Boris Shapoval, and I won’t be killed by some nobody.”

“What about a trained assassin?” Donovan says as he sneaks up behind him and makes Boris flinch.

It’s enough of a distraction that I squeeze the trigger and hit him in the chest. He manages to fire off a round, but thankfully it misses. Donovan is there and knocks him to the ground as I run over and kick the gun away from him. I stare down at his dying body and he blinks up at me, trying to choke out something in Russian before he dies.

“*Das vadanya,*” I say before I raise my boot and bring it down hard on his mouth.

Chapter Seventeen



DEMI

“I’m fine really,” I tell Curt for the millionth time. Three doctors at the hospital have told him this as well. Each have given the all-clear for me to go home, but it’s him pressing that maybe I should stay overnight. Never in all my life has anyone been so worried over me. If I wasn’t already madly in love with him, I’d be done for.

“There’s already a bruise forming.”

He’s got his hand inside the back of the hospital gown I’d put on when I first got here. His warm palm goes over the spot I’d hit on the bathroom counter. It isn’t bothering me, and I’d forgotten about it until Curt made me recount everything that happened. Then he made me promise to not leave out any details. I’d done so hoping it would put him at ease, and I think in some ways it did.

“I assure you, Mr. Adler, it’s only superficial. We’ve done scans and x-rays, and she’s fine. It will look far worse than it actually is. She’s a lucky girl,” Dr. Nora says, but she has no idea how lucky I truly am. “Plus, I’m sure your bed at home is better than a hospital bed.”

“It is,” I’m quick to add. “It’s the best I’ve ever slept in.” I lean into Curt’s touch. “I want to go home.” I run my hand up his chest, and he looks down at me. “Please,” I push. If

anything, I'm worried about him. He shot a man today, not to mention the kick to the face he gave Boris. I'll never forget that sound.

It really should have grossed me out, but it didn't. I'd felt a barrage of emotions at the time, but the first was the feeling of being safe. It was nearly overwhelming to come to the realization that Curt would always protect me. No matter what, he would always come for me, and that is something I've never had before. I had no idea how much I needed that until it overwhelmed me with relief. I'd felt lighter and loved, which was all new to me.

As scary as all of it was, the silver lining is the fact that the Shapoval family is done for. They can't hurt innocent girls any longer. The only good thing those men ever did was lead Curt and me to each other.

"All right, I'll take you home." He leans down and kisses the top of my head.

"I'll get everything together, and if you need anything you can call me, day or night." She pulls out a card and gives it to Curt. "Thank you for the generous donation as well. You didn't have to do that, but the hospital will put it to good use."

"Donation?" I ask when she leaves the room. "Really? I only hit my back."

"Money well spent. This hospital is the closest to our home." Warmth blooms in my chest when it calls it our home. "I'm sure it will come in handy in the future too." He shrugs it off and grabs a bag someone brought up so I could change into clean clothes.

"I don't have plans of getting kidnapped in the future. I swear," I tease, trying to get him to lighten up. He lifts me off

the bed and helps me to my feet before he pulls the gown off me.

“Babies,” he says far too easily as his hand brushes my stomach and he pulls a sweater down over my head.

“Babies?” I whisper in shock. Did I hear him right?

“It’s only a matter of time.” He shrugs again and acts like he’s talking about the weather or something that’s no big deal. “Brace your hands on me.” He drops to his knees in front of me, and I put my hands on his shoulder while I step into the black leggings. He pauses when his hands get to my sex.

“Curt.” I can’t help the small moan that comes from me. His face is right there. I push my hips forward absently. My body needs what only he can do to it. He pushes my sweater up and kisses the lips of my sex. His tongue slips out, stealing a taste, and a growl leaves him. He yanks my leggings the rest of the way up to hide the temptation, and I pout.

“I’ll take care of you when we get home,” he promises as he puts my socks and shoes on next.

“I love when you take care of me,” I say, meaning it in more ways than one.

Before today I wouldn’t have said that out loud, scared I was being too clingy and not wanting to overwhelm him or give him reasons to think I’m too much to deal with. I’m not going to hold back what I want to say anymore. You never know what each day might bring, and I don’t want to have regrets like I had today, things left unspoken that I wished I’d said.

“Good, because I’ll be doing it until I take my last breath.” He stands and tucks a piece of hair behind my ear.

“I want to take care of you too.” I wrap my arms around his neck, plastering myself to him. Since he found me, I haven’t let him get more than a few feet away. I bet if someone asked him he’d say he’s the one that hasn’t let me more than a few feet away.

With everything that happened, I was a bit surprised they hadn’t made Curt go down to the police station or something, but they let him go with me. He and his friends must know a lot of people in high places. I also think Gracie’s husband had a big hand in all of it. Even after everything that went down, she still had a smile on her face—one that worked wonders on her husband. He’d been ready to end all the Shapoval men, but she’d calmed him with a mere touch. I’m noticing I have that same ability with Curt.

“You take care of me by being with me.” He leans down, taking my lips in a long kiss. I moan into his mouth, trying to climb his giant body until a throat clears, breaking us from the moment.

“Judge Prescott is here,” Boone says.

My stomach tightens with worry. I know Curt shot that man while saving us, but still. They don’t know if he’s going to make it, but the FBI agents told us it didn’t matter either way. Curt was cleared of any wrongdoing.

“No one is going to separate us. I think I’ve proven that to you,” Curt tells me, sensing my worry. He’s right, and I need to let that go.

“Okay.” I rest my head on his chest, believing him.

“Did you get the paperwork done?” Curt asks his brother.

“This isn’t my first rodeo. I’ve got you covered.” Boone holds up a little box, and it takes me a second to realize it’s a

ring box. He tosses it towards Curt, who catches it easily.

“Thanks, we’ll be right out.” Boone nods, stepping back and letting the door fall closed.

“What’s going on?”

“We’re getting married. We can plan a better wedding later, but I need this now.” He opens the box and pulls out the ring. He doesn’t wait for me to hold my hand up for him as he grabs it in his own and pushes the giant rock onto my finger.

“This might weigh more than me,” I laugh, even as tears are forming in my eyes.

“Give me some time and I’ll change that.”

“Curt!” I giggle. “You’re not asking?”

“I told you that—”

“I know what you told me. I remember everything you say and do, Curt. I can’t help it because I’m a bit obsessed with you and madly in love. I think I’d agree to do anything for you. Except to share you.”

“I only want you. It’s you or no one for me, angel. You’ll be the only woman I’ll ever love.”

“Curt.” Tears slip down my cheeks as I look into his eyes. “I don’t need a big wedding. I just want to get married to you and call you my husband.”

“Say it again. Tell me you love me,” he demands.

“I love you, Curt.”

“Love you too, Demi.” He leans down to kiss me, but the door swings open again.

“Save it for the vows! The judge is waiting in the chapel,” Phoebe shouts.

“We’ve got a wedding to get to,” Val says from behind her with a white dress in her hands. Gracie is with her too, and I can see their husbands are looming in the background.

No, I don’t think I’ll ever need another wedding. This one is going to be perfect.

Epilogue



CURT

Thirteen Years Later...

“Stop being dramatic,” Demi says as she comes up behind me. I feel her small hands go around my waist and rest on my stomach.

“I don’t like it.” I scowl outside the window at the group of kids sitting around the firepit.

“It’s an innocent bonfire and s’mores night. Don’t go all crazy dad mode on her.”

“That’s not what I do.” I keep on scowling, and Demi’s silence is telling. “It’s not.” I try to defend myself but it’s no use. Letting out a long sigh, I turn away from the window. “Fine, I won’t stare at them, but I’ll still be dramatic.”

Our oldest daughter is outside with some of her friends having a bonfire and hanging out. When she asked, I said yes without even thinking about who she might be inviting. When I saw Donovan pull up and drop off the boys, I started to get suspicious.

“I thought they were all friends.” I glance over my shoulder, but Demi pats me on my chest to pull my attention away from it.

“They are.” She looks up at me like she’s talking to a five-year-old. “But she’s at that age where boys are finally cute and not gross.” Demi shrugs and takes me by the hand. “And why wouldn’t she fall in love with one of the Combs kids? They’re our best friends, and they’ve been inseparable since diapers.”

“They’re still boys.” I know I sound like an ass, but that’s my girl out there.

“They’re good young men, and I’d be proud if our daughters ended up with one of them.”

“I don’t like it.”

“Duly noted.” My wife’s smile is indulgent, and I narrow my eyes on her.

“You knew about this before tonight, didn’t you?”

She turns and walks away, giving me a little shrug. “Maybe.”

“Maybe? Oh, angel, you know better than that.”

She wiggles her ass as she darts off to the bedroom, and I’m hot on her heels. When we get to the top of the stairs, she squeals as I throw her over my shoulder, and I carry her the rest of the way, kicking the door closed behind us.

“You’re in for it now.” I slap a hand across her ass, and she giggles as she pushes her ass into it.

“Don’t tempt me with a good time.”

“You are pushing it.” I toss her in the middle of the bed, and she spreads her legs, showing me she’s not wearing any panties under her dress. “Angel, were you walking around all night without anything under that dress?”

My hand jerks at the hem of my shirt until I tug it off and toss it to the ground. Then I hurriedly strip down and crawl onto the bed, pushing her legs apart.

“Oops.” She doesn’t look sorry at all as she spreads her knees.

“Give me that pussy.” I grab her ass and pull her closer as my mouth falls on her cunt.

“Curt!” she squeals and I smack her ass again.

My tongue slides between her lips, and I suck on her clit before my fingers curl inside her. She’s soaking wet, no doubt waiting all night to push my buttons and get me to react. I know she’s doing this to distract me right now, but I don’t care. It’s working.

“Right there, Daddy,” she moans, and I pull my mouth off of her.

“Fuck, do you want me to cum on myself?” With one quick move, I flip her over and jerk her hips back. “Ass up,” I order, reaching into my boxer briefs and pulling out my cock.

It’s hard and throbbing as I squeeze it a few times and then swipe it through her slick heat. With one hard plunge, I’m balls deep and she’s groaning almost as loud as I am. There’s no gentle teasing right now as I start to pound into her. She arches her back and pushes against me, silently begging for me to give her all of my frustration and passion.

My wife knows me better than I know myself, and after all these years, I still can’t get enough.

“More,” she moans, her hands gripping the sheets, and I feel her pussy clench around me.

“All of it,” I grunt as I reach around and rub her clit. “You’ll get every last drop.” After the first time she falls over the edge, I pull out and flip her on to her back. “Now I want you to look at me when you cum on my cock,” I demand, sliding back inside her tight silk.

“I love you,” she moans and digs her nails into my chest.

“Forever, angel. Forever.”

THE END!



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