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introduction

I'm kicking off the holidays with a bundle of sweet snowy festive reads! Four previously released classics from my backlist are now all in one click for a limited time!

CHRISTMAS CHEMISTRY

It's time for the ho-ho-holidays and while this is one of my favorite times of the year, I'm feeling a little off. My mom has gone on a well-deserved cruise and I'm alone, starting a new position to be the assistant of famed researcher Dr. Nathan Amherst.

The department secretary says he's terrible and they have to hire new assistants all the time which is why I'm starting at the end of the term. She's all but begging me to overlook his bad habits and nasty temper.

I could've endured those things, but I wasn't prepared to for him to be the science version of John Wick. He's so gorgeous and so smart and I'm so attracted to him that I'm worried I won't be able to keep my hands off of him.

I need this job but it's already in jeopardy—and so am I.

INSTA HOLIDAY

Tyson Carter has known Rory Carlson is the one for him since, well, forever. All through high school with every score, he hoped to impress her into his bed. Nothing worked. Rory has remained stubbornly resistant to his Carter charms but Tyson didn't win all those championships through luck. He can be just as strong-willed as she.

Rory Carlson has two younger brothers, a household full of debt, and a derelict mother. She doesn't have time for rich kid Tyson Carter who, despite all his sports achievements, has decided to be an influencer. It doesn't matter to her that he has hundreds of thousands of followers. Does that put food on the table? Tyson is gorgeous, handsome and smart, but she needs someone she can rely on.

In this insta world, she wants something permanent. During this holiday season, can Tyson convince her that forever after is possible with him?

KING'S CASTLE

King built his fortress to keep people out, not in. After his abusive old man kicked the bucket, King took the family fortune and built a haven for women and children who needed protection. He has one rule and that is the women decide when they get to leave. When Hayden shows up, all his self-discipline goes out the window. He's ready to risk it all to keep her...even against her will.

Hayden came to find her sister—not a man—but one look at King has all her female parts kicking into high gear. He's autocratic and demanding and everything she shouldn't like but she can't help being attracted to the soft heart he keeps hidden. She should run away but every moment she spends with him has her wishing that her home could be the King's Castle.

OH SNOWY NIGHT

*Oh! Snowy night the stars are brightly shining
It is the night of the lumberjack's big fall
Long lay his heart in eternal slumber
Till she appeared and his soul felt enthralled
A thrill of hope the romance world rejoices
For yonder breaks a new and glorious tale
Swipe open your Kindles
And read the latest story
Of the slight surly Conn
And of Faith who brought new hope*

christmas chemistry



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one

“I DON’T NEED AN ASSISTANT.”

“Too late. She’ll be here in about ten minutes. Don’t be a dick to her, or the university will pull your funding,” Rachel, our department secretary, warns.

With disgust, I toss down my pen and glare at the older woman over the top of my glasses. “I never asked for an assistant, and therefore, no one should be upset when I fire her.”

“You can’t fire her. She’s an employee of the university and was hired by Dean Campbell.”

“Then she can go service Dean Campbell.” I pick up my pen and return to re-reading my paper on rapid growth hydroponics for retail consumers. Most efficient hydroponic farms are thousands of square feet big. This new prototype I’m developing could be installed in kitchen cabinets and grow everything from tomatoes and lettuce to berries and oranges. Imagine never having to go to the grocery store again—the utter dream. I hate shopping and try and get delivery whenever I can. Usually it just takes a small bribe.

“See, that’s just the type of attitude that is going to result in a lawsuit. This is a bio technology graduate student, not a sex worker. You can’t treat her like one.”

“Meaning I shouldn’t treat her like a bio tech student or a sex worker? Your pronoun references two possible objects.” There’s not enough in the paper about the labor and transportation costs. I need to run a few more numbers and scenarios. Abandoning the printout, I switch over to the

computer and pull up the database. It'll take hours to crunch some numbers, hours that would be better spent on researching. I pinch the bridge of my nose.

“Dr. Amherst. Did you hear what I said?”

“That I can't fire the assistant? Yeah.” I wave my hand toward the door, wanting Rachel to get out and leave me alone so I can work.

“No. I said that the south elevator—you know what? Never mind.” The door bangs behind her when she leaves.

I shake my head. People are always mad around here, and I have no fucking clue why. If everyone did their work and left all the other people alone, we would all be happier. I should put that in the suggestion box we have in the breakroom. No socializing during work hours. In fact, the breakroom itself should be abolished. I nod emphatically to myself. Brilliant idea. I switch to a document program, type up my suggestion, and send it off to the printer. On the device is a paper copy of the latest headhunter inquiry. *Dr. Amherst, I get so many inquiries as to whether you'd be interested in moving to the private sector. Not only are the benefits and pay better, but the R&D budgets would make a grown scientist weep. Give me—I crumple it and grab my breakroom breakthrough. I'll drop it off on my way home tonight, thereby avoiding people in the breakroom, delivering my recommendation, and leaving work all in one efficient economy of movement. With that problem solved, I reapply myself to my work. I'm deep into grams per growth and total dissolved solids, or TDS as we call them, when the phone rings. I let it go to voicemail, but it rings again. And again. By the fourth loop, I realize that the person is not going to give up. It's probably Rachel calling to remind me of some faculty function that I will be blowing off.*

“Yeah?” I bark into the phone.

“Your assistant is here. I'm sending her in. Remember! No lawsuits.” Rachel hangs up, and five seconds later, there's a knock on my door.

“Come in,” I sigh. A quick survey of my office has me pushing my hand through my dark hair. It's a disaster in here,

and the second desk near the door is covered with papers. I walk over and start to clear things away—and by clear, I mean shifting the piles of paper on the desk to the floor. She can sort through things. After all, isn't that why they are giving me an assistant?

The door creaks open. “Dr. Amherst.”

I don't bother looking up but instead gesture her toward the desk. “Yes. This is the right place. This is your desk.” I knock a fist on the top of the wood. “Did Rachel give you a computer? Just set up here. Sorry about the mess. I guess that will be the first task for you. Once you're done, I have some modeling you can do. You do know how to do that?” I raise my head and lock eyes with a goddess. An orchestra starts playing in my head. Sunlight in the dank office appears to surround her. If Rachel were to arrive and tell me that this person dropped from the sky and there are a pair of wings in the south lawn, I'd nod in acceptance. That would be a perfectly reasonable explanation.

“I'm really excited to be here, Dr. Amherst. I've read all your work.” She holds out a small, delicate hand. Her middle finger, slightly longer than the rest, houses a small ring with a pearl mounted in silver or platinum. My eyes shift left, and there's a weird sense of relief that floods me when I clock that her ring finger is empty.

I nod my own greeting and move out of the way, knocking over a big pile of research. “*Fuck,*” I curse. I bend down. She bends down at the same time. Our heads strike each other.

She lets out a yelp of surprise or maybe it's shock. *Shit.* I grab her head between my hands and steady her before she can topple backward onto her ass and knock down more papers. “You okay?”

“Yeah.” She rubs the back of her head. A small smile spreads across her face. “I told my mom this morning I was going to make an impression on you. I should've specified that I wanted it to be a good impression. I'm really not this clumsy.”

“You’ve succeeded.” I cup the back of her head and feel for a knot.

“In what way?”

There’s no sign of injury, but I’m reluctant to let her go, reluctant to stand. What I want is to draw her into my lap, kiss her senseless, and then make love on the floor amidst all my research. Somehow, though, I think that falls under things I shouldn’t do because it might end up in a lawsuit. Rachel tried to warn me.

With a sigh, I force myself to let go and stand up. “You’ve made an impression all right.” I force myself to flee to the window. As I gaze across the short distance between her desk and mine, I realize how fucked I am. Maybe I should just write her a check now and get it over with because by the end of this term, she’s going to own everything I have in my bank account as well as my heart.



two

DR. AMHERST IS DEFINITELY LIVING up to some of the rumors I've heard about him. I wouldn't classify the one claiming he is antisocial as a rumor anymore. It's definitely true. Or at least that's how it seems, anyway. He's not rude as some of them have said.

Anytime I ask him a question, he doesn't get irritated, but he also doesn't make an effort to add to the conversation. He makes sure to answer quickly for me, though. It's me doing most of the talking. His answers are straight to the point. He hasn't even asked me my name yet. I'm not sure if I should bring that up or not.

I actually worried over this before I got here today. I'm a talker. I can't help myself. I even talk to myself as I work. People often get annoyed by it. I knew it would be something I'd have to get under control if I were going to be working directly in his office. I don't think Amherst would appreciate me rambling on all day. I don't want to annoy him or have him fire me.

Rachel told me if he did fire me to ignore him and keep working. That made me even more nervous. I repeated the words in my head as I made my way to his office this morning. Over and over again. *You will not be a chatterbox.* It clearly hasn't worked.

I move a giant stack of now organized papers over so that I can start cleaning up something else. This place was a mess. I've gotten some of it looking presentable. I was more than happy to clean it up a bit. I am already learning a ton. Some of the papers have little handwritten notes on them from

Amherst. I guess in a way he talks to himself too. Instead of saying the words out loud, he simply jots down his thoughts. Maybe we're not so different after all.

Anytime I see his handwriting I stop to read the note he put on the page. I can't help myself. I would probably have more done by now if I wasn't stopping to read so much. Not that it takes me long. I have always been able to read quickly and still maintain the information.

"Do you always do that?" I look up from the paper in my hand to Amherst. His dark hair is now a mess from his own fingers. The man looks nothing like one would think a scientist would. He's built with broad shoulders, and he has at least a foot on me. His jaw looks like it could've been chiseled out of granite. My mom said he looked a little like a younger, annoyed John Wick. The picture they had online of him only showed his face, as if someone had forced him to take it. I'm guessing it was probably Rachel.

"Do what?" I ask, looking around. Did I do something wrong?

"Talk out loud when you work." He looks at me like he's studying me. I've noticed that he glances over at me a lot. I'm guessing it's to make sure I'm doing what I'm supposed to be doing.

"Oh. I'm sorry." I quickly apologize. I'm sure the doctor is trying to work, and I'm making it harder with my mouth. "It's a habit. I'll do better."

"No, it's fine. I rather enjoy the sound over the quiet."

"Do you always do that?" My eyes travel from his handsome face to his hair. It's sticking up in a few directions right now. I think it's kind of adorable. His dark eyebrows furrow together, not knowing what I'm talking about. "You run your fingers through your hair a lot."

"No." His answer is to the point. We stare at each other for a long moment because to me it feels as if his response should have contained more words. I thought maybe I'd get something along the lines of *I didn't realize I did that* or *Yes*

when I'm thinking something over. But all I got was a simple *no.*

My stomach lets out a loud growl. It's being noisy too. I flush with embarrassment. I was too nervous to eat breakfast this morning.

"I haven't fed you." Fed me?

"I think you meant that you haven't let me go to lunch?"

"No. You can't eat here. The breakroom food here is not good. I'll order something to be delivered to us. We can eat in the office while we continue to work."

"You don't have to do all that. I saw that there was a vending machine in the breakroom. It's not a big deal really."

He stares at me for a long moment. "Did you eat breakfast?" I shake my head no. "You have to eat breakfast. It is a very important meal for your body. One of, if not the most important." For the first time today I'm quiet. I think I'm a little in shock at how much he's talking now.

"I think my body is getting enough food even when I skip breakfast." I try and joke. My silence didn't last very long. I've got some curves, so it's not as though I'm famished. His eyes roam up and down me. He turns around, knocking something over in the process. When I look down I realize it was his phone that fell. He lets out a few curse words before he bends down to swipe it off the floor.

"I'll order us lunch." He heads back over to his computer. "Do you have any allergies?"

"Nope." I let out a small laugh. "You'll ask if I have allergies now but not my name."

"Your name is Kayla."

"Oh. Well, you never asked. It makes sense that someone would have told you though." I wait for him to tell me how he knows my name, but he remains silent. He goes back to clicking away at his computer, so I too get back to work.

"Are you feeling okay?" he asks ten minutes later.

“I’m fine. Why?”

“You haven’t spoken in a little while.”

“Just working.” He runs his hand through his hair again. I fight a smirk. He doesn’t only have a brilliant mind, but he’s so handsome too. He really is the whole package. I’d bet anything he has a knockout girlfriend. One with a brilliant mind that can keep up with him and a killer body. It’s on the tip of my tongue to ask, but I bite it back, reminding myself to chill out. His personal life is none of my business. Unless he wants to tell me about it himself, I’m not going to ask. To be honest, I don’t think I really want to know.

“Did you order all of this food?” Rachel asks as she enters the office. Her hands are full of bags.

“Yes. Put it over there and you can go.”

“I’ll take it to the breakroom.”

“No, leave it here.” She rolls her eyes and puts the bags down on the empty spot I made earlier.

“Is he being a jerk to you?”

“No.” I’m not seeing the reason why everyone else thinks the man is rude. Amherst glares at her.

“All right. Enjoy your lunch,” she says before leaving again.

“So. What’s up with the breakroom?” I ask. Amherst starts pulling all kinds of stuff out of the bags. “Did something go down in there? Is there office gossip I should know about? Are there meal stealers? I had a roommate in college who stole my food all the time. Even when I marked it with my name.”

“Who stole food from you? What’s her name?” The look on his face makes me burst out into laughter. Today is turning out a lot differently than I thought it would. Amherst doesn’t seem as intimidating as everyone said he would be. That said, it’s only been a few hours.



three

IT'S dark by the time I look up. Kayla is still bent over her desk working on the data calculations. Right now, I'm not sure if she's sexy because of her fucking amazing brain or because of her looks. It's a toss-up. The probability of one woman being both smart and hot, and ending up as my assistant doesn't seem very high. I need to keep her around. What had Rachel said I should do? Be nice? What does that entail exactly?

I tap my pen against my notebook for a few seconds, but nothing comes to mind. Nice is a bland term, like white toast, plain noodles, and unsalted butter. I've sat through my share of harassment seminars to know what I shouldn't do. It's a short list. Don't touch. Don't stare too long. Don't get too close. Those same seminars don't really tell you what is appropriate, though. Is lunch okay? I can't remember if that was on the list of don'ts because I don't eat with co-workers. I don't go to drinks after work during what they all call happy hour but where they spend two hours with cheap booze complaining about their dumbass supervisor, whomever that may be. In sum, I'm not in a position to be harassing anyone, but now I have Kayla. Or maybe *have* is the wrong term. She's here and not entirely mine, although I'll be damned if I'm sharing her with anyone else. I turn to the internet. It has the answer to everything, right?

Ten minutes later, I decide the internet is trash. I knew this before because if it wasn't full of garbage, I wouldn't be doing research. The answers would exist already. I suppose they do exist and await my discovery. Thus, the same conclusion would be true for the things I should do to ensure that Kayla

remains as my assistant. To wit: the answer exists but not on the internet. The internet tells me I should recognize her leadership potential and ensure a safe place for her to grow. I should be happy for her success and encourage her to grow beyond me. Fuck that noise. Like I'm going to let anyone else in this godforsaken university have a chance with her.

I'm the only one who should be staring at her exposed neck with the tendrils of hair wisping over the base. Dr. Jonas from biochem has no right to gaze upon her delicate wrist or the way her blouse falls around her shoulders. Even the fact that Rachel has seen her irritates me. Kayla has way too much skin exposed what with her ankles, wrists and neck being uncovered for everyone to see. It's a good thing it's winter out and she has to wear long sleeves and pants. I'd have to develop some temporary blinding shield for her to wear if it was summer. I'll put that on my to-do list. I'll have to check in with the robotics department to see what kind of prototypes they have.

I stand up. "Let's eat." I'll keep feeding her. She makes the best sounds when she eats something she enjoys.

Her head pops up as if she's attuned to me. "That sounds great. What are you interested in?" She reaches for her phone. "I know this great Thai place that delivers. I love their bahn mi sandwiches. The baguettes they use are so crispy but if you don't want a sandwich, they make a great curry."

"No."

Her hand stops suspended over the desk. "No?"

"We'll go there." That seems to be the best solution. Confined inside the office with me thinking about the ratio of skin to clothing doesn't feel like a safe place for me or her.

"Okay. That sounds good." She leans back and stretches her arms in the air. The fabric pulls tight around her tits. This isn't good. I look up at the ceiling. *Don't stare* was definitely one of the don'ts. Definitely. We need to get out of here. I grab my wallet and keys.

"Let's go." I start walking for the door.

“I need to get my coat. Do you know where Rachel would’ve put it? She took it from me when I arrived.” There’s a shuffling noise, a muffled curse, and then I hear some papers falling to the ground.

I risk a look over my shoulder, and this time instead of her tits being molded by her clothes, it’s her very fine ass. An image of me standing behind her, grabbing her hips with my hands and thrusting forward until all the piles of papers are strewn across the room pops into my brain. A sweat breaks across my forehead. “There’s a closet behind her desk. It’s probably there. I’ll meet you at the elevator.”

I don’t wait for a response because another minute inside the room and I will have broken the second rule—the one about no touching. Who made these bullshit rules anyway? I stomp all the way to the elevator.

We’re adults. We should be able to look and touch and taste and suck and—*Fuck*. This is getting out of hand. I’m a scientist. I am only moved by data and facts, by hypotheses and conclusions. Lust is for the weak and dumb. What I need to do is go for a run and clear my head. I have some pent-up adrenaline that hasn’t been worked out properly. When was the last time I exercised? This morning? That was hours ago. All that sitting in a chair has resulted in the atrophy of my self-discipline. Sex is for losers. Science is for winners. I take a deep breath, glad that my priorities are once again in order. The elevator dings just as a breathless Kayla arrives by my side. Her cheeks are pink, and her lips are glistening, as if she licked them. I gulp. My brain synapses are misfiring, and suddenly, I’m not in the department waiting for the elevator but I’m in the office, leaning against my desk. She’s on her knees. Her pink lips are parted, and my dick is shuttling in and out. I swallow a groan. When the elevator doors slide open, I jump forward to escape. She starts to join me, but I shove out a hand to stop her.

“I’m not hungry anymore. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

Her lips part in surprise, which is probably the worst image for me to see before the elevator doors close. I’m going to have to run a marathon to wipe that vision out of my head.

The elevator cab jolts, and the doors part. Kayla's gorgeous face sports a serious frown. "Did you just close the elevator doors on me?"

She steps onto the cab and jabs the parking button. "If you don't want to go out to eat, that's fine, but I can ride the elevator with you, can't I?" Under her breath she mutters something about how she's starting to understand the rumors.

"What rumors?"

Her eyebrow goes up. "You don't know? The ones about how you're difficult and irascible and how everyone felt sorry that I was assigned to you."

Assigned to me. I like how that sounds as if I've got full ownership over her. I don't, but it'd be nice to put a collar around her neck that says *Property of Nathan Amherst, Ph.D.* It'd be a velvet-lined one. I wouldn't want her delicate neck to get scratched or abraded. If she did get a sore spot, I'd suck the bruise away. Or maybe I'd add more bruises. Her skin might look all the more delectable with an assortment of marks on it.

"Doesn't that bother you?"

"Hmm?" I wasn't paying attention, so I backtrack in my memory bank. What did she say? That the rumors about me are that I'm an asshole? "That sounds about right."

A perplexed expression creates her brow at my admission. I could've lied and said I was Santa Claus, but I don't think she would've bought that. Maybe I should give her some explanation. Although what I'm not sure. I'm a dick because all I care about is my research. People generally interfere with that. She's a scientist in training. I think she would understand. "Look, I—" My words are abruptly cut off when the lights in the elevator flicker off and then back on. There's a loud screech of metal scraping against metal. The car shakes, and an ominous groan echoes overhead.

"Oh my God, what is happening?" she gasps.

"Hold on." I slap one hand against the side of the elevator car and reach out to her with another. The rules against no touching don't apply in these circumstances. The car picks up

speed, moving faster and faster. Kayla stumbles into my arms right when the car lurches to a stop. I clasp her tight, her soft breasts mashing against my hard chest. The car creaks and then jolts again, driving us both against the wall.

Just as I'm about to say we'll be fine, the lights cut off, plunging us into darkness. Kayla tries to climb up my torso.

"I got you." I rub a soothing hand down her back. Under my palm I can feel her tremble. She's scared.

"What's going on?"

"The elevator's malfunctioning, but we're likely close to the parking garage level, and after that there's only one more floor, so if we drop it's only two stories and the worst that can happen is maybe a broken leg."

"Only a broken leg?" Kayla's voice is high-pitched and frightened.

"A sprain then," I lie. Ordinarily, I'm a facts only kind of man, but the falsehood slips off the tongue easily. As long as it makes Kayla feel better, I could write papers about how the sky is green and the grass is blue.

"I need to get out of here." She struggles out of my arms. I let her go, and she races to the closed doors. "I can't be in here. I can't breathe in here." Her fists strike impotently against the heavy metal. "Help us. Help! There's someone stuck in here," she yells.

I reach past her to flip open the telephone door. There is a small blinking light. It's not much, but my eyes are adjusting quickly to the darkness.

"There's a telephone in this elevator?"

"It's for these situations," I explain. I wait for a ringtone, but it doesn't come.

"Well?" I can hear the hope in her voice.

"The university doesn't maintain its buildings well," I reply and return the receiver to the cradle.

“No. That’s not an acceptable answer.” She pulls out her phone, her hands shaking as she unlocks the screen. “Dammit. There’s no service in here.” Kayla shoves the useless piece of electronics back in her purse. “What am I going to do?” She draws in a quavery breath. “I’m sorry,” she tells me. “I’m usually so much more put together than this. It’s just...”—*gasp*—“that I don’t like”—*gasp*—“dark”—*quivering inhale*—“places.”

There’s a susurraton, and then the space beside me becomes empty. I reach down and find the top of her bowed head. She’s collapsed to her knees. I drop my briefcase and shrug out of my coat, whipping it around her shoulders. Lowering myself to my knees, I draw a shuddering Kayla to my chest. Her small hands curl in my shirt. I hear a snuffle and a caught breath. Her tears wet the expensive cotton. Anxiety roils through me at her obvious terror, so I do the only thing I can think of to take her mind off this situation. I kiss her.

I tuck my thumb under her chin, tilt her face back, and claim her mouth. She parts her lips in surprise, and my tongue sweeps in to taste her. She freezes at the intrusion, and so I pause too, thinking this was the wrong move, but then her hands drag me closer. Our mouths fuse together, and her tongue licks over mine, sending a bolt of electricity from my mouth to my cock. The damn thing springs to attention and pounds against the zipper of my trousers. It senses the wet heat of her cunt is only a barrier or two away.

I jam my hands into her hair and angle her head for a more thorough claiming. Her fingers busily unbutton my shirt. With her help, I strip off my shirt and let her hands explore my bare skin. I plant my ass on the floor and stretch my legs out, pulling her onto my lap so she can straddle me. The heat of her cunt arrows through the layers of fabric as she rocks against my hard shaft.

I slide one hand down to her ass to pull her closer, letting my hand ride her hip while she works herself against my cock. Desire storms through my veins. I should take her now. I should pull off her pants and impale her on my cock, driving her down my turgid length time and again until she’s creaming

all over the elevator floor. I circle her waist with my hands and then dip my fingers inside the waistband of her pants, ready to finger her sweetness when the fucking lights turn on.

Her head comes up, breaking our contact. The next sound is a sharp piercing noise followed by a high-pitched voice. “Dr. Amherst, is that you?”

My head drops back in resignation. “Yes,” I answer wearily. Why’d they have to save us? We’re adults. We can save our own damn selves.

“I’m so sorry. There was a slight malfunction, but everything is working, and you should be able to get to the parking garage with no problems.”

“Thanks,” I answer sourly. I help Kayla get to her feet. She doesn’t look at me while I button my shirt. I’m fully clothed by the time the elevator reaches the parking lot level.

“I’ll hand in my resignation tomorrow, Dr. Nathan Amherst,” she tells me as the doors slide open.



four

WHAT IS WRONG WITH ME? I crawled up my boss like he was a freaking tree. Before we'd even gotten on the elevator he'd made it clear that he didn't want to go anywhere with me. In a small space of time we went from going to have dinner together to him trying to get away from me as quickly as he possibly could. So much so that he tried to close the elevator doors on me. I'm not really sure why his demeanor changed. The only thing I do know is that I am crushing on him. Hard.

I must have done something, and he picked up on it. He probably wanted to make sure we weren't blurring any lines and that we remained professional. I'm guessing his attitude change was his way of drawing the line in the sand. It was abrupt, and I couldn't fight the sting I'd felt when he made it clear he didn't want me to be in a small space with him.

He had the foresight to see that I would attach myself to him given the chance. I've lived up to that. I clung to him in the dark. It's a silly thing to be afraid of, but I could never shake the fear. I still leave a light on in my bathroom with the door creaked an inch at night when I go to bed.

How am I going to tell my mom about this? She gave me a pep talk this morning knowing that I was nervous for my first day. I have no doubt she'll be calling me tonight to get all of the details. We talk most nights. We've been doing it since I moved out on my own a few months ago. I didn't have to, but I thought it was the next step in my life.

All through college I worked and saved. My nest egg isn't giant, but it allowed me to get a studio apartment over this cute

bakery. If Mom were home right now, I'd drive over there and confess everything, but she's not there. She's on a ship out in the middle of the ocean on a month-long cruise with her friends.

"How many times do I have to tell you to call me Nathan," Dr. Amherst says very close to my ear, sending a tingle down my spine. I turn around and run right into him. I start to fall backward, but he grabs me and pulls me into his body so that I don't hit the ground. My fingers dig into his shirt as I gaze up at him. His brows are furrowed together like he's studying me and I'm some creature he can't figure out. "Say it. I want to hear you say my name." His hold on me tightens.

"Nathan." I can tell that he's still turned on. I know it's the normal human reaction for a man to have when a woman humps them. The body readies itself for sex. "I'm sorry." I try to wiggle out of his hold, but I get nowhere. His cock jerks against me.

"You're not quitting."

"But—"

"This isn't up for discussion." His hold on me loosens some so I can take a small half step back. "I'm hungry again." I furrow my eyebrows because this man is giving me whiplash.

"I should get home." He doesn't look happy with my answer. "I'm sorry." I don't know what else to say.

"Stop apologizing," he orders. "You have nothing to apologize for."

"I'm sorry; it's a habit." I gasp, putting my hand over my mouth. I'm sure he's not surprised by my nervous rambling. I've pretty much done it all day. He lets out a small, surprising chuckle. I drop my hand from my mouth, my eyes going to his. It's still a touch red from our kisses. I wonder if mine looks the same. "I know I made you..." I glance down at his cock.

"If you're apologizing for that then you should have been apologizing to me all day." His response shocks me. "Because

it's been that way since the moment I laid eyes on you. You're breathtaking," he says before he kisses me. I moan into his mouth, knowing I should stop. He breaks away from the kiss, his eyes looking wild now. Everything with him is abrupt.

"Where is your car?" he asks. My mom told me to use her car while she was gone but I never went to pick it up. I rode the bus in. I don't mind taking public transportation.

"I took a bus."

"You took the bus?" he repeats as he clears the small space I made between us.

"It's cheaper than filling the car up with gas, better for the environment, and I get a chance to read my book on it," I inform him. I don't see why more people don't use public transportation.

"I'm taking you home." His hand locks around my wrist, and before I can protest, he's pulling me toward his car. It's a sleek black Tesla. It's sexy. He opens the passenger door for me to climb in. I drop inside because I've never been in one before. He shuts the door for me. A moment later, we are pulling out of the parking garage.

My eyes roam over the inside of the fancy car and the ginormous screen it has. He weaves in and out of traffic. The engine purrs as though it enjoys the way he handles it. I clench my thighs together as I watch him. I know I shouldn't be getting turned on, but I can't help it.

"Do you know the bakery Mo Bow?" I ask, trying to get my mind off how skilled his hands are. I got a taste of how it felt to have them on me, and my body wants more.

"So you are still hungry." No. My stomach is in knots about everything. There is no way that I could eat right now.

"I'm really not hungry." We did have a giant lunch. "I live above it." He asks his car for directions.

"Is this Mo Bow open in the morning?" he asks.

"Yeah." The one downside to living above a bakery is you smell sweets all day and then get a craving. I've put on a little

weight since I moved there, but the treats are too good to resist.

“Good, we’ll stop in and pick up breakfast.”

“But—”

“You’re not quitting,” he growls out, making it sexy. How come none of the rumors talked about how sexy Dr. Nathan Amherst is? I feel like that should have been mixed in there. “I’m your boss. You are to do as I say.”

“Okay,” I agree. It’s like he can’t stop turning me on. I need out of this car before I jump him like a cat in heat. “I go in the back.” I point for him to go around the corner. When he comes to a stop, I jump out of the car. I already have my keys in my hand. “Thanks for the ride,” I shout, putting the key into the lock. I start to open it, but a hand comes down, stopping me. I turn around to look up at Nathan.

“You’re not quitting,” he reminds me again. “I’ll be here in the morning.” He drops his hand from the door. I slip in and quickly lock it behind me. I lean against it and close my eyes. I take a deep breath, trying to pull myself together. That only lasts a few seconds before my phone starts to ring. I pull it out from my purse. It’s my mom. I’m not sure what to tell her about today. I’m not sure if it was horrible or the best day of my life. I suppose I’ll find out soon enough.



five

I HAVE A HARD TIME SLEEPING. I keep envisioning Kayla and me engaging in all sixty-four positions enumerated in the Kama Sutra and a handful more that are probably not physically possible but exist in my mind. Before dawn, I haul my weary carcass out of bed and go for a run. After two hours, my legs are near dead, but my cock is very much alive. I stroke an unsatisfactory orgasm out in the shower, imagining Kayla pinned against the glass while I pound into her from behind. Out of the shower, I dress, and since there's no point in sitting around my house, I go to work. There are still hours to go before I can drive over to the bakery.

The department is empty. I sit down at my computer, but my eyes keep straying to the desk near the door. If I take her computer away, she won't be able to type out a resignation letter. Of course, if she has a computer at home getting rid of her work one doesn't solve the problem. I need Dean Campbell to rip up the resignation letter, but what do I tell him? That she threatened to quit after I kissed her? He'd make me sit through a dozen lectures on harassment in the workplace, and I'd get behind on my project. Obviously I shouldn't have kissed her. The thing is...I can't even promise that I won't when I see her again. I slam my hand against my desk.

Everything needs to be taken one step at a time. First, I will drive over to her place, and we will get coffee and pastries and talk this out like rational adults. Second, we will drive back here and conduct our work. Third, if I continue to have inappropriate fantasies about Kayla, I will take care of them with my own hand. If none of that works, then I will kidnap

her and keep her in a cabin in the woods until she agrees that the best thing to do is lie around naked in my bed all day.

I grab my Tesla keys and head for the parking garage. Mo Bow is not far away, and while it's still too early, I feel better sitting outside her apartment than back at the university in our empty office.

Wait.

Our office?

It's been one day, and I'm already changing my pronouns. I frown. This type of rapid attachment isn't good. Isn't it what led me to claim her mouth in the elevator when I could have rubbed her back or had her do jumping jacks or basically anything other than attacking her and making her want to quit?

I decide to get out of the car and see if she's awake. Some people are early risers. I am. There's no reason to think she's still asleep. Hell, she could be impatiently waiting for me or writing that damned resignation letter.

I take the stairs two at a time. At her door, I lift my fist to pound on it when it occurs to me that I should bring a peace offering. Downstairs in the café, I pick out a dozen donuts and four different kinds of coffee. She didn't say what kind she liked, so I opted for a dark roast, light roast, a mocha latte, and an iced Americano. Armed with breakfast, I return to her apartment. My hands are full so I can't knock properly. I end up banging my elbow against the steel door.

A woman who is not Kayla opens it as far as the lock chain allows. "Yes?" the older woman says with an arched, unwelcoming eyebrow. Is this Kayla's mother? All evidence would point to that. They have the same eyebrows, nose, and general face structure, and so it has to be a relative.

"Ma'am." I give her a chin nod. "I'm here for Kayla."

"And you are?" The eyebrow remains elevated.

"Dr. Nathan Amherst." I lift the cartons of coffee and donuts. "I'm bringing her breakfast. Can you tell her I'm here so that we can go?"

The woman looks me over like I'm an insect under a microscope and not one that she's impressed with. "No. I don't think I will." She slams the door shut, leaving me with a shit ton of food and drink and no Kayla.

I debate whether I should knock again, but what's the point? At some point Kayla will have to leave, and as long as I'm waiting she won't be able to escape. Or, you know, she will remember we had plans and will act accordingly.

"Dr. Amherst! Dr. Amherst!"

I hear my name called out. I pause on my way to the car and see a young woman tripping toward me.

"Dr. Amherst," she says breathlessly when she reaches me. "It's me. Dani Nelson from your Soil & Crop Sciences class last term."

I don't remember her. I don't really remember any of my students. Teaching is a necessary evil.

Her lips quiver and start to fall. "I sat in the front, three seats from the aisle. I wanted to get closer to you, but your class fills up so fast. I waited three hours to ensure I got to the front of the room and even then it was a close call."

"Why?"

"Why what?"

"Why did you want to get close to me? Are you hard of hearing? I used a microphone while I taught."

A burst of laughter escapes her. She places a hand on my arm and bends over as she chuckles. "No. No," she says as she straightens up. "I could hear you fine. Gosh, you haven't changed at all, have you?"

I have no idea what that means. The girl plucks the donut box out of my hand. "Ohh, I love Mo Bow's monster donut. It's so good."

"Which one is that?" I should give that one to Kayla.

The girl points to the blue donut with the cookie crumble. "It's supposed to look like Cookie Monster."

Sometimes my students talk in a language I don't fully understand. I just let it go.

“Cookie Monster is a puppet on Sesame Street. Didn't you watch that when you were a kid?”

I'm sure I didn't. As a kid, I was reading textbooks and preparing for high school. I don't share that with the student, though. “You may have a different one.” The monster donut will go to Kayla since it is the superior donut in the box, but this girl can have one of the dozen as a gift for clueing me in to which pastry is the best. Kayla will love this donut and the coffee and there will never be another word of resignation again.



six

I STARE at my Aunt Milly in shock. I can't believe she just shut the door in Nathan's face. I don't even know why she's here. All I know is that she used the emergency key to get in my place early this morning. My mom probably sent her to make sure I went to work today. I'd been going back and forth all night about whether I should call in sick, resign, or put my big girl panties on and go to the office. I told my mom most of what happened between me and Nathan, but I left out some of the juicier details. She is my mom, after all.

"I thought you wanted me to go in?" I am still surprised that Nathan showed up this morning. I thought once he had time to think about everything that he'd realize this was a problem. My mom doesn't seem to see a problem with any of this. She was laughing and telling me how adorable Dr. Nathan Amherst is. Adorable? That is not a word I'd pick to describe Nathan.

"Was that really the doc?" Milly asks, looking shocked. "He's hot. No wonder you couldn't keep your hands off him." Yeah, my mom definitely sent her here.

"Tell me about it." I let out a long breath. He hits all the right spots for me. I was hoping that once I met him and put truth to some of the rumors about him that my crush would be stomped out. No such luck. Instead it was only heightened by the way his lips felt on mine and how he had made sure that I was taken care of all day. Him showing up with food this morning didn't help either. That man is always trying to feed me. Another point in his favor.

I go to peek out the window and see him talking to some girl in the parking lot. She looks familiar. I'm sure I've seen her but can't put a name to the face. We likely were in school together at some time. She's beautiful, with long blonde hair and legs to match. She looks very put together. The total opposite of how I usually look.

"I need to get going," I tell my Aunt Milly. I'm not appreciating how close this mystery girl is standing to Nathan. Is he giving her a donut? He brought those for me! I go from being embarrassed about last night to angry in an instant.

"I was going to take you. We're playing hard to get." Wait, what? I didn't know we were playing anything. I know one thing for sure: I'm not playing with this blonde girl that is getting too close to Nathan. She better back off my man. He looks confused by what she is saying. I should save him. Not because I'm jealous but because it's the right thing to do.

"Lock up for me. I'll handle the rest." I grab my bag and rush out.

"Nathan!" I call after him. He turns his head. I swear he almost smiles, but the girl says something to him, drawing his attention back to her. "Are you ready to go?" I try and play it cool, but my tone is tart.

"Wait, is she your girlfriend?" Neither of us say anything. "I'll take that as a no. I'm not passing this opportunity up. You're not my professor anymore." She pulls out a card, placing it on the lid of the donut box. "Call me sometime, Nathan." She bats her damn eyes at him.

"Dr. Amherst," he corrects her. She lets out a cute giggle before she winks at him and then takes a bite of the donut she got from him earlier. She lets out a moan before turning to leave. I stare a hole into her back.

"She gave me her card."

I roll my eyes. "She gave you her number so you can call and ask her out on a date." Nathan looks surprised. "You didn't know she was hitting on you?" I have to bend my head all the way back to look up at him. He's in slacks and a button-

up with the top few buttons undone. No one should look this sexy so early in the morning.

I glance at the card to see her name is Heather. I know I shouldn't be annoyed at her, but I am. Maybe it's because she looks as though she's his type. She doesn't have to break her neck to look up at him. He's a big man with giant hands. He needs someone to hold on to. I thought about those hands last night when I got home.

"For sex?" That snaps me right back to reality. "I'm not interested."

"We should get going," I say, heading for the passenger door. "Before you give all my donuts away to other women." I open the door and plop down inside.

He opens the door, putting the donuts down in the back seat and putting a coffee into each cup holder. "I saved you the best donut. The cookie monster one. But if you wish I will go back and get more donuts."

"I'm fine." I lift one of the coffees. I see my name written on it. "You're right. The cookie monster is the best one."

"Good, at least the girl was good for something. She wouldn't stop rambling." He starts the car and pulls out. The lock engages, and the smell of him reaches me. I press my legs together tightly, taking a sip of my coffee. My coffee is made the way I love it, and I know he must have asked Mindy at the bakery. There's no doubt that she's going to be texting me to ask about Nathan once the morning rush is over.

I sip my coffee as I look down at what I'm wearing. I'm in a flowy dark blue skirt paired with a simple long sleeve top. The top fits snugly against me. I picked this outfit not only because it was cute, but it covers all of me for the most part. I was hoping that might keep me from pouncing on Nathan at any given moment.

"I ramble," I point out.

"Yes, but I enjoy the sound of your voice." He dips his chin as if agreeing with himself.

“Are you going to use the card?” I reach back and grab it. “She works for Cerner.” I flip the card over. It’s as nice and put together as her. I can’t even remember if I put makeup on today.

“I know the CEO of Cerner. I don’t need anyone else’s number that works there.”

I wave the card at him. “She wants you to wine and dine her. For you to try and get in her pants. I don’t think it would be hard for you to get there.”

“On the contrary. I don’t think it would be *hard* at all.” I burst into laughter.

“Did you make a sex joke, Nathan?”

The smile on his face drops away as I reach back and grab a donut. “I love how you say my name.” He rolls to a stop at the light.

“I love saying it,” I admit. The smile returns to his face. As nice as this is, I know we’re playing with fire, and I’m going to be the one that gets burned. Nathan’s moods can shift like the wind. I’m not sure if I have what it takes to hold his interest. He’s in a league of his own.

I’m in way over my head when it comes to him.



seven

EVERYTHING IS GOOD NOW. Kayla is at her desk. I am at my desk. There's no one else around. No murmurs of resignations. I take a sip of my black coffee and smile at my computer screen. Even my research is coming together. I dig into the new calculations that Kayla sent over yesterday, and the morning slips by.

Around lunch time, a growling noise interrupts me. I look around to see what animal has slipped into my office by accident, but there's no one here but Kayla and me. Kayla looks flushed, though.

"Did you see something?" I pick up a textbook. It's not the greatest weapon but it'll do for anything that could get by Rachel, our secretary. It's not like this is the zoology department.

"It's me." Kayla glances down at her lap.

"You brought a pet?" When did that happen? I get to my feet and walk over to Kayla's desk, but her lap is empty.

"No. It's my stomach." She tries to shoo me away. "But I'm fine. Really."

I let the textbook drop onto her desk. "Your stomach is so noisy that it sounds like a wild animal got loose but you're fine. Really?"

She blushes harder, and I have to avert my eyes before I attack her. The contrast of the red against her golden skin with her dark hair tumbling over her shoulders like a midnight waterfall makes my gut clench and my dick harden. I need a

minute. I snatch the textbook up and return to the relative safety of my desk. In my desk drawer, I find the menu of the Thai takeout place I like and wave it in the air. “What do you want to eat?”

“Pad thai sounds good.”

“Protein?”

“Pork.”

I make a note of it and grab my phone to call in the order when Kayla stands up and stretches. She’s wearing another one of those silky tops that hugs all her curves. My mouth goes dry. Food doesn’t seem interesting anymore. Instead, I’m hungry for her. It’d be very easy to clear my desk off, lay her down on the surface, and fuck her until we’re both sweaty and too tired to move. In the dark of the elevator, I didn’t get to see her body. I only felt it. Here I could open the shades, let the sunlight flood the room, and examine her glorious body in full bright detail.

I lick my lips. I could weigh the heft of her tits in my palms, measure the depth of her cunt with my fingers. The sunlight would create maps on her skin that would change every time she writhed from my touch. Every moment would create a new discovery.

I grab my throat and squeeze tight until there’s no air inside of my head to give space to these damn fantasies. I can’t stay in here alone with her another minute or my cock will be inside of her. Then she’ll talk about resigning, and everything will be bad again.

I stand up, throw on my coat, and head for the door.

“Oh, are we going out? Let me grab my jacket.” She hops over to the corner and is back by my side before I can tell her no. I rub a frustrated hand across my forehead. Fine. If she wants to come with me, I’ll allow it. We’ll be outside and around other people. The risk is low. It exists, because she’s hot as fuck in her work clothes, and my dick is in a semi hard state at all times when she’s near, but I should be able to control myself. It’s a good thing it’s winter and I can cover up

with my long coats or everyone would get a good view of the chub in my pants. I nod abruptly and lead the way. The Thai place is a short ten-minute walk from campus. Kayla attempts to start a conversation but lapses into silence halfway to the restaurant when she realizes that I'm not going to respond. It's dickish, but it's either remain silent or tell her in graphic detail how I want to spread her legs and feast on her cunt until she creams a bucket load of cum on my tongue. Even someone as dense as I am knows that's not allowed.

The restaurant is full of Christmas decorations and customers. A song about Santa assaults our ears as we fall into line.

Kayla claps her hands. "I love Christmas, don't you?"

I didn't before but I do now. "It's my favorite holiday of the year."

"What's your favorite Christmas song?"

"There are so many," I lie. Do I even know one? The Jingle Bells song is about the only tune I can recall at the moment.

"I like the traditional ones like O Holy Night and The Little Drummer Boy, but not gonna lie, Mariah Carey's song always gets me in the mood."

Somehow I don't think the mood she's talking about is sex, but my brain files all these tidbits away. "What about decorations?" I point above our head at the tinsel dangling from the ceiling.

"Snowmen and reindeer are my faves. You?"

"Same. Love snow and deer."

"You know reindeer are real, right? They're a species of caribou. When I was a girl, my dad would always put out this granola mix that he called reindeer food before we went to bed and when I would get up in the morning the food would be gone. He'd say that Santa had visited and that's why there were so many presents under the tree Christmas morning." A sad little smile touches her lips.

“Where’s your dad now?” I ask, even though I have a suspicion about the answer.

“Died of a heart attack while he was shoveling snow when I was twelve.” She dips her head, and her hair falls forward, shielding her expression from prying eyes. It’s been a while, over a decade since she lost her father, but it still hurts her. My chest tightens.

“Is that when you learned reindeer were real?”

“Yeah, I was kind of mad and determined to prove that Santa wasn’t real. I mean at twelve, I should’ve already known that, but Dad was so good at the pretense.”

“How come you love Christmas so much?”

“I don’t know. I feel close to him during this time, I guess. I can’t hate anything.” She shrugs and lifts her gaze to mine. “I’m just not built that way.”

And it’s then that I vow that this year she’ll have the best Christmas ever.



eight

MY MOOD SHIFTS thinking about my dad. Sometimes it feels like yesterday since he left us and other times it feels as though it happened forever ago. We always did Christmas up big before he passed. Now the holiday brings a bit of sadness with it for Mom and me.

I have a feeling it's why she went on the month-long cruise with her girlfriends this year. She's skipping it this year. I encouraged her to go. She sacrificed so much of herself after my dad passed to make sure that I was always taken care of. I wanted her to do this for herself.

It might have been too hard on her this year. More so with me having moved out now. When she brought up the cruise, I pushed her to go. She needed to get back out there. Even though I knew it meant that I'd likely be alone for Christmas, I still wanted her to go and have a good time. So far she is having the time of her life.

I'm supposed to go to my Aunt Milly's for the holidays, but in truth I wanted to skip. Staying at home with my tiny tree and reading sweet romance holiday books while drowning myself in hot chocolate doesn't sound too awful.

"I think I should order food," Nathan says abruptly, pulling me back from my thoughts.

"We ate two hours ago." I glance at the time on my computer screen. Not to mention the other food he forgot he ordered. He sent it all to the breakroom. I bet he's popular around here if he's always doing nice stuff like that.

“You pushed your food around your plate. I wouldn’t necessarily call that eating.” I’m noticing that Nathan notices everything about me. Is he like that with everyone? He’s smart so I’m sure it’s not hard for him to recount everything.

“I’m sorry. I can only get a little down when I think about my dad.” It doesn’t help that I’m pretty sure that Nathan was ignoring me the entire way to lunch. It definitely didn’t do anything for my mood. I was starting to think I was already losing his attention.

I go from thinking Nathan notices everything about me to then thinking he doesn’t pay attention to anything I say. It is becoming exhausting. He stares at me.

“No food. Got it.” He shifts on his feet.

“Are you okay?” I would almost guess he’s uneasy right now. With the way his moods shift, this could really be a number of things going on with him.

“I’m okay?” It comes out like a question.

“Okay.” I turn back to the computer screen. I’m entering notes he’s made so they will be saved to a document in a dropbox so he can access them from anywhere. I enjoy doing it. He’s so brilliant. I’m getting more out of this than I’ve ever gotten out of any of my classes.

“There’s cake in the breakroom,” Rachel says, popping her head in the door. “It’s Jack’s birthday.” I pop up, never being one to turn down free cake.

“I’m a sucker for frosting.” I make my way around my desk and head toward the door.

“Me too.” Nathan stands from his chair.

Rachel laughs. “Oh, you’re serious?” She gives Nathan a puzzled look. “You normally would give me a reason why one shouldn’t eat cake before complaining about the breakroom. Again.” My eyes dart between them. They are having a stare-down.

“Are we going? Because I really want a corner piece and those are the first to go. They have more frosting.”

“Her mind is amazing,” Nathan says. “I’ll make sure you get a corner.” Rachel shakes her head before we follow her out of the door.

“Any plans for the holidays?” Rachel says, making small talk as we head toward the breakroom.

“Not this year, but I do have a date—”

“A date!” Nathan says in a half-growl, half-shout, making both Rachel and me jump in surprise.

“Yeah, with my Kindle.” I snort a small laugh. Okay, he might have not lost interest already. He sounded angry at the idea of me going on a date.

“That’s my kind of date.” Her lips pull into a smile as her eyes bounce between Nathan and me as we all walk. When we near the breakroom, Nathan gets closer to me. When we enter, I see about ten people. I realize that I haven’t really met anyone else that works here. I spend all my time in Nathan’s office. He even has a personal bathroom.

“Everyone, this is Kayla,” Rachel introduces me. She starts going around the room to everyone, telling me their names. Nathan shifts so that he’s standing right behind me. I can feel the warmth of his body. Being this close to him and breathing in his masculine scent has me getting turned on again. I want nothing more than to lean back and press my body against his. I could simply drop my head back so he could kiss me. How the heck does he keep doing this to my body?

“How is Dr. Amherst treating you?” one of them asks. I missed all the names because Nathan stole my attention. Before I can answer, Nathan answers for me.

“I treat her well. She’s mine.” I know he means I’m his as in I’m his assistant, but my mind takes it elsewhere. Then he pushes the rest of the way into me, and I can feel that he is hard. I bite the inside of my cheek to keep from moaning. I have no doubt I’m flushed. Everyone is staring at us looking the same way I feel: confused.

“Nathan has been wonderful. I’ve learned a lot already.” I smile.

“Nathan?” one girl says, seeming surprised that I used his first name.

“Nathan, you say.” The man smirks.

“Cake, Jack. No candles. It’s disgusting to blow on a cake,” Nathan barks out. “And next time, address me correctly. It’s Dr. Amherst to you.”

I turn my neck to look up at Nathan. He’s glaring at Jack. At least I’ve got one name down. I think Jack and Nathan have beef. Oh, it’s my first piece of office gossip! I’ve never gotten to experience that before. I’m going to get it out of Nathan when we get back. Find out why we dislike this Jack guy so much.

“No candles,” Rachel agrees. She walks over to the table where the cake is set out with the two number candles on top. At the same time she starts to sing “Happy Birthday,” and everyone joins in and claps at the end.

“I need a corner piece,” Nathan demands over the clapping. I have to hold back a laugh.

“I’ve got it,” a pretty brunette says as she starts to cut the piece. She only cuts one piece and heads our way. She’s staring right at Nathan with hearts dancing over her head. Not really, but I can see the interest in her eyes. *Get in line.*

I should move aside as she gets to Nathan, but I don’t. He easily reaches over and takes the plate from her hand. I don’t miss the small glare the woman gives me before heading back toward the cake.

I turn around, and Nathan gives me the plate with the corner piece. “See all the icing?” I say. I grab the fork on the plate and take a bite. I let out a happy moan. It’s not the stupid whipped icing you get sometimes. This is the real deal. I break off another piece, but this time I lift it to offer a bite to Nathan.

The chatter that had been going on dies out as he leans down and takes the offered bite of cake. “We should eat this in our office,” I say in a whisper—one that sounds way too breathy even to my own ears.

“Yes,” he agrees immediately. Score. I’m going to get all the office gossip from him. I start to make my way back out of the room. I watch as he steals us another corner piece. That man really is brilliant, and I’m as turned on as ever.



nine

“SO ABOUT JACK,” she says when we get back to our office.

“Jack?” There’s a tiny spot of icing on the corner of her mouth. I want to lick it off, and she’s talking about the jackhole studying how reducing carbon emissions is actually bad for the environment.

“Yeah, why do we hate him?”

“Because he’s dumb.”

“That’s it?” She moves behind her desk where there’s no space for me. Why don’t I have a table in here? Why do we have desks? Desks are dumb like Jack.

“Is there a better reason to dislike someone?”

“I thought it would be something like Jack took someone’s research and passed it off as his own or Jack and Rachel had an office romance, but he cheated on her with an undergrad.”

“He’d be fired then.” If I moved a couple of these piles of papers, I could slide my chair over next to hers. It wouldn’t be comfortable, but I’d be closer to her.

“Is there any good—and by good, I mean juicy—gossip here?” She forks in another bite of the cake and frosting sticks to her lips.

This is torture. I force myself to concentrate on her words. Juicy gossip? I cast about trying to come up with something, but I don’t pay much attention to the other people in the department. There was that one incident, though. “Rachel brought in—”

“Rachel? Our department secretary?” Kayla’s eyes widen. They’re so pretty with the specks of green against the light gold background. They remind me of a cat. A lovely, warm kitten that should sleep in my bed. I have just the place for her. I realize I’m drifting and drag my thoughts back on track.

“Yes. Rachel our secretary.”

“I didn’t realize she would be involved in any juicy gossip. That totally surprises me, but go on.” Kayla leans forward, her arms pressing her tits together. Where was I again? Oh, yeah, Rachel.

“Rachel brought in a special shake. I think she mentioned she was dieting. I don’t recall.” I wasn’t paying attention. “You take a liquid, whether it’s water or some sort of milk substitute, and you pour in a powder. Once those two ingredients are in your container, you shake it several times. Maybe a minute or longer. I believe she said that the shaking was part of the exercise, which is possible. Rapid arm movements done ten minutes a day can reduce the excess fat in your arms, although to really benefit, you would likely have to vary your exercises so instead of always shaking perhaps do windmills and barbell presses.”

“Nathan, you’re straying.” A soft smile plays around Kayla’s lips. Her presence is very distracting.

“Sorry. Rachel had a drink she brought in for breakfast. One morning she was shaking it, but the cover wasn’t on tight enough and the mixture exploded out of her cup, drenching her shirt.”

Kayla’s nose wrinkles. “That’s not what I meant by juicy. I didn’t mean literally wet, but metaphorically. As in the story is so good, it makes your mouth water.”

“I’m not done with the story.”

“Oh.” Kayla cocks her head and gestures for me to continue. “I’m all ears.”

“Because her shirt is ruined, she decides she will use the dean’s bathroom.”

“The dean has a bathroom in his too office?”

I nod. “Yes. It is one of the benefits of his job.”

Kayla sighs dreamily. “That sounds amazing. I would love my own bathroom.”

“I, too, hate using public restrooms.” She’s so smart.

“This does not surprise me in the least.”

“I’m not sure what you mean by that.”

“You look like someone who enjoys his privacy.”

She would be right, but I didn’t realize how perceptive she was. Not only smart but intuitive. I lack the second skill while excelling at the first. “You’ll be a good scientist,” I inform her. “Better than me.”

This statement surprises her. Her eyes grow big, and her cheeks pinken. “That’s about the nicest thing I’ve ever heard anyone say.”

The smile on her face is so bright, I have to turn away. Coughing into my fist, I try to catch my breath. “Rachel—” I croak out, “Rachel goes into the dean’s office believing him to be at lunch except he has returned while she was away from her desk. He is bent over his desk and his TA is swatting his ass with a riding crop.”

“A what?” Kayla bursts out.

“A riding crop. It’s a thin, pliable leather device used during—”

“No. I know what it is. I just said what because I was surprised. Dean Campbell looks like Santa. Now every time a Santa appears on my TV, I’m going to think of Dean getting spanked in his office. This is terrible.” She buries her face in her hands.

“It wasn’t Dean Campbell,” I reassure her. “It was the former dean. Dean Albert Monahan. He was fired for engaging in inappropriate behavior with his TA. The TA was given a new post, but eventually transferred to a different program, although I’m not sure why.”

She peers at me over her fingertips. “What did Dean Monahan look like then? Please say it’s not Santa or I won’t be able to celebrate Christmas ever again.”

An image of a rotund balding man with a white beard flashes in front of my eyes. Dean Monahan looked more like Santa than Dean Campbell, who only sported the white beard and a small pot belly. I wonder if beards are a prerequisite to deanship? All of the current sitting deans around here have white hair and white beards. A regular Santa convention, in fact. Obviously I do not share this with Kayla. “He was an older Keanu Reeves,” I lie.

“Oh? Then he must’ve looked like you.”

“Me?”

Kayla looks taken aback. “Has no one told you that you look like Keanu’s John Wick what with the angular face and longish black hair?”

“I can’t say that I have ever heard this.”

“Well, it’s true.”

“Is this a bad thing?”

Her eyes glow. “No. Not at all.”



ten

“YOU NEVER DID SAY what you were doing for the holidays. We get a long break. What are your plans?” Nathan asks.

“Rachel told me that you never take the break. That you still come in even though everyone else is out.” I stand from my chair, needing to stretch. I got a lot done today. Little by little I’ve been getting this place organized. It no longer looks like a filing cabinet exploded inside of it anymore.

“This year is different.” His eyes follow me as I move a stack of folders. I’ve noticed that Nathan watches me a lot. I’m not sure if it’s something he does in general or if it’s me. I like to watch people too, but you’d think I was twirling around here singing show tunes or something.

“This year is different,” I agree. “My mom is on a cruise. I’m supposed to go to my aunt’s, but I’ve been thinking of skipping it and spending it alone at home.” His face softens.

“Is it because of your dad?” I give him a half smile. I love the fact that Nathan remembers everything I tell him. That he actually listens when I talk.

“That’s part of it,” I admit. “This year feels different for some reason. I thought it would be best to watch a bunch of holiday movies and binge on all the sweets I plan to make.”

“That sounds nice.”

“A little lonely but maybe it will be good for me. I’m an adult now. I don’t live at home. I should be okay with being alone. I mean, you seem to love it,” I point out. “You still

haven't told me what you're doing." I try and get the focus off me and my sad plans. Plus, I'm curious as to how Nathan spends his free time.

"I have a cabin in Lancaster. I was thinking of going up there." My mouth falls open. Everyone wants a cabin in Lancaster. It's supposed to be one of the most magical places. There is a small little town that sits in the center surrounded by snow covered mountains as far as the eye can see.

"I bet it's beautiful." I let out a long sigh. My mind is already thinking about how fun it would be to have a cabin in the middle of nowhere covered in snow. You could cut down a tree from your own yard, put it up in your living room, and string it with lights. It sounds so relaxing to think about sitting in front of a fireplace with a cup of hot cocoa.

"It's quiet."

I snort a laugh. I have no doubt that's why he got a cabin. It has nothing to do with the snow or beauty. The main draw for Nathan is that it is away from civilization. He probably loves being there with only his thoughts.

"Does it have a fireplace? Do you chop your own wood? Is the cabin made out of logs?" I start peppering him with questions. "Wait. Show me pictures." I walk over toward him. I expect him to pull out his phone, but he only watches me as I draw closer to him.

"You should come see it for yourself," he offers.

"Is that a good idea?" Even though my first instinct is to say yes. I play it cool, leaning my hip into the table only a few feet from him. "You mentioned a few times today about people getting fired around here if they... you know." I wiggle my eyebrows. He seems lost, not following my line of thinking. "Get it on," I finally whisper.

He reaches his hand out, his thumb wiping the corner of my mouth. When he pulls it back, I see a small dot of icing there. He brings it to his lips and sucks it clean.

"No one is going to fire me," he finally says. I lick my lips, still not sure this is a good idea. My body, on the other hand

thinks it's the best idea it's ever heard. "How about you ride up with me tomorrow? I'm going to take some stuff up and come right back. I could use a hand, and you are my assistant."

"Why are you going out there tomorrow? Christmas is next week." We do, however, go on break soon. I noticed when I looked at the calendar that everything was blocked out after the holiday party. We don't come back until a few weeks into January.

Disappointment had hit me hard when I realized that I'd have to go weeks without seeing Nathan. But then I'd remembered how Rachel had said he still tends to come to the office during break. I figured that even though I was off that I could still come in if he was working. Sounds like he won't be here either.

"There's a storm that is supposed to be rolling in soon, and I want to make sure the cabin is ready. I haven't been up there yet this year."

"So you'll need my help getting the files from the office up to the cabin?" I steer his answer to fit both of our agendas, wanting more than anything to say yes and go with him.

"Yes, I need you." Why did he have to say it like that? I know he doesn't mean it the way my mind wants him to, but it still lights up my insides all the same. I feel myself wanting to take another step toward him but stop myself.

"Bathroom!" I blurt out, turning and darting from the room. When I exit, I almost run right into Rachel.

"Are you running from him?" she asks with a laugh. Yes, but not for the reasons she is teasing about.

"Bathroom."

"Okay." I step by her, going to the bathroom. I linger there a little before coming back out.

"How is everything? Are you fitting in?" Rachel asks when I walk past her desk.

"I think so." I don't really see anyone else to try and fit in with.

“I wanted to give you a heads up. I overheard Jack talking about asking for your number.”

“Really?” I scrunch my nose.

“I take that as a no for you.” She laughs. “I think I like you even more. He’s a charmer and most of the girls fall for him.”

“No worries there,” I promise.

“Well, so it’s not awkward remind Jack about the rules if he does come a knocking.”

“Right.” My stomach tightens. The rules. I wish I could see those in fine print. I wonder if there is a loophole. Nathan said no one would fire him.

“So no one can date anyone here?” I ask, wanting to know.

“There are a few outs but not many. You can be married.”

“So no first dates?” I tease. “Unless it’s to the courthouse.”

Rachel laughs, going back to looking over the spreadsheet on her desk.

Nathan didn’t say anything about if anyone could fire me or not. It would be so worth it if this was a forever kind of thing. For all I know, this might be a fling to him.

I could actually see Nathan going on about how humans shouldn’t be in monogamous relationships. I’ve read some studies too and understood what they were saying. Understanding and doing are two totally different things. When it comes to love I let my heart guide me, and call me old fashioned, but I want the forever kind of love.



eleven

IF I DON'T GET my mouth on Kayla soon, I'm going to explode. I thought about it all last night and it made the most sense to get her into an enclosed space—to recreate the elevator experience without the terror of loss of life or limb. Thus was born my brilliant plan to get her to the Lancaster cabin. I take her there and pretend that my car breaks down, never mind that it's a new Tesla sent to me by Musk in thanks for the formula on a new plant-based energy source. We then are forced to stay at the cabin until the tow truck arrives—only no tow truck arrives because I pay off Henry, the auto guy, to stay away. Then she takes off her clothes and begs for me to take her. It's a solid plan. No holes at all.

First, though, we're going to need food because if she's hungry she will be distracted. Hunger is the number one cause of failed seductions. I don't know that this is true, but it sounds right.

“This is the Kingsbury. Can I help you?”

“I want to order some groceries,” I say.

“What do you mean order groceries?”

“I want to order food to be delivered to my house. I'm at 511 Pine Grove. The gate access is 4357. I'll leave it up to you to decide what to include but make sure you have champagne, ice cream, chocolate, whipped cream, honey—did I mention whipped cream?”

“Sir.”

“Yes?”

“This is Lancaster. We don’t deliver.”

I frown. How is that possible? “Everyone delivers.”

“No, sir, we don’t. This is a small town, and we only have four employees. No one—”

“How much?”

“How much what?”

“How much to get you to deliver my groceries?”

“Sir, I—”

“A thousand?”

“A thousand dollars?”

“Yeah.” I glance at the clock. After I arrange for the groceries, I guess we need to pack. Should we be going today or tomorrow? That might depend on when the food gets delivered.

“When do you want the goods to be delivered?”

“What works best for you?”

“The store closes at ten tonight.”

“Sounds good. Make sure all the cold goods are packed on ice. I prefer organic, if possible. Fruits, vegetables, meats, desserts, anything else you would need for an extended stay that includes a holiday meal. Here’s my card.” I rattle off the numbers and hang up. That task is taken care off.

Kayla walks in.

“I’m closing up shop.”

“Already?”

“There’s no reason to delay. Our work will wait.” I give her coat a shake. “I hear there’s a storm coming, so we should get going.”

“Let me run down to the breakroom. There’s extra cake there, and I want to take it home.” She darts out of the room before I tell her that she’s not going home, but I suppose if she wants cake, she can bring it to the cabin.

I put my coat on, throw my bag over my shoulder, and head out to the waiting room. Rachel's gone from her desk, so I grab a post-it and jot down that we're leaving. As I stick it on her computer, I hear a voice drift out of Dean Campbell's office. Hopefully, he's not in there getting his rod sucked because I'm not prepared to deal with a new dean so soon after Monahan got sacked. Department changes always result in an interruption in my work. I'm about to leave when I hear my name.

"Amherst doesn't..."

Do I care what they are saying about me? No, not really. I take a step toward the breakroom when another name filters out. *Kayla*.

I back up and wait.

"I think there's something going on between the two," says Rachel.

"Between Dr. Amherst and Kayla, his new research assistant?" squawks another woman in disbelief. Her voice sounds familiar. Maybe a former student? I feel like I've heard it somewhere before, but I can't really recall because who remembers people who are unimportant? "No way. I hit on him all during my term, and he had zero interest in me. I even saw him outside the Mo Bow bakery, and he looked as if he'd never seen me before. I sat in the front row and wore skirts so short that my ass was always resting on those dirty cloth seats, but I did it for him. It's depressing when I think about it."

"Why'd you come back then?" queries Rachel.

"Because now that I'm not a student of his anymore, I thought I'd re-introduce myself. I mean, how many guys as smart as Dr. Amherst look like him? I'm surprised there isn't a line."

"Oh, there is, but we manage to get rid of most of them. He hates all the attention, but with Kayla he's totally different. He listens to her," Rachel declares.

Well, of course I listen to Kayla. She's always saying interesting things.

“But she’s his assistant. If they get caught...well, the university would fire them. Remember Monahan?”

“No. They would never fire Amherst. He’s too valuable. His patents give the university so much prestige that they’d never give him up. Monahan got fired because he was dead weight. What will happen is that Kayla will be accused of trying to take advantage of him, and then she’ll be kicked out of the program and basically blackballed. I should warn her, honestly.”

“Please do and then call me so I can come back and offer my naked shoulder for Dr. Amherst to cry on,” the girl jokes.

I scowl and back away. Kayla could get kicked out of the program and blackballed? That’s fucked up.

“Are you ready?” Kayla chirps over my shoulder.

I spin around and take in her beautiful face, her sexy body, and her bright, brilliant eyes. I need this woman. I need her more than I can breathe, but I also don’t want to be the instrument of her destruction.

“I got my cake.” She lifts up a tin-foil wrapped plate.

“I can’t go to Lancaster,” I inform her.

Her face falls. “We can’t?”

Oh hell. At least she can go. I’ll drop her off and she can eat all the food while I come back here and work. That way she gets to have some semblance of Christmas. “I was wrong. Come. I’m taking you to the cabin.”

“Right now?”

I grab her elbow. “Right now.”

“But—”

“No buts,” I reply sharply. “It’s either now or never.”

“Wow. I guess now,” she says in a subdued voice.

I’ve already fucked things up, and we haven’t even gotten out of the department. Did I say I had a good plan? What a massive idiot I am.



twelve

“IS EVERYTHING OKAY?” Nathan had ushered us out of the office before I could ask any questions. And believe me, I tried to ask questions, but he continued to cut me off and rush me out. It makes me think something might be wrong.

“The storm is coming. I want to beat it.”

He’d said that the storm wasn’t coming until next week. That he needed to go up there to drop some things off and to make sure everything was good to go for his stay when he came back. It was only supposed to be a day trip. He might be talking about another storm. Maybe that’s what has him so scatterbrained. A word I never thought I would use to describe Nathan.

I should enjoy this alone time with him. I know I’m going to miss him when the break hits. Christmas was looking extra lonely this year. I thought that was what I wanted. Now not so much. I want to be with Nathan, but I’m not supposed to be with him. It makes my insides ache.

“Won’t you get caught in the storm later?” I look up and out the window thinking we might get caught in it right now. I really want to see his cabin. The place sounds like a wonderland. I bet it is breathtaking when covered in snow. A small part of me had wanted him to offer for me to spend the holidays up there with him when I told him I didn’t have any plans. Well, except for the ones with my Kindle. It was a terrible thing to want, knowing we aren’t supposed to be crossing this line.

“It will be okay.” He rests his hand on my thigh. I stare down at his big hand that’s spread out across my thigh. It’s warm and heavier than I thought it would be. Nathan really is a big man. I wet my bottom lip, knowing I’m getting turned on. I’m not sure if it’s because of where his hand is or merely that he’s touching me. I didn’t know hands could be sexy, but that is Nathan. He discovers the unknown.

“What is the fetish where people are attracted to feet called?” I ask. I know that’s a thing. There might be one for hands too. If that’s so I might be one of those people.

“Podophilia.” He glances over at me. “Is that something you’re interested in?”

“You want to show me your feet, Nathan?” I say through a laugh.

“If you would like.”

I laugh harder. “I’m sure your feet are lovely, but I’m in no rush to see them.” I was in a rush to see other parts of him though. “Is there one for hands?” Nathan actually looks like he’s thinking for a moment.

“Cheirophilia.”

“You really do know everything.” I watch out the window as snow starts to fall. Okay, he might not know everything. The snow is already coming down hard. What if we get stuck out at his cabin together? I don’t know if that would be terrible or wonderful. I’m still not sure if there can be a Nathan and me with all of the department rules. The only real loophole is to get married, and I’m guessing Nathan isn’t going to marry me so we can actually date.

It would be hard to keep my hands off him. Not only would we be trapped together all alone but in a cabin while snow falls with a fire in the fireplace. That’s a romantic dream come to life.

“Is it too hot in here?” Nathan turns the heat down in the car. “Your cheeks are flushing.” I reach up and touch them. I think that blush is because my mind was starting to drift to Nathan kissing me on the couch in front of the fireplace.

“I’m fine.” I drop my hand from my face. It lands on Nathan’s. Before I can pull it back, he’s tangling our fingers together. “I’m not sure we’re supposed to be doing this.” I give his hand a squeeze. “I could get fired.”

“If they fire you, I’ll quit.” I shake my head. “I’m sure there is a loophole. I’ll read over the rules in the handbook. It will be okay. It has to be.” He squeezes my hand. That’s the second time he’s had to reassure me everything will be okay. On two things I’m pretty sure he might be wrong about. A first for Nathan.

I reach for the radio and find a station that’s playing Christmas music. I sing along with the music. “Am I annoying you?” I start to reach for the volume to turn it down. He stops me.

“I enjoy hearing you sing.”

“Now I know you’re trying to be nice. I’m a terrible singer. So much so I played an instrument in high school so I didn’t have to do choir. It was one or the other.”

“I enjoy your voice singing or talking.”

“Really? Sometimes I think you space out when I’m rambling on.”

“There isn’t a word you’ve said to me that I’ve missed. If I looked spaced, I was more than likely thinking over the things you said.” I smile over at him before I go back to singing. I want to ask him why he sometimes goes from burning hot to ice cold.

When he starts to slow down, I perk up to see where we are. He hits a button and a gate swings open before he pulls in and heads up a windy road. I let out a small gasp when the cabin comes into view. It looks like it was plucked out of a magazine and dropped into a winter wonderland. Snow is already starting to coat everything.

“I don’t think we’re going to make it out of here, Nathan.” The snow is coming down fast with big snowflakes.

“Would it really be so bad to be stuck in a cabin like this for a few days?”

“No.” I shake my head. “Unless I go and fall in love with you. That would be bad since there can’t be an us.” His eyes widen for a moment, and I know I’ve caught him off guard.

“I told you not to worry about it. I’ll—”

I put my hand over his mouth, silencing him. I want to laugh at the shocked look on his face. This one is bigger than the one when I talked about me loving him. I’m guessing no one has ever told Nathan to stop talking.

“What if we let ourselves have this time together? Explore whatever this is we’re feeling? A few days of not worrying about the rules. What if what happens at the cabin stays at the cabin? No one would ever know. It would be our little secret. Then we could go back and act as if nothing happened.” I slowly lower my hand from over his mouth. I wait for a response, but he only stares at me. Is he going back to the cold thing?

“A man would be stupid to keep you a little secret.” He leans over, his warm breath tickling my lips. “I’ll agree to almost anything if it means that when you enter that cabin you’re mine.”

I clench my thighs together at the possessive tone he wrapped around the word *mine*. I wish that I could be his forever, but I know that I’ll take whatever we can have for now.



thirteen

A LOT of people would say that science is only about facts, but it's not. It's about intuition and gut instinct and following your hunches. When Newton had his epiphany about gravity, he was at home trying to avoid contracting the plague. Under his family's apple tree, the apple fell straight onto his head. He theorized that there must be a force pulling the apple downward as it never fell to the side or upward. Alexander Fleming's nasal drip into a plate of bacteria eventually led to the discovery of penicillin—that and his habit of not cleaning his dishes, which was completely understandable. When trying to discover what kills off bacteria, who has time for washing dishes? Time is better spent over your microscope, staring at the corner of the room where the wallpaper joints are slowly coming apart due to the humidity, or coming apart due to being in close contact with an activating agent.

That would be Kayla. She's undoing me, and rather than pick apart the why's of this phenomenon, I'm going to ride that gut feeling that she belongs to me, that she and I have met in this universe at this time because it was meant to be, much like Newton and his apple or Copernicus and his solar system. I'm not going to let something as stupid as policy someone made up overrule this primal connection we have.

“Also Marie Curie,” I mutter as I swing her up in my arms.

“Marie who?” She stiffens.

“Marie Curie. Discovered radium, not serendipitously like the blue mold penicillin discovery, but through education, training and research.” At the doorway is a giant box which

I'm guessing is the groceries. I avoid it and unlatch the door with a finger scan.

“Do I want to know why we are discussing radiation, or should we talk about your fancy door locks?”

“Neither.” I drop her inside the door and kick it shut. “Time for this.”

I slant my mouth across hers, diving deep into her mouth, opening her to me. Gut feeling. Animal instinct. Visceral reaction. It's all I know now. She wants to fall in love with me. That's really all I need to know. My job is to tip her over the edge, make her fall.

Her hands come up to cup my face, and that small touch rocks me like an earthquake. She's ripping up my foundation and pouring love into the base. I'm desperate to give back. My fingers find the bottom of her shirt. I slide under the fabric and feel her shiver under my touch. Her tits are heavy in my hand. Her nips poke against my palm as I lift and mold her tender flesh. I tear my mouth from hers. “Got to have a taste,” I gasp out.

I push the shirt up over her glorious tits, jerk down her bra, and watch those babies bounce out like apples tumbling from the netted bag. I lift one to my mouth and suck the nip hard, so hard that my cheeks hollow out. Her knees buckle, and I move to catch her.

“God, that was...I didn't know my breasts were so sensitive.” She's half-delighted, half-abashed.

I kiss her on her rosy cheeks. “Let's see what else is sensitive.” I move her away from the door, perching her on the edge of a thin hall table.

I move lower, my mouth finding the curve of her stomach, the tiny indent of her belly button. Her trembling intensifies the further south I go. I push down her pants, only far enough so I can see the juncture of her legs, allowing the knit fabric to bind her legs together. The cotton fabric of her panties is dark where her juice has soaked through. “Turned on, baby?” I finger the cotton lightly.

“Yes, damn it,” she chokes out. She wriggles her legs slightly, trying to get more freedom, but I like her bound and tight, exactly as I have her.

I slap her lightly on the ass. “Stop that.”

She stills immediately. “Did you just spank me?”

“Yes.” My fingers find her cunt again, rubbing over her underwear and watching intently as the dark spot spreads.

“I haven’t been spanked since I was a child.” She shakes her ass.

I slap it again.

She moans. “I shouldn’t like this.”

“But you do.” I rub her faster and harder. “And you like this too.”

Keeping my fingers on her sex, I catch her tit with my mouth. I suck hard, working a rhythm between her legs and her tits until her fingernails dig into my scalp. Her moans turn to tiny gasps, little cries, pants of pleasure. She doesn’t know if she wants to pull me off or hold me tighter. I press on, sucking on her swollen nipples, fingering her cunt through the underwear. *Come for me*, I command in my head. *Come on my fingers. Soak my hand. Give it all to me.*

Her body tenses. Under my touch, her pussy pulsates, quivering, convulsing. She explodes. A cry erupts from her mouth, her palms pressing hard against the sides of my head, her liquid pouring onto my fingers. I wrench the gusset aside and plunge my fingers inside of her tight, hot cunt. She screams and tries to maneuver away, but I hold her strong, one hand on her ass while my other hand thrusts into her juicy channel. The ripples of her orgasm flutter against my fingers. I keep advancing until she realizes there’s no mercy, no quarter. She gives in and lets the orgasm rip through her, pushing her over the edge. Fall in love? Nah, she’s going to be *in love*.

Hurriedly, I withdraw, ripping off my clothes, licking all of her juice off my fingers and then smearing the rest on my heavy cock. I give my shaft a hard, angry pull. I need inside of her like yesterday. I don’t know how I’ve held out this long.

She's mine, mine, mine. Primitive need drives out all rational thought. It's only instinct now.

“You ready for this? ‘Cause I can't wait another second. I'm going to have you, Kayla. I'm going to make you mine. Once I'm inside of you, you can't look at another man, touch another man, smile at another man. You hear me? That's what it means to be mine. If you have a problem with that, you better pull up your soaking wet panties and run away right fucking now.”

A snarl crosses my face. I probably look like a monster, the killer from the woods that's come to stalk his prey, but there's no going back for me. There's no going back for her either, even though I said she could leave. She can't. I'd run her down, tie her up, and keep her here in my cabin naked and restrained where she'd only be able to feed by my hand.

“Last chance,” I lie to her, and before she can answer, I rip off her panties and plunge inside of her.



fourteen

I GASP as Nathan thrusts all the way inside of me. I'm so wet he slides right in until he hits my innocence. My nails dig into his shoulders. The feeling is a mixture of both pain and pleasure. I'm overwhelmed but in a good way. This is all happening so fast. I barely got the words out that we could have this right now and he is all over me. The control I didn't know he's been fighting shatters.

"Kayla." Nathan groans my name. "Shit." He closes his eyes, taking a deep breath. "I'm sorry." He leans down and softly places kisses on my face. "I had no idea."

I swallow, a knot forming in my throat. My eyes start to burn.

"Don't cry." His eyes go wide, and I can see he's about to panic.

"I'm not." I lick my lips. "Well, maybe I am but not because it hurts. You're being so sweet." I've never felt so close to another person than I do right now. I want to have this feeling forever. I want to have him forever.

"Sweet?" He asks like he's thinking over my choice of words. I slide my hands up his arms to wrap around his neck. "You like sweet?" He places a few more kisses on my face. My body starts to relax more. I turn my head, wanting his mouth back on mine.

I start to wiggle. Any pain I felt has melted away, and now all I feel is full. My clit still tingles from what Nathan did to my body earlier. Nathan lets out a load groan as I begin to

move my hips. His fingers dig into my hips, trying to slow my movements. I can tell he's fighting for control.

"It doesn't hurt," I tell him. I try to move my hips again, but he's got me locked in place.

"I've made a mess of this." I gasp when Nathan lifts me, his cock still inside of me. I wrap my legs around him. "The bed" is all he gets out before I'm kissing him. Now I can move my hips, and I do what I want. My back hits something hard. "You're not helping." He thrusts in and out of me a few times. Again, he has me pinned so I can no longer move. "Be still or this is going to be over way quicker than either of us wants." He smacks the side of my ass before he begins to move inside of me again.

"I'm trying, I swear."

Nathan almost stumbles as I feel myself contract around him over and over. My body is begging for him to move. I sink down and lift back up. "I can't stop myself," I admit, pressing my chest into his.

He kicks open a door before tossing me down on the bed. My body protests at the loss of him inside of me. But the image of him standing at the foot of the bed looking hot as hell will be burned into my memory forever.

"Don't move," he orders as he starts to strip what's left of his clothes. I stare at his cock, thinking that him taking my innocence should have hurt more than it did. The man really is big all over. I start to sit up, but he grabs my ankles and pulls me to the side of the bed. "I said don't move."

"I said I need you back inside of me." I try to grab for him.

"I'm making this right." He drops to his knees, his mouth coming down on me once again. I moan out his name as he licks and sucks me. My back comes off the bed as he makes me orgasm again. My eyes fall closed as the pleasure rolls through my body.

I feel Nathan move. My eyes open to see him over me now. I'm in the center of the bed. The head of his cock is pressed up against me. He teases me with a few short thrusts

until finally he sinks deep inside of me. The pleasure on his face is indescribable. It only spurs me on.

“Yes.” I lift my hips, inviting him to begin to move inside of me.

“You’re so damn beautiful. I don’t think there is a more perfect creature on this earth.” My mouth parts, but only a moan comes from me as his thrusts become quicker and harder. I lift my legs, wrapping them around him.

I feel another orgasm already building inside of me. This one is bone deep. “Nathan.” I whisper his name. My voice is unsure if I can handle the pleasure I know he’s about to give me.

“Give it to me, love. I need you. I need you to come for me.” I do. Between him calling me his love and saying he needs me, I’m done for. I cling to him as my whole body clenches. He groans out my name as his warm release spills deep inside of me.

I stay wrapped around him, not wanting to move. His heavy breathing tickles the hair on my neck.

“That was...”

“Incredible?” I suggest.

“Not a good enough word for what this is.”

“Nathan Amherst is at a loss for words, and I put him there.” I giggle, a little proud of myself. He lifts his head. He’s got a smile on his face. It makes him look younger. It makes me happy to know that I put that smile there too.

“You do many things to me that no one ever has before.” He kisses me. I sigh into his mouth. “Wait here.” He pulls out of me. I watch as he walks to the bathroom. I sit up on my elbows when I hear the water turn on. A moment later, Nathan is coming out with a towel in his hand. He pulls my thighs apart before pressing the warm towel to my sex and cleaning between my thighs. My heart flutters at the gentle care he’s giving me.

He tosses the towel to the floor before grabbing me. I let out a small scream of surprise as he carries me into the bathroom. He slowly lowers me into a giant tub.

“Relax. I’ll be right back. I’m going to get you a drink.” He gives me a kiss and begins to walk away. Then he stops and gives me another. When it starts to deepen, I can’t help the giggle that comes from me. He can’t stop kissing me for two seconds. Yeah, I think sweet is the word that best describes Nathan when it concerns me. It might not be the way other people see him, though.

“Fuck it,” he says, slipping into the water with me.

“I’m not thirsty. I just want you,” I say between kisses as he sits, and I straddle him.

“You have me,” he says as he pushes inside of me. I do have him, but for how long? The plan was to have this weekend. To not fall in love. The plan was stupid. I was in love with Nathan before we even got here. The only problem is that I’m not sure how long I’ll be able to keep him when we return to the real world.



fifteen

“I DIDN'T KNOW you could cook,” Kayla observes from her perch on the counter, tucked in the corner against the fridge.

“It's a science,” I tell her, plopping the last of the cookie dough on the sheet and sliding it into the oven. I check the stew and add a little salt. “For cooking it's the acid to salt ratio, sweetness tempered by the source. For baking it's starch and fat.”

“I suppose it is.” She gnaws lightly on her lower lip. “I don't know how to cook. Only Bake.” It's said quietly, as if she's confessing to some great sin.

I shrug. “I don't usually either. It's too time consuming for one person. Better to order out.”

“But this smells so good. What if you ruin me for takeout food?”

The snow is falling fast and hard, we just rolled out of bed after fucking each other's brains out, and she's talking about even her taste buds being ruined by me? I keep my smile to myself, but internally, I can't help but cheer. Everything is working out great. I swat her ass with the side of my spoon. “Go sit down so I can test out that theory.”

“Only because you ask so nicely.” She rolls her eyes. I like that she's sassy with me. She doesn't feel my position over her as threatening. It shouldn't be since hiring and firing her isn't my responsibility. The conversation I overheard about Kayla getting the boot if she's found to be in a relationship with me

tickles the back of my brain, but I shove that thought aside. Everything is going to be fine.

Kayla carries bowls and silverware to the table. “Milk, coffee, water?” she asks.

“Milk.”

I heft the stew pot up and set it onto the counter, ladling out portions into the dishes she’s provided. As the steam rises, filling the air with the redolent smell of cooked onion, garlic, and caramelized meat, Kayla inhales. “Ugh, this smells delicious. It’s truly unfair that you’re brilliant, look like a god, and can cook.” She frowns at me. “How is it that you’re still single?”

“How are you still single?” I parry. “You’re brilliant, look like a goddess, and know how to order out.”

“I don’t feel like that last one is a great asset.”

“It is.” She won’t be cutting herself down in front of me. “Tell me about your Christmas traditions. What should we do here since it looks like we’ll be spending several days in the cabin? You have the reindeer food story. What else?” I want to do them all.

“We always had a tree with a big topper. My mom always wanted an angel topper for the Christmas tree but couldn’t find one that she liked. Dad was at a gas station and found one and brought it home. It was hideous.” She lets out a small laugh. “It was so heavy that it nearly made the tree tip over.” The memory puts a sad smile on her face. “Mom hated it at first, but it kind of grew on us all.”

Maybe I shouldn’t do the reindeer food thing. I want her to have new memories but here with me.

She shifts uncomfortably in her seat. “How about you? What Christmas traditions do you have?”

“None.” I spoon the stew into my mouth.

“None? Like no Christmas presents on Christmas morning or the Elf on the Shelf?”

“Elf on the Shelf?”

“You’ve never heard of that? It’s a little stuffed elf and you move it around every night as if he’s come to life while you’re sleeping. Mom would have him attached to the kitchen cupboards or one morning I found him on the counter half buried under flour that had spilled out of the container. He looked like he had tried to climb up the side of the ceramic bin and it tipped over.” This time her smile is bright and happy, but inwardly I’m frowning because I didn’t order an Elf on the Shelf. Fuck me. Maybe I could make a pine cone man. Pine cone on the limestone? Doesn’t have the same ring to it, but if the stupid stuffed man makes her happy then I’m getting one.

“I did not have an Elf on the Shelf. I spend most holidays—most days—in the lab or going over my research,” I say by way of explanation.

“Doesn’t your mom miss you? My mom is away this year. I pushed her to take a cruise she’s been wanting to do forever. If she was home she’d drag me out by my short hairs if I didn’t come home for Christmas.” She checks her watch. “I should probably call her and check in. She’s going to be worried. Do you mind?”

“Nah. I’ve got some research to dive into anyway.” I watch her go.

I need my Kayla locked up in the cabin until the break is over.

My vision of us sitting by the fire, drinking hot rum and making love until we’re too exhausted to move is starting to evaporate like smoke. Jealously, I watch as she calls her mother and laughs way too many times. I don’t think I’ve ever made her laugh like this. I don’t know if I’m capable of making her laugh like this. I’m not a funny person. There’s no recipe for being funny or making people laugh—or is there? I mentally debate this until Kayla returns to the table. Her face is flushed from the merriment she shared with her mom. The last time I saw Kayla looking like this was when she was in my bed, having just experienced a tremendous orgasm. So maybe I can’t make her laugh, but I can make her scream. I can make her come from sucking on her tits. I guess it’s time for dessert. I sweep a hand across the table, not caring that

dishes crash to the ground. Her eyes grow wide, and a small yelp escapes as I drag her out of her chair and spread her across the newly cleared space.

“What’s going on, Nathan?”

I grin ferally. “It’s time for dessert.”



sixteen

I FASTEN the back to my snowflake earring, it being my final touch to my outfit for the holiday party tonight. This is going to be hard. Nathan and I only got back to the city today. I don't think he wanted to leave the cabin at all, but since it's the holiday party for work tonight we came back.

Once it's over then we will all officially go on break. I'm not sure how I'm supposed to be around Nathan anymore without touching him or leaning into him for a kiss. I haven't had any practice in acting as though we're not together since we stayed so long in Lancaster.

We did some work while we were there. It made me feel less bad about not being in the office for those two days. I'm so new, I don't want people to think I'm ditching work. I think I more than did my job. I'm Nathan's assistant, and I made sure he was taken care of in all ways. I think I'm pretty good at it too. I giggle at my own dirty thoughts.

A knock sounds at the door, letting me know Nathan is here. He dropped me off a few hours ago so I could get ready. He went home to do the same. I know Nathan is only going to the holiday party because I am. Socializing isn't really his cup of tea. Some of our co-workers might actually die of shock when he walks in. I think it's sweet that he's going so that he can be with me.

When I open the door, I let out a small laugh when I see Nathan is really wearing the sweater I got him. It says Oh Chemistree Oh Chemistree on the top and the periodic table has been shaped into a Christmas tree. I ordered it when we

were at the cabin when I'd asked Nathan about the holiday party, and he admitted he didn't own a holiday sweater.

"Your chest is lighting up."

I look down at my sweater, which has dancing lights on it. "Do you like it?" I give him a smile. My fingers itch to grab at him, but I'm not sure if I should or not. He kissed me when he dropped me off. It was hard and long, taking my breath away. I worried it was a goodbye kiss. Not one that meant we'd never see each other but a goodbye to what we did at the cabin. We're back here, and we have to act professionally again. My stupid plan sucks. How the hell had I planned on not falling in love with Nathan? Did I really think that was possible? Well, it's not, and I'm already head over heels in love with him.

My mind had screamed for him to tell me he loved me. To tell me this wasn't a fling and that whatever the fallout might be, it would be worth it because we're forever. There were so many words that I waited for but never came. I mean, I would have been happy with him asking me to spend Christmas with him or even to get married over the break. Then no one could say anything about our relationship. Wow. I sound like a crazy obsessed stalker.

"Everyone's eyes will be focused there." He glares at my sweater, making me laugh at the pout that has formed on his lips. I grab my bag, pushing out the front door before I grab Nathan to pull him into my place. I knew if I didn't get us out of my apartment, one thing would lead to another, and we wouldn't be attending any holiday party. Was that glare because he was jealous thinking that other men would be looking at my goods? I hope so. It's a terrible thing to hope, but I do.

He grabs my hand as we make our way toward his car. Okay. That's a small sign that he doesn't want to leave what happened between us at the cabin. Yet it could just be a habit. I don't correct it as he opens the door for me, and we're on our way.

"When will you head back to the cabin?" I find myself asking. I look out the window, not wanting to show all the

emotions playing on my face. Do I even want this job if it comes at the cost of heartbreak? No, I don't think I would, but I also have no idea what Nathan sees us as. He might not believe in monogamy.

“Soon” is all he says. I steal a peek at him, but his eyes are on the road. When our building comes into view, my stomach starts to turn. Why did I think a holiday party would be fun again?

“Love.” His hand grabs mine, and my heart turns over as it always does when he calls me love. He's done it a handful of times now. “Something is wrong. Tell me what it is.”

“I'm fine.”

“You're not. I can feel it.” His eyebrows pull together like he's thinking over his own words. The valet it looks like they hired is opening the driver side door before I can say anything in response. I pull my hand away to get out of the car. When he comes around, he tries to make a grab for me, but I move.

“Nathan,” I say under my breath. I can see the frustration on his face. His hands are clenched into fists at his sides. When we finally enter the party, it's already in full swing. I hardly recognize the place with all the lights and Christmas decorations. I'm actually a little surprised how many people are here. I only know a handful of them.

Nathan gets swallowed up by people like he's a rockstar as soon as we walk in. I guess around here he kind of is. My insecurities start to eat at me. I chew on my bottom lip as I stand off to the side and watch as everyone else mingles. My eye catches the girl I saw last week who was hitting on Nathan outside of the bakery. She gave him her card and made it perfectly clear that she wanted him.

Did he invite her here? He's looking down at her while she talks, and her hands are very animated. I don't like how close they keep getting to him. One more inch and she'd be touching him. I also don't like the fact that I'm not next to him with his arm wrapped around me. I turn around to head to the bathroom but run right into Jack. He catches me before I can fall on my butt and make a fool out of myself.

“Cute sweater.” He smirks down at me as his eyes eat me up.

“Thanks.” I glance back over my shoulder, unable to help myself.

“I wouldn’t do that if I were you,” Jack says, drawing my attention back to him. “He’s really your boss. You’ll end up fired, and he’ll end up with a new girl.”

“What do you mean?” I try to play coy.

“I just mean if you’re looking for a little fun, I’m your guy.” He steps closer. “We’re in different departments. It would be fine.” He reaches up, running his finger down my jaw. “I can show you how much better I am in bed than Amherst.”

I take a step back. “I don’t know what you’re talking about,” I say again. He rolls his eyes.

“Men talk, Kayla. Even men like Amherst.”

“He wouldn’t,” I blurt out. His eyebrows lift. I don’t know if that look means I just gave myself away or Amherst told him everything.

“Besides, he’s already on to the next.” He looks over to where Nathan is. “Let’s get a drink.” He reaches for my arm and starts to pull me along. I go with him because my mind is absent of any other thought than to get away from Nathan. As for my heart, well, that’s broken.



seventeen

I CAN PINPOINT the exact moment when instinct started overtaking reason. It was when Kayla first walked through my door. I used to be all science and facts, and now I'm all emotion. That's what drives me from the overly talkative former student all the way across the room to the doorway that Kayla is being dragged through. That's why my fist comes up and connects with Jack's jaw. That's what drives me to take the man to the ground. Jack's own hand flies up and glides next to my cheek.

I barely hear the shouts of the department staff behind me, and their hands are like gnats I shake off as I split his lip open.

"Nathan, oh no, baby, you've been hit." Kayla's distress breaks through my rage. I let her haul me off a dazed Jack and pull me to the side. Her lovely eyes are filled with worry as she dabs at my cheek. "He must be wearing a ring because it gashed you here."

I capture her hand and press it to my lips. "Doesn't hurt. I swear."

"I smell a lawsuit," murmurs Rachel, who is nearby.

"Jack touched me first," Kayla protests.

"But you're not the one who hit him. It was Dr. Amherst, so it's not self-defense."

I wonder when Rachel became a lawyer, although maybe sorting those issues out is part of her job. "It doesn't matter." Punching the asshole felt good and if I have to spend a night in

jail, it would be worth it. I give Kayla a wink and then wince when pain arrows into my eye above the cut.

“Don’t do that,” Kayla chides, rubbing my eyebrow. I dip my head down so she can have better access. I should’ve let Jack get in a few more punches. I’m liking all this tender attention she’s delivering.

“You two look cozy.” What is with this girl? Can she not take a clue? How did she ever pass my class? “You know it’s against administration’s policies to date any student although it doesn’t look like you guys dated much but just jumped right into the sack. Don’t worry, girl. I’ve got your back. I’ll file a report on Dr. Amherst tomorrow. I had the same experience with him. He took me out for dinners and told me unless I got on my knees, I wouldn’t get a good grade.”

A crowd has started to gather with Jack and Dean Campbell at the front. Jack’s broken mouth forms a proximate smirk while Dean Campbell grows pale, likely at the thought of the way the department’s funds are going to plummet if I’m not here.

“Wait a second—” I start.

“You better not say anything,” Rachel warns. “It can be used as fodder in the lawsuit.” She turns to the student. “Come with me and we’ll have you write up a complaint.”

“Better put him on administrative leave,” Jack advises. “And you—” He points a finger at Kayla. “You’re done.”

I charge at Jack again, but a dozen hands pull me back. He slinks away toward the food table.

“Come on.” Kayla pulls at my arm. “Let’s go home. We’ll sort this mess out later when everyone is sober and your cheek is taken care of.” She throws a dark glance toward Jack’s back. “Who knows? You might have rabies or something.”

Rachel nods briskly. “Good idea. You two go on and you”—she nods toward the student—“you come with me.”

Kayla marches out of the party room with her head high and her shoulders straight, totally unconcerned about her future, but once we reach the elevator and are out of sight of

the rest of the staff, she wilts like a flower without enough water. Her head bows, and her snowflakes twinkle sadly under the bright fluorescent lights.

“Knew we should’ve gotten rid of the breakroom,” I mutter as I jab the elevator button. “You’re going to be fine, Kayla. I’ve got a lot of contacts around the country. There are plenty of other science departments.”

“That’s nice,” she replies, but her tone says she’s miserable.

I rub the back of my neck and try to think of something else to comfort her with. “I can pay Jack off. I have plenty of money. My patents earn several million—”

“It’s not about the money,” she cries. The doors to the elevator slide open, and she jumps inside, furiously pressing the parking button.

Caught off guard, I nearly let the doors close before I come to my senses and slam a hand against the edge of one of them. I push the heavy doors aside and climb on board.

“Were you trying to get away from me?” I growl, backing her into the corner.

“Yeah, I was. After all, isn’t that what you want?” She puts her chin up. “Talking about sending me away to another department.”

“You don’t want to continue to work?” I’m full of confusion now, anger at her trying to escape warring with puzzlement over her not wanting to leave this hellhole.

“Of course I want to work. Leaving here in the middle of my studies is not great for my resume or my future.” Something glittery flashes in her eyes before she turns her head to the side.

“Yeah, I get that.” Changing in midstream can mean a setback of a year or more. “Which is why you should let me use my contacts to find a new place for you. Joy Patterson has a great program in Seattle at Washington U. They’re doing some breakthrough work with vertical farming and solar energy. You’d be a great fit there.” Patterson has been begging

me to come work with her, but Dean Campbell has basically let me do whatever I wanted so leaving this place wasn't appealing. Or, I should say, it wasn't appealing before. But now that Kayla's career and reputation are in jeopardy, it's a good time to move on. I pull out my phone. "Let me give her a call right now."

"No!" Kayla swipes the phone from my hand. "I can find my own damn TA position. I don't need your help. I'd rather die—"

Her voice cuts off abruptly when the elevator screeches, and the interior is plunged into immediate darkness. "Oh no," she moans. "Not now."



eighteen

MY THROAT CONTRACTS as I fight for air. Why did this have to happen now? I was already in the middle of a small internal panic attack and now this. Before I can try and do anything, I'm lifted off my feet and into Nathan's arms. I bury my face in his neck, breathing him in. A sense of calm comes over me. As hurt as I am by him, my body seeks his comfort.

"It's fine." His tone is gentle as though he's talking to a scared kitten.

"It's never fine when people say it's fine," I say into his neck.

"You're right. It's better than fine when I have you in my arms." Some of the tension leaves my body hearing his sweet words.

"You can be really sweet sometimes."

"And the other times?"

"Confusing?" I say that about him, but I feel as if I'm the same way these days. It's strange how at times I feel like I'm really close to Nathan and others I'm not sure who he is.

"I understand this. I too find myself confusing when it comes to you. This is all new to me. I'm never sure of what you want. Unless we're naked in bed." I let out a small laugh. We didn't need words in bed. Everything was so much easier at the cabin. I want to go back.

"What is new to you?" I ask, knowing I need clarity about all this before I drive myself insane.

"Having a relationship."

“But we’re not. We were only supposed to have our time in the cabin. That was the deal,” I remind him.

“That was *your* deal.”

“See! Right now you’re doing the confusing thing again. You just tried to send me away two seconds ago. Now you’re implying that maybe you do want something more than a fling with me, but you never outright said it. So I’m left to try to figure it out and it has me all twisted up. I don’t know how to do these dating games, so I’m never going to figure it out.” I blurt out in one rambling breath, my frustration bubbling over.

“I don’t know these games either.” I let out a groan. “Tell me how to fix this.” I can tell he’s as frustrated as I am. I shouldn’t be angry with him. He hasn’t done anything wrong. From the moment I met Nathan, he’s been nothing but nice to me. You can’t make someone love you.

“I don’t like that girl.”

“I—” He pauses. I’m sure he’s confused by my random comment. She bothers me the most. I think it’s because I know she wants Nathan and said those things because her flirting with him at the Holiday party didn’t give her the result she desired. I wanted to be able to claim him as mine and tell her to get lost, but it wasn’t my right. “What girl?” His eyebrows furrow the same way they do when we’re in the office and he’s trying to figure out some complicated problem.

“Donut girl. The one who used to be in your class or whatever.” She was full of crap when she said that they went out to dinners. If that was true then why did she give him her card and flirt with him when we saw him outside of the bakery? Wouldn’t he already know those things if he’d taken her out? I knew that girl was trouble the moment she stole one of my donuts.

“Oh yes. I do not like her either. We agree on this. You know that I’ve never—”

“Been with her? Yeah, I know. She gave you her card. She’s full of crap with her comments and I’ll be sure to report that for you.”

“I don’t care, but that wasn’t what I was going to say. I’ve never been with anyone other than you.” I sit there in shock for a moment as I let his words sink in.

“Wait. What?” How is that possible?!

“I told you this is all new to me too, and I don’t understand dating games either.”

I swear you could knock me over with a feather. It felt like he knew what he was doing at the cabin. “How is that possible?” Nathan isn’t only brilliant, he’s freaking handsome as hell. It adds up to some degree, though. That girl is an example. He didn’t even realize that she was hitting on him at all. She had practically thrown herself at him, and he had no clue.

“I’d thought about it before. To understand it on a scientific level, but there was no one that ever interested me. I didn’t want to have someone’s mouth on mine or vice versa.” He gives a small shake thinking about it. “Then there was you. From the minute I saw you, I wanted to put my mouth on every part of you.” I smile into his neck. He did put his mouth everywhere before we left that cabin.

“You want to send me away.” His hands stop roaming up and down my back. That tightness in my throat starts to come back again. He grips my hips.

“I only want to make things right for you. This isn’t a fling to me. I tried to stay away from you when I realized that it may affect your career, but I find with you my emotions control me. I’m not used to it. I’m fucking my plan all up.”

Hope blooms in my chest. “What is your plan?”

“To trap you in my cabin and make you fall in love with me.”

“Nathan,” I gasp. Is he in love with me? I lift my head to look at him. The elevator jerks suddenly and starts to move again. The doors slide open on the same floor that we started on. Everyone turns to look at us with shocked looks on their faces. I’m still clinging to Nathan. He moves, hitting the button, and the doors close again. This time we make it to the

bottom floor. I try and wiggle out of his hold, but he doesn't let me even as he tells the valet to get the car.

“Everyone is looking at us.”

“I don't care. What's done is done. It's clear we're together. It was stupid of me to think that I could try and hide it. I can't keep my hands off you. I'm only at the party because you're here and I was trying to make sure you have the best Christmas possible.” He does love me.

The valet pulls up, and he finally lets me down. I get in the car, and Nathan takes off. It's clear we're not heading toward my place.

“Where are we going?” I ask.

He glances over at me. “To finish my plan.”

I smile, wanting to tell him that he already achieved his goal. I've already fallen in love with him.



nineteen

“YOU FIRE HER, AND I QUIT,” I inform Dean Campbell as I stand at the foot of the bed. I shouldn’t have answered the phone, but I figured he’d want to apologize.

“Even if you married her, it’d still be a breach of the honor code,” the doofus insists.

“Didn’t realize I was a student.”

“It applies to everyone at the university. Your reputation is going to take a hit.”

“Brother, my reputation could be on the floor, my research project in flames, and a meteor crashing into the earth, and I still wouldn’t leave her.” I disconnect and toss the phone to the side. As I pull off the lit-up Christmas tree, Kayla huffs out a sigh and looks at the ground as if this is somehow her fault.

“We’re getting married,” I announce.

She makes a face. “Is that the deal you made with Dean Campbell?”

“Nope.” I shuck off my shirt and tackle my trousers. “It’s the deal I’m making with you. Either marry me or no more of this.” I take my cock in hand.

A muffled laugh escapes her. “Are you threatening me? Or blackmailing me?”

“Both? Either? Is it working?” I don’t have much of a plan here. I just want to make love to Kayla and do my research. I can do the latter anywhere.

“Maybe.” She lifts her head enough to get a good look, and a wicked little light appears in her eyes. “What else are you proposing?”

“Besides marriage? Nothing. It’s all or nothing, babe.”

“I want it all,” she declares.

“Good girl. Slide onto your knees then and open your mouth.”

She does as she’s told.

“Flatten out your tongue and open wide.”

Her jaw drops, and whether it’s in surprise or actual obedience, I don’t care. It’s an opening and I take it. I slide my heavy weight along the slippery surface of her tongue, penetrating the humid recesses of her mouth. Her lips rub across the sensitive membranes of my shaft, and my eyes roll into the back of my head. Her hands reach out to grab my hips.

“No.” I give a stern shake of my head. No way I’ll be able to last if she touches me. “Hands behind your head,” I order.

I didn’t even know I was into this, but seeing her on her knees with her hands cupping her own skull, her mouth wrapped around my cock, the submissive posture, willing to take everything that I have, nearly floors me. “You’re going to make a real obedient little wife for me.” The words just come out. “I’m gonna tell you what to do, and you’re not even gonna have to think for a moment.”

She whimpers, and I have to lock my knees before beginning a slow shuttle in and out of her mouth. Fire whips through my veins like a golden lash. Every time she touches me, she binds me closer. I was hers from the moment she walked into my office, but each time we touch, our bonds wrap tighter. Nothing can sever us now. Not the dean, not the university, not even science itself. We will be one forever.

“Open your throat, baby. It’s going to be rough, but we’ll make it,” I encourage. I cup her chin and stroke her bulging cheek with a thumb. “You need me to pull out?”

She wrinkles her nose in mute refusal. I reach around and cup her neck to lend her some support. “Take it easy, girl. Don’t try to swallow it all at once. Open up for me. You do a good job here and I’ll give you a passing grade.”

She moans again, and one of her hands drops between her legs.

“None of that,” I bark. “That’s my pussy. Did I tell you you could touch my pussy?”

She shakes her head, and her teeth scrape across my cock. I have to bite down on my lip until I taste blood in order to get control over myself, but it’s nearly too late. I can feel the orgasm building, pressing on my spine. I pull out.

“Wait!” she protests, putting out a hand to try to grab me. I swivel away. “I wasn’t done,” she pouts.

“Your little pussy needs attention. That’s mine now. You don’t get to touch unless I tell you to. Up on the bed and spread your legs.” I flip her back onto the bed and pull the sweater over her head. “You can’t wear anything that has lights on your tits in the future.” I crumple the damn thing in a ball and toss it in the corner.

“That was my favorite sweater,” she mock pouts.

“Put it on a teddy bear and enjoy it that way.” I pull down her skirt and underwear and then push her back. “Time for me to eat.”

She tastes like spiced cider, hot, tangy, and intoxicating. I tunnel my fingers into her tight cunt and scissor them apart to make way for my marauding tongue. I could eat her all day and all night and never get tired of her. Her heels dig into my back, and her chest heaves as she gasps for air. I grab one of her tits and massage as I devour her cunt. This is the life. The perfect, pleasurable life I didn’t even know I needed or wanted until Kayla appeared. She cries out as the orgasm seizes her. Her hot juice spills onto my tongue. I surge upward and thrust into her just as the next wave seizes her.

“Love you,” I choke out between thrusts. “Loving you now and forever. Don’t you ever forget that, hear?”

“I won’t. I promise. I won’t.”

“You love me, too,” I demand.

“Of course. Of course I love you.” She pushes up to wrap her arms around me and press her lips to mine, and that’s how I love her, holding her and thrusting into her, rubbing our bodies against each other until we’re one person, crashing through the waves of pleasure, binding our souls together.

I never thought much about Christmas in the past, but this year and for every year after, I will always think of it as ours.

epilogue

KAYLA

ONE YEAR LATER

“MERRY CHRISTMAS,” Nathan says as he presses a kiss under the shell of my ear. My eyes flutter open. I slowly roll over to face my husband. I never get tired of calling him that. This man has made dreams of mine come true that I didn’t even know I wanted.

“Morning.” I tilt my head for him to kiss me. “Did you get me what I asked for?” I fight a smirk.

“I did.” Nathan doesn’t fight his smile.

“What?” I sit up, quickly trying to get out of the bed, wanting to see it for myself. Nathan has a hold on me and pulls me back into bed. “What did you do? Buy a helicopter and have them dump snow over the cabin?”

It’s been a very warm winter so far. I have our cabin decorated to the max. It looks like Christmas exploded on everything, but this is our first Christmas with our little one. He might still be inside my belly, but I’m counting it.

“That was plan A, but Mother Nature took care of it for me.” I stare at him for a moment before I burst into laughter. It’s short-lived when I realize how badly I need to use the bathroom. “Don’t jump off the bed like that. I’ll put the mattress on the floor, and you’ll have to call me for help whenever you need to get up.” I roll my eyes at his ridiculousness as I quickly make my way to the bathroom.

“Don’t you touch the bed frame!” I shout from inside the bathroom because Nathan would do as he threatened.

“Don’t jump from the bed and I won’t.” He leans against the door frame, watching me wash my hands.

“Did it really snow?” I ask him. He snags my big fluffy robe off the hook and holds it open for me.

“I’ll show you.” I slip into it before he takes my hand and leads me toward the front of the cabin. The curtains are pulled

back from the big picture window in the front, revealing a winter wonderland. I let out a small squeal when I see how much snow has actually fallen. I spin around, wrap my arms around Nathan's neck, and plant a hard kiss on him.

He lets out a groan and deepens it more. I melt into him, wondering how I got so lucky to find a man like Nathan. He really is one of a kind.

"Oh sorry!" I hear my mom say. We break away from the kiss.

"Nathan made it snow for us, Mom," I tell her.

"Is that why he was dancing outside naked last night covered in Christmas lights?"

Nathan's face grows confused while I giggle.

"A snow dance." I pat his hard chest.

"Let me start the coffee." He drops a kiss onto my head before going over to the fireplace and tossing another log onto it first. I can't believe how much life has changed in only a year. The university ended up begging us both to stay. Nathan finally agreed after he demanded some staff changes. We actually make a good team. I'm the only person in history to get Dr. Nathan Amherst to work with them. We've already made leaps and bounds together.

"What should we do for breakfast?" Mom comes over to join me on the sofa. My stomach growls at the mention of food. I just hit my third trimester, and I'm hungry all the freaking time.

"Cookies?" I suggest. We have a ton. Mom and I spent half of yesterday baking. She loves being up at the cabin with us.

"You can have *a* cookie with your breakfast." Mom gives me that mom look. I wonder if I'll give my little one the same look. My heart flutters in my chest thinking about the baby's arrival.

"Do you have makeup on?" I lean over some to try and get a better look. Mom blushes.

“I might have put a little something on.” I bite the inside of my cheek so I don’t make a goofy giant smile. Mr. Barker is coming over this afternoon to have Christmas dinner with us.

“Will Barker be able to get in here with all the snow?” I look back over my shoulder to the kitchen where Nathan is.

“Nothing is going to stop that man from getting here,” Nathan says. He brings over a cup of coffee to my mom, who is blushing more now. The change in my mom even over the last year has been wonderful. She seems really happy, which makes me happy.

I think she finally let go of the pain of losing my dad and is moving on. We’ll never forget him, but there is still life out there to be lived, and I’m happy she’s trying to live hers now. Finding out I was pregnant put everything into perspective for everyone.

We might have lost someone in our family, but that doesn’t mean we can’t keep growing this one. My dad will live on in our son, who will carry his name. Nathan goes back into the kitchen, coming back a moment later with a hot chocolate for me. He sits down, pulling me into his lap. I snuggle into him.

His hand rests on my stomach. He places a kiss on my neck as my mom starts to hand out the wrapped presents under the tree. Her eyes linger on the top of the Christmas tree. The horrible tree topper my dad got all those years ago sits up there. Nathan had to rig it up there so it wouldn’t topple our tree over like it did years ago. I smile at the memory. I have been smiling a lot since Nathan came into my life.

I snuggle deeper into my loving husband as we start to open gifts. My mind drifts off, thinking about all the years to come and all the new memories that are left to be made. Our family will hopefully grow bigger each year, and the cabin will continue to be filled with laughter and love.

The Christmas spirit is contagious. My husband is proof of that. He’s caught the spirit with us all. I knew it was inevitable. That feeling wraps around you, bringing everyone together. You can’t help but get swept away. We might be scientists, but

we can't deny that there is a magic that comes along with Christmas that can't be explained.

Love has a way of healing you. Again, it can't be proven, but the evidence is all around us every day.

* * *

Lovelies:

Are you keeping warm? Are you keeping safe? I worry about you. I hope this story brings a little light into your life and provides you a small escape. Thanks for being with me this year. Let's look forward to the new year together.

Xoxo Ella

insta holiday



Tyson Carter has known Rory Carlson is the one for him since, well, forever. All through high school with every score, he hoped to impress her into his bed. Nothing worked. Rory has remained stubbornly resistant to his Carter charms but Tyson didn't win all those championships through luck. He can be just as strong-willed as she.

Rory Carlson has two younger brothers, a household full of debt, and a derelict mother. She doesn't have time for rich kid Tyson Carter who, despite all his sports achievements, has decided to be an influencer. It doesn't matter to her that he has hundreds of thousands of followers. Does that put food on the table? Tyson is gorgeous, handsome and smart, but she needs someone she can rely on.

In this insta world, she wants something permanent. During this holiday season, can Tyson convince her that forever after

is possible with him?



one

“I WISH IT WOULD SNOW.” Rory Carlson sighs, looking up at the sky.

“I’ll make it snow for you.”

Rory spins around and points a finger in my face. “Tyson Carter, if you don’t stop following me, I swear to God, I’m going to do....” Rory stomps her foot in frustration because there’s not much she can do to me. I’m a god, little g, here in Edison. I was Edison High’s star quarterback, winning the state championship three times in a row, and in Texas that means you can kill someone and get away with it. Me following around Rory Carlson in her battered Jeep as she makes deliveries for different businesses in town is not going to raise even one eyebrow.

“Just keeping you safe,” I drawl. Rory looks especially good today in her skinny jeans and white T-shirt with the faded Wonder Woman logo. Her eyes are shiny and bright, which tells me she got a good sleep last night, which is rare for her. During the week, she delivers for the hardware store, the café, and the grocery store. She waits tables at the café Thursday through Saturday. On Sunday, she cooks at home, preparing enough food for the week for her family. At some point, she’s going to drop from exhaustion, and so I need to be there to catch her.

“I’m eighteen now, not seven, and do not need anyone—particularly you, Tyson Carter—to keep me safe.”

I don’t roll my eyes, but I want to. “And that incident with the meth head a month ago was what? A welcome encounter?”

She scowls. “It was an accident. Harry wouldn’t have hurt me if he wasn’t high. He thought I was an intruder and was trying to protect his home.”

“I agree, but he was high, and he’s an addict, so the chance that he’ll be high and violent in the future is greater than zero.”

“You’re being dumb.”

I shrug. “Maybe.”

“And lazy.”

“Lazy?”

“Yes! All you do is follow me around or hang out with Sterling Justice. Don’t you have ambitions?”

“Sure. You.”

She throws up her hands like this is a completely unreasonable statement. “That’s not an ambition.”

“Rory, we both know I’ve got money.” I don’t know why she’s upset about the fact that I’m spending my days watching her instead of the stock market.

“Your parents have money,” she corrects. She wrenches open the door of her Jeep and climbs in. “That’s not going to last forever.”

“Pretty sure it will.” My dad runs over the books with me once a month and has since I was fifteen. Not because he expects me to take over. Nope. He wanted me to know that all I had to do in high school was excel at sports. My state trophies, my individual awards, all sit on a shelf behind his desk. I think he polishes them nightly.

“You don’t know that. Besides, I want someone who can keep up with me, someone who has the same kind of drive.” She guns her engine. “And that someone does not follow others around and post dumb videos on social media. I’m going home now. Don’t follow me, and stop posting stuff about our non-existent relationship! We are not dating!” She peels out of the hardware store parking lot without a look behind her. I lift my phone and take a video.

“I know that.” So does everyone who follows me. After blurring out the license plate, I post the edited video with an update. “That feeling when your crush leaves you in the dust. Literally.”

I get twenty thousand views within the first few seconds of posting it. I don’t know why, but the internet is keen about my one-sided romance. My follower count increases every day. I’m going to hit three hundred thousand soon.

“Was that Rory Carlson?” a voice asks.

I look over my shoulder to see Cane Justice ambling over. His boot heels make a soft clicking noise against the asphalt. “Yup.” I turn my phone screen toward him.

A long, low whistle glides from between his teeth. “She wants nothing to do with you. I like the touch of her giving you the finger.”

“I felt like that was important to keep in—for authenticity’s sake.” I tuck my phone away.

“Sterling come to town with you? I haven’t seen much of him lately.”

“He’s busy with the princess. Her dad’s moving into the ranch.”

“Yeah, I know.

“It’s getting to be a full house. Good thing Sterling and Maria are going off to college. Gives us some time to get a house built for them.”

My best friend has fallen for a real-life princess. At first he thought the dad was going to object to the relationship, but it turns out that the Justice Ranch is exactly what old Prince Harold needed. The Justice house is bursting at the seams with three of the Justice cousins getting hitched.

Because misery loves company, I ask, “How’s Astor these days?”

Cane’s sober face turns dark. “You know how it is.”

“Guess we can be single together.”

“You ever ask your followers what you should do?” Cane jerks his head toward my phone.

“Regarding Rory? Nah, but they give me free advice all the time. Do you want me to ask about your situation?”

He hesitates and then shakes his head. “No. No one can solve my problem unless you know how to bring a horse back from the dead.”

“Probably someone knows, but it’ll come back mad and haunted and eat up the entire town until there’s nothing left but empty corpses and shit.”

Cane snorts. “Tyson, Halloween is over. It’s Christmas time.” He points to the main street where the wreaths and lights got hung last week. “Can’t you see?”

“Zombies don’t care about the holidays. Every day is an eating day for them.” I snap my fingers. “That’s actually some good content. I’ll see what the followers think. Why don’t you walk like the undead for me and I’ll post it.”

Cane obliges because what else does he have to do? Like me, all his time is spent waiting for his woman to join him by his side. It’s not really living, though. You can’t really live unless you have your soulmate next to you, but I can—and will—be patient. At some point, Rory will figure out that I’m the man for her. It might not be today or tomorrow, but it’ll happen. No doubt in my mind.



two

HE'S DRIVING ME INSANE. But even worse, he's actually wearing me down. From the very start I've had no idea what to do with Tyson Carter. Growing up in somewhat of a small town, everyone knows Tyson. He graduated last year, but still he lingers around Edison.

He could have gone off to any college he wanted. Not only because of his skill on the football field but also his family name. But I guess when you don't have to worry about money, you can do whatever your heart desires. I don't have that privilege.

Needless to say, he's still in Edison making social media videos and becoming more famous with each day that passes. The girls online swoon over him, and all the boys want to be him. The recent comments on his posts are all about how he stays in Edison because of me. That thought had never once occurred to me. I still find that hard to believe, but with each passing day I start to think maybe it is actually true. And I'm not sure what to do with that.

I pull out my phone when I park outside of my next delivery and do what I always tell myself I'm not going to do. I check to see if Tyson posted again. He has. It's a video of me from a few minutes ago. I notice that the likes and comments are rolling in already. Lately he's been posting more and more that pertains to me.

I glare at the one from Jessica saying she's more than willing to be Tyson's girl. That he wouldn't have to ask her twice or chase her. I shouldn't care, but I can't help but be pissy about it. I don't want Tyson, but no one else should have

him either. It's a ridiculous way of thinking, but it's all in my head, and no one will ever have to know.

I scream when an unexpected knock sounds at my window. Astor holds her hands up, mouthing the word *sorry*. She takes a step back so I can open the door.

"Didn't mean to scare you." She gives me a warm smile. I always admire that about her. Astor understands hard work too. She's worked on her family's farm since she could walk. There is nothing that she loves more than horses. Well, out loud at least. It suddenly dawns on me that we actually have a shit ton in common. Even though she's a handful of years older than me.

"I was playing with my phone. Sorry. I've got your delivery in the back." I jump down from my Jeep and go around to grab her order from the hardware store.

"You're fine. Sorry for the last-minute delivery. I couldn't get away."

"Anytime. You know that." I hand her over the box. She doesn't actually get deliveries from me often. I know money can be tight for her too, so she usually runs her own errands if she can. Every penny matters when you don't have family money to fall back on.

"You hear we might actually get snow?" I drop my head back to look up at the graying sky.

"It might be nice," I admit. Astor makes a noise, clearly not agreeing with me. Then again, I don't have horses to worry about and whatever else they have going on here. I know she does the bulk of work on the land, and I'm guessing snow would only make things harder for her.

"I suppose a white Christmas could be beautiful. I've never experienced one." She finally gives.

"Marry Cane Justice and I bet he'd take you to Aspen every Christmas." I poke her a little to see if I can get a reaction from her.

"You talk a lot of shit for a girl who has Tyson Carter in love with her."

“Fair point,” I agree quickly, hoping she’ll drop the subject.

Tyson’s family owns Carter Energy Transfer. They are an energy company that transports oil and gas products. Tyson has the luxury to never lift a finger for the rest of his life if he doesn’t want to. His family has secured their wealth already and will take care of him.

I know that’s not his fault or doing, but I’d be a liar if I didn’t admit I was bitter about it. Still, I always find myself thinking about him first thing when I wake up and last thing when I go to bed. He’s always there and not only physically.

“How do you do it, Astor?”

“Do what?” she asks, looking confused.

“Keep away from him?” I’m not trying to pry into her business. I truly am curious as to how she maintains her distance from Cane. Maybe she could share some tips with me because I’m obviously failing miserably when it comes to Tyson.

Even now, my fingers itch to pull my phone back out and check social media again. To see if he’s responded to the girl who posted she would happily be his girl. He usually does. Always saying his heart will know no other. He’s a giant sap. I hate how adorable it is. Anyone at a first glance would never think that about him.

“That’s a bit different. It’s only you that’s keeping you from Tyson.” She takes the box from me. “See you around,” she says before she takes off back toward the giant barn. I’m pretty sure she’s talking about her father not caring for the Justices. I’m not really sure. I’ve never heard the story, but I’ve never been big on gossip. Who has time for it?

Though I think she’s wrong. My family might not tell me not to be with Tyson, but the reality is I don’t have time for him. I barely have time for anything. The truth is I’m a bit scared if I let myself have even a taste of Tyson Carter I’ll never want to let go.

Then what? People depend on me. I won't be selfish. Not when it comes to taking care of my little brothers. They've been let down enough. I shut the back door of my Jeep before jumping back into the driver's seat to finish my deliveries. I need all the cash I can get. This Christmas will not be like last year. I promised my brothers that.



three

“TYSON, your mom and I’ve been thinking you should get away for the holidays. Give your account some fresh content,” Dad suggests over dinner. He slides an envelope across the table until the edge hits my plate.

I set my fork down and peak inside the envelope. It contains plane tickets and a printed invoice for a hut in the Maldives. “People like that I’m relatable. I don’t think a tropical vacation that costs thirty grand a night is relatable.”

“You never know,” Mom chirps. “I watched an hour-long video of someone getting their hair washed in Japan. That’s not relatable, but it was entertaining. Your audience might enjoy new scenery.”

I rub a finger under my nose because I don’t want to offend my very loving parents, but I can see right through their scheme. “This is nice and all, but Christmas is around the corner, and I’ve got a date on Christmas Eve.”

Dad clears his throat. “About that. Your mom and I thought that I could take over your duties as Santa Claus this year.”

For the last five Christmas Eves, I’ve ho ho ho’d my way around town dressed in a Santa suit, dropping small toys and candy at homes where I know there are kids. I shake my head. “No can do. The suit wouldn’t fit you.” My dad is two inches shorter and about a hundred pounds heavier.

“We can easily get a new suit made,” interjects Mom. She turns to my dad as I guess this tag-team effort now requires him to chime in. When he doesn’t immediately speak because

he's intent on scarfing down his porterhouse steak, she nudges him with her elbow.

This show would be kinda amusing if it wasn't all intended to take me away from Rory.

My dad gets the clue and hastily sets down his utensils. While he's wiping his mouth, he makes a snicking noise by clicking his tongue against his teeth. It's his *Aw, son* sound, the sound of regret tinged with a little bit of disappointment. My heart sinks slightly. I love my parents, so it's hard facing even the tiniest bit of disapproval which hardly ever comes my way. Even when I said I wasn't going to college until Rory could leave her family, they never pushed.

"Son, it's been almost a year now. Your friends are off to college, but you're still here."

"Isn't Edison the greatest place in Texas? No better place to raise a family or grow old—or so Uncle Phillip says." Uncle Phillip being Edison's mayor going on twenty years now.

"It is, of course, but I just wonder if you're staying here for the right reasons," presses Mom. "It's not that I don't approve of Rory. She's lovely. Her brothers seem...sweet," she finishes after a long pause. Rory's brothers are a handful but normal boy handful. Even if they were hellions that wouldn't be Rory's fault. It isn't her job to raise them or to provide for them even though she's doing the best she can under the circumstances. "But she doesn't seem receptive to your advances, and I know you are too decent of a person to force yourself on someone who has interest elsewhere."

"First, she doesn't have interest elsewhere. Second, I'm not forcing myself on anyone. Third, she'll come around, and when she does, I have to be standing right there, otherwise she might miss me. Good talk, though. Appreciate your concern." I sweep the rest of the potatoes into my mouth, swallow, and then gather up my plate and utensils. "Sadie, best damn steak in the country once again," I holler as I make my way to the kitchen. I dump my dishes into the sink and give the older woman a quick smooch. "Thanks. Any leftovers?"

She points to the cardboard box. “I made a casserole from the steak and potatoes. It’s enough to feed them a couple of days.”

“You’re the best, Sadie.” I grab the box and take off before my parents can cook up another argument. I have a feeling this isn’t the last I’m going to hear of me wasting my life away for Rory.

At Rory’s house, there’s only one light on and no Jeep in the driveway. The blue light of the television flickers in the window. I knock, but no one comes to the door, so I open it.

Her brother, Dean, immediately screams and throws a game controller at my head.

I duck out of the way. “What the hell, Dean?”

“Sorry, fuck, I thought you were someone else.” He trudges over to pick up the discarded device and then peeks into my box. “What’s in here?”

“Potato steak casserole. Just dump some on a plate and heat it up in the microwave. There’s also au jus sauce to go with it along with some fresh corn and biscuits.”

“Sweet. Come over here, Logan, let’s eat before Rory gets home.”

“Where is Rory?”

“Working. Where else?”

“It’s Tuesday, though. She usually finishes her deliveries by seven.”

“Yeah, but the café was down a waitress because Megan went into labor,” Dean informs me as he piles two plates high with the food.

“Shit. Does that mean she’ll be working at the café every night now instead of just the weekends?”

“Probably.” He and Logan sit down and start eating like it’s their first meal of the day, although I know they get lunch since I, secretly, pay for that.

I drop into an empty chair and pour myself a glass of milk. “Girl is going to kill herself from work.”

Dean drops his fork to the table. “I told her I would take a job—”

“Dean, you’re eleven. You’re not working.” I shake my head. “Your job is to eat, play video games, study sometimes, and watch out for Logan.”

Six-year-old Logan gives me a smile full of potatoes and corn. I reach out and ruffle his hair. The Carlson family is in a bad way, and Rory won’t let anyone help her. She can’t, really, because the state wants to take the kids and put them in foster homes, so Rory has to pretend that their little family is intact. Her mom Sheila shows up every once in a while to keep up appearances, and no men seem to linger around long with Sheila.

I wish she’d let me help her more, but she’s got her pride. I finish my glass of milk and lean forward. “You got homework, Dean?”

“No. Finished it, but do you wanna play FIFA with me?”

“No. You’re too good.”

“Chickenshit.” He sticks out his tongue.

“Fine, but only one game. A man’s got his pride.” I start tidying up the kitchen.

“I won’t beat you too bad, Tyson. Promise.”

We both know that’s an empty lie, but I sit my ass down in the living room on the worn-out pile carpet full of stains and cigarette holes and play FIFA with Dean. At ten, Logan conks out, and I carry him to bed. I make Dean climb in next to him since they share a double, and then I go out and sit in my truck until Rory pulls up an hour later.



four

I'M thankful when I pull in the driveway and see Tyson's car parked outside the house. I had no idea I was going to be pulled into the diner tonight. I was dead on my feet from a full day of deliveries, but I couldn't say no. Megan, one of the other servers, went into labor a month early. I'm not surprised Megan went early, considering she's looked as if she were ready to pop for a while now.

There was no option but for me to go in. My boss, Jenny, was already short-staffed, and I couldn't tell her no. She's always helpful and flexible with me. More than she needs to be. I also don't have the luxury to turn down money. Not with having two brothers to feed and clothe at home.

Since I didn't know I was going to be home late, I hadn't prepared anything for the boys' dinner. Usually I'm more organized, especially when it comes to them. They've experienced enough chaos in their lives. I try not to beat myself up too much about it. It's not like they don't have snacks and such to pick on. But I try to make sure they have a proper dinner every night. Mrs. Walkey, who lives a bit down the road, swings by to check on them from time to time, but Tuesday nights she has her church choir practice.

Mom has been gone for a few days, and I'm betting it will be a few more before she pops up again. I tried to reach her, but her phone was off. I pay that damn bill so I can try to get ahold of her, but she can't even charge the thing. I don't know why I ever hold out hope that she might come through for me once in a while. That I could actually depend on her for something. I should know better.

Somehow, though, I hadn't been too worried. Deep down, I knew Tyson would swing by and check in. It dawns on me that he's actually the one person I can count on to always be around. The boys can be pretty good about minding themselves when they're home alone, which is more often than I'd like them to be for their ages, but sometimes they can get a bit crazy.

I no sooner have my old Jeep in park and Tyson is opening the driver's side door for me. "I've been missing you." I snort a laugh. I think I'm so tired I've got the giggles now. At the sound of my laughter, Tyson's whole face lights up.

"They good when you check in on them?" I ask. I actually take his hand and let him help me out. When my feet hit the ground, he doesn't release his hold but instead tangles our fingers together.

"They're good. Playing video games."

"Thank you. I know you got them that gaming system." My brothers are a weak spot for me, and Tyson knows it. It's the one place I can never bring myself to get upset with him.

"Sometimes I need someone to play with me online." He shrugs it off like it's no big deal.

"Well, thanks. I should go feed them." I try to free my hand, but it's pointless. Tyson only holds it tighter and starts to walk me toward the door.

"Rory! The news said we might get snow! Maybe we won't have school!" Dean shouts as he comes running out the front door.

"Since when do you watch the news?"

"Someone told me in the game."

"No school?" Logan is out the door behind him.

"I don't think we're getting snow, guys," I say, not wanting them to get their hopes up.

"I can see my breath." Logan tilts his head back and starts making little puffs.

“A white Christmas would be cool, but fuck, it’s cold.”

“Seriously? Can you not curse?” I don’t need other people looking down on us any more than they already do.

“I don’t do it at school or nothing.”

“Respect your sister,” Tyson orders him. Dean purses his lips but nods. I squeeze Tyson’s hand.

“You guys hungry?”

“Tyson brought us—” Dean slaps Logan in the chest, cutting him off. “Sorry.” He gives Tyson an apologetic look.

“Don’t be, little man. Don’t lie to your sister to cover for me. I cover you. You guys don’t cover me.” Logan smiles happily that Tyson isn’t upset with him.

“All right, go inside and get ready for bed. It’s cold out here.” They both say their goodbyes to Tyson before they shuffle back into the house. I’m going to have to see about getting them heavier coats. That’s not going to be cheap, but it’s a necessity.

“You know I’ve got some older coats I don’t use. Think they’d want them?” I turn to face Tyson. Has his stalking gone so far he’s in my head, or can the man really read me that easily?

“I’d appreciate it. But only if it’s stuff you’re not using.”

“Promise.” He gives me another one of those big smiles, making him look as handsome as always.

“I should—” I trail off when an old beat-up truck comes speeding into the driveway. Tyson pushes me behind him. I peek my head out as the truck slams on its breaks, almost crashing into the back of my Jeep.

“That bitch took my money!” a man shouts as he throws the door of his truck open hard. It bounces back and almost hits him, but he catches it. “Where is she? Shelly! Get your ass out here!”

“Inside,” Tyson orders. His whole body has gone solid. His whole demeanor changes.

“I don’t—”

“Inside, Rory,” Tyson snaps at me. The firmness in his voice is one I’ve never heard before. Well, not directed at me, at least. My body has a strong reaction to it. One that goes straight between my thighs. So not the time. “Rory, I’m not messing around. Get your little ass into that house and make sure your brothers aren’t hearing this.”

“Okay, please be careful.” I rush into the house. I hear the man shouting after me. He might think I’m my mom. We have the same hair and are about the same size.

I fight back tears, not sure if I should lock the door or not. What if Tyson needs to run into the house? Oh God, this man could hurt or even kill him. He could be drugged out of his mind. I’m guessing he’s either a drug dealer or one of my mom’s ever-changing boyfriends.

I swear if Tyson makes it out okay, I’ll kiss that man. At this point he’s all but earned it.



five

“THIS AIN’T none of your business. This is between me and that bitch.” The mean drunk tries to push his big body past me. The alcohol fumes rolling off his frame are enough to knock me off my feet.

That bitch he’s referring to is Rory’s mom. “Well, she’s not here, but her kids are. It’s a school night, and they’re getting ready for bed. Anything you’ve got to say to Shelly can be said tomorrow.”

“I’ll take one of the kids then. Shelly can come ransom him.” The drunk’s face twists into an ugly sneer. “Or her.” He grabs his package. “I can take payment right here.”

I guess he wants to get hit. That’s all I can think of. So I oblige. I sock him in the jaw and kick him in his package and then his face. He spins, howls, and then lands on the hard-packed dirt yard, a cut above his eye dripping blood from his forehead to his chin.

Behind me, the front door bangs against the siding, and three sets of shoes clamor down the stairs.

“That was so cool,” Dean cries.

“Like a cartoon!” Logan yells.

“Are you all right?” Rory comes up to my side and twists my face to the right and left.

“I’m fine. Didn’t I tell you to stay inside?”

“Yes, but the boys heard this man yelling and thought you might need help.”

Not the answer I was looking for. “And if this guy had a gun or even a knife, then what?”

“Then we wouldn’t have come out.”

I don’t believe her, but I don’t feel like arguing either.

“Come inside before you go home. Eat some of your leftovers.” She tugs on my arm.

“Let me take care of this first.” I’ll need to call the chief and have this dude hauled away.

“You can do it inside.” She takes my hand, and like an obedient dog, I follow.

As we walk toward the steps, Logan slips under my other arm. “Can you teach me some of those moves, Tyson?”

“Sure.”

“Me too,” Dean says. “What kind of martial art is it? Karate? Judo?”

“Self-defense.”

“Huh?” the boys chorus.

“I took the same self-defense class in high school,” Rory says as she holds the door open. “I would not be able to pull that roundhouse kick off.”

“I’m a little athletic.” I slap the two boys on the back. “Go get back into bed so your sister can get some shut-eye, too.”

The two immediately run down the hall for the bedroom. Rory sighs. “Why can’t they listen to me like they listen to you?”

“Because I’m the fun visitor and you’re their parent.”

“I’m their sister.”

“That too.” I pull out my cellphone and dial the dispatcher. “You go eat while I take care of the mess outside.”

She crinkles her nose at me because she doesn’t like being ordered around but her stomach growls, and she slips away.

“What’re you doing up so late, Mr. Carter?” the third shift dispatcher, Bette, chirps in my ear.

“There’s a mess on the sidewalk over on Kellogg and 14th Street. Thought someone might want to come out and clean it up.”

A long silence floats down the line. “Kellogg?” Bette’s voice is full of disapproval. “There are two rules of Edison. One is nothing good happens after dark, and the other is nothing good happens on Kellogg. What are you doing there, son?”

“Visiting friends.”

“Are you doing drugs, Tyson Carter? Because if you are, your momma’s heart is going to crack in two, and your daddy is going to have a heart attack.”

“Nothing like that is happening, and my parents know where I am. I brought some leftovers to a friend, and when I was leaving, some drunk came at me. I had to defend myself. He just needs to sleep off whatever it is that got him so riled up, but he should probably do it behind bars because you don’t know what kind of mood he’s going to be in when he wakes. Now are you going to send someone out, or do you want me to drive him into the station?”

“I’ll send someone out,” Bette replies, but she’s not happy about it.

“Is someone coming?” asks Rory.

I tuck my phone away and push her gently back into the kitchen. “Yeah, a deputy will be here soon. Want to tell me what that was all about?”

“I’m guessing it’s one of Mom’s hookups.”

“He said something about stealing.” I want to know what I’m dealing with so that I can keep Rory safe.

Rory flushes and stares at her plate in gloomy silence.

“Rory?”

“I don’t know,” she says finally. “Sometimes my mom gets into stuff over her head.” She pushes away from the table and takes her half-eaten plate to the trash.

“I just want to keep you and the boys safe.”

“It’s not your job.” She dumps the food and then rinses the plate off.

“I want it to be my job.”

“Well it’s not.” Her words are punctuated by the sound of the garbage disposal and then the clanging of dishes into the dishwasher.

I’ve managed to piss her off—a skill I’ve perfected in the last four years. To hell with it, I decide. If she’s going to be mad at me, let it be about something good.

I grab the dish towel out of her hands and press her up against the sink. “It’s gonna be my job, so you might as well get used to it.”

I slam my mouth against hers. She makes a muffled sound of surprise, and I make the most of the opportunity and slip my tongue inside. Her hands come up to my shoulders, and I tense, thinking she’s going to push me away, but instead her fingers curl around, and her nails dig into my skin.

The world tips upside down as she kisses me back. Right. She’s never getting rid of me now.



six

I KNOW I should pull away. This is the last thing I need to be doing right now but damn does this feel so right. For the first time in my life, I did something I shouldn't do. I convince myself that I'll only be selfish this one time. I part my lips, letting him deepen the kiss. I even start to kiss him back.

His lips are surprisingly soft. His tongue makes sweet slow strokes, and I know he's savoring this kiss. He's taking his time, and I let him as my body starts to awaken. He pulls the tie in my hair, letting it all fall free before he sinks his fingers into it.

He tightens his grip on it as he tilts my head back to deepen the kiss even more. I don't know what I was expecting my first kiss to feel like, but I do know this surpasses anything I could've imagined.

I press my body into him, a whimper of need leaving me as heat pools between my thighs. My breasts feel heavy. What is happening to me? My hands slip under his shirt, my fingers trailing the hard lines of his stomach. He might not play football anymore, but his body is still in shape from the many years he did.

"Rory." He groans my name, and damn is that hot too.

"Oh shit!" Dean says. It's the splash of cold water reality that I need to bring me back to my senses.

I jump back from Tyson, almost tripping over my own feet in the process. His arm comes out, catching me before I can fall. "Finally! Now I can tell everyone Tyson Carter is my sister's boyfriend."

“I said you could tell them already,” Tyson responds with a smirk. His mouth is red and a bit puffy. Did I really do that to his lips? Wait, did he just say that he told my brother to tell people we’re dating?

“Tyson.” I say his name in a tone that lets him know we need to talk about this.

“What? They were saying you were hot.” He shrugs.

“They do say that, and it’s freaking gross.” Dean backs Tyson up.

“Thanks,” I say dryly. “Back to bed. I’ll be in shortly.”

“You’re not gross. I only think it’s gross that they like you in that way. No brother wants to hear that shit about his sister.” He walks over and gives me a side hug. I lean down and kiss the top of his head. He’s getting so grown up that I know it’s only a matter of time before he no longer lets me show him affection.

“I know.” I reassure him that he didn’t hurt my feelings. Dean and Tyson bump their fists together before he leaves us alone in the kitchen.

“Tyson, we—”

“Don’t, please don’t say it. Not tonight. Give me this one.” His eyes are almost pleading with me. Something inside of me cracks.

“All right,” I agree, but guilt weighs on me. “Tyson, you know this isn’t about you, right?”

“You really going to give me the *It’s not you, it’s me* talk?” He gives me a teasing smile, making me laugh. But I can still see the emotion written on his face.

“My hands are full. I can’t let myself get distracted.” If this were another time in my life when things were more settled, I know without a doubt I would be ecstatic that Tyson Carter wanted me to be his girl. But those are not my circumstances, and now is not the time to be selfish when my brothers are counting on me.

“And I’m lazy, as you said. Maybe you could give me things to fill my hands with.”

“Tyson!”

“Ah, shit. I didn’t mean it like that, but either way. Give me shit to do. I can help.”

“But it’s not your responsibility.”

“It’s not yours either, Rory.” That’s where he’s wrong.

“They’re my brothers.”

“And I want to be your man so your shit would be my shit.” Now he’s full-on smiling.

It’s one of the things I’ve admired about Tyson. He always has that smile even when things are going to hell. His outlook is always positive. He’d even been that way on the football field. They’d be losing, and everyone else was pissed off, but he’d smile and get them through it. In the end he always won.

A knock sounds at the door. “Let me go talk to the cops. You tuck the boys in.” Before I can answer him, he’s dropping a kiss on my mouth and heading for the front door. I reach up and touch my lips, which are still tingling.

Damn, was that kiss good. My body is still screaming for more. I can’t remember the last time I’ve enjoyed something as much as I did that minute of getting lost in Tyson. It’s only going to make it harder now to push him away.

The man really is wearing me down. I think part of me keeps waiting to see when he’s going to give up. I know it will crush me. Not that I’d ever let anyone else know that. There is something in him showing up every day that gives me this trace of reassurance that I’m not always alone.

I busy myself, making sure the boys are set in bed. I don’t want to deal with the cops. They always give me these sad looks and remind me of the local food pantry. When I come back out, Tyson is standing in the living room, clicking away on his phone.

“Taking Jessica up on her offer?”

“Jessica?” He gives me a confused look, slipping his phone back into his pocket.

“About being your girl. She’s pretty.”

“You wound me.” He puts his hand over his heart. “I belong to a sexy, smart blond with green eyes and a killer ass. Whether she wants me or not, I’m all hers. “He clears the space between us. “No reason to be jealous.”

“I’m not.” I roll my eyes. “Everything okay with the police?” I ask, changing the subject, knowing I already showed my ass.

“About that.”

“What?” I glance to the closed front door, which I can see is locked.

“He took off before they got here.”

“Okay, does it matter really?” I try to hide the trace of fear that spikes through me.

“To me it does. He said some fucked-up shit, and he could come back, so that means I’m staying.”

“Staying as in, here?” I point to the ground. “You can’t stay here.” Temptation would be way too close then.

“I can stay in my car out front all night, or you can let me crash on the sofa.” He folds his arms over his chest. I know that look in his eyes. It’s the one he always gets when his mind is set on something.

“All right.” I give. I’m too tired to fight him at this point.

Tyson Carter wins this round.



seven

FALLING asleep on the sofa is a no-go in part because it's too short and too lumpy but mostly because my hard-on will not abate. I can't even go into the bathroom to fap because there's only one, and it's right next to Rory's bedroom, so I just lie on my back, my eyes pinned to the popcorn ceiling and my hand at the base of my dick, squeezing the life out of it in hopes of strangling my erection.

It doesn't help that sometime in the middle of the night or early morning, I grow so tired that I start having hallucinations of Rory coming out of her bedroom wearing one of those cotton jersey G-strings and a thin T-shirt she's cut off right below her tits. She straddles me, and magically we both fit on this skinny stretch of a cushion.

"Ty-ty, I've wanted you for so long," she says. "Let me show you how much." She reaches her hands behind her head and slips her hair into a ponytail. The action raises the T-shirt enough that the lower part of her tits are exposed. My breath catches in my throat. I keep my hands at my sides because I'm uncertain if this apparition will disappear if I move.

She shimmies down my legs until her face is even with my crotch. My dick springs from my boxers, waving its ruddy head eagerly in the direction of her mouth.

"I've never given a guy a blow job before," she whispers, her hot breath sweeping across my sensitive skin like wind on a fire.

"That's okay," I croak out. "Never had one before either."

She arches her eyebrows. “The cheer squad didn’t help you out?”

“Didn’t want them to.” I allow myself to slide my hands up her back, under her shirt, reveling in the skin-to-skin contact. My thumbs stroke the sides of her breasts. She shivers lightly under the caress.

“Were you waiting for me?” she teases with a coquettish tilt of her chin. With each word, my dick grows thicker and harder.

“Damn straight.” I’m torn between wanting to pull her up to my mouth and wanting to shove my dick down her throat.

“I feel like making you wait longer.” She purses her lips and blows gently on my cock. I think I let out a whimper. “Nah, I’m not that cruel.”

Her tongue darts out to lick up my shaft when a piercing whistle penetrates my skull. I bolt upright to see Logan about two inches from my face, a yellow play whistle snug between his teeth. Hurriedly, I glance down at my lap and find that the blanket, while twisted, still covers me. The loud noise deflated my erection like a pin in a balloon. I guess be grateful for small favors.

“What’s up, little man?” I ask as if I wasn’t having the horniest dream about his sister.

“We got school. Can you drive us?”

“Sure. Sure.” I rub my eyes and peer at my watch. The dial on my Audemars Piguet says it’s seven. “Where’s your sister?”

“She went to work already. She starts delivering at six for the grocery store.”

I glance down at my lap again. Did she...come over while I was sleeping? Was I jerking off? Shit. I wish I could remember, but it’s hard to figure out what was real and what was my overactive imagination. I mean, I’m sure she wasn’t straddling my cock while I was sleeping. Right?

“Let me get dressed and we’ll take off.”

“Cool! Can we go through McDonald’s and have McMuffins for breakfast?”

“Logan, shut up. I told you not to ask him,” calls Dean. His mouth is muffled by the toothbrush hanging out of the side. There’s a drip of paste on his chin. I brush my face with my thumb to let him know that he’s got a minty guest hanging around and then pat Logan’s head.

“It’s all good. McMuffins, juice, and whatever else you want, but you’ve got to be ready in ten minutes.”

The boys rush to get dressed while I pull on my discarded jeans and T-shirt, which smell faintly of booze. I guess I got too close to the dealer last night. The boys scarf down two meals each and then wave merrily to me when I drop them off. A few of the moms in the school line give me some weird looks, which I ignore.

I drive by the grocery store, but Rory’s Jeep isn’t there, so I run home, shower, change, and then head down to City Hall to see my uncle. Mavis, his admin, waves me off. “You can’t go in there. He’s having a budget meeting.”

“Shit.”

“What’s wrong? Is your mama hurt?” She rushes to my side.

“No.” When I left the house, she was elbow deep in her flower garden. “I wanted to see if Uncle Phillip knew anything about some meth dealers in the area.”

Mavis frowns. “Child, why’re you asking about that? That’s grown person’s business. Go make your funny videos and leave all of that to the authorities.”

My funny videos? Is that all I’m known for? “I’m a grown person, Mavis.”

“Sure you are.” She pats my cheek. “How’s that romance with the Carlson girl going? From your last post, it looks like she’s still playing hard to get. You need to give us all an update.”

I scrub my face and bite back a retort that would likely hurt Mavis' feelings. "It's still going. If anything positive happens, y'all will be the first to know."

"Oh, honey, no one wants anything positive to happen. We like the yearning." She winks and shoos me to the door. "I'll let Mayor know that you stopped by. Bye bye, now!"

I find myself on the other side of the office door before I can blink. I'll admit I wasn't the best student in the classroom but I didn't realize that the town thought of me as some kid who didn't—no, couldn't—do anything worthwhile but post little videos that made people laugh. I'm doing that because it's low effort and gives me an opportunity to follow Rory around.

Is that why Rory won't go out with me? Because she thinks I'm a useless human? Getting a regular job does not appeal to me, but maybe I can prove my worth to her by cleaning up this business with her mom and the meth dealer. Can't be too hard. I know everyone in this town.



eight

I KNOW my mom is actually ignoring my phone calls at this point. She accidentally answered at one point only to hang up on me. I text her, letting her know what happened last night. That some man is looking for her. But she hasn't even bothered to respond to my messages.

I was happy when Tyson had pushed to stay the night with me and my brothers. What if that man had tried to come back? I like to think I can take care of myself and the boys, but I don't want my own ego to get in the way of their safety.

Now I can't stop thinking about him showing up again this evening while I'm working and only the boys are home. I swear my mom is always trying to make my life harder. This isn't the first time someone has come looking for her. And I'm pretty sure it won't be the last, unfortunately.

If it was only so easy for me to pick up and move. But there's no way I could leave my little brothers behind. Mom might not be around, but she does have final say when it comes to them, and she knows she can use that against me at the end of the day. She'd throw a fit if I up and left and not for the reason she should. Nope, she'd be pissed that she wouldn't have a place to crash when she decided to come back.

Dean texts me when he and Logan make it home from school. He does the same when they get to school each morning. I hate how much I put on his shoulders for such a young age, but there aren't a ton of choices.

I have to be at work to keep the bills paid. He told me that he got Tyson to take them this morning instead of taking the

bus. He sent me a picture of Logan shoving a giant breakfast sandwich into his mouth. I know it's ridiculous, but each time Tyson does something for them, it chips away at the walls I've built to protect myself.

I text Tyson to see what he's up to. The second I send the text, my phone rings. His name appears on the screen. I can always count on him. Time and time again.

"Babe, you okay?" are the first words out of his mouth. I should tell him not to call me that, but I find myself liking it a little more each time he says it.

"Yeah, I'm fine." He lets out a long breath.

"You scared me. You never text."

"Oh." Guilt fills me. Right, the one time I text him it's because I'm about to ask a favor.

"You need something? You know I got you." He fills the silence that I let hang for too long.

"I'm worried about the boys after last night. I'm at the diner working now, and then I've got some deliveries. Is there any way you'd be able to check in on them for me?"

"I'm with them now."

"Oh," I say again.

"I picked them up from the bus stop. You cool with me getting a tree? Logan keeps talking about it. I might have promised them already. Sorry. Next time I'll ask you first."

"I suppose that would be fine." I give. The thought of Tyson trying to give them some sort of normalcy has another little crack forming in that wall of mine.

"We'll wait for you to get home to decorate it." Relief fills me that Tyson is planning on staying with them until I get home.

"Then who is going to follow me around when I make deliveries?" I tease.

"I've got that handled," he teases right back. At least I think he is.

“Ty! We have some decorations in the basement!” I hear Logan shout in the background.

“I’ll leave you to it. You sound busy,” I say, smiling. Tyson has no idea how much weight he’s taken off my shoulders. I tell myself not to get used to it.

“Never too busy for you, babe.”

“Ty.” I sigh, enjoying his words far too much. I hear the boys calling him again in the background.

“I’ll let you get back to your tables. Love you, babe,” he says before ending the call. I stand there shocked for a minute. Tyson has been telling his followers online he’s in love with me. Hell, he’s even told me he’ll always love me and only me, but he’s never flat-out said the words to me before.

I tuck my phone away before I get back to work. Whenever I get a few seconds, I check my emails to see what deliveries I have lined up after work. I’m kind of hoping I don’t have a ton. I want to get home and maybe help with the tree. It’s the first time I’ve been excited for something in a while.

“What the hell?” I say when I see I have triple the amount than normal. The program is supposed to cap them at so many. It must be broken or something. I groan, knowing I can never do all these without working through the night. How did this happen? It even lets some people book at the same time, making it all but impossible.

“I sat someone in your section. It’s your last table for tonight,” Carol says, walking past me to drop some dishes into the sink.

“Thanks.” I head back out into the diner to see my brothers and Tyson all sitting at one of my booths. All of them smile when they see me. I don’t miss the thick winter coats they both have behind them.

“Hey.” I walk over to the table. I lean down and drop a kiss on Logan’s head. Dean is far too cool for me to do that in public, so I withhold from doing it.

“We came for burgers and milkshakes,” Dean informs me. “I kicked Tyson’s ass in Elite Showdown, so he had to buy us dinner.” I’d bet my tips that Tyson lost on purpose.

“Mouth,” Tyson and I say at the same time. Dean rolls his eyes.

“Dean is the best. Told you not to take the bet,” Logan tells Tyson.

“He is the best,” Tyson agrees, making Dean smile even more.

“You all want your normals?” I ask. The boys both nod.

“I’ll have whatever they are,” Tyson says.

“When are you going to be home? We got a tree. We should all decorate it together!” Logan asks, staring up at me. The excitement rolls off him.

“I think I might be late. I’m sorry, bubs.” I run my fingers through his hair. Logan’s smile drops from his face, breaking my heart.

“Can I talk to you outside?” Tyson asks, standing from the booth.

“Sure.” I rip the sheet off my notepad. “Let me drop this in the kitchen so they can get it started.” I step into the back, putting their order in. Carol tells me she’ll get the milkshakes for me.

When I step outside, I see Tyson standing with three other boys. They are all in high school letterman jackets.

“What’s going on?” I ask as I head over to them. Tyson pulls his coat off, draping it over me. He leans down and brushes a quick kiss against my mouth. It’s so fast I can’t try to get away from it. Though I’m not sure I really want to. He’s becoming far too tempting lately. I’d actually stolen a kiss from him this morning when he was passed out on the sofa. I don’t know what came over me, but I’d done it.

“Don’t get mad” are the first words out of his mouth.

“Oh gosh. What?”

“You might have noticed that you have more than a normal amount of deliveries tonight.” I narrow my eyes on him.

“How do you even know that?”

“I just do. And because I’m the one who allowed them to be placed,” he admits, shocking me.

“The hell, Tyson!”

“I’ve got you. I’ve subbed it all out. I’ve taken all the orders and split them all up between Mark, Jacob, and Ryan.” They each raise their hand when Tyson says their names.

“What are you doing?” I growl.

“Why don’t you guys head out? Remember what I said,” he warns them.

“We swear. We got this, Carter,” Ryan says. The other two nod eagerly, happy to be pleasing the legend, Tyson Carter.

“Then get to it,” he orders, and they all take off toward their cars. “You’re going to end up making a third more than normal after you give them their cuts.”

“Tyson.”

“We’ll see how this goes, and we can end up hiring more people if we need to. You’re the only person who will deliver in some of these rural areas out here in the country. You can turn this into something bigger and end up working less and making more. You have to turn down orders all the time because it’s not possible to get to them all. I even added some rush fees on some of these people.”

“I don’t know about this.” I worry my bottom lip between my teeth.

“These kids are looking for part-time after-school work. Especially during the holidays, and that’s when you have way more orders than you can handle yourself. This is a win all around.” I stare at him, not sure what to say. “Now you can decorate the tree tonight.”

“This is doing too much now.”

“When it comes to you, I’ll do anything.”

“But I have nothing to give in return, Tyson. You know that.”

“All I want is you.”

“There isn’t any of me to give.” I’m already stretched so thin.

“Right now, all I want is a kiss and to decorate a Christmas tree with my girl and her kickass little brothers who I love and adore almost as much as her.” He goes straight for my weakness. My brothers. Also, his kisses that I’m enjoying way too much.

“Shut up and kiss me, Tyson.”

Of course he does as I ask, making another crack in the wall I’ve been trying to build around my heart. The one I’m pretty sure already belongs to him.



nine

“THIS FEELS LIKE GIRL STUFF.” Dean looks at my pile of supplies with narrowed eyes.

“The glue gun will not make your dick smaller, Dean. I promise.” I hand him a Styrofoam ball.

“What about glitter?”

“I don’t know. Why don’t we sprinkle it in your lap and see what happens?” I wave the plastic container full of red sparkles in Dean’s direction.

He covers his groin with two hands and vehemently shakes his head. “No. Please!”

Logan watches this all with interest. I cock my head. “Logan, you okay with glue and glitter?”

He nods. “We glued and glittered in school today.”

“That’s my boy.” I rub his head. “See how brave your brother is,” I say to Dean. “You going to be outclassed by a six year old?”

“Will not.” He grabs the glue gun.

“Will too!” shouts Logan.

“You can’t even use the glue gun!” Dean shouts. “You’re too young.”

“I’m not too young. I can use the glue gun,” insists Logan.

I start to agree, but Rory catches my eye and shakes her head. I guess glue guns are too dangerous for a six year old.

“Let’s paint the glue on the pine cones,” I suggest, sliding a paint brush in Logan’s direction. “Your brother and sister can use the glue gun with the Styrofoam instead.”

Logan gets a mulish expression on his face and crosses his arms. “I don’t wanna. I want to use the glue gun.”

“I think we should all use the paint-on glue. The last time I used a glue gun, I burned my finger, and it hurt for days.” Rory plops down next to Dean and pulls her legs into a crisscross position.

I snatch the glue gun off the table and throw it over my shoulder. “Glue guns should be outlawed,” I announce.

“Like the spinning wheels in Snow White?” Rory laughs.

My breath catches, and my mind stops working momentarily at the sound. She’s so beautiful when she’s happy, and her laughter fills me with warmth. I could be happy just sitting next to her and listening to her make random noises. It’s a dorky sentiment, but I can’t help it.

“Yeah, like that. Hey, Logan, make a video for me, will ya? I’ll pay you.”

His eyes brighten, and he grabs my phone, but Rory holds up her hand. “No, you are not paying.”

“Of course I am. This content earns money, so there’s no reason why Logan shouldn’t be paid. I’m not into exploiting child labor.” I nod to Logan to go ahead. He happily starts filming.

“What do you mean your videos earn money?” Rory asks.

“I have a couple of brand deals.”

“What’s brand deals?” Dean asks.

“It’s when a company pays you money to mention them. Like Mr. Deloitte and his car dealership.”

“You do ads for Deloitte’s Deals?” Rory butts in.

“No. It’s for these.” I pluck at my jeans. “I wore a pair one day and got a lot of likes. The company emailed me and asked

if I would put their brand in my tags whenever I wore them, and they paid me for it.”

Rory is shocked. “I didn’t know that. Why didn’t you say anything?”

“Why’s it a big deal?” But I know why. She thought I was wasting my time on those videos, and she’s not entirely wrong. I’m doing them because it’s a way to spend my days while I wait for her to fall for me. I’m not a guy with a lot of ambition, and she should know what she’s getting into with me.

“It’s not,” she concedes, but there’s a little line between her eyes as if she can’t figure out what’s bothering her. I don’t press. She’ll have to work that out for herself.

As we glitter up the pinecones and the Styrofoam balls, Logan makes holiday videos. Soon there’s glitter everywhere—in our hair, on our shirts, in my mouth—but everyone seems to be having a good time. Logan’s giggling, and even Dean doesn’t seem to mind that his fingers are coated with red and green sparkles.

Once a pile of ornaments are completed, Rory ties ribbons on the end while Dean and Logan and I place the homemade decorations on the tree. It doesn’t take us long and Dean is about to turn on the lights when the front door opens. A bottle blonde in tight pants and a leopard print shirt with buttons that are fighting for their lives stretched across a very prominent rack appears. She slams the door shut behind her with a kick of her high-heeled shoe and throws out her arms. “Mommy’s home!”

“Sheila,” Rory mutters under her breath and gets to her feet. Her brothers run over to get their hugs. Logan is so happy he’s shaking.

“Mommy! Mommy!” he yells.

“I know, Button. It’s been a while, hasn’t it? Mommy had to go away to earn some money, but she’s back now.” She presses kisses all over Logan’s face. Dean presses close to Sheila’s side, averting his face so we can’t see how overcome he is.

Beside me, Rory grows stiff. I slide my hand into hers, and she clutches my fingers tight. Sheila's head comes up from kissing her son, her eyes pausing on Rory and my intertwined fingers and then traveling up to my face.

"I heard you were seeing Tyson Carter, but I couldn't believe it. It's hard to believe even though I'm seeing it with my own two eyes," Sheila drawls softly.

Rory tries to wriggle out of my grip, but I hold her tight. Her mama doesn't scare me.

"Your mom and I went to school together. Did she tell you that?"

"Yeah, she mentioned it once." A long time ago when I first showed interest in Rory, Mom asked me if it was Sheila Carlson's girl. I'd said yes, and that was the end of the conversation.

"We used to be friends. She and I would get our hair done at Bannon's Barbershop. I always got mine lightened, and Cherie would get red highlights put in because your daddy liked those."

"That sounds like my mom," I admit.

"We drifted apart after high school. She married your dad, and that put her in a whole different crowd than mine." Sheila looks around the small living room with the worn-out carpet and the sagging, cracked leather sofas. "It's nice that you've made friends with my Rory. She's a good girl, aren't you?"

"Not really," Rory replies stiffly.

Sheila's soft face hardens for a split second before a fake smile appears. "My Rory has a lot of spirit, but I bet that's why you like her." Sheila winks at me. "I'm going to go get changed. Rory, why don't you get dinner started? I want to hear all about your romance. You're staying to eat with us, aren't you, Tyson?"

"Yup," I reply.

"No," Rory says. She glowers at me. "No," she repeats.

“Yes. I’m not leaving you.” I squeeze her hand. “Let me help you in the kitchen.”

Sheila’s smile turns very real as she disappears down the hall with a son attached to each arm.

“You sure you want part of this world?” Rory tosses down a Styrofoam ball on the ground.

I do, but I’m not sure how to convince Rory of this other than staying by her side, no matter what.



ten

“SHE WANTS me to make dinner, but I didn’t see her toting any groceries,” I mumble more to myself as I pull open the refrigerator door. I pause when I see it stocked full of more food than has ever been inside it before.

“About that. I tend to eat a lot, and I wasn’t sure how long I might be staying.” He gives me one of his normal shrugs to play it off. I realize he’s expecting me to be pissed about it.

“Thanks.” His brows lift in surprise at me not getting mad at him for overstepping. The truth is I’m not sure if I should or not. Tyson is getting hard for me to keep at a distance. I’m starting to see that he truly does care about my brothers. I hadn’t gotten a chance to go to the store this week. I can deliver loads of groceries to other people, but it can be almost impossible to get my own at times.

“You’re welcome.” He smiles, but it drops when he hears my mother’s laughter coming from the other side of the house. He clenches his jaw so tight a tick forms in it.

I can tell he doesn’t care for her, and I can’t even be upset. Once upon a time when I was little, I used to rush to her the same as my brothers did. Hanging on to a hope that she might change one day. But I soon realized that day would never come.

Even when she can stay away from the drugs and booze, she’s still a narcissist that is always seeking out the next man in her life. She feeds on male attention more than anything else in life. It makes me sad not for myself anymore but for Dean and Logan.

Not one of us has the same father. She thinks getting knocked up is a way of getting a man to stay around. Sometimes they did for a little while, but in the end, they always went running for the door.

“Do spaghetti. It’s Dean and Logan’s favorite,” Tyson suggests. That has me smiling. I love how much he has gotten to know my brothers.

“All right.” I start grabbing everything we need while Tyson grabs the pots and starts boiling the water for the pasta. “I had fun tonight,” I admit, leaning up against the counter.

“I did too.”

“Really?” I slice some bread to put into the oven. Tyson opens it for me to slide it in.

“Yeah, really.” He pours the sauce over the meat before putting a lid over it and giving the pasta a stir. “Rory, I enjoy doing anything with you. The boys are an added bonus.” He steps into me, backing me up against the counter. “I’m in this for the long game. I want to be a part of your life, Rory.”

“Why?” I drop my head to stare up at him. Tyson has the world at his fingertips, but all his attention has always been on me. I’ve never understood it.

“You really don’t feel this?” He leans down, his mouth brushing against mine. God, it feels damn good when he’s close. I want to pull him closer and keep him there forever, but fear always wins out for me when it comes to Tyson. My mother hasn’t taught me much in life, but she has taught me that men run. Even some of the good ones. They try to stick around, but it becomes too much for them. In the end, they all leave.

“I feel it,” I admit, not wanting to lie to him. “What happens when you win, Tyson? If you win this game and you get me? Then what?” Would the thrill be gone? I bet I’m the only girl to ever turn Tyson away. Not that I’ve ever seen him give a girl the chance to do so. Except me.

He lifts his palm to my cheek, his face growing serious, but before he can say a word my mother ruins the moment.

“You’re not going to take Rory from us, are you? We’re a package deal.” Her words rake against my skin. I know when she sees Tyson all she is thinking about is money and how she can use him to her benefit.

I bite the inside of my cheek to keep from saying anything rude. I won’t do that when the boys are so close and could hear. She tries to use them against me. The reality is she could kick me out of this house right now, and there isn’t a thing I could do about it. The thought of her keeping me from Logan and Dean is too much to bear, so I push it to the back of my mind. I always have to skirt a fine line when it comes to my mother.

“Nah, how could anyone not want a package that includes Dean and Logan?” He turns to the side, dropping in next to me. Sheila’s eyes bounce between the two of us before they linger on Tyson.

“How serious are you two? Rory can be a bit of a prude.” My mouth falls open. Tyson’s whole body goes stiff beside me. She did not say that. The hell? Is she seriously going to try and hit on Tyson? Why is this even shocking me?

“What’s a prude?” Logan asks, walking into the kitchen. “Spaghetti!” Thankfully, the food distracts him. I step away from Tyson to see to it.

“You know, someone was looking for you,” Tyson says, keeping it vague as he puts the heat back on Sheila.

“He’s a liar. I didn’t take anything from him.” She puffs her bottom lip out. Even with the drugs and drinks, she’s managed to stay pretty.

“Let me, babe. It’s hot.” He grabs my hips, pulling me away from the stove to dump the pasta into the strainer. “Set the table, Dean,” he calls out.

“So you got my text?” I fold my arms over my chest.

“I’ve been busy, Rory. You’re not the only one who works around here.”

“Good, rent’s due.” She narrows her eyes on me.

“That mean he’s still looking for you?” Tyson cuts in while he still finishes dinner.

“Who cares?” She shrugs.

“I care. What if he shows up here again?”

“Guess you’ll have to spend the night again.” She winks at him. How did she know he stayed the night to begin with? The boys must have told her. I bet she gave them a full interrogation.

“Yes! Tyson is staying the night again,” Logan shouts.

“Cool.” Dean comes into the kitchen to grab plates. Both he and Logan miss the tension that’s thick in the room.

“Let’s have dinner.” I rest my hand on Tyson’s arm. He relaxes at my touch. It’s nice to have someone at my back for once. Hell, at this moment Tyson is at my front.

I’ve misjudged him in so many ways. I can only hope now that I’m not misjudging again.



eleven

“WE’RE GETTING A LOT OF LIKES,” Logan says around his toothbrush. Toothpaste foams around the corners of his mouth as he shoves the phone into my face. “We should make one of us dancing. The dancing ones are the viral ones.”

I shift my toothbrush to the side of my mouth and take a closer look. Dean tucks his chin into my arm and peers at the screen. The video of us making holiday ornaments is getting a lot of attention. “I can’t dance. Can you?”

“No. He sucks,” giggles Logan. “He dances like this.” Logan does an awkward jiggle of his hips. I nearly snort the paste up my nose.

Dean knuckles his brother’s head. “Not as bad as you.”

Logan pulls his toothbrush out of his mouth and looks like he’s about to shank his older brother.

“Okay, tomorrow we will do a dancing video,” I hurry to say in case the two start fighting. “You can both pick a song and dance, and we’ll post them both.”

“Mine will win.” Dean taps his chest.

“Mine’s gonna be viral. It’ll be so big it’ll be on the news.” Logan draws a rectangle with his finger.

“It’s not a contest,” I say, but neither of them buy that.

“Are you going to live here forever?” Logan asks.

“You can if you want,” Dean offers. “We could get bunk beds.”

“I’ll let you sleep on the top,” Logan chirps.

“He doesn’t want to sleep on the top. Grown-ups sleep on the bottom.” Dean taps his brush against the sink for emphasis.

“The top is the best. Grown-ups are dumb.” Logan spits into the bowl and rinses off his toothbrush. He drops his brush into the cup on the sink and races out. “Rory! Rory! We need a bunk bed.”

“You don’t have to stay if you don’t want to,” Dean says quietly. He wipes his brush off carefully with a piece of toilet paper and cleans up the sink so that there’s not a spot of water or excess paste left over. He’s a good kid, helping his older sister out.

“I’m happy to be here, my man. As long as I’m not in the way, I’ll hang around.”

“There’s really not enough space. Not even if we get bunk beds.”

“There’s the sofa in the living room.”

“Tyson isn’t moving in here,” announces his mom. She appears at the door of the bathroom with her hand curved around Logan’s small head. He peers happily up at her, as if she just brought him the latest PlayStation. It pisses me off that she’s going to leave and hurt these kids. I have a feeling that no matter how much money I have, it wouldn’t turn her into a good mother. “If anything, he’s going to take us all to a better place. Tyson’s got a lot of money, so he can buy Rory a big house that will fit all of us nicely. No more sharing bedrooms or bathrooms. The kitchen will always have a full refrigerator, and there will be dozens of games and toys for you boys.”

“He doesn’t need to buy us anything,” Dean says stiffly. Logan’s smile falters at his brother’s cold words. He senses something’s off, but he’s not quite sure what it is.

“It’s all good.” I try to smooth things over. “This place suits me fine.”

“Oh it’s like that, is it?” Sheila’s face grows hard. “As Rory’s mother, I have to stand up for her, especially when she isn’t strong enough to do so herself. You can’t have free milk

from the cow. Just because we aren't Carters doesn't mean we don't have value."

"I know that."

Dean's eyes ping pong between me and Sheila while Logan just grows increasingly confused. I wonder where Rory is.

Sheila reads my mind. "She's taking out the trash. Maybe you should tell her good night."

"But Tyson is staying here tonight," Logan says quietly.

"Not tonight, he's not. His own mama called, and she needs him at home. You two climb into bed. I'll come and read you a story." The two boys don't need to be told twice. Dean pulls away and chases after Logan, who runs down the hall with a loud cheer.

"My boys love me." Sheila smiles, but it's not a nice smile. It's a declaration that she can turn these boys—and by extension—Rory against me if I don't give this woman what she wants. If I give in to Sheila, if I give her money, she will be back, and because I have money, her tastes and demands will become more expensive. This is a war, then, between Sheila and me. Sheila has the upper hand. She's their mother, and I'm just some guy who Rory has kissed.

"Maybe they'll grow to love me, too," I suggest. "I'm sticking around, Sheila, no matter what."

"We'll see." She runs a cool gaze over my frame. "I don't know if you're good enough for my Rory. You'll have to prove it to me. For now, I think it's best if you go home."

"Okay." No point in arguing.

"Tell your mom I said hey."

Why does that feel like a threat? "I will."

I tap my brush against the porcelain and drop it into the cup next to Logan and Dean's. When they wake up, they'll see my brush here and know that I'm coming back.

Rory's coming in from the back door as I'm gathering my keys.

"You're leaving?" she says as the door slams against her ass.

"Not far and not for long. I'm going to run home, shower, and get some things. I'll be out in my truck tonight." I lean down and press a kiss against her cheek. "You can't get rid of me that easily," I tease.

Rory's expression is grim. "You should probably go back to your side of town, Carter. You don't belong here."

"I belong next to you. Wherever you are, I'll be there."



twelve

I LISTEN outside the boy's room as Sheila reads them a bedtime story. I might actually think it's sweet if I didn't think she had an ulterior motive. As much as she doesn't love being a mother, she does get off on the somewhat god-like complex the boys have when it comes to her. Sadly, they are only a tool in her games. She needs their devotion in order for her to be able to keep using them. Especially as they grow older and can be a bit more vocal.

My mother never does anything that doesn't benefit her in some way. She is the most selfish person I know. I try to shield my brothers from her crap as much as possible, but some things are out of my hands.

I hear Logan beg her to read another book. I'm sure Dean is out cold, but she's done her part. She's not going to do more than she needs to. I venture back toward the kitchen, not willing to have this fight with her outside the boys' bedroom. She appears a few minutes later, going straight to the freezer to pull out a bottle of vodka to make herself a drink.

"What did you say to him?" I ask. I know she must have said something to Tyson earlier. He tried to hide that he was pissed off, but I've become good at reading him. Sometimes I think I watch him as much as he watches me. The only difference is that I hide that I'm doing it.

"I told him the truth."

"He's not a meal ticket or someone you can use. He's a friend, and the boys really like him." I want to say so much

more, but I don't. I know I need to tread carefully with her. Especially now that she's started drinking.

"Because he makes stupid Christmas decorations with them?" She rolls her eyes. I want to scream at her, but I hold it back, knowing it's pointless. That saying anything would only cause her to yell back and wake the boys.

"He helps me keep an eye on them too. He's good with them." I push that point at least.

It shouldn't be worrying me that she might be scaring Tyson off, but it is for some reason. Isn't that what I want?

"He wants to get laid."

"Tyson Carter can get laid whenever the hell he wants," I say dryly. I might not like that truth, but it's reality. He doesn't, though. He spends his free time making videos, watching me, or doing something for his family.

"Men enjoy the chase." Again, I bite back a retort.

I have no clue how she would know that. She never makes any of the men she dates chase her. She's all in from the first moment, whether they're good or bad for her. She's the last person I would take dating advice from. To be honest, I wouldn't take any sort of advice from her.

"I'm going to get ready for bed. I have work in the morning."

"No more girl talk? I think you could use a bit if you're only scoring some groceries from your new boyfriend." I ignore her as I head toward my bedroom, not giving her what she wants. "You're not better than me, Rory," she calls after me. I lock my door behind me.

I lean up against it, closing my eyes. I'm wearing down. I don't mean physically, either, but from the emotional toll she has on me. Now, she's trying to push the one thing away that to a degree is mine. If I let myself have it.

Why can't I? Even if only for a few nights. I'm quickly realizing I already have a fear of Tyson moving on with his

life. Why can't I enjoy this for as long as it lasts or before my mother somehow has it taken from me?

I head over to my window and look outside. In the distance, I can see the outline of Tyson's truck. I smile, popping open the window. I've never snuck out in my whole life. Not that I need to at my age, but I don't want Sheila knowing what I'm doing or that Tyson came back.

The second my feet hit the ground I take off on a dead run. Tyson opens the door to his truck, stepping out.

"Something wrong?"

"No." I throw myself at him. He catches me easily. Without thinking, I kiss him. He groans against my mouth as I press my tongue past his lips. His hold on me tightens. I cling to him. Damn does it feel good to have someone hold me close. To want me the way he does. Even with all the crap that is going on in my life.

"Rory, babe."

"What?" I keep kissing him, moving my mouth down his jaw and to his neck. He tastes good. His fingers dig into my hair.

"Am I dreaming again?"

"You dream of me?"

"Night and day." I lift my head to look him in the eyes.

"You always come back."

"Why does that keep surprising you?"

"No one ever stays," I admit. "They get out of here as soon as they get what they want. Hell, I even want to take the boys and get out of here."

"One day we will if that's what you want."

"Right now I want to keep on kissing you. Can we make out in your truck? Never got to do that." I missed out on a whole lot in high school. I think Tyson might have always been waiting around for me. He didn't even go to his prom. I

hadn't either. Not because I didn't want to but because I couldn't afford to.

"All right." He keeps me in his arms as he walks around to the passenger side of his truck, getting in. I straddle him.

"Tell me your last dream." He starts to blush, but the overhead light in the truck goes out, hiding it from me. He's even more handsome when he blushes. "Tell me," I push.

"You were about to...." He trails off. His cock jerks through his sweatpants. It presses right against my sex. I can feel every hard inch of him. I can't help but to press myself down onto him. His hands grip my hips. I swear I feel them tremble.

"Say it. Maybe I'll do it." I wiggle against his cock. Since that first kiss, my body has come roaring to life with so many desires. I've been able to keep them at bay before now, but not anymore. "I dreamt about you too. Tell me yours and I'll tell you mine. You've waited long enough, Tyson. Let's make a few of these dreams come true."



thirteen

HER WORDS MAKE ME DIZZY. It's a good thing I'm sitting down. "Fantasies? I've got a thousand of them."

"Name one." She puts both hands behind her neck and flips the ends of her hair over her shoulders. It shouldn't be so damn sexy, but it is.

"You sitting on my face." My tongue nearly vibrates with want.

She coughs. "Going to the end of the catalog right away?"

"Nah, that's in the front. First page, actually. The end has things that involve costumes and whips."

"On you, right? A little French maid costume would look cute on you," she teases, leaning forward. Her hair falls like a curtain around my face. My hands squeeze her hips.

"I'll wear a cow costume and moo like a horny steer if that's what turns you on." I'm not even kidding.

"I think you've hung around Sterling Justice too much."

Her mouth is like an inch away. "Yes. He's a bad influence. Thank you for saving me. Now it's your turn. What's your fantasy?"

"A spa day." She nips at my mouth.

"With me? I like that idea. We can do fun things in the mud bath."

She freezes. "Mud in my coochie? I don't think I'm up for that."

“Scratching that off my fantasy list. We’re down to 18,999 things now.”

The laugh comes from her belly, and it lights her up so that even in the dark I can see her true happiness. I can feel the delight coursing through her frame. Driven by lust and love, I rise up and kiss her, capturing her joy in my mouth, swallowing it until her light fills me, and then I give it in return.

Our tongues dance and tangle. Her hands press my shoulders into the leather of the truck seat. I welcome the pressure. It makes me feel alive. Every part of me is throbbing with need.

“My fantasy is you making love to me. Making me come,” she whispers against my mouth.

I almost spill into my sweatpants.

“Yeah. Let me take you somewhere.” I put my hand down to the side to prop the seat up, but she stops me.

“Here. Take me here.”

“No. I am not popping your cherry in the front seat of a pickup truck.”

She folds her fingers around my cock, and I about pass out from the blood loss in my brain. “Don’t I get to choose when and where I lose my virginity?”

“Okay. I’m not popping my cherry in the front seat of a pickup.”

Her busy hands stop moving. “Your cherry? You’re a virgin?”

“I told you that you are the only one for me.”

She scoots back on my lap. “I didn’t know that meant you hadn’t ever had sex before.”

I struggle to sit up and wonder if I should turn on the light because I can’t see her face, and I can’t tell from the sound of her voice if she’s pissed or turned on. “I guess I come off some

kind of way to you because I played sports or because I'm a Carter, but when I say something, I mean it."

"I'm starting to understand that."

"Does that bother you?"

"No. It's just—it's kind of hitting me that all the stuff you've been saying about sticking around and happy ever after aren't just lines to get into my pants." She rubs her lips together and then laughs, sort of self-consciously. "I did think you were chasing after me because I was the one thing you couldn't win. I'm sorry that I made those assumptions."

"It's fine."

"No. I'd be pissed if I were you. People are always assuming things about me or my brothers because we're poor. That we're dumb or dirty. That we don't take care of ourselves. That we don't have dreams."

Rory sounds genuinely distressed. I tug her back in my arms, even the small distance too great for me. "I accept your apology. Now let me make you happy."

I slide my hand into her pants until I find her pussy. She's wet and hot. Every fantasy I've had of her hasn't prepared me for how good she feels.

"Fuck me silly, Rory. You feel like magic."

"God, don't make me laugh," she moans. Her hips start to move, riding my hand.

"Put your tit in my mouth, babe. I need to suck on you."

She does as I ask, flipping up her shirt and holding her tit so that I can draw the nub into my mouth. I suck hard, hallowing my cheeks, taking deep long draws as I finger her with long strokes. She gasps and writhes, gyrating and swaying like my hand is a mechanical bull. With each movement, my knuckles brush against my swollen cock. My orgasm flutters at the base of my spine, ready to detonate.

"Other tit," I order. She switches it up, and I use my free hand to pluck and squeeze the wet nipple while I eat at the other one. Her cunt pulses against my fingers. I slide another

digit in and grind the heel of my hand against her clit. She tenses and gasps, her cum flooding my hand as her orgasm swoops through her body, shaking her from toes to fingertips. A long, keening cry escapes her mouth. I keep jacking my fingers into her, drawing out her ecstasy as long as I can.

I keep my own orgasm tamped down, denying myself so I can enjoy this precious one first. I've made her come and denying myself will only make that first time even better, but it won't be in the passenger seat of my pickup. I made one of her fantasies come true, and it's time to fulfill the rest of them.



fourteen

“THERE SOMETHING you want to tell me?” Tammy asks as I restock the sugar caddies on the tables in the diner. We’re a bit slow today for some reason.

Normally, I’d be down about it, knowing the busier we are the faster the time goes and the more money I’ll make. But nothing can put a damper on my mood today. I’m riding a bit of a high from everything that happened with Tyson. Last night was one of the best nights of my life. It actually has me dreaming of the possibility of having more one day.

I can’t stop smiling. Even knowing my mother is lingering around the house right now. Who even knows if she’s pulled herself out of bed yet? Right now, I couldn’t care less. There is nothing I can do about that. She is who she is at this point, and I have to bide my time and deal with her until the boys get older.

“Not that I can think of.” I search my mind. I haven’t heard any good gossip today. Sometimes we score big, but nothing juicy is going around at the moment. People seem to only be talking about the Justice men dropping like flies and falling in love. It might be in the air or something.

“You’re all smiles, and people are thinking Tyson Carter might be dead. You do it?” She’s always riding me about Tyson. I think she and a few of the cooks have bets on when I’m going to give in to him.

“What are you talking about?” I’d ended up falling asleep in his truck on top of him. I think it might have been the best sleep of my life. It’s been that way the last few nights. When

he's close, I sleep like a baby. There's something about having him at my back that puts me at ease.

"He hasn't posted on social media in the last few days. His followers are getting worried." I fight a smile.

"Maybe he was busy." I shrug.

"Busy being murdered by you? That why you're smiling so much today? You need an alibi? I was alone last night. You can say you were at my place."

"Damn, Tammy. I didn't know you'd go that deep for me." I laugh.

"Sometimes you kill a man. These things happen to us women. No need to go to jail over it." She winks at me. I only laugh harder. The bell on the front door chimes, and we both turn to see who is coming in.

"Love that sound," Tyson says as he enters the diner. Butterflies fill my stomach at the sight of him. He looks so damn handsome, and he's all mine.

"You look good for a dead man. Not shocking." Tammy winks at him before heading into the back.

"You come for lunch?" Tyson clears the space between us, pulling me into his arms. His mouth comes down onto mine in a deep kiss. I melt into him. There is no fight left inside me when it comes to this man. He can do whatever he wants to my body at this point. I'll let him.

"I came for you, and you know it," he says against my mouth, causing me to smile.

"Pretty sure I was the only one that came."

"You're killing me." He gives my ass a squeeze.

His cock hard cock presses into my stomach, making heat settle between my thighs. Last night he made it more than clear this isn't about him getting his rocks off. He could have done it all right there in his truck. I mean, I'd offered, but the Tyson Carter I've really come to know is always giving when it comes to me. I find myself wanting to give to him, too.

“I’ve missed you,” I tell him. He gives me a smile that lights up his eyes.

“I got something for you.”

“I can feel that.” I wiggle my brows at him. He’s opened up these desires I didn’t know I had, and they are spilling out now whenever he’s around.

“Rory.” A deep rumble comes from inside him, making me laugh. I can’t remember the last time I’ve laughed this much. Or even been this happy. He reaches into his back pocket and pulls out an envelope and hands it over. “It’s your share.”

I peek inside. “Seriously? Did you add to this or something?” This is double what I make on my own in a night doing deliveries. I thumb through the cash and see I’m wrong. It’s triple the amount. Holy crap.

“Nope. If you can take more deliveries, you get more money. I was actually working on this app for you this morning. I have an online tech friend helping me. Think it’s going to help a ton. You could really have something big with delivery to folks outside of city limits. The normal apps won’t let them order. You’ll get to scoop them all up and grab locals too.”

I’ve been picking up a lot of orders, but all by word of mouth from people who live a bit outside of town. I was able to charge a higher delivery fee, so it paid well.

“You’re really something, Tyson Carter. You know that?” I run my hands up his chest.

“Been trying to tell you that for years.”

“You know your followers think you’re dead, right?”

“I’ll get to that later. Told the boys I’d do some videos with them tonight so they’ll see then that I’m still kicking.”

“Sheila might be around,” I remind him. He stiffens for a moment but quickly hides it. I know he doesn’t care for my mom at all, but he plays nice. Same as I do.

“Why don’t you kids get out of here? We’re slow. No use on both of us sticking around,” Tammy says, coming in from

the back.

“We could go Christmas shopping for the boys. Get some gifts to put under the tree,” Tyson suggests. “Got your orders covered for tonight too,” he adds.

I do have some extra money. “Okay,” I agree. A few stolen hours with Tyson for the afternoon is a Christmas gift to myself. Maybe I can give him a little gift of my own if he’ll let me.



fifteen

WALKING around town holding Rory's hand feels good. Snow's not falling, but it's Texas, and that's probably a good thing. The hint of a flake and the entire state shuts down. A year ago, we didn't have heat. That was bad. We make do without the fluffy white stuff the Northerners get. There are wreaths on the telephone poles and light-up candy canes hanging off the streetlamps. My uncle even bought a giant blow-up Santa that sits on the front lawn of City Hall. When you kick or punch the stomach, Santa laughs.

Rory's cheeks are rosy with happiness. She's bought all kinds of stuff for the boys. Dean is getting new sneakers and a Switch. Logan's getting sneakers, too, along with a powered train set and Pokémon cards. I convinced Rory to let me gift a new TV for the entire family. It'll be delivered by Santa—aka me—on Christmas Eve.

“Home?” I suggest as we load the presents into the back of the truck. I'm not thrilled about seeing Sheila, but I'd endure the devil if it meant spending time with Rory.

She arches a brow. “What about your place?”

“What about it?”

“How come you've never invited me over?”

“I have a lot of times. You've always said no.” I open the passenger door and boost her inside. “But, yeah, we can go to my place. My mom's probably home.”

“Oh.”

That's an unenthusiastic, almost disappointed, sound. Frowning, I make my way to the driver's side.

She waits until I'm buckled in to ask, "What about Sterling's place? Doesn't he have a house in the back sixty?"

"That's his cousin Tucker's hideaway. Why do you want to see that?" I start the engine.

"I don't," she groans. "Tyson Carter, can't you tell what I'm hinting at?"

"No." I really don't.

"I want to give you a present." She waves her hand at her lap.

My eyes pop wide. "Why didn't you say so?" I grin and step on the gas.

"I was trying to be discreet."

"Just come out and say you want to fondle the family jewels. We'll go to my place."

"No. Your mom is there."

"She won't care, besides she'll be in the greenhouse, which is a mile from my bedroom." It's not, but the little lie is bound to make Rory feel better.

Rory slumps into the corner between the seat and the door. "I can't do it. Just take me home."

"No way."

"I can't meet your mother like this. Look at me." She pulls her T-shirt away from her chest.

"I can't. I mean, I want to, but I'm driving. You looked fine while we were shopping."

"Fine? A girl can't look fine meeting her—" She trails off.

"Boyfriend," I supply. "Her boyfriend's mom? Maybe other girls can't, but mine can because my mom is awesome and my girl is awesome."

"Please don't make me."

But it's too late since I've already pulled up in front of the big colonial with its plaster columns holding up a wide second-story veranda that stretches across the front of the house. Mom must've seen me coming down the street because she's on the porch waving merrily at me.

I reach over and squeeze Rory's hand. "She's going to be thrilled. I promise."

Rory makes some whimpering noise and slides even further down the seat so only the top of her head can be seen over the door. I climb out and run up the stairs to my mom.

"Got my girl in the truck. She says she can't meet you because she's not dolled up. I told her it wouldn't matter," I whisper into my mom's ear.

"Rory?" She immediately shoves me aside and trots down the steps. "Rory! It's me, Tyson's mom." She pulls the door open and has Rory on the sidewalk and under her arm before Rory can answer. "Call me Cherie. I'm so happy you've stopped by. Tyson can't stop talking about you, and I've been dying to meet you. I'm sorry for looking like a mess. I was gardening."

Mom's wearing pink pants with a white floral blouse, looking like a fresh peony.

"Mrs. Carter, you look gorgeous while I'm dressed in an old T-shirt and jeans and I smell like food."

"Good food, though. It's from the cafe, right? Tammy is always whipping up the most delicious things."

"Mom, give Rory a moment to breathe." I hold the door open for them.

"Am I coming on too strong? I'm not, am I?" She squeezes Rory tighter, and Rory—well, she looks dazed but happy. "Honey, go put the kettle on, and we'll make some mulled cider for you two to enjoy while I finish up in the garden. You staying for dinner? Any dietary concerns?"

"No, Mrs. Carter. I have to go home and feed my brothers."

“Can’t they come here?” Mom turns pleading eyes in my direction. “You’ll go get the boys and bring them right over, won’t you, Tyson?”

My gaze flicks down to Rory’s. Her plans to give me a private present are going down the tubes, but in exchange for our sacrifice, her family is getting to know mine, and that’s a worthwhile trade.

“Sure, Mom, but let me have some time with Rory. The boys are still in school.”

Mom thwacks her palm against her head. “Of course they are. This is perfect. I’ll go put everything away in the greenhouse. You turn the oven on and mix up the biscuit dough.”

Rory turns to me in shock. “You can make biscuits?”

“Don’t you watch my channel? Those are some of my most viewed videos.”

“I filmed those on my camera,” Mom brags.

“Rory will stand in for you this time, won’t you, Rory?”

“I sure will.”

Mom beams. “All right. You two kids start dinner, and I’ll be back.”

As soon as the back door shuts, I pull Rory into my arms. “Want to see how fast I can make you come?”

“No!” She shouts and wriggles free. “You have biscuits to make.”

I shrug. “It was worth a shot.”



sixteen

I'M NOT GOING *to say anything. I'm not going to say anything. I'm not going to say anything*, I repeat on a loop in my mind.

“This is stupid,” I blurt out. Tyson pulls off his adorable apron and tosses it onto the kitchen counter. Today has been incredible. I haven't had this much fun in a long time. Even his mom is as sweet as could be. Coming to his house was nothing like I thought it would be. I have to admit I had some preconceived notions about his family. I of all people should know better. People are always judging me.

“What?” he asks, confused because I was laughing a few minutes ago. I'd been recording him on his phone and only just ended the video. Then a message popped up. I never should have clicked it, but I couldn't help myself. It took me over into his Instagram messages. That's when I saw all the DMs.

“Nothing. Forget it.” I shove his phone into his chest. I have no reason to be mad. I scrolled through some of the messages. There are tons from other girls, all of them suggesting to him that they'd be more than willing to be his girl. A few even sent naked pictures of themselves. He doesn't respond to most of them. When he does it's him shutting their advances down. He even sent a picture of me to a few of the girls saying he has a girl, and that was before I really was his girl.

Tyson takes his phone from me and sees what I was looking at. “Why don't we put it to bed?”

“What?”

“For the record, I get messages from assholes telling me you’re too damn hot for me so don’t think people aren’t coming for you.” He huffs, irritated. “You are too hot for me, but fuck, they don’t have to shove it in my face.”

“Whatever.” I roll my eyes.

“Let’s show them, so we can put it to bed.”

“You better not be talking about a sex tape.”

“The hell. You think I’d let anyone see you naked?” He clicks the screen, making the video go live. I freeze as he pulls me firmly into his side. “I’m not dead. I’m busy with my girl.” Then he kisses me as the live stream continues.

I almost push away, but the second his mouth is on mine, I melt as usual. If Tyson would have grabbed me and laid one on me years ago, I think we would have been a done deal back then. I moan into his mouth, wondering if maybe we have a second to slip away. I want some alone time with him before we pick up my brothers.

“That’s enough. For them at least,” he growls, lifting his head and ending the video.

“Where’s your bedroom?” I ask, but before he can answer, my alarm goes off on my phone. “The boys.”

“I’ll go grab them. Why don’t you hang out here?”

“Like by myself?”

“I’m here,” Cherie says, entering the kitchen. “I see you two are Instagram official.” I can’t help but laugh as she holds her phone up. I can tell how much she loves Tyson and wants the best for him. It’s a totally different relationship than I have with my mother.

“Hang, I’ll be back.” He lays another kiss on me right in front of his mom before I can try to protest. He leaves me half dazed as he bolts out the door, leaving me with his mom.

“I turned the heater on for the pool. Do you think your brothers will want to swim?” Cherie asks.

“I’m sure they would love to.” They are going to lose their minds when they see this place. I’ve never been somewhere so fancy in my life. But at the same time, it’s homey. I’m not scared to touch anything. I think that has more to do with Cherie and Tyson. They are so laid back and easy-going.

“I’m glad you’re giving him a chance,” Cherie says, going over to the oven and peeking in on the biscuits Tyson and I made.

“If I knew he cooked we would have been dating years ago,” I tease. She gives me a warm smile.

“I’ll be honest. I was a bit worried.” My stomach tightens, dreading what’s about to come next. “Not at first, but after the first year went by and you wouldn’t give him a chance I worried.” I let out a breath, sure she was going to say something completely different. I don’t know why I keep doing that. I hate when people do it to me. I need to stop. It’s clearly not working for me.

“I’ve got a lot on my plate. Dating hasn’t ever been on my radar. I’ve been trying to make sure my family is taken care of,” I admit.

“You know this wasn’t always my life.” Cherie waves her hand around her beautiful state-of-the-art kitchen that could feed an army if she wanted. I know she fed the football team back in the day. “My grandmother raised me. My mom was a bit of a mess. We didn’t have much, but she gave me what was important.” Her eyes start to water. “Sorry, I lost her a few years ago.”

“I’m sorry.” I can’t help but walk over and give her a hug.

“Don’t be. At least I had someone. Ty tells me you’re kind of alone.”

“I have my brothers.”

“But you should have more, sweetheart. If you ever need someone to talk to, I’m here. Just because I’m Ty’s mom doesn’t mean you can’t talk to me. I have a feeling you’re not going anywhere. Ty is a lot like his daddy. Once Rick had his sights set on me, there was no turning back for either of us.” A

smile lights up her face as she gets all dreamy-eyed at the memory.

“I think Tyson is a lot like you. He’s a bit of a romantic.”

“I’m not surprised. When Tyson wants something, there is no stopping him. He was that way with football and now all this social media stuff. I had no idea there was so much money in it.”

“Me either,” I admit.

“Now you do.” She smiles, and it meets her eyes. I don’t know how I missed it. She’s so right. Here I thought Tyson wasn’t driven, but I was so wrong. He goes full force into the things he’s passionate about. “Tell me about your brothers. I saw a few videos of them, but I’d like to know more. They’re adorable.”

I get lost in telling her all about my brothers. That is until I hear them come in the door. Their voices bounce through the house. Cherie and I make our way toward the front of the house, where we find them along with Tyson and his father Rick.

“You boys ever thought about playing football?” Rick asks them.

“I’m killer at Madden, aren’t I, Tyson?” Dean looks up at Tyson. Logan has his arm wrapped around Tyson, leaning into him. Seeing them like this always brings a smile to my face.

“He sure is.” Dean preens under Tyson’s praise.

“You boys hungry?” Cherie asks, drawing their attention to her. I wonder a bit what they’ll think about her. She’s a modern-day June Cleaver.

“Always,” Logan shouts excitedly as the doorbell starts to sound through the house. At least that’s what I think it is.

“I’ll get it.” Rick walks over and opens one of the giant double doors. My heart drops when I see my mother standing there.

“Well, there you are. I think someone forgot my invitation.”



seventeen

IT'S like the fairy tale where the one witch doesn't get her invitation but comes to the party anyway and spreads a black cloud of doom over the event.

When Sheila first arrived, Logan was thrilled. He abandoned his towel and duck-shaped floatie and raced over to throw his six-year-old body at his mother's legs. She fussed over him, commenting how his swim trunks looked too tight and how he wouldn't grow if too much of the pool chemicals got into his mouth. Logan opted not to swim after that. Whenever we asked him if he wanted to get in the water, he'd press his lips together and shake his head vigorously.

Dean got a different treatment. He is older and has a better understanding of his mother's moods. He could tell immediately that despite Sheila's smiles, his mom wasn't happy. Logan stuck close to her—and to Dean—even as Sheila remarked that Dean didn't like nuts when my mom brought out peanut butter cookies or that he hated football when my dad offered to play catch and that video games were for babies when I booted up the PlayStation. The boasts about being good at Madden weren't repeated.

Rory got the best, and by best, I mean worst treatment. Everything from her hair—*so bland, why haven't you colored it like I suggested*, to her face—*very worn out, going to look like you're forty in your twenties*, to her weight—*you're supposed to be serving the café pies, not eating them or is that where all your tips are going*.

"Rory looks perfect," I'd said which is only the truth. Her mom's response? That I was young and a victim of my little

head doing all the thinking for me.

That led to my mom telling Sheila that we should all try to focus on the positive, to which Sheila said, “Easy for you to say, Cherie, given that you left all the dirt behind and climbed up the ladder to live in your ivory tower, forgetting about everyone who supported you when you thought spam was a delicacy.”

Spam’s fucking delicious, so I don’t know why that’s such an insult, but it shut Mom up. Dad wanted to say something in her defense, but Mom kind of shoved him out of the room, whispering something in his ear that kept his mouth glued shut.

Even now, as we sit together at our dining room table—the one that we never use because it’s too big and fancy—he hasn’t said much of anything. He carved up the ham, poured some drinks for the three adults, and proceeded to sit back and grind the back of his teeth together as Sheila continued a subtle attack against her three kids.

“Dean, don’t pick at your teeth. You’d think you were raised in a barn. Logan, you’ve already had two biscuits. One more and you’re going to explode like a tin can full of rotten fish. Rory, for the love of God, would you stop slouching? You look like you’re a fisherman.”

“Fishermen have bad posture?” I can’t help myself. The question sort of asks itself.

Rory brings her napkin to her face to hide a smile.

“Yes. From bending over,” Sheila replies stiffly.

“Rory’s been carrying a lot of weight on her shoulders for a while. If her posture’s shitty, it’s because she’s working three jobs and—” Rory kicks me in the legs.

Sheila gets my drift, though. She tilts her head, fork dangling between her fingers, as if she is thinking about stabbing me with it. “And what do you intend to do about that? You’ve brought my family here to your palace for a visit, but tonight they will have to go home to our shack where there is no pool or PlayStation. Dean will whine about his next visit,

and Logan will sulk for days while Rory grows older by the minute. I know exactly how Rory feels because I was her. I had a taste of this life, but because I didn't have the right connections, I was only good enough for a f...king," she ends coyly.

My eyes fly to my dad. He'd dated Sheila? He shakes his head.

"I'm not going to lie, Sheila, Tom didn't do right by you back then," he says.

"Are you saying your son is going to be different?" Sheila challenges.

"Yeah," I interject. I don't need my dad speaking for me. "Damn straight. I'm marrying Rory. Logan can swim here every day, and Dean can play video games whenever he doesn't have homework."

"If you say so." Sheila twirls the fork in her fingers and then resumes picking at her plate.

"I'd marry her today," I say, feeling an urgency to prove myself. "Call a priest. Or get Uncle Phillip here. He's the mayor."

"No."

Rory almost shouts it.

My head spins toward her. "What?"

She stands up abruptly, the chair bouncing backward and nearly falling over. "I don't want this. I don't want to marry you. I can take care of this family. Logan, Dean, let's go." When they don't immediately get to their feet, she screams, "Now!"

"What's going on, Rory?"

But she doesn't answer me. She's running toward the door like the devil is chasing her. Logan stuffs a biscuit in his pocket and grabs Dean's hand and follows his sister out the door.

Sheila's wearing a shocked expression. She didn't expect this outcome.

I guess I should've. Rory's feeling backed into a corner, like my proposal was forced. It should've been done with flowers and candles and maybe a prop jet writing letters in the sky.

"Excuse me," I tell my mom, who waves me off.

I hurry after Rory. She's got the boys in her Jeep and is about to take off, so I do what any other desperate man in my situation would do. I plant myself in front of the headlights, stretch my arms out, and yell, "You're only leaving over my dead body."



eighteen

I'M on the verge of tears. I have been since my mother showed up here. It's the story of my life when dealing with her. The second I start to settle in or think I'm getting my footing, she's there blowing it all to hell for me. I should be used to it by now. But for a little while, I thought just maybe I could finally have something that made me happy.

I felt normal when I was with Tyson's mom. She didn't look at me like I was the girl from the wrong side of the tracks. She seemed to even like me. That was until Sheila showed up and put everyone on edge.

"Rory, I'm not moving. You'll have to mow me down to get out of here." I can see the determination in his eyes. He wasn't lying when he said over his dead body. And damn is it too good of a body to go to waste.

"Don't do it. This isn't Grand Theft Auto. If you run him over, he won't come back," Logan says from the back seat.

"Who's been letting you play that game?"

"He just likes to drive the cars and stuff. He doesn't do the missions or anything or engage in any of the other stuff. I swear." Dean tries to come in quick for the save.

"Babe, get out of the car. We need to talk." Tyson rests his hand on the hood of my Jeep. I see his parents standing in the doorway watching us. Where is my mother? She's probably inside stealing the silver or something. She's an opportunist and would have no problem taking advantage of the Carters being distracted. It's a shame that my mind immediately wanders to think the worst of her.

“If you marry him, do we get to move in here?” Logan asks. My heart flutters at the reminder that Tyson declared to everyone he is going to marry me. The truth is I would marry Tyson in a heartbeat if I weren’t carrying all of this baggage. I just don’t want him to marry me out of pity.

“You left Shelia in the house alone,” I point out as I open the door to my Jeep, knowing I’m not going anywhere until Tyson moves. I have no doubt in my mind that he will lie down and sleep there if he has to. I more than anyone know Tyson never gives up when he wants something.

Tyson is in front of me before my feet even hit the ground. “You’ve got to stop running from me.” His hand comes to my face, holding me in place as he brings his mouth down onto mine. I let him kiss me, relaxing into him. Some of the tension starts to leave my body. I might be mad at him, but the truth is I love him. I have for a long time, but I was afraid to admit it.

“Are you done with your dramatics?” My whole body goes stiff at the sound of Sheila’s voice.

“I think it’s time for you to go, Sheila,” Cherie says. Tyson lifts his head. We both know his mom’s words are going to piss Sheila off. I hold my breath, waiting for her reaction, praying she doesn’t embarrass me more than she already has.

“Fine, but I’ll be taking my boys with me.” Tyson takes my hand, leading me back around my Jeep.

“You’re not going to do that. Not tonight,” Rick tells her.

“Excuse me! Those are my children!” she screeches. A rush of anger fills me, so intense that I fight not to burst into tears.

“If you try to take them tonight, I’ll call the police. They’re not getting into a vehicle with you, and I think we both know why.” Rick’s voice is eerily calm. Sheila’s back straightens. Normally when she’s using, I can spot it, but sometimes it’s hard because she’s always high.

“Don’t think this is done,” she hisses before stomping off toward her car. It doesn’t go unnoticed by me that there’s a new dent in the side of it. I don’t know how that thing still

runs, to be honest. She pulls out of the driveway, making a whole show out of it. Her tires spin out in the process, leaving marks on their pretty stone.

“I’m sorry,” I say.

“Don’t apologize,” all of the Carters say at the same time.

“All right, boys. I think we should get back into the pool then have dessert,” Cherie declares loudly, making her way to my Jeep to open the door for them. “You’re on break now, aren’t you?” she asks them.

“Yes,” Dean answers, hopping out first.

“That mean we can stay over?” Logan asks.

“I think that’s a brilliant idea.” Rick winks my way as he leads Cherie and the boys back into the house, leaving Tyson and me all alone.

“That was the most embarrassing experience of my life. I’m sorry your parents had to see that.” I bury my face in his chest. Both of his parents are still being so sweet. It’s no wonder Tyson is such a good man.

“The only person that should be embarrassed here is Sheila. It’s no secret how she is, babe. I don’t understand why you’d ever be embarrassed. What you get up and do every day for your family speaks to the person you are. I’ve always seen that. It’s part of why I love you so damn much.”

There is no stopping the tears from coming now. I lift my head to stare up at him.

“We both know what’s important in life. You’d give everything you have to protect those boys. You have given everything. You’ve sacrificed so much.” He wipes the tears from my cheek. “Don’t run from me anymore. I want to be in this with you. Let me,” he pleads. I slip my hands up his chest, wrapping them around his neck.

“No more running.” I break. It’s easy when you find someone you know will pick up the pieces. “This isn’t me agreeing to marry you,” I quickly add as I fight a smirk. “Not until I know how you are in bed at least.”

“Then we better get on it.” He grabs me by my ass, lifting me off my feet. I should tell him to put me down. His parents might see. But then he kisses me, and like always when his mouth meets mine, I’m lost in the best of ways.



nineteen

I WANT to take Rory inside and make love to her like she deserves, but with her brothers here and my parents watching over everyone, there won't be a better opportunity for me to take care of business. I set my girl down and brush her hair out of her eyes. "I've got to go and do something with Sterling. Stay here with the boys and my parents."

"Tonight?" She's disappointed but not suspicious.

"It won't take long. Keep my parents occupied, will you?" Her lips are wet and plump and shiny in the fading sunlight.

"Is it a Christmas present for them?"

"It's a Christmas present," I agree and kiss her again—not so much to distract her but because her mouth is irresistible. She doesn't mind. She kisses me back, hooks her leg around my hip, and tries to climb me like a tree, which makes me regret having to put her down again. "Hold all of those thoughts. I'll be back soon and will want to try out all the things we didn't talk about doing to each other."

"What about the things we did talk about?" she says, wiping a finger across her thumb and then sucking on it, like she's trying to absorb my taste.

Fuck. That's hot. I sway toward her, only managing to catch myself at the last second. Straightening, I give her a pat on her ass and direct her inside. "Parents. Pool. Distract." I can only manage the one word at a time since my mind is in the gutter, envisioning myself inserting my hard cock between her ripe lips.

She goes inside without any more questions, giving me a little finger wave as she disappears inside the front door. When I can't see her anymore, I jog toward the garage and climb into an old pickup that my dad uses to haul manure for Mom's garden. Its bed is dirty, and the wheels are almost bare, but I'm not using it for those reasons. The best feature is that there aren't any license plates on this beater. They expired years ago, and since Dad only uses the truck occasionally, he hasn't bothered to replace them.

I text Sterling that he's my excuse. He sends me a thumbs-up in reply. Sheila's dealer slash boyfriend lives in the next county over, which is twenty minutes away. I pass by Astor's farm and wave at Cane, who is sitting in his truck staring moodily at the fence line. Glad to see I'm not the last man standing. I don't know if Cane is ever going to win Astor's daddy over, and Astor, well, you can't blame her for not leaving her dad in his condition.

There's a patch of land just on the border between Edison and Cactus Ridge. On it sits four trailers and one double-wide. Until a couple of years ago, three generations of Pemples lived here. Then old man Pemble died, and the son, who had a disability from the war, decided to move in with his daughter down in El Paso. The youngest Pemble sold the land to put himself through college.

No one knew who bought it until a group of bikers showed up. County records say the title holder is 1PC which, according to my uncle, is for One Per Center. It's basically a gang. They've been quiet, although everyone knows they're running drugs here. Basically, that means they can be bought.

I'm not taking out the whole crew. I just want to buy one man.

I attach my camera to the dashboard and turn it to face the front door of the double-wide. I throw the duffel bag over my shoulder and climb out the driver's side.

The sounds of a football game slide through the gaps between the metal wall of the trailer and the door frame. I pound on the door to make sure I can be heard over the

television. The TV cuts off, and then I hear boots stomping against linoleum. The door creaks open a half-inch, and a weathered face pokes out.

“Whaddya want?”

“I’m here to make a purchase.”

He looks me up and down before spitting at my feet. “Thought you rich kids did the prescription thing.”

“Not that kind of purchase.”

The man narrows his eyes. “Only kind of thing I’m offering.”

“You haven’t even heard my deal yet.” I drop the duffle onto the top step and nudge it forward with my toe. “Take a look.”

Curiosity takes hold, and the door opens wide enough for my bag to fit through. One tug and the duffle disappears inside. I wait, my hands in my pockets, and count backwards from ten. I’m on two when the door reopens, this time wide enough for me to see that my guy is alone.

“What’s this supposed to mean?” He shakes the piece of paper in my face.

“Just what it says. I want to buy Terrance Frame from you. I think his nickname is Two-faced Terry since he ratted out his cousin to the feds and sent his cousin’s gang to prison for ten years. According to my research, he hooked up with you all about three months ago promising a big score but hasn’t come through.” I read off the details from the email I received from my high school trainer, who has been buying steroids on the sly for years. He hands them out to the team like candy. I never took any because I had no desire to shrink my dick in exchange for bulking up. “Anyway, rather than get you all in trouble for just making a living, I figured I’d take him off your hands.”

“What do you mean by trouble?”

“I take a lot of video around town and accidentally caught this.” I hand him my phone so he can see four members of his

gang, including Two-faced Terry, talking to the feds. The guy starts cursing and bangs down the steps, pushing past me. He arrows to the third trailer and throws open the door. I hear crashing and banging, and then Terry appears, boots over ass, as he's thrown out of the trailer.

The head of the gang picks Terry up by the collar and drags him across the dirt to throw him at my feet. "How long do I have?" the gang leader asks me.

"Probably thirty minutes."

"Fuck!" he shouts, but he doesn't waste time. He runs toward his bike and guns the engine. So much for solidarity.

I call my uncle. "The leader just left. Heading south on Fifty-five."

"Thanks. We'll pick him up."

The others are slowly trickling out. I wave to them and shout, "Feds are coming."

They scatter like startled birds. Terry tries to crawl away. I step on his back. "Where're you going?"

"Get off me, you little prick."

But since we both know I can beat him up with one hand, he doesn't move. "Here's the deal. After you threatened the boys, I had a bunch of people watching you. There isn't much that goes on in public these days that isn't on tape. We caught you selling drugs to teens as well as ratting your friends out to the feds. I provided that footage to my uncle, who is the mayor. You're going to be put away for a while, and either 1PC or your cousin's friends are going to take special care of you in prison." I ease off his back and lean down to dust my footprint off his shirt with the tip of my hat. "Next time don't fuck with me or my loved ones and you won't cause these problems for yourself."

I slap my hat back onto my head and amble over to my truck. The video is still running. I shut it off and send myself the file. Taking random video all over the city seemed like worthless fun at first, but I have so much blackmail material

these days that if I ever have to protect Rory and her brothers again, I'll have the ammunition to do so.

No one is going to hurt her or her family—not her mom or this random drug dealer. Not anyone.



twenty

“THANK YOU AGAIN FOR EVERYTHING,” I tell Cherie as I sip on the hot chocolate she made for the two of us. It’s been so nice spending time with her.

Both of my brothers are passed out cold in the game room. They hadn’t lasted long after they’d eaten dessert and gotten back into the pool. They tried to stay awake, but the second they sat down on the giant comfy sofa in the massive game room, they were out. It’s nice knowing they’re safe and that I will have peace of mind tonight when I lay my head down on the pillow. Even though right now sleeping is the last thing I’m thinking of.

They were quiet for a bit after Sheila tore out of here, but there is something about Cherie that draws you out and makes you feel comfortable around her. Maybe it has something to do with the fact that this wasn’t always her life. That she knows what it’s like to have nothing. It makes her more relatable. Plus, there’s the fact that she loves Tyson and it shows.

“If you really want to thank me, don’t break my boy’s heart.” There she goes again, always looking out for Tyson. That’s the way a parent is supposed to be.

“I think I’ve always been worried that’s what he was going to do to me,” I admit.

“You might think Tyson is rash in some of the things he says and does, but when the dust settles, he’s always still standing behind what he said.” I know every word that she says is true. No matter how many times I tried to turn Tyson away, he never gave up. He’s always been there for me.

“I don’t doubt Tyson would marry me.”

“And I don’t doubt he’s been planning to marry you since all the way back in high school. He didn’t come up with that thought tonight. Like I said, he might seem rash at times, but he’s always got a plan and is further ahead than most think. He gets that from his father.” Cherie smiles, clearly proud of the men in her life.

I’m so surprised she has no problem with her son wanting to get married. We’re young, but then again, I don’t think I ever really felt that way my whole life. I’m grateful to have at least had my grandmother, who gave me some sense of normalcy. But since she passed, I’ve had to be the responsible one all of the time.

“Tyson,” Cherie says, her eyes going over my shoulder. I turn to see him entering the kitchen.

“Hey, Mom.” He kisses her on the cheek before he drops a quick one on my lips. “Going to steal my girl away for a bit.” He plucks me easily out of my chair and into his arms.

“Tyson.” I laugh as he practically runs toward wherever he’s headed. I’m guessing it’s his bedroom.

“Need you” is his only response as he carries me up the stairs, taking them two at a time. He doesn’t stop until we’re inside his bedroom with the door shut and locked behind us.

“Everything okay?” I ask when he sets me down on his bed. I love how the whole room smells like him. I’m becoming addicted to everything Tyson Carter.

“Everyone I love is under this roof. Yeah, I’m more than okay right now.” My breath catches at his words as he pulls his shirt off over his head. My mouth suddenly goes dry as I take in every hard line of his broad chest. “Need you skin to skin. You gonna give me that?”

“Yes.” Without hesitation, I start to pull at my own clothes. We are both naked within seconds with Tyson coming down over me. He pins me to the bed below him as he kisses me softly at first, but that doesn’t last long. Years of built-up need bleed out between us.

His cock rubs against my pussy, making me gasp. I can't believe how wet I am already. My hard nipples rub against his chest, my whole body aching with need. It's not only a need to come but to be connected to Tyson. The one person I know I can trust and count on.

"I need you." I lift my hips, attempting to rub against him.

"Need to get you ready," he whispers against my skin as he kisses down the column of my neck. Before I can say another word, I feel his mouth wrap around my nipple. All rational thought leaves me as he licks and sucks me.

"Tyson, please," I beg him.

To my surprise it works, and seconds later, he releases my nipple. He places open-mouthed kisses down my stomach until he gets to my sex. I lift my head to see what he's doing down there. I watch as he runs his finger along the lips of my pussy. I try to lift my hips again, but he pins me down with his other arm.

"Is this all for me?" He lifts his finger with the evidence of my arousal to his mouth. I simply nod my head because I'm too turned on to form words at this point. "I need the words."

"Always. The first time I touched myself I was thinking about you." Something primal flashes through his eyes at my confession, but I want him to have it. He's waited so long to have me. I want him to know I've been waiting too in my own way. Even if I was only ever fighting myself and thinking I'm not good enough.

"No more touching yourself. It's my job now," he says before his mouth descends onto my clit. He didn't need to make the demand. The second his mouth wraps around my clit, I know I've been ruined.

I sink my fingers into his hair as he licks and sucks at my clit. He presses one finger into me and then another. It's more than I can take. Too much pent-up need demands to be released. He must know I'm close because he hooks his fingers inside of me as his tongue is relentless in its strokes against my clit, sending me over the edge.

“Ty!” I scream out as the pleasure courses through my body. Tears slip down my cheeks when Tyson moves up my body and starts to kiss me.

“Baby.” My eyes flutter open, loving when he calls me any kind of pet name. He presses kisses to my cheeks.

“I’m happy. I swear. It’s just a lot. I can feel it. That you love me so much. You’ve taken your time even when I pushed back. You never gave up on me. So many times, you could have walked away, but you only came on stronger. I don’t think you’ll ever know what that means to me. As you already know, there aren’t a lot of people that I can depend on in my life. You’ve built so much trust inside of me.”

“I know. It’s why I did it. I love you, and when you love something, you fight for it. You know that better than anyone.”

“I love you.” I wrap my arms around his neck.

“I love you, too.”

“Then make love to me already.” Now it’s me making demands.

“I don’t have a condom, but I can pull out or I could just eat your pussy again.” He smiles, not worried in the least about his own pleasure.

“I’m on birth control. Have been for a while.”

“Fuck yes.” He claims my mouth in another kiss. The head of his cock starts to press inside of me. He freezes when he gets to the thin barrier of my virginity.

“Don’t stop now,” I breathe against his mouth.

“I love you,” he says again before he thrusts into me fully. I gasp, my nails digging into his shoulders. The pain is sharp and fast but fades quickly. As I stare up into Tyson’s eyes, he actually looks to be in more pain than me. He holds completely still, waiting for me to adjust to him. I can always count on this man to look out for me.

“If you love me, Tyson, then you’ll move.” I try to lift my hips, but I’m pinned under him. He lets out a groan but does as

I ask. He pulls out, thrusting back in quickly. My eyes stay locked on his face, wanting to see every bit of his pleasure.

As my own pleasure starts to build, I lift my hips, meeting each of his movements. “So damn tight. I’m not gonna last.” He sounds almost panicked, and I know he doesn’t want to come without me.

“I’m close,” I admit.

Tyson’s hand slips between us, his fingers going straight for my clit. His touch is all I need to give me the final push over the edge. My sex locks around his cock, and I come with his name on my lips. I cling to him, surprised at how hard I orgasmed.

He groans my name before coming with me. His warmth spills inside of me, connecting us in a way I know deep down we’ll only ever share.



twenty-one

“CAN I SEE NOW?”

“Not yet.” I maneuver Rory carefully through the door. Her brothers—hiding on the side of the porch—cover their mouths to muffle their giggles, but Logan isn’t quite successful.

Rory’s head whips toward the sound, and I barely manage to keep my hands over her eyes. “Logan?”

Another giggle leaks out before Dean slaps his thirteen-year-old hand over Logan’s unmanageable eight-year-old mouth. It’s been two years since Rory and I got married on Christmas Day. My mom’s feelings are still hurt, but she’s gotten over it by pouring her motherly love into Dean and Logan. Dad’s playing catch with Dean every day, molding him into the next NFL quarterback, something I never had the ambition to do.

I may have hurried things unnecessarily, but I wanted to give Rory stability and security. Plus, once we were married, she was more amenable to expanding the delivery service, hiring more people who needed jobs, and taking on a more managerial role.

“Why are we outside? You didn’t buy that car, did you?”

I also demanded she take care of all my money—both my earning from the videos and endorsements as well as the trust.

I used to do it, but it was nice leaving that in her hands. She’s strict with the money, though, and tells me I’m way too frivolous. I think we make a good team. If Rory was in charge,

we'd eat spaghetti and ramen for dinner, but the family needs steak now and then.

“No. I didn't replace your Jeep.” Even though that thing seems to be one pothole away from collapsing, I've honored her wishes and not bought her a car. She usually drives my truck anyway. Besides, my parents are buying her a car this Christmas. She can't tell them no.

I nod toward Dean, who flips a switch, and as soon as the snow starts falling, I take my hands away and shout, “Merry Christmas!”

“Merry Christmas!” yell her brothers. Logan runs over and throws himself at Rory's legs.

“Do you love it, Rory, do you love it?”

Rory holds out her hands, her face glowing with wonder. “Is...this snow?”

“It is snow, Rory,” Logan says at the top of his lungs. “Isn't it cool?”

“How?” Her brows furrow together as she searches for the snow-making machine, but it's around the corner of the small house hidden by a bunch of saw horses and lumber that I'm using to build an addition. My latest DIY series is bringing in big numbers. Nothing my followers enjoy more than seeing me sweat, for some reason.

“It's magic,” I tell her and steer her away from the machine and into the small snowfall. It's cold for Texas, but not cold enough to prevent the snow from melting the moment it hits the ground. Still, as long as you look up or forward, it feels winter-y.

“Why do I feel like it would've been cheaper for you to replace the Jeep?”

“Nah, I'm frugal now. This is courtesy of Wendy's Heating and Cooling over in Jackson City. I'll film Dean and Logan pelting me with snowballs later for an ad.”

Rory pats me on the shoulder. “Good job out of you.”

“Great. Then let’s enjoy the snow.” I pick up a thermos I left before I brought her out and unscrew the top. “Hot chocolate.” I hand her the cup and drape a candy cane over the edge. “And a hat.” Dean hands me the red scarf, hat, and mittens set. I tug the hat over her head and wrap the scarf around her neck. “It’s cold in the snow.”

Her cheeks are growing rosy. “It is, isn’t it?” She hums as she takes a sip of her cocoa.

She’s so easy to make happy, so easy to love. I lean down and kiss her, sweeping my tongue inside her mouth, tasting the chocolate and the mint and her.

Dean and Logan make gagging noises, but it only makes me kiss her longer until finally, she pushes me away. “Behave,” she whispers.

“I will for the next”—I check my watch—“five minutes.”

“What’s in five minutes?”

“Grandpa Rick and Grandma Cherie are coming to take us to see the new Star Wars movie!” Logan says, his volume still at ten.

Moments after he says that, my parents’ Mercedes pulls up next to the sidewalk. Mom hurries out before Dad can open her door and throws her arms open. Logan throws himself at her and they hug like they’ve not seen each other in a year when it’s only been a couple of days. The boys wave goodbye and then clamber into the car, disappearing down the street.

Rory drops down onto the top step and sips her cocoa. The snow falls around her face, making her look angelic.

“Next year, let’s go to a place with real snow.”

“Like where? Vail?”

“I was thinking Canada. Lake Louise. We can ice skate, ride horses in the snow, take sleigh rides, make love in front of a fireplace.”

“I like all of those ideas.”

“Great, because I booked it.” I pull a piece of paper out of my pocket and hand it to her. “This is next year’s present. Don’t expect any more,” I lie.

“Are you doing a promotional video for them, too?” She unfolds the travel itinerary.

“Nope. This is out of our savings. You’ll have to live with that.”

“You think I’m cheap, don’t you?” She nudges my shoulder.

I wrap my free arm around her and pull her close. “No. I think you grew up without a lot, and it’s hard to forget that. I think you’re awesome, and without you, I’d probably spend every dime I made.”

“I doubt that. Your bank account was more than healthy when I took it over.”

“I didn’t have much to spend it on. I was saving it up to spoil you.”

“How’d you know you loved me? Like why me?”

“Why not you?” I counter.

“Because there are other girls—prettier, richer, smarter.”

“Richer, maybe, but prettier and smarter? Never. I loved you since the day you kicked David Rodrigo in the balls when he said that women existed to make men sandwiches during health class in eighth grade.”

“That far back?” She’s shocked. I kiss her again.

“Yeah. I was a goner. I tried to ask you out, but you were never around, and it was in the eighth grade so I waited.”

“And waited,” she says.

“And waited,” I add.

“And here I am.” She grins like an imp.

“Yup.” I get to my feet and then throw her over my shoulder. “Now it’s time for payback.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

I slap her ass and carry her inside. “It means it’s time for you to suffer for all the waiting I did. I’m going to eat you out until you start orgasming, and then I’m going to stop until the urge goes away. I’ll repeat it again and again until—”

“Until I feel as anxious as you did for years?”

I throw her on the bed. “Until you admit you love me.”

Her eyes grow tender. “I do love you.”

I pull my shirt off over my head. “Say it again.”

“I love you, Tyson Carter.”

“And again,” I demand as I shed my jeans.

“I love you to the moon and back.”

“You’re my whole universe, Rory.” I peel off her clothes and slide inside of her, forgetting my promise to make her suffer. She’s wet and hot and welcoming. Her legs part, and her arms come up to clutch my body close.

“And you’re my whole life, Tyson.”

“Merry Christmas,” I murmur, and then I shut up so that I can give her the greatest present of all—orgasms! Nah, kidding, it’s love.



epilogue

RORY

MANY YEARS LATER

“TYSON!” I cry out as I start to come. I was so sure I was dreaming. Or I suppose it’s a mix of both. I’d been dreaming about my husband, his face between my thighs, to only wake with it actually happening.

“You taste sweeter,” I hear him say. My mind is still foggy with sleep. “Obviously my wife is keeping shit from me,” he mutters.

“What?” I ask, thinking I’ve missed something. He doesn’t answer me, though. Instead, he flips me over, grabbing my hips and pulling me to my knees. A half-second later, he’s thrusting all the way inside of me. “Don’t like when you keep shit from me.”

“I don’t know—” His hand comes down on my ass, giving it a hard slap. I gasp, my pussy clamping down around his cock, making him groan.

“Don’t try to make me come already or your little ass is in trouble.”

“I can’t help it.”

“You can help by not keeping shit from me.” I try to speak again, but he starts to thrust into me harder. All I can get out are moans as he plows into me from behind. It’s rough and sweet at the same time. I never know how he manages to do that, but he does. My husband always takes care of me. He knows exactly what I need before I do. It’s always been that way with us.

“Tyson,” I get out. My fingers grip the sheets, needing something to cling to. I’m so close already, but I know he’s not going to let me come until he gets what he wants.

My Tyson doesn’t need or want a lot of things, but when he does, he can become a bit obsessive about whatever it is. Me being one of his obsessions means he knows everything

about me. That includes my body. He can get me off better than I ever could myself. He can draw it out for me or have me coming before I even know what's happening.

“Want my fingers on your clit, baby?” he asks, but we both know he's not really asking. He already knows what I need. It's just a matter of when he's going to give it to me.

“Please,” I beg.

His fingers slip between my thighs, quickly finding my clit as he keeps rutting into me from behind. It doesn't take me long to lose it. My whole body tightens as I come undone. Tyson keeps me on my knees as I pull him over with me. He groans my name as his heat spills deep inside of me.

He drops to his side, rolling me with him. He moves my body around as if I weigh no more than a doll. His cock stays seated inside of me as he spoons me, his face buried in the side of my neck.

“I know this body, and I've given you three days to come clean,” he whispers against my ear.

“Seriously?” I huff. “I only realized last night, and I was saving it as a gift! Do you know how hard it is to get a present for a man who can buy anything he wants?”

“I don't want for anything. You gave me all I could have ever wanted when you let me marry you. My life is full with our little family.”

“Let you?” I burst out laughing. He rolls, pinning me under him. I slip my hands up his bare chest and around his neck. It never gets old waking up to this man.

“You agreed to marry me,” he huffs right back, making me smile up at him. I did. Who wouldn't? Marrying him was the best decision I ever made in my life. Us being together was inevitable. The things Tyson has not only done for me but the boys has him owning every part of me. He showed me the kind of man he is. One I'll never let go. One that I want to have my own babies with.

“I did. I let you put a baby inside of me too,” I tell him. I was going to give him the positive test in a little box I wrapped

for Christmas today.

I'd been feeling off the past few days. I was sure it was too soon for me to be pregnant. I hadn't been off my birth control long. The only thing that had been holding me back from us having a baby is wanting my brothers to grow up a bit more. They deserved as much attention as I could give them. Logan is about to hit his teens and has his own little life with his friends.

Dean is a senior in high school now. He's graduating with a full ride for football. I wanted a bit of space between them and any children Tyson and I had. I also wanted to enjoy some time alone with my own husband before we had little ones under foot.

"I knew it!" he shouts.

"Yeah, apparently before I did."

"I know this body." His hand comes to my belly before he presses his mouth to mine in a soft kiss. It doesn't last long before he's springing from the bed. "I'll make breakfast."

"It's Christmas," I remind him before he tries to make a feast thinking he needs to feed me more than I'll ever be able to eat. We always have a giant dinner in the afternoon on Christmas.

"I know. Parents will be here in a few hours." I glance at the clock on the nightstand to see it's nine. "I'll make something light."

"You can tell them." I reach out and snag Tyson around the wrist. "They're going to be excited."

"Yeah, Mom is going to lose it." He leans back down over the bed, brushing some of my hair out of my face. His eyes lock with mine. "Love you."

"I love you, too." He kisses me again before leaving me in our bed. I sit up, thinking how different my life is.

My mother has been out of our lives for years. I don't have any idea where she is. Tyson and his father Rick pulled some

strings and got me custody of the boys. I'll never forget that day when Tyson handed me those papers signed by the judge.

I had no idea how much anxiety I was holding in until he cut me free with that piece of paper. I cried for hours. Tyson held me close, never letting go. Now they're ours. Not only Tyson's and mine but Rick and Cherie's too.

They've not only been parents to me but in a way to the boys as well. They fill the spot as grandparents to them too. They're both good at being what any of us need them to be. Last year, we all got our last names changed to Carter.

Dean had asked about it when his name was starting to get noticed. Both Cherie and Rick lost it when we showed them the final papers last Christmas. I suppose a new grandchild is the only way to beat last year's gifts.

I snag my robe from the bathroom before I can go in search of my boys. I pass the living room to see Dean in there with his girlfriend Cara, giving her a present.

They both give me a Merry Christmas as I walk by toward the kitchen. I know Dean and Tyson aren't related, but sometimes they can be so alike it can be freaky. Like Dean's obsession with Cara. When I hear her little squeals, I know he gave her the promise ring I'd help him pick out a few weeks ago when we went shopping.

"Do I smell cinnamon?" I ask, stepping into the kitchen.

"My wife is knocked up. Of course you smell cinnamon. I'm making your favorite." He lifts me off my feet and sets me on the giant kitchen island. He's already got a cup of hot chocolate waiting for me. "You feel all right?" he asks as Logan comes strolling into the kitchen, plopping down in one of the chairs. He always shows up when the smell of food starts to fill the house.

A house Tyson built for me not far from his parents. Think that's what I love most about it even in all its beauty.

"I feel amazing." Tears fill my eyes. "How do our Christmases keep getting better?"

“You,” he says simply, making my insides melt. Tyson always thinks I’m the world. I suppose to him, I am. I shake my head.

“It’s you.” I might have worked my ass off, but I never believed I deserved certain things. Tyson showed me I did. He made me reach for the stars that I thought were impossible. But with his love and support, I no longer doubt myself. I know anything is possible.

“All of us,” Logan says. “Family.”

“Our family,” I add.

That’s what it’s all about. As long as we’re together, it will always be a perfect Christmas.

* * *

My loves,

This is the last book of the year. The year flew by yet I have almost no recollection of it. It’s been a strange couple of years and I’m so thankful that you’ve been with me during this time. Writing these stories and having you read them is the only thing that helped me get through the year. Please stay safe and sane this holiday season. I love you.

xoxo Ella

king's castle



King built his fortress to keep people out, not in. After his abusive old man kicked the bucket, King took the family fortune and built a haven for women and children who needed protection. He has one rule and that is the women decide when they get to leave. When Hayden shows up, all his self-discipline goes out the window. He's ready to risk it all to keep her...even against her will.

Hayden came to find her sister—not a man—but one look at King has all her female parts kicking into high gear. He's autocratic and demanding and everything she shouldn't like but she can't help being attracted to the soft heart he keeps hidden. She should run away but every moment she spends with him has her wishing that her home could be the King's Castle.



one

“CABINS three and six are occupied. Cabin two is reserved for our incoming guest. Number four should be here in”—I glance at my watch—“thirty minutes. Number five and seven are being cleaned. How long is the waiting list?”

Cynthia checks her tablet. “Twelve, King.”

“Damn.” The number never gets smaller. “When can we start construction of the rest of the cabins?”

“Not until March at the earliest.” Her glum tone matches my mood.

I pat her awkwardly on the back. “Nothing we can do for now. Why don’t you see what the girls in five and seven need since we’ve got the occupants flying in tomorrow?”

“Flying?” Cyn’s lip curls up.

“Jake’s picking them up.”

“Ugh.”

“What’s up with you and Jake anyway?”

“He’s a man and men suck.”

“I’m right here.”

“I’m sorry but it’s not my fault you were born with a dick.”

I drop my hand protectively around my crotch. “I’m a fan of my dick.”

“No one else is,” Cyn informs me.

“I mean...that’s your opinion.”

“No one here likes dicks. Dicks are bad and Jake has a dick.”

“I’ll take your word for it.” I haven’t checked out Jake’s package and have no intention of doing so.

“We should get a female pilot.” Cyn makes a note in the tablet while I fold the week’s itinerary and tuck it into my back pocket.

“If you find one, let me know.”

“I’ll put an ad in the paper.” Cyn jots something down. Probably, how to get rid of a body in the north woods.

“We live in a town of five hundred,” I remind my cousin.

“If you offer enough, you could lure someone out here.” Her chin comes out, as it always does when she is feeling particularly aggressive. “Aren’t you getting a doctor to come here?”

“Maybe? The jury’s still out. She may take one look at this place and hate it. She’s a city girl.” Cyn makes a disgusted face. “If she doesn’t like it, we don’t want her here.”

“Pretty soon you’ll be kicking me out,” I joke.

The ominous silence that greets me is a tad alarming, but since my name is on the deed and it’s my bank account that funds this haven I think I’m safe, although maybe I’ll start locking my door at night.

The doorbell rings and Cyn’s sassy mood dissipates. She folds the tablet across her chest and looks warily at the door. Inwardly, I curse out her ex. He’s in jail now and he better die there because the minute he steps out of his cell, I’m killing him.

“I thought you were checking on five and seven,” I prompt.

Cyn makes a jerky motion with her head, momentarily lost in a bad memory so I throw out, “Don’t forget Jake is coming. You probably want to condition your hair or something so you look nice for him.”

“In his dreams,” she snaps. And she’s back. She stomps out, letting the screen door slam noisily behind her as if to punctuate how much she dislikes Jake.

She doesn’t fully recognize that her so-called hate for Jake outpaces her fear of men, but I’m grateful for it, so even if she does find a female pilot, I’ll never fire Jake.

I couldn’t even if I wanted to. It’s his ‘copter and his time that he volunteers to pick up women in need of escape and bring them here. If I told him that he couldn’t land in my backyard, he’d put his bird down in the middle of the road and wait for Cyn. He’s determined to have her. He feels like he missed his chance back when they were kids. He’s right. He should’ve taken her away even though she was only eighteen and her daddy hated him. It’s not like Uncle Greg was a good judge of character. While I was off doing top secret shit for the government, Uncle Greg sold Cyn to the highest bidder—a man twenty years Cyn’s senior. He mistreated her bad, beating her up because he couldn’t get a rise out of his pecker. He thought a young wife would change things. It didn’t.

I wasn’t around to save her. Jake saw to that and I’ll be forever grateful. But she wasn’t ready to acknowledge either his feelings or his actions. I had my own wounds to lick. War’s not good for anyone’s mental health, so I brought her up here and we built this shelter together.

Cyn’s got a whole network she’s developed. Women who are in need of assistance, who need to go off the grid or who just need a place to hide for a while contact her. We feed them, clothe them, and help them find new jobs—sometimes even new identities. This place isn’t known to many people so Cyn had a right to feel a certain sense of unease at the ringing of the doorbell. No one who knows us would use it. No one who knows us would lean on the damn buzzer and let it ring endlessly like the person is doing now, being a damned nuisance. I grab my sidearm, slide it into the shoulder holster, and pull open the door.

I don’t know who’s more surprised—the tasty morsel with the long dark hair looking up at me or me with my cock

coming to instant attention as I fall ass over heels into a pair of the prettiest brown eyes to have ever seen a sunset.

“Where’s Danny?” my future wife demands.

Danny? Oh, hell, no. The woman of my dreams can’t be looking for a man. I’m right here. Good thing I’ve got the gun. “Who the fuck is Danny?” I scowl.

She scowls right back. “Who the fuck are you to ask me who the fuck Danny is?”

“I’m King.”

“So?”

“So you asked me who I was. Now it’s your turn.”

Her nose goes up. “My mama taught me not to talk to strangers.”

“Then what are you doing on my doorstep?”

“Getting Danny back!” She wriggles by me and starts yelling, “Danny! Danny!”

I don’t bother to tell her the house is empty because the truth is, I’ve got her just where I want her.



two

I LOOK around the beautiful giant cabin but don't see my sister anywhere. I turn back to the man that is too handsome for his own good or maybe for mine. I was taken aback when he'd opened the door. No wonder my sister took a job here. I don't blame her on that accord but she will be coming home or back to *her* home in the city. She isn't running. It is a bunch of bullshit and I am going to tell her that. I'm not planning on letting some jerkface like Brandon run her off. He isn't worth it and both of us know it. She had taken off before I realized exactly what she had planned.

“Where is Danny?” I ask again. My patience is starting to wear thin. This is the address she told me she was going to. I got her letter in the mail two days ago. I still can't believe she sent a letter in the freaking mail. Who does that? I know I live in the country but it's not like we don't have social media and email. Not to mention cell phones. Hell, Danny is the one that made me get on social media to begin with. Then in a blink of an eye, all of hers were gone. I have a feeling that it's because of Brandon. I'm going to show that man what stalking is.

“I have no idea who Danny is.” The big man crosses his arms over his chest, making him look bigger than he already does. Not that it takes much. I barely come in a few inches over five foot, so most people look big compared to me. But this man is giant sized. The muscles under his shirt sleeves beg to be let out and I can tell by the callused hands that he's no stranger to hard work. He stares at me. Taking me in as I return the favor.

“That supposed to be intimidating?” I ask, putting my hands on my hips. Not wanting him to think that I was checking him out. Sure he’s handsome but I’m not here for that. I’m here to get Danny and bring her home. I might be small but I am quick on my feet. It comes with the job. He drops his arms from his chest immediately.

“I do my best to never intimidate females.” His voice is calm. Almost lazy. “That’s the opposite of what we do here. In fact, I’m going to have to have you tell me who you are and why you’re here. I can’t let random people just roam around my land.”

“Give me Danny and I’ll be gone.” I give a fake sweetness to my voice, adding in a smile as an extra bonus.

“If you’re looking for a man you won’t find him here.” He smirks. “Alive at least.” He winks at me and I don’t know if he’s joking or not.

“Liar. You let Jake roam around here.” A beautiful woman comes strolling in from somewhere in the back of the house. She has the blondest hair I’ve ever seen. It’s almost white. With her bright blue eyes, she’s breathtaking. My own eyes go straight for her ring finger but I’ll never admit that. Not even to myself. The weird feeling I got in my stomach when I thought this big lug was married is scary. I’d felt a pang of jealousy and that doesn’t fit my personality type at all. I guess there’s a first time for everything.

I look back to the man that I’ve been having my showdown with. I realize that this gorgeous woman and he have matching eyes. Prompting me to guess that they’re related. My stomach settles at this revelation and everything is right in the world again, besides me not being able to find Danny.

“Jake is a good one, Cyn.”

She purses her lips but doesn’t tell him he’s wrong as she glares at him.

“You looking for a place, sweetheart?” Her voice is soft and kind for me.

“I’m looking for my sister. She said she was coming here for a new job. Danny Weston.” I go with asking Cyn because I’m not getting anywhere with GI Joe meets lumberjack.

“Doc Danielle Weston,” Cyn confirms.

“Yes! She said she took a job here.” I run my hands over my eyes, feeling tired all of a sudden but relieved that I am in the right place. It sure as hell was no easy feat getting to this secluded area. “This is the King Center, right?”

“Yeah. I’m Cyn King.” The woman reaches her hand out, taking mine. “I’m guessing my cousin didn’t introduce himself. Everyone just calls him King.”

“That like an ego boost thing?” I smirk. I don’t know why I want to poke at him but I do. It’s like I’m in grade school and I’m picking on him because I don’t like the feelings he’s stirring up inside—or more that I don’t understand them. It’s childish but it keeps on popping out of my mouth. Mama did say I never knew how to quit when I was ahead. That hasn’t changed a bit over the years.

Cyn throws back her head and laughs. “I don’t know. Everyone has always called him by his last name. It’s just stuck.”

I turn to look at him. “What’s your first name?”

It’s his turn to smirk. “Maybe one day I’ll tell you.”

I furrow my eyebrows, having no idea what he means by that. I’m only here to get my sister. So I’m not sure when he plans on telling me this bit of information since I won’t be here longer than it takes me to find Danny.

“The new doc won’t be here until tomorrow.” His words break me from my thoughts. “I’d suggest you get some shut eye.”

“Why? Jake was flying her in tonight. Is something wrong?” I can hear the panic in Cyn’s voice, which scares me, too, if my sister is on the flight.

“No, the storm. It’s delayed them,” King tells her. “They are fine. In fact, it’s safer.”

Cyn nods and I wonder if this Jake is her boyfriend or something. Wait, she took a dig at him when she walked in here. Guess Cyn and I have something in common because I seem to enjoy taking them at King. I should lay off if he's the man my sister mentioned in her letter.

“With the storm bearing down and you wanting to see your sister I take it you'll be staying.”

Doesn't sound like a question really. “I'm not going anywhere.” I lift my chin.

“Good.” This time he full-on smiles. Cyn's eyes bounce between the two of us while her face remains scrunched, looking confused.

I guess I'll have a little more time to find out King's first name. Not that I should even care. But I do.



three

BAD WEATHER in the winter is a given around here. But I've never been so grateful about the inconvenience of being snowbound till about right now.

"Here's your room." I usher her into the suite across the hall from my own. "I didn't catch your name."

"She didn't share it," Cyn helpfully points out.

The brunette shrugs. "King isn't sharing his first name so why should I? You know my last name. It's the same as Danny's." She steps into the room and takes a look around.

"I can't call you 'girl' the whole time you're here." I wonder if she likes the decor. It's kind of rustic. I like things made out of natural materials. The bed is made out of sturdy oak. The sheets are pure cotton. The rugs are wool. Each of the cabins is different. Some are modern. Some are more European. Cyn decorated them thinking that if the women who came here could stay in places that made them feel good, then they might heal faster. And not everyone liked the cabin feel, which seems weird and false, but it's turned out to be true.

"I won't be here long enough for you to worry about that."

So she hates it.

"Maybe she should stay in one of the cabins," Cyn suggests. She must be getting the same vibe as I am. Guess I'm going to be redecorating. Until that gets done, this little intruder is going to have to deal.

"Those cabins just got cleaned and I don't want to put extra work on the staff."

Cyn rolls her eyes. She knows why I don't want to move this woman out to the cabins. I want Danny's sister to stay in as close proximity to me as possible, and since I doubt she's ready to be sleeping in my bed, the one next door is the next best thing.

"I'm fine anywhere. Like I said, I'm not going to stay long. As soon as Danny gets here, we will be out of your hair." She tosses her purse on the bed.

"Not to be a total downer, but unless Danny wants to leave, you can't take her."

The sister spins around and places her hands on her hips. "Who's going to stop me?"

I look at her small frame and then at my much larger one.

"Size doesn't matter," she huffs.

"Oh, it matters," I say softly. I'm a big man—everywhere.

"Ugh, gag me," Cyn interjects. "Can you not make suggestive comments like that in front of me? I'm your cousin, for crying out loud."

"And it's a good thing or I'd have kicked you out long ago if it wasn't for Aunt Marie."

"Rude. He's so rude," Cyn says to Danny's sister.

"I can see that. I'm really sorry you have to deal with it but you can also see why it's important for me to get Danny out of here."

"Ah, well—" Cyn scratches the side of her neck. "You see, what King said is accurate. We won't allow anyone to take Danny away unless she wants it."

"I'm her sister."

I can see the fire snapping in Cyn's eyes. I grab her elbow and drag her out of the room. "I definitely hear people calling for you."

The one great thing about Cyn is that she's pretty good at reading the room. She realizes she almost let things get out of control. She pulls out of my grip, adjusts her shirt, and says,

“Fine. I’ll go check on the cabins, but no one is taking Danny. Not even her sister.”

“I know.” I give Cyn a push. Those are our rules. Once a woman is under our protection, no one can take her away. You never know who’s pulling the strings in a woman’s family. Could be her mom or her dad or her brother or her abuser. It doesn’t matter to us who wants the woman back. It has to be her choice so even though I want to fuck the daylights out of Weston, not even she can take Danny out of the compound.

There’s no need to argue about it, though. Danny should be here tomorrow and can tell her sister that personally.

I poke my head back into the room where Weston is pulling open drawers. She stops when she hears me. “You have any luggage to bring up?”

She brushes her hair away from her face, a little flustered at being caught snooping. “No. I don’t intend to stay long so I have a change of...stuff in my purse.”

I eye the small satchel on the bed. She must mean underwear. In that case, she’ll need pajamas and something comfortable. “I’ll get you some clothes then. There are towels in the closet in the bathroom along with some toiletries.”

Cyn keeps us well stocked. There’s all kinds of smelly shit in the bathrooms.

“I like peach, if you’re wondering,” I tell her as I head across the hall to my room. I don’t hear her response, but I assume it’s sharp and maybe even profanity laden. I grin to myself. Weston’s a fiery girl with a mouth on her. I like it. A lot. I can’t wait for her smart mouth to be all over me, leaving bruise marks on my neck, my chest, and, most importantly, my cock. Even though there’s a whole room full of new clothes in all kinds of sizes, I opt to pull a sweatshirt and a pair of long gym shorts out of my own dresser. I’ve never had a woman wear my clothes before, but I know instinctively I’m going to like seeing Weston’s body draped in something of mine. She’s so fine, it makes my back teeth ache with want. A nice rack, curvy hips, a face so pretty that it makes my chest tighten every time I look at her.

I can't wait to make her mine. Hopefully that will be tonight. My cock is already hurting. I reach inside my jeans and adjust the heavy length. It's still obvious I have a hard-on but I don't really give a shit. She should know I want her.

I cross the hall and walk through the open door. "Got a man at home?" I toss the clothes on the bed. "You might want to call and apologize to him."

"For what?" She fingers the clothes.

"You're going to have to break up with him since you're going to be my woman now."

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"Just how life's going to be from now on. Also, I'll need to know your first name by the end of the day." I turn and head for my room again. I'm going to need to rub one out so I can function for the rest of the day.

"Why is my first name so important?" she calls after me.

"Because I'm not calling you Weston when I'm balls deep inside of you."



four

I ROLL my eyes at King's words. I think he's got it in his mind that his crude comments are going to annoy me but I spend half of my time in barns and fields with men, so not much affects me. I don't think there's anything that I haven't heard. Still even with that, I feel my face warm thinking about King actually being inside of me. The one place I've never let another man go. Again, because I hang out with too many of them and know that most only want one thing. Once they get what they're after, they move on to the next. I think deep down inside, I know if I give myself over to a man I'll turn into a stage five clinger. I get attached easily. It's why I keep most people at arm's length. People always leave. That's exactly what's brought me here.

My own sister left me. Even though I knew she had to, it still hurt me. She had no choice if she wanted to be a doctor but I guess I always thought she'd come back. There wasn't really anything to go back to at this point. The closest hospital to our little town is over two hours away. So, as I've said before, I can totally understand why Danny chose not to come back.

I am lucky in the fact that I chose to be a veterinary technician. There is plenty of work for me in our small town. Since we are in such a rural area, I've had to go with my boss Sawyer a time or two to make a house call to check on actual people. The man is a veterinarian, not a human doctor. Yet we've stitched up more people than we probably should have over the years.

I walk over to the bed, picking up the clothes King brought me. I could use a shower. It has been a long trip. I need to think about how I am going to get my sister to come home with me. If she doesn't want to be in the big city because of Brandon then why not just come home? This place looks almost as rural as being back home. None of it makes sense to me. I didn't receive a warm reaction from either Cyn or King when I suggested that I was taking Danny back with me. They seemed to get very protective over her. I must say that it worries me a bit. What is this place? My sister said she was coming here to work and lay low but I think I might be missing something. They keep talking about cabins but when I pulled up it didn't look like it was a hotel or retail place. There was no sign advertising lodging.

I turn on the shower, looking through the drawers in the bathroom. I find myself grabbing the peach body wash. I pull my hair up on top of my head before undressing and stepping into the warm water. I let out a small moan as it runs over me. All of the muscle aches from driving for hours melt away. I let my mind drift to different scenarios of why my sister is choosing to stay here.

If I get her back home and douchebag Brandon decides to show up there, I could shoot him then wrap him in a little bit of chicken wire, find a lake and bam, no more Brandon to worry about. As easy as my plan sounds, I don't actually think I could kill someone. I'm in the business of healing things, not destroying them. I still cry like a baby whenever we lose an animal at work. I don't care if the creature was twenty years old and lived his best life. I always spring a leak. It's the hardest part about my job.

I turn off the water after washing myself and grab a towel. None of my random shower thoughts matter. I know that if I were to off Brandon, Danny would head back to the city and I'd be left alone again. So many times I've debated just moving there to be with her but I'm really not sure I'd take so well to living in a big city. I always seemed to get lost or overwhelmed the few times I visited. There were too many people and no space to breathe. I don't know how Danny does

it. She said herself it can be a little much at times but if she wants to practice medicine, that is where she has to be to do it.

I head over to the bed to get the clothes King gave me. I'm not sure why but I lift the shirt to my nose, smelling it before I slip it on. It smells like him, woody and masculine. It's also ten sizes too big for me but I'll make do. I try and put on the shorts but they only fall off. The man really is a giant. I have to roll the top over and over again to get them to stay up. The shirt goes to my knees anyway.

I decide to forgo wearing underwear because let's face it, I only have one clean pair in my purse and I'll need those for tomorrow. I actually do have a suitcase in my truck; I just don't want to bring it inside. I don't know why but I have this feeling that if the suitcase comes into the house it's never going back out.

Kings vulgar words keep fluttering through my mind. I can't stop thinking about what it would feel like if he actually was *balls deep* inside of me. I don't usually get turned on by dirty talk but something about him has me feeling a certain way. I do my best to shake those thoughts from my head, remembering that I'm here for one reason and that's Danny.

I'm not here to be King's woman. Whatever the hell that even means. Maybe it has a totally different meaning in these parts. A smile flits across my mouth. Tomorrow, I may just lie to him and say that I tried to call my boyfriend but my phone isn't getting service. I decide that I'm going to do exactly that.

I'm way too excited to see his reaction when he thinks I belong to another man. I should feel bad but I don't since he was cocky and tried to declare that I was his. I don't take crap from anyone and this big, giant, no first name King guy isn't any different.



five

WHEN WESTON COMES DOWNSTAIRS the next morning wearing my clothes, I decide that I am an utter genius. “We’ll have to burn all of your clothes.”

“Why’s that?” She frowns.

“Because you won’t be wearing anything that’s not mine anymore. Got a call from Jake and he and your sister should be here this afternoon. What do you want to eat?”

“I’m not hungry and there will be no burning of anything.” She holds up her phone with the charging cord dangling from it. “Do you have a plugin I can use? I need to call my boyfriend.”

My good mood heads straight down the shitter. “Your what?”

I thought we had already cleared the fact that she had no man in her life.

“My boyfriend. He’s an MMA fighter. Very big. Fit.” Her eyes sweep over me and I see a flicker of interest before it disappears. “Toned. Sexy.”

She throws out the one-word adjectives like she’s trying to create a shield against her attraction to me. It’s some real bullshit. I fold my arms across my chest.

“No. There are no chargers in this house.” Absolutely zero for her purpose.

She points to the wall. “Won’t that plugin over there fit?”

I spin out of my chair and snatch the charger out of the wall, throw it on the ground and crush it beneath my boot heel. Whistling tunelessly, I pretend none of that happened and say, “I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

Her nose goes up. “Fine. It’s not like I need it. I still have fifty percent charge on my phone which is more than enough for me to have a sweet conversation with my man.”

I see two options here. Her phone gets destroyed or we go someplace where there’s no cell service. The broken plastic and wires crunch underfoot as I walk toward her. She backs up, holding her phone protectively to her chest. The back of the couch stops her progress.

I lean forward. She leans backward. She feels warm from this distance, like a little radiator that could heat you up during the cold winter nights. She smells good, too. I inhale and catch the faint hint of peaches. A smile flits across my lips. She’s not as immune to me as she pretends to be. Guess her phone is safe. If she has a man, she’ll be breaking up with him because Weston belongs to me.

“Wh-what are you doing?” She stutters.

I’m going to play her bluff. I pluck the phone from her limp grip. “Calling your boyfriend. What’s his number?”

“Ah, well, I don’t know if he’s home right now. He travels a lot for sales.”

“I thought you said he was an MMA fighter.”

“Oh, right, well—” She brushes a nervous hand across her forehead. “He’s selling his services. His fighting services.”

“What’s his name? I watch some MMA. I might have seen him.”

“I highly doubt that!” She says in a high-pitched, anxious tone. The pulse point in her neck flutters wildly. I’d like to press my lips at that very spot and feel her heart beat against my mouth. Soon. That’ll happen very soon.

“Maybe we could search him up on the internet and watch some of his moves so I know what I’m getting into.”

“He’s busy,” she repeats testily.

“Then while your phone is charging, we’ll go and feed the dogs.” I straighten, pulling her upright. Her breasts brush my chest and my dick instantly stands to attention. I can tell by her small gasp and widening eyes that my hard-on does not go unnoticed.

“That’s right, baby,” I tell her. “It doesn’t matter who you have in your little favorites list, the only man in your life from this day on is going to be me.”

I leave her there, bracing herself against the sofa and march over to the utility drawer in the kitchen. Inside there’s a spare adapter. I attach her phone cord and plug it in.

“I thought you said you didn’t have a plugin.”

“Guess I was wrong.” From the hall closet, I find a pair of rubber boots, soft socks and a big down coat that’ll cover her from neck to ankle. I add a couple foot warmers for good measure. “Come over here and get geared up. The dogs are hungry.”

It takes her a few seconds to compose herself. I’m not sure what she’s grappling with—her desire or mine. Either way, we’ll have to do something about it tonight or neither of us are going to get any sleep.

“What kind of dogs do you have?” She asks as she approaches.

“Sled dogs. I’ve got a couple malamutes and a husky. They’re a little rambunctious but friendly. You scared of them?”

She shakes her head. “No. I love dogs.”

“Good. Put your feet into here.” I hold the socks up for her. Her hand comes down to rest lightly on my shoulder while she shoves her dainty foot inside, the pale toes disappearing into the wool. I’ll be sucking on those later. I pull the long wool up over her muscular calves and underneath the hem of the gym shorts. Her breath hitches when my fingers brush against the tender skin behind her knee and then stops altogether when my hands stop around her lower thigh. Her legs tremble under my

touch and the hand on my shoulder becomes heavier as she forgets that she doesn't want me close. I could nudge up the shorts with my nose. I could sweep my hands higher under these baggy shorts. The heat coming from the core of her body is tempting me. It's as if there's no barrier between her sex and my hand and if I'd just move up slightly, I'd be able to feel the wet fire of her cunt. My hands move slowly, waiting for a sign to stop, but there's nothing but silence.

"I'm about two seconds away from petting your pussy so if you don't want that to happen, you better tell me now."

A hand slaps on top of mine. "Stop." It's softly spoken but a no's a no in my world.

My hands fall to the ground and I lean my head against her thigh, waiting for some blood to return to my brain. I shouldn't have ever said a word. If I'd kept my big mouth shut, I'd be knuckle deep in her cunt at this very moment, feeling her wet walls squeeze my fingers as I fucked her with my hand. Then I'd turn her over the sofa, get my cock out, and bury myself inside of her. Fuck me and fuck my principles.



six

I GASP as we step outside into the cold. I'm thankful for it. It chills my heated body while quickly distracting me from what I'm feeling toward King. It took everything in me to tell him to stop. I had to force the words past my lips. I'd regretted saying them instantly and wished I could have taken them back. This attraction I have for him is something that I can't understand. I've never felt this toward a man before. I mean, I've found men handsome but they've never made me ache for them. I don't want to instigate it but still I keep poking at him to get a rise. I love how his jaw clenches and the heat flashes in his eyes when I do it. He'd gotten so jealous over the whole boyfriend story that I made up. I know it was a little immature but I don't appreciate him trying to boss me so I needed to needle him a bit. I'd be lying if I didn't admit how much I enjoyed his reaction.

Over the years I've worked around a lot of men and none of them ever tried to hit on me. To them, I was always one of the guys. If Danny were here she'd call bullshit on that one but she couldn't argue with the fact that no one has ever asked me out or declared that I was their woman. It's probably because they know better. It would get them a quick punch to their nuts but I don't find myself wanting to punch King. Especially not in his nuts. Those seem important to me now. Everything about him does. That's what has me on edge with him. He evokes feelings in me that I have no right having. I'm here for Danny and I need to keep reminding myself of that.

It gets cold in the winter where I'm from but this is a whole other level. The wind isn't helping much by picking up some of the snow and blowing it around. I take a step into the

mound of it, wondering how deep it has gotten now. The cold might be worth it seeing how beautiful it is here. I misjudged the depth of the snow and realize a little too late how deep it really is. I start to fall but a giant arm wraps around me, keeping me from face planting into the snow.

“Careful, Slick.” He pulls me into his warm body while wrapping his arms around me. “We’re going to have to get you better winter gear. As much as I enjoy seeing you in my clothes, I want you warm and safe more.”

“I’m not staying. Don’t waste your time or effort getting me any gear.” I tilt my chin up in defiance. “I’m here for my sister,” I remind him and myself. I’m not sure who needs the reminder more at this point.

“Whatever you say, Slick.”

I narrow my eyes on him. “Why are you calling me that?”

He starts walking, guiding me with him so that I don’t fall over in the snow. “You got a slick mouth that’s going to get you a tanned ass.”

My mouth falls open.

“You did not just say that,” I whisper loudly in shock. So much for the cold air cooling down my body. It lights up all over again like when he was dressing me. Before I can come up with a good retort, I notice two big dogs happily running toward me. King lets out a whistle and they both immediately stop running and sit at attention, obeying his command. I have to say that I can’t blame them. I know if I let it, my body would listen to whatever order he gave it.

“They’re beautiful.” A moment later two more come running from around a barn. They see the other two dogs sitting and do the same. They wait next to each other as they stare at King waiting for his next order. It’s easy to see who the alpha is around here.

He gives another whistle, this one lower. They jump up and continue to run our way. They circle around us. I think they are going to jump up on him but they don’t. I can tell they want to but have been trained not to. I drop to my knees, not

caring if I get covered in snow. I'm going to die if I don't get to pet them soon. Unlike with King, all of them bombard me, practically knocking me over in the snow as they try to lick my face. I laugh as I try to give them each a little attention. Our fun comes to a halt when King throws out some command having them act all serious again. I watch as he walks over and reaches out his hand to help me up.

"Seems as though you cause everyone to act out of place when you're around, Slick." This time I laugh. I'm going to pretend I'm on a cuteness high from all of the adorable dogs.

"They are sled dogs?" I reach down and pet the smallest one's head. He leans into my side, enjoying my attention.

"I take them out a few times a week. They enjoy it but mainly they keep an eye on things around here."

I look around and see small cabins placed all about. Not too close together so you can have privacy but close enough with walkways that look to be shoveled already from the last bout of snow.

"What is this place? My sister said she was coming here to lay low. To lend a hand." There is more to this place than I'm putting together.

"I'm kind of hoping your sister stays. Cyn made up our nicest cabin just for her." My stomach knots. Not only because I want my sister to come home with me but jealousy curls its ugly head and I get a taste of my own medicine.

"Sorry to break it to you but she's going where I'm going. Home." I watch as a small spark of irritation crosses his face before it turns into a smirk.

"I guess she's staying then because your home is where I am and I'm here."



seven

SHE OPENS her mouth and I know something smart was coming out but at the last moment she decides against it. I'm disappointed. I like sparring with her. It shows she's not afraid of me.

I crouch down close to her. She needs to get used to feeling me by her side at all times—so used to it that when I'm not there, she doesn't feel right.

“What is it that you do when you're not trying to rescue your sister?”

Slick snaps her fingers in my face. “Ah ha,” she crows. “So you admit my sister needs rescuing.”

“Nah. I'm just repeating what you said earlier. Your sister's fine. She'll like it here and when she's ready she can leave if she wants. No one is keeping her any place she doesn't want to be. Are you avoiding my question because you're embarrassed about your job? You shouldn't be. All jobs are valid.”

“I'm a vet tech and if she can leave whenever she wants, then as soon as your Jake brings her, we'll be gone.”

I opt not to respond because it'll only be repetitive. I'm keeping Slick and nothing will change my mind. “What's a vet tech do?”

“Everything a vet does but surgery.”

“Hmm. That's good. I've always wanted more animals here, but don't have much experience with taking care of them.” I dig my hands into Blue's ruff and give it a good

scratch. The old boy rubs his chin against my knee. “Having a vet tech on staff will make a big difference. Guess we’ll have to build a barn. Think it should be heated?”

“Heated barns are nice but really expensive. I’ve heard if you use radiant floor heating it’s better—” Slick stops petting Lucy and shoots me an annoyed look. “There’s no *we* here so if you build a barn, it’s because you want to and no other reason.”

She’s really set on keeping her distance. I’m starting to wonder if it’s going to take more than a day to get her into my bed. My dick howls its metaphorical head off in dismay.

“Heated barn with a radiant floor it is. I’ll fly an architect up here tomorrow. Jake and Cyn can go fetch him.”

“Didn’t you hear what I said?”

“I did.” I give Blue one last firm pat before standing. “But your words don’t track with my plans so I’m ignoring them.” I hold out a hand. “Want to take a tour of the cabins? I’ve got two empties waiting for their visitors if you want to see.” I know she’s curious. Every time I’ve mentioned the cabins, a questioning light pops into her eyes.

“If you’re ignoring my words, I’m ignoring yours.” She disregards my hand and rises on her own, dusting her hands against her jacket. “You may show me a cabin.” She jerks her chin like she’s the Queen of England. I love it.

“Come on then, Slick.” I head in the direction of cabin number five. The walk is cleared but there’s quite a bit of snow to cover before we hit pavement. I’d have taken her hand in mine, but she might’ve slapped me and in the cold, that sort of blow can sting like a mothereffer. As we walk side by side, I keep an eye out for Slick, who is struggling a bit with the long coat. After watching her wobble a third time, I sweep her into my arms.

“I can walk,” she declares, batting her hands against the steel cage of my arms.

“Yeah, I know. You can talk, shower, and eat by yourself, too, but someday I’m going to kiss you until you’re breathless,

eat you out while the water rains down on your head, and feed you from my own hand so you might as well get used to me doing things for you now. Besides, I think Blue and Lucy were getting worried they were going to have to drag you out by your collar if you fell down.” The two dogs hop excitedly through the snow beside us.

The small pats turn to punches from her newly formed fists. “You are delusional!” she shouts. “Even if I wasn’t here for my sister, I wouldn’t climb into bed with a man who has clearly lost it.”

I set her down on the front stoop. “If you say so.” I open the door to cabin five and step aside. Cabin five is minimalist with heated cement floors, black custom cabinetry and a bank of windows that make you feel like you’re living outside. A cast iron stove hangs from the ceiling in the middle of the room to provide additional heat.

“This isn’t going to be my sister’s place. She’d hate it here,” Slick announces, but I notice that she seems interested. She trails her hands over the marble counter before checking out the fireplace. “You never told me what you do for a living or what this place is.”

“I don’t do anything but live here at the retreat.” At least, that’s what Cyn says. I do the books, invest my money, help build the cabins, fix any maintenance issues, and make sure the boogie man stays away from the gate.

She swings away from the fireplace and pins a narrow-eyed gaze on me. “How do you afford this? Is it drugs?”

“Not drugs. My old man had a lot of money and when he died, it came to me.” The old man meant to change his will but was too busy beating on my mom and sticking his dick into every passing vagina that he never got around to it. Medical reports say he died of a heart attack but I wouldn’t be surprised if one of his bedmates got tired of him and slipped something into his drink. “And this place”—I hold out my arms—“is for women and girls who need a place to stay while their shit gets sorted. My mom needed one of these but didn’t have it so she passed away from one fist to the gut too many.” The doc who

treated her told me she didn't have to die, that the injuries weren't internal but her heart gave out anyway. I understood. I didn't want to stay living around my old man either.

“Are you saying that my sister's stalker...” She trails off, not wanting to finish the sentence, not wanting to be in a situation where someone she cares about was being abused and she didn't know.

“I'm not saying anything like that.” The two sisters are going to have to talk this issue out on their own. “But your sister needed a refuge and cabin number two was empty.”

Slick doesn't look convinced. In fact, she looks downright miserable. It's time for hot cocoa, some peppermint schnapps, and a fire, I decide. “The dogs are cold,” I lie. “I need to get them inside. Ready to go back to the house?”

Slick nods. The lure of the animals is too much for her to deny, even though she's feeling glum. I pick her up again and this time her protests are feeble. She's preoccupied with the information about her sister. If the dogs and the booze and the fire don't distract her, I guess I'll have to use something else.



eight

“ISN'T this the best croissant you've ever eaten?” Cyn says as she pushes another plateful toward me on the coffee table. She covers them in a warm honey butter that is like heaven when it hits my tongue. I'm sitting in the living room on the floor surrounded by the dogs with a fire blazing away. I am warm and full. I can understand why a woman would want to come here. It feels safe and accepting. Almost as though you're home. My mind is still whirling with everything King told me about this place and it gives me a better understanding of why my sister would want to be here.

“Why are you being so nice to me now?” I lick my fingers. “What are you after? I'm better when people shoot it straight with me.” I grab another warm croissant as I pet Winter's head. She's quickly becoming my favorite. I'm pretty sure at one time she was the runt of her litter. She's smaller than the other dogs and seems a bit clingier.

“As much as King and I tend to bicker I don't think I'd like the idea of him not living close to me. We're cousins but it often feels more like we're brother and sister.” I already have an idea of where she's going with this. “He traveled a lot when he was in the Army. He's back here now and it would hurt if he left again.” I can understand that. It's the same way that I feel about Danny.

“So you should get it. I want my sister to come back home.”

“I do. But I think you're forgetting that your sister is the one that wanted to come here. She needs a place to lay low and well—” Cyn lets out a long sigh— “we kinda need her

too. Your sister is a doctor. A top notch one at that. Ours is getting older. She wants to retire. We don't just need one but the town could use one too."

"I need to talk to her," I admit. There is so much more happening here than I know. This isn't as easy as I thought it was going to be. To top it off, King isn't helping me keep my head on straight. With every promise, or better yet, demand, he makes to me, I soften a little more toward him. He both frustrates and excites me at the same time.

"I think we might need you, too."

"I'm just a vet tech." I rub Snowflake's head. She rolls over, showing me her belly. I give it a little rub.

"I'm talking about King."

I peek over at her. "What about him?" I try and play it cool. He left me in the living room to do some work. Told me that my sister would be here soon.

"I don't know. You did something to him. He's acting all weird." She reaches over and grabs my hand. "Don't take him with you. We need him here, too. He keeps everyone safe."

I can see the worry in her eyes. Our conversation from a little while ago makes a little more sense now. She's afraid of losing him so I need to reassure her that I'm only here for one reason and it's not King.

"I only came for my sister." Something funny settles in my stomach as the words leave my mouth. I put the half-eaten croissant back on the plate, suddenly losing my appetite. Why does talking about leaving here upset me? I think King is doing something to me, too. I oddly enjoy all of his manhandling ways and straightforward comments. Sure, I pretend they irritate me but it makes me feel girly. Sexy even. For once, I'm not just one of the boys. He sees me in a different light and I'm eating it up. Not only that, he is making all these plans as though we are some done deal. Plans that are all too enticing, but they should send me running for the hills.

"That might be why you came to begin with but things tend to change rather quickly. Kind of like the weather around

here. One minute it's calm and then the next thing you know, it's a full-blown blizzard." I keep quiet because I know she's right. King already has me feeling unsettled. "Especially when it comes to matters of the heart."

"You and Jake? Is that a matter of the heart?" Every time his name comes up her eyes light up but then she hides it.

"There is no Jake and me." I can see the sadness in her eyes. "He's a good man but I'm not sure I have a full heart to give him." Oh shit. If I was on the fence about Cyn before now she just pushed me right on over to liking her. I realize that I haven't really had any girl time since Danny moved away. It's nice to have someone to talk to about things. Even if neither one of us is willing to admit to our feelings.

"But you spend your life healing other's hearts. Making them feel safe."

She thinks about this for a moment. "Those who can't do, teach?" She cocks a half smile but it doesn't meet her eyes. I want to tell her that the only person she's fooling is herself but I keep it to myself. She's not ready, and I not only respect that, but I can also relate to it. I'm the last person that should be giving out advice about relationships since I've never been in one.

Unless you ask King. Apparently, he and I are in a committed relationship that he is already making all kinds of plans for.

I don't only need to talk to my sister, but I need to clear my own head. Maybe a small taste of what King is trying to offer might help me with that. What's the worst that could happen?



nine

AFTER CYN LEFT I moved into the living room with my laptop, wanting to be close to Slick. I'm doing the books when I hear, "So I heard sex is good for getting rid of tension."

My head whips up so fast, I have to double-check to see if I broke my neck. Slick is bringing up sex? I run my fingers along my vertebrae and try to work out what she's saying. Is it just an innocent question or is it an invitation?

"That's what I've heard," I respond, trying to feel her out. "You tense?"

She shrugs, stretching out her legs in front of the fireplace. "I'm worried about Danny, I guess."

"She should be here soon. Sounds like you need a distraction."

She peeks at me under a veil of lashes. "Maybe I do."

"Can't have any guest of mine suffering from a spot of anxiety." I set my laptop aside and pat my lap. If she climbs on top of me, I'll know exactly what she wants.

She stands immediately and all the blood in my head drops to my dick.

"Should I take off my clothes?" she asks. Her voice is small now; her bravado not as loud.

"Nope." I can tell she's not quite there yet. Whether it's because she's shy about her body or she's nervous about letting me get her off, it's not clear, which is why I'm not going to have her remove even her shirt.

I pat the top of my thigh. “Hop on over.”

She takes a step toward me. “How is this going to work?” Her eyes have a suspicious light in them. I crack my knuckles in anticipation. She’s not convinced I can make her come without her clothes off and my dick inside of her and while that day will come soon, I suspect it won’t be tonight. I’m still going to thoroughly enjoy this moment.

“I’m going to touch you. You’re going to tell me what you like and what you don’t like and then I’m going to make you come.”

“I don’t think you can.”

Yup, she has doubts, which is fine by me.

“If I don’t make you come, I’ll tell Jake to fly you and your sister anywhere you want tomorrow.”

She lowers herself to my thigh and throws out her arms. “Do your worst.”

I rearrange her so her ass is snug against my thickening cock and her legs are draped over my thighs. She squeaks as I position her.

“Problem?”

“N-no problem,” she says but it’s obvious this kind of thing is new for her. The fact that she’s a virgin fills me with a bad sort of bestial pleasure. I’ll be the first to touch her cunt. The first to pierce her sex. The first to claim her. It’s the thinking of a caveman, a Neanderthal, but I can’t stop it. My cock throbs in anticipation. Sinking in to her hot cunt will be the end of me. I’ll be ready to stop my life right then. What could possibly be better?

Desire thrums in my veins. I stroke my hand down her arm and try to calm myself, but touching her only makes me harder, fills me with more want. I draw a hand over her back and feel her tremble under my touch. It’s a good thing my jeans are zipped and there are two layers of clothing between my cock and her bare pussy or I’d be inside of her right now. I clear my throat and try to rein in the desire to flip her over onto her knees and take her.

“You touch yourself?” I ask. My voice is hoarse with lust.

“Of course,” she retorts over her shoulder.

I slide my hand over her hand and rest it on her upper thigh. “Under your clothes or over your panties? You slide your fingers into your warm cunt or you put a shower head to your little clit?”

She squirms her fine ass against my cock, sending bolts of arousal through my already molten blood. I bite down on my inner cheek so I don’t come like a schoolboy.

“You seem to know a lot about a girl’s masturbation,” she says when she finds her voice.

“I’m a literate man, Slick. I can read. Now lean your head back against my shoulder.” I stroke her inner thigh and press her legs even farther apart until the spandex stretches thin against her pussy. I touch her lightly over her clothes. Her lips are plump and her sex is hot. “You feel the rod against your ass, Slick? One of these days, we’re taking your pants off and you’re going to sit on my cock. Every time you wriggle your ass, you’re going to feel my hard shaft in different places and it’s going to make you come hard.”

“You’ve been saying all day you’re going to take me but all I feel is your hand between my legs,” she snaps.

“Oh, so you want to be a brat, do you?” I smile. This is even better than I thought it would be. “Tell me if this hurts.” I smack her pussy.

She yelps. “What did you just do?”

I smack her again. “Did it hurt?”

“Of course it hurts.”

What a pretty little liar. She nearly came on that second hit. I take my hand away and place it on her thigh, stroking my fingers up and down that firm surface, coming close to her cunt but never touching it.

She coughs lightly and wriggles again, trying for that contact.

“You want something, Slick?”

“I thought you were going to make me”—wriggle wriggle—“come.”

“You gotta be honest then. That’s how this works. You tell me if you like it when I’m caging your pussy lips between my fingers or rubbing circles around your clit. When I slap you, you tell me if you want it harder.” I slide my hand up and press the side of it firmly against her sex. I can feel her muscles contract. “Tell me,” I order.

Her mouth remains stubbornly closed. I move my hand away. She grabs it, digging her nails into my palm. “Do what you said you were going to do.”

A true brat. I bring our hands down hard on her covered pussy. She jerks and screams at the contact, her whole body tensing as a small orgasm rolls through her. I kiss the side of her ear and press her tightly against my chest. “We’re just warming up, Slick. You should hang on.”

I bracket her pussy lips with my index and middle finger and start drawing them back and forth. She writhes on my lap, a sexy demon ruining me with every rub and motion. My own erection grows thicker, stiffer.

“Not enough,” she gasps. She wants more and I want to give it to her. I reach under her shirt and free her breasts. Slick moans when my fingers close around her plump flesh.

“Your tits are soft, babe. Softer than a—” I stop because there isn’t anything that compares. I pull the cups down and pull her tits out. I pinch one nipple and then the other, reveling in her soft gasps and her squirming ass. I want to come so bad. I want to pull out my cock, lift her up and ram into her in one swift motion. I want to fuck her so hard and so long that she can’t walk the next day.

“I bet you’re wet underneath these pants, aren’t you? I bet your panties are soaked with your juice. You ever taste yourself?” I’m sure she hasn’t. She’s too shy, too innocent for that. “When you tell me your name, I’ll take off your panties and drink your juice directly from the source. I’ll tongue your

pussy so hard you'll forget your own name. You want that, don't you?"

A low, long whine escapes from between her lips. "You're teasing me."

"Yeah." Because watching her get turned on, feeling that small orgasm roll through her body, hearing her voice turn from high-pitched to low and back again as she tries to release some of the desire that is building inside of her is the sexiest thing I've ever experienced. "The more I tease you, the better it's going to be." I roll the now-hard nipple between my fingers.

"Too much of a good thing is bad," she retorts.

I respond by slapping her pussy. She cries out, a thready, needy plea for release. I need to taste her, even if it's just her mouth. I abandon her tits, cup her jaw and angle her face for a kiss. My other hand busies with rubbing the sting away. She tries to close her legs, to keep the sensations in, but I force her open, widening my stance. I deepen the kiss, trying to meld us together so she can see how we belong as one.

I can feel her heat and her need between the layers of fabric and part of me wants to slip my hand past her waistband, under her pants until there's nothing but her skin and my touch. The slickness of her want would lube my path and she could ride my hand until her cum drips down my fingers.

I keep working her until her whole body arches and she tears her mouth from mine to release a scream. The orgasm shudders through her, like an electric shock traveling from one end of her body to the other. She arches and tries to fly off my lap, away from my relentless touch. I release her jaw to clamp an arm around her waist and let her ride the wave with my fingers still stroking her.

When she comes down off her high, she's limp as a dishrag. Her head lolls on my shoulder.

"My panties are wet," she moans and this time it isn't in need but in distress. My cock can't tell the difference. The

word wet coupled with the word panties is enough to make him thrust forward for attention. I order him to stand down while I rise to my feet, swinging the worn-out Slick up in my arms.

She doesn't have the energy to protest.

"Into the shower you go and then afterward, hot tub."

"What about you?" she asks weakly.

"You're not gonna get any cock until you tell me your name."



ten

I SIT in the hot tub wondering how I got myself here. I can't even work out if I'm mad or not. I let out a long sigh, dropping my head back. This tub is what dreams are made of. This whole place kind of is. How am I ever going to talk my sister into leaving here when I'm questioning leaving this place myself? Which is crazy because of course I'm going to be out of here soon. The sexy giant is off his rocker with saying that I belong to him and giving me orgasms that do in fact make me forget my name. I don't want to tell him my name. This game is too fun to stop now.

"Is the water still warm?" King strolls back into the bathroom with a towel in one hand and a robe in another. He sets them both on the bathroom counter. I fight not to cover my body. I mean he's already seen all of it, so what's the point? He's fully dressed again in a black shirt and jeans. The man showered with me earlier but kept his stupid boxer briefs on. He washed every inch of me before putting me into the warm hot tub.

After he washed me, he massaged all of my muscles, which left me feeling as though I was one big pile of goo that would do just about anything. The man really does have magic hands. I didn't realize that someone's touch could be both gentle and hard at the same time. That actually describes King in a nutshell. Crap. I am starting to fall for him more the longer I stay. I have to get the heck out of here. Not only to save myself but my sister too. I can't let myself get too wrapped up in King. I need to keep reminding myself that I'm here for my sister even though the selfish part of me wants to explore this thing with King.

“How come I gotta be naked all the time and you don’t?” I can’t keep the pout out of my voice.

“Don’t want to scare you.” He winks. I glare at him, which does a whole lot of nothing. In fact, I think he enjoys when I give him hard looks. “Seen you had a suitcase in your truck. I brought it in for you. Doesn’t seem as though you packed enough to spend the rest of your life here but we can always get you some more stuff. Don’t worry, Slick, I plan on providing you with whatever you need.”

“You went digging through my stuff!” I sit up.

“I played with your pussy an hour ago.”

I shut my mouth, hoping the heat from the hot tub hides the blush I can feel making itself known.

“If you want to play with it again you better stay out of my things.”

“I put the suitcase away after I unpacked your stuff.” He ignores my warning. He walks over to the tub, leaning down. His eyes never leave mine. “Give me a kiss.”

“No.” I tilt my head back, my lips pouting out. My body listening to his command, I offer him my mouth.

“That’s my girl, Slick.” He brushes his mouth against mine. I let out a small moan as his tongue slides across my bottom lip, making my lips part to let him take his kiss. He can kiss me all he wants. It doesn’t mean I have to kiss him back.

“Hay bales! Is that your truck I see outside?” I jerk back at the sound of my sister’s voice. Crap.

“She’ll cut your man parts off if she catches us like this!” I hiss.

“Hay bales?” He laughs.

“Not my name.” I stand. “Get out of here. I still have plans for you and your man parts.”

“Sorry, Slick. No name, no plans.” He shakes his head. His eyes roam over my body. I think he’s as mad as I am about this little rule he’s made.

“I know you’re here, sis.” Danny’s voice is getting closer to the bathroom, causing me to panic a little.

“Gimme a little of that sugar, Slick, and I’ll get out of here.” That sexy mouth of his smirks, knowing that he has me at a disadvantage.

“I can’t believe you’re blackmailing me right now.”

I grab his face, pulling him down as I thrust my tongue into his mouth. He pulls me into his body. I wrap around him as we both deepen the kiss. Like his touch, his kiss is both gentle and hard at the same time. I get lost in him until a loud banging brings me back to reality.

“I locked the door.” King smiles. He knew we weren’t going to get busted in on.

“You’ll pay for that one.”

“Worth every fucking penny.” He puts me on my feet.

“I’m just getting out of the shower. I’ll be right out.”

“You okay? You sound off,” my sister shouts back.

“No, I’m not okay! I had to track you down in the middle of a snow storm because you don’t listen.”

“Here we go,” I hear her say. I know she’s talking to herself now. “I’ll see you in the kitchen.”

I let out a sigh. She has no idea that this is King’s room and I’m in his bathroom wrapped around him naked. If she did, she’d either kill him or I’d never hear the end of it. I’m not sure which way it will go. Hell, I’m not sure if I want to kill King or keep on clinging to him. I figure I don’t really have to make the choice right this second.

“I got you wet.”

“It was only fair. I got you wet, too.”

My mouth falls open. He always has the better comebacks. I turn, stomping toward his closet. I stop when I realize that I need a towel. I stomp back to him and he hands it to me, smiling the whole time.

“Stop smiling. I’m mad at you.”

“No you’re not.” He follows me into the walk-in closet. I watch as he pulls off his shirt, letting me see that body of his again. I’ve seen many shirtless cowboys in my day and not one could hold a candle to King. Before I can ogle him too much, he puts on another shirt.

“I’ll go greet your sister.” He leans down, giving me a quick kiss before I know what he’s doing and he’s gone. I hurriedly get ready because King knows a lot more about what’s going on with my sister than I do. I find my stuff put away like he said. I pull my hair down and give myself one last look in the mirror to make sure I’m put together enough. I put on a pair of blue jeans and a sweater that falls off one shoulder. I grab some of King’s thick socks, putting them on my feet to keep my toes warm as I head toward the sound of voices.

“We want you to stay as long as you like. We know you’re here to lie low but we could use someone like you around. We’re not the only ones in need of a doc. The town could use one too.”

“Your closest hospital is over an hour away without weather issues,” I hear my sister respond.

“And we always have those,” King says as he looks up to see me entering the kitchen where he, Cyn, and my sister are talking and drinking coffee.

“Hay bales!” Danny jumps up, running over to give me a hug. “I told you not to come.”

I hug her back. “How could I not come? I’m here to take you home.” I bury my face in her neck for a minute. Her being here reminds me how much I miss her. I knew I did, but seeing her in person really brings it home for me.

“We’ve talked about this. I’m not going back there.” She pulls back to look down at me. Danny and I look a lot alike in the face but she has a good four inches on me. She is tall and thin where I am a little thicker and on the shorter side.

“You don’t even like it in the city. Not really.”

“I don’t like it back home either.” She reminds me. “Not sure why you’re hanging on to it so much either.” She raises one of those eyebrows at me like she knows something I don’t.

“It’s home.”

“Home isn’t a place.” King says from behind my sister.

“I like him.” Danny smiles. It’s soft but her eyes don’t light up like they normally do. Reminding me of the reason she’s here to begin with.

“He’s a bossy know it all.” I let my sister know. She’s my sister so it’s only right that I warn her about King. What I don’t say is that I like that he’s that way. She doesn’t need all the details.

“That’s not true, Slick. I don’t even know your name.”

Danny starts to open her mouth but I put my hand over it.

“Do not tell him my name.” I slowly drop my hand from her mouth.

“Is something going on here?” She looks between King and I.

“These two are love birds or something.” Cyn says as she takes a drink of her coffee.

“Where’s Jake?” I ask Cyn.

“She’s feisty as shit.” Cyn looks to King as she says it.

“Fits right in.” He agrees with a smile.



eleven

DOC WESTON LEADS *Hay Bales* to Cabin Two, the one Cyn set aside for the doctor.

“How was the trip?” I ask.

“Fine.” The pilot, Jake, drops into a stool at the island. “My ass is sore. Two runs in as many days ain’t great.”

“Poor baby,” Cyn mocks.

“If you really felt bad for me, you’d climb on to my lap and kiss it better,” Jake invites.

Cyn rolls her eyes. “Kiss what better?”

“Everything, but if you want specific directions then it’d be—“

She lunges forward and slaps a hand across his mouth. “Don’t you dare.”

“Thanks, Cyn,” I say to my cousin. “I also don’t really want to hear what’s rattling upstairs in your empty house.”

“Exactly.” Cyn draws her hand away. “Keep all of that to yourself.”

“I’ve been keeping so much to myself, my pipes are gonna burst,” Jake mutters.

I pluck a stick of butter from the fridge and pour a cup of coffee for Jake.

I send a sympathetic look and the java toward Jake. He grunts his thanks. I know how he feels. This afternoon’s little escapade with Slick has my balls hurting. I rubbed one out in

the bathroom after I showered her but that didn't do much but take off the edge. That ache won't go away until I'm balls deep in her cunt. As I spread the butter on the rapidly cooling toast a thought strikes me. Did I say that she needed to tell me her name or that I just needed to know what it was? I pin my gaze on Jake. "Doc talk much about her sister?"

He doesn't answer, too busy staring at Cyn, who's busy avoiding his eyes. One of them could leave but they seem to get something out of this awkward situation. Whatever kind of odd courtship is going on here isn't working for me at the moment.

"Jake," I say sharply.

"Huh?" His head swivels slowly in my direction as if suddenly remembering there is more than the two of him here. "Ah no. No, I don't like the chatter while I've got my hands on the stick."

Cyn makes a disgusted noise in her throat. "Typical."

"Why's that typical?"

"Maybe she needed the company? Why don't you show some interest in someone other than yourself for once." Cyn shoves away from the island. "Why are you such an ass?"

As I munch on my cold toast, Jake's face crinkles in bewilderment. "What are you talking about? How am I an ass wanting to enjoy the silence? It's not like the doc is a big talker."

"You wouldn't know if she was or wasn't because you never ask." Cyn stomps out of the room leaving an open-mouth Jake behind her.

When he turns toward me I raise my palms and dust off the crumbs. I have no idea. "Don't ask me."

He makes a face but doesn't press.

"Do you have a run to make after this?"

His eyes drift toward the door Cyn exited. "I think I'll stick around for a while."

Since I know that Slick is going to try to escape with her sister, I tell Jake, “Make sure you lose some important part of the helicopter so it can’t run.”

Jake shoves his barely drunk coffee mug aside and leans across the table. He wants to make a deal. “What are you gonna do for me?”

“Nothing,” I reply bluntly. “Cyn’s my cousin.”

He clicks his tongue against the roof of his mouth. “Then I guess my bird is fully operational.”

“Then I guess you’re gonna have to get out.” I jerk my thumb toward the door.

“Man, why are you being this way?”

“I don’t know what went on with you and Cyn, or why she pretends not to like you, but it looks like you have some work to do before she’s going to come around. I’ll let you hang your boots up here for a while and give you the opportunity to change her mind, but that’s about all the help I can give you. In return you’re going to forget how to fly your bird or lose a piece of the instrument panel, or saw a door off. One of those things.”

“You concerned your little robin is going to fly away?”

“I don’t like to leave things to chance.”

Jake curls his grip back around his mug. “I thought the women here got the right to leave whenever they want.”

“Sure.” I sweep the crumbs off the counter and toss them in the trash. “But it doesn’t apply to doc’s sister. She doesn’t want to leave. She’s going to say she wants to leave because she’s spirited and she wants to make me work for it, but she really doesn’t.”

“You hear yourself?”

“I know it sounds wrong but Slick drove on to my property uninvited and so now I’m keeping her.”

“For how long?”

Is Jake right in the head? Maybe Cyn's right to avoid him. I snatch the mug out of his fist and toss it into the sink. "What are you on? Forever. I'm keeping her forever."

I leave Jake to ruminate on that and go to fetch my woman.



twelve

“YOU GOING to tell me what’s up with you and King?” Danny asks. I duck my head to try and hide the blush that I can feel rising to the surface. I’m not exactly sure what’s going on with us or I’m not ready to admit it yet. To myself or anyone else.

“Nothing is up with King.” I pretend to look around her cabin with added interest. Inspecting everything I can so that I don’t make eye contact with her.

“Doesn’t seem like nothing.” She steps into my path. I can tell from the look on her face that she isn’t going to let this go. I’m going to have to give her something.

“It doesn’t matter what’s going on with King. We fooled around and now I’m leaving. What do they call those? One night stands?” I pop off trying to sound casual about it. Acting as though it’s no big deal at all for me. That it’s only for fun. I wish that were actually the case because it would make leaving easier. I wouldn’t have all of these feelings that I can’t describe going on inside of me. I’d be able to go on my merry way and not feel as though it was going to cause my heart to break. The thought of never seeing him again weighs heavily on me.

“You’re so full of shit, Hayden Weston.” She shakes her head at me.

“If you think you have all the answers then why the hell are you asking me?” She folds her arms over her chest and keeps on staring at me. She’s done the same thing since we

were little kids. She has the patience of a saint and will wait me out until I spill the truth.

“We didn’t have like all the way sex.” I give, only a little though. It’s clearly not enough because her face doesn’t change. “I could of had sex.”

“No you couldn’t have.”

“I could have! I know you’re the doctor and all but I know how to have sex.”

“Of course you know how sex works. I gave you the sex talk.” Touche.

“Then why are you acting like I wouldn’t have had sex?”

“For you sex is love. You’re not having sex with anyone unless you think that person has staying power.”

“Not true. You know where we live. There is no one in that town to even have a quicky with.” I retort. This is a fact.

“You’re so full of shit. Ethan’s been in love with you for years and he is not hard on the eyes.” I make a gagging face. Ethan is in love with my vagina. I’ve known him since grade school when his family moved to town. There isn’t a girl left in our small town that he hasn’t slept with or tried to sleep with. He only wants to hook up with me because I’m a challenge to him. One he’d never conquer. Hope I’m not on his bucket list because there’s no way he’ll be checking that off it.

“I just haven’t had sex with King yet because he is demanding to know my name!” I declare.

“I can’t believe it.” Danny shakes her head at me again. “A man wanting to know your name before you have sex.” I glare at her. I’m supposed to be the sarcastic one between the two of us. Why is she stealing my moves?

“Aren’t you supposed to be mad or something? He keeps on kissing me and saying I’m staying here. He unpacked my things and put them away!” I try and reason with her. King is the enemy. He may be a big sexy one but he’s still the enemy nonetheless.

“I want you to stay.” She gives a shrug. “You need out of that town. It’s stifling you. You need to spread your wings someplace new.”

“Speaking of ditching town I’m going to beat the shit out of this Brandon.” She cringes at the mention of his name.

“I don’t want to talk about him right now.” I see a defeated look on her face. It has me backing off the subject of him. It’s not a look I’m used to seeing on my sister. She’s always so put together and fearless. She has such a spark for life and for anyone to try to put a damper on that has my blood boiling.

“We can just go home,” I suggest. Even as I say the words they taste like dirt in my mouth.

“Hay bales.” Danny lets out a long sigh before dropping down onto the loveseat. “We grew up there. Doesn’t make it home.” She says the same thing she’s been saying to me for years.

“Don’t you want us to live closer to one another?” I bite my lip.

“I’m not leaving you.” She reaches up grabbing my hand pulling me down to sit with her. “I’m not abandoning you.”

“Why you gotta use the *A* word.” I roll my eyes. “You’re not a head doc. Don’t be psychoanalyzing me. You only took a few of those classes.” That makes her crack a smile which makes me happy. She reaches over, taking my hand in hers.

“Come on, Hay Bales, it will be an adventure. Something new for the both of us. Whaddya say?”

“You really want to stay here? I know you don’t want to talk about Brandon right now but you can’t let someone run you off from your life.” As much as I hated my sister living in a big city that gave me anxiety just thinking about it, I hate it more that some man ran her off.

“Don’t get me wrong. Brandon gave me a nice shove to leave. He’s the head of the hospital. No one listened to what I had to say about him.” She makes a disgusted face. I try and keep my face passive. Both of us don’t need to be mad. “But I wasn’t fond of that hospital anyway. I feel as though I could be

doing more. Really helping. I can do that here, Hay Bales. I really want to make a difference in people's lives and I think this is where I am meant to do it."

"They do seem to be doing some good around here." I admit. "And it's only a long drive for me to get here."

"Yeah, but you could stay." She wiggles her eyebrows at me.

"Maybe I need to get back to Ethan." I elbow her in her side, teasing her.

"Coming in!" King announces before the door flies open a second later. "Sorry." He looks a little sheepish about barging in but he still did it. "Who's Ethan?"

"You going to help me talk my sister into staying?" Danny asks him, ignoring his question.

"You're supposed to be on my side!" I smack her jean covered thigh.

"That hurt." She smiles big as her eyes dance with mischief. "Hayden." My mouth falls open and I know she's calling my bluff.



thirteen

“WHATEVER I’M PAYING YOU, it is clearly not enough. Please give yourself a raise,” I say to Hayden’s sister Danny. I didn’t expect this kind of support but I appreciate it. I thought she might give me a fight on me wanting her sister but I am glad she is on my side. I can use all the help I can get when it comes to Slick.

She smiles warmly. “Nice to see you again, King.”

“So you’re taking the job? Not just staying here for a little while?” *Hayden* ping pongs her eyes between me and her sister.

“Offered her a job when she reached out about coming here to begin with,” I confirm. Convincing doc was easier than I thought it would be, but that was primarily because of the stalker. She needed to get away and I promised good pay, an opportunity to help other women, and protection against the stalker.

“Why didn’t you tell me all this?” she demands of her sister.

Doc lifts her shoulders. “I did tell you. I wrote you a letter saying I was leaving the hospital and coming up to King’s estate.”

“No. Why wouldn’t you tell me about him? The job.” *Hayden* jerks her thumb in my direction.

Doc looks perplexed. “Why would I tell you about King?”

“Because he’s...the....person,” *Hayden* flounders.

I lean back against the door jamb and fold my arms across my chest. I, too, am interested in the answer. “The person?” I prompt.

“You be quiet,” she snaps. Returning her attention to her sister, she says, “Why didn’t you tell me about the person who hired you? I want to know that you’re safe.”

“No one safer than me,” I drawl. “You should know that by now.”

She covers her ears. “Just because we kissed a little doesn’t mean I trust you.”

“Hayden,” chides her sister.

“What?” Hayden drops her hands to her lap. Annoyance flashes across her beautiful face. “Kissing means nothing these days. People kiss strangers. Pick them up and have one night stands.”

Doc picks up her sister’s hand. “Maybe people do, but you don’t. You like stability. That’s why you live in that same town we grew up in and didn’t want to move to the city with me even though Millsville has nothing good for either of us.”

I file all of this information away. Hayden was from a small town like this one and she wanted to put down roots. That’s pretty much the reason I set up shop here. Away from the crowds of people, I could create a private community that would last for a long time.

“You’re my sister. We’re supposed to stick together,” Hayden wails in frustration.

“All right.” Doc twists away from her sister and pins me with a serious stare. “What are your intentions with my sister?”

“Marriage,” I say immediately. From the moment I saw Hayden, I knew that she was the one I built this place for. Her, me, our family and the people that needed to be taken care of. It’s a place my mom needed and never had. Hayden was going to help build it with me. She’s not aware of that yet, but it’ll come.

“What?” yelps Hayden.

Doc appears unsurprised though. “How many exes have you had?”

“None.” Another easy question. “I was in the military for a while and then when I got out of that, I came up here, bought a few thousand acres and started building cabins.”

“None?” Doc says, her eyebrows lifting.

“None?” echoes Hayden.

“None,” I repeat.

“He just didn’t date. Like Ethan, he just sleeps around,” Hayden declares.

Ethan again. I narrow my eyes. I’m going to need a full dossier on him.

“Ethan dated. He always had a girlfriend but he also cheated on the girlfriend all the time,” Doc clarifies.

“Who is Ethan?”

“This guy who was always sniffing around Hayden. He wanted her because she wouldn’t climb into his probably diseased bed,” Doc says.

“This the boyfriend you were going to call?”

“No. Obviously not.” Hayden sticks her little nose in the air.

“Boyfriend? Since when do you have a boy—”

“Wow. I’m hungry,” Hayden cries. “When are we having dinner?”

So there’s no boyfriend and her name is Hayden. All the pieces are falling perfectly into place. There aren’t any barriers to sliding inside of her wet cunt tonight. Well, none other than her virginity but that won’t be an issue. She was ready for me to take her earlier today and she’ll be ready for that breach tonight.

“Right now. I came to tell you it’s ready.” I pick up the coats off the hooks along the wall and hold them out. Doc gets

up and shoves her arms through the first one and I drape mine over Hayden's shoulders, taking the moment to bring her body close. Even through the padding and down, I can feel the warmth of her small body. My dick stirs. Tonight, we're gonna get a good taste of what it feels like to be inside her slick heat. I won't last long—not the first time, but I'll make it up to her in rounds two through five. "For the record," I murmur against her hair, "I do not have one night stands."

"How many night stands do you have?" Doc asks, picking up on my words.

"None. I'm like Hayden. I like stability."

Doc holds out her fist and I bump it with mine, leading to a loud, disgruntled sigh from Hayden.

"I can't believe you're jumping ship like this," she says. "We're sisters. You're supposed to back me up on everything."

"I am backing you up, Hay Bales. We didn't grow up calling Millsville 'Shittsville' for nothing. The town is a dead end for you. You hate the city, like small towns, crave stability, and you can have it all here. Why do you think I sent you the address to this place?"

"Because I would've hunted you down like a dog if you hadn't."

"That and because I want you to be with me and if it takes you falling for a guy like King, then so be it." She looks up over Hayden's head and fixes a serious gaze on me. "But if you hurt my sister, I will come into your room at night with my scalpel and cut off your mistletoe and holly."

I wince and pull Hayden closer. "I promise on all the holiday ornaments that Cyn put away last week I will not hurt Hayden." I jerk my chin. "Why don't you go on ahead? The stew's getting cold."

"I'm hungry, too," Hayden complains as she watches her sister walk out the door. The minute the door shuts, I spin Hayden around.

"You have five seconds," I inform her.

“For what?”

“To lodge any objections you might have to spending the night in my bed with my cock between your legs.”

Her cheeks turn red, but she doesn't back down. “I'm not going anywhere tonight but this cabin with my sister.”

“I mean, okay, if you want your sister to watch, I don't care. It's a little odd, but even your father standing here with a shotgun isn't going to keep me away from you. Not tonight or any night after.”



fourteen

I STARE up at King and his all too handsome face. “Fine. I’ll stay in your bed while I’m here.” I’d show both my sister and King that I can have random sex if I want to. They have no idea what they are talking about. I don’t relate sex and love. Wait. If King is saying that he relates, wouldn’t that mean; I stop that thought dead in its tracks. King can not be in love with me. Can he? His words imply that he is but he’s only known me for a minute.

“Glad we have come to an agreement.” He steps to the side, opening the cabin door for me. He wraps an arm around me as we exit. I let him because he’s big and warm and it’s freezing outside. I’m just stealing his warmth that’s why I nestle into him. For that reason and that reason only. “You do know you’re staying here indefinitely. I don’t think you’re grasping that fact, Slick.”

“I can’t leave right now.” I motion towards the snow that is once again falling. It never really stops around here. It’s beautiful. This whole place really is. No wonder my sister so easily agreed to take a job here. This place is kind of perfect. What all of these folks are doing here for these women warms my heart. King may have a smart mouth but he has a big ole kind heart.

“Whatever you want to tell yourself, Slick.” He pulls me more into his body. I find myself melting more into him.

“So you been in love before then?” I ask King, hoping for some reason he denies it. If he’s into this whole love equals sex thing then that must mean he has relationships with the women he sleeps with. That must be why he said he likes

stability. He probably meant that he only gets it on with girls he really likes or loves. Why does that sound worse than one night stands? At least with one night stands there aren't any feelings involved. It is all pleasure and lust. With stability comes love and for some reason that doesn't sit well with me.

"I love Cyn." He offers.

"That doesn't count. She's your cousin." I elbow him in his side because I don't know if he's trying to sidestep my question or if he can see that I might be a little jealous so he's teasing me.

"Can't say I ever loved someone I wasn't related to." His confession makes me feel a little better. I probably shouldn't enjoy someone not experiencing love in their life but I find I might be a little selfish when it comes to this. Oh god. I'm the jealous type.

"Me either." I admit. "Boys are gross." I look up at him with a teasing smile.

"That they are." He reaches for the back door to his place pulling it open for me. "Good thing I'm all man." I can't even argue with that. Not that I'm given a chance to even if I wanted. His mouth lands on mine before I can say a word. He kisses me deeply. I let out a small sigh into his mouth. My hands reach up to his chest so I can dig my fingers into his coat. There I go, clinging to him again. How am I ever going to leave here if every time I'm near King I can't seem to let him go? My mouth smarts off one thing but my body does a whole other and I'm pretty sure he knows it.

"Eat then bed." King says pulling his mouth from mine looking pissed about it. I can already smell the stew. My stomach grumbles at the scent but I'm hungry for more than food. I can totally do this. Prove them wrong. I can have a fling.

"You're letting all the cold air in." I hear Cyn yell from inside the house. I let go of King stepping in from the doorway so he can close the door. She pops her head around the corner to look at us. "Are you two always going to be like this?" She teases but I catch a wishful look in her eyes. I don't think it's

really for us but a longing of her own. I don't know her too well but hopefully one day she'll confide in me. Wait a second. I shake my head at that thought. When did I decide I was staying long enough to form bonds?

"Jake here?" I ask, being a smartass or maybe it's that I want to see what's going on there. Cyn's eyebrows furrow at my question before she heads back into the kitchen.

"Dinner will be ready in twenty minutes." She tosses over her shoulder as I watch her leave the room. Guess she doesn't want to talk about it. I instantly feel bad for poking at her.

"If you can't take the heat, stay out of the kitchen." King yells to her back. I watch as she raises her arm and her middle finger at him. I smile, immediately feeling a sense of relief at her response.

King takes my hand guiding me through the house and back into the kitchen area where I see my sister and Jake talking. Cyn keeps peeking over at them while she stirs the soup. I let go of King's hand to go over to Cyn to pretend I want to see what's in the pot.

"Not her type." I whisper to Cyn as my way of a peace offering. She flicks her eyes to meet mine. I know she wants to ask how I can be so sure but she can't bring herself to do it. I get it too. We both put up these hard fronts. At this moment I feel connected to her. "You'd be more her type if you know what I mean." I give Cyn a wink before I declare loudly. "Smells good. Anything I can do to help?"

"I think I've got it." She gives me a smile. I nod heading over to the table that is already set. King is already sitting at it watching my every move. I try to walk past him but he snags me around the waist pulling me down into his lap. This time I let him because that's exactly where I want to be.

For now anyway. Since this is totally just a fling I tell myself. King holds onto me tighter. I'm pretty sure we both know that I'm a liar.



fifteen

“YOUR BEDROOM IS NICE. I didn’t really get a look at it before.” Hayden smooths a hand across the comforter. She can barely bring herself to look me in the eye. She’s nervous.

I lean back against the dresser and give her some time to settle down. “Built this cabin by myself. It was originally only the living room and the kitchen. I bunked down on the sofa out there for a long time.”

“You didn’t have plans to make it a retreat right away?”

“No. After I got out of the Army, I wanted space. I didn’t particularly care where. A buddy of mine told me that there were about five thousand acres for sale up here so I bought it and moved here with my truck and Blue. A few months later, Cyn showed up with a friend of hers. The ex was a cop who was able to track her everywhere and so the friend needed to get off the grid.”

“You all stayed in the cabin?” She’s stopped picking the comforter apart and is leaning toward me, interested in my story and not so afraid of being in my bedroom.

I keep talking. “Nope. Cyn’s friend was scared, so I slept out in the truck and they took the cabin. After a couple days, I went and bought a trailer. That friend told another friend about our place and it kind of snowballed from there. When I started building the cabins outside, I had them add onto the main space with this upstairs.”

Hayden nods as if this all makes sense to her. I push away from the dresser and take a step toward her. My dick’s hard and my teeth ache from want. I need her. I’m about to reach

for her when my phone buzzes. It's one of my special alerts, too. Instantly, I go on guard.

Hayden doesn't miss a thing. "What is it?"

I fish my phone from my pocket. "I don't know. Yeah, King here."

"There's someone at the gate," Pippa, the night security guard, says.

"Male someone or female someone?" I cast a regretful look toward Hayden. Her virginity is going to remain intact for a while longer.

"Looks like a mother and her teenage son. They're arguing. I think he wants her to go inside but she won't get out of the car."

A teenage son? "Hold on." I hold a phone to my chest. I've seen a picture of the asshole that hassled the doc and he's pushing fifty. But, Hayden brought up some dude a couple of times.

"Could Ethan pass as a teenager?"

Hayden frowns. "No. Not in any way. If anything he looks ten years older because he drinks and smokes constantly. Why?"

"There's someone at the gate who doesn't have an invite."

"Oh? I don't think it's him. No one is going to mistake him for a teenager but beyond that he wouldn't ever chase after me."

I doubt that. If I had an inkling I'd lose Hayden, I'd follow her anywhere.

"The mom is pretty distraught. I asked her who gave her our address but she refused to say. Instead, the boy gave me the number."

We have a code—a sort of secret SOS. In order to keep the place safe, people who come up here have to give us a passcode. It's my mother's date of birth.

“I’ll be out.” I tuck the phone into my pocket and head for the closet for my gun and a coat.

“Can I come with?” Asks Hayden.

I pull on the shoulder harness. It shouldn’t be dangerous, but I don’t know the people at the gate. “Best if you don’t.” The gun’s chamber is empty when I check and the magazine is full. I shove the gun into the holster and shrug on my jacket.

“If I stayed with you, is that how it would be? I’d stay in the cabin with an apron on while you did all the important things?”

I briefly lose consciousness at the image of Hayden wearing an apron and nothing else. “I probably wouldn’t get anything done if all you wore was an apron,” I reply when I regather my wits. “I’d bend you over and fuck you against every flat surface. Hell, it wouldn’t even need to be flat.”

“I’m serious.”

And she is. Her face is set in somber lines and there’s a glint in her eyes that tells me I better get the answer right.

“I need you to be safe. That’s the most important thing to me.”

“It’s a mom and a teenage boy. How terrible could it be?”

That’s how she convinces me and now that we’re standing outside the gate with Hayden on my right and Pippa on my left, I realize it was a mistake. If I didn’t have witnesses, maybe I would have just strong-armed the boy aside, gotten into the car and driven up to an empty cabin. But now I got a boy who is feeling cornered, a scared as hell mom, a security officer who is feeling pressured and a bewildered civilian. It’s a good thing we live out in the boonies or we’d have the local police on our doorstep for causing a disturbance.

The boy raises the shotgun again. “Don’t come near me,” he screams.

I raise my hands even higher. “No one’s going to hurt you.”

“I thought this was a safe place! They said it was a safe place!”

“It is.”

“Why you all have guns then?” He swings the barrel between me and Pippa.

“Lay it on the ground, Pips,” I order.

“Not while he has a 12 gauge pointed in our direction.”

“This isn’t good,” Hayden says.

“I know. Get into the truck and drive back to the cabin.” It’s hard to keep the growl out of my voice.

“Not them. Him.”

I follow her outstretched hand to see it pointing toward a white SUV pulling up in the snow. A man’s behind the wheel. The sound of another engine’s breaks diverts the kid’s attention. I jump forward and tackle him. The shotgun skitters out of his hand. Out of the corner of my eye, I see Pippa snatch it up. The mom gets out of the car, runs over to us and starts to pummel my back.

“Get off him. Get off my son!”

Somehow, over the din, I hear Hayden say, “Ethan?”



sixteen

I WATCH my sister check over the teenage boy, Isaac. I know he shouldn't have had a gun but I feel proud of him for wanting to protect his mom.

"No more guns." Danny tells him as she puts a bandage over his elbow where he scraped it during his fall. The entire situation had been scary but the bravery that this young man had showed was commendable.

"It was my father's. I took it." He admits.

"You got any more we should know about?" I beat my sister to the question. He shakes his head no.

"I did what I had to." He puffs out his chest some. It is stupid but I get it. King comes strolling in with a look of understanding for the boy's actions on his face, too. Seeing King in his element and how he'd handled everything that went down has only made me want to be here with him more.

I don't know why I'm fighting this King thing. Me continuing to pretend that it is only going to be sex and then I am going to be on my way is not working anymore. That plan now sounds ridiculous to me. King is the kind of man you marry. One that you keep and cherish. I am only lucky that no one had up and took him for themselves already. The care and concern that he shows for strangers is commendable. Imagine how he'd be with his own family. Thoughts of having his baby run through my mind. It's something that I never really thought much about but he makes me want all the things.

"I'll teach you about gun safety but you won't be needing them while you're here. As you can see no one makes it past

our gates unless we let them in.” The boy nods, mumbling another apology. He is as scared as his mother. He’s just a little bit better at hiding it.

“We can stay though? You’ll keep my mom safe?”

“Of course.” I answer for King who aims a smile my way, letting me know he appreciated me answering for him like I owned the place. “We have a cabin for you.” I think we do anyway. I remember a few being empty.

“We do.” King agrees with me. Danny pulls down the sleeve of Isaac’s sweater covering up the bandage.

“Might hurt a little more tomorrow. Nothing a little Advil won’t cure.”

“Thanks.” Isaac stands. “Can I see my mom now?”

“I’ll take you to her.” Cyn says stepping into the room next. She’d gone off with the boy’s mom for a talk. King and Pippa has disappeared somewhere with Ethan. I was ordered to stay with my sister to help her if she needed it. I’m not great with being ordered around but the look on King’s face had told me that it wasn’t the time to smart off. It is clear to me that Cyn and King know what they are doing around here. I would stay out of their way and do what I could to help when they told me.

Cyn guides Isaac out, leaving just Danny, King and I in the small medical room. She cleans up a few of her supplies putting them away. It’s quiet in the room besides her opening and closing drawers.

“I can get more stuff. Just make a list.” King tells her finally breaking the silence in the room. All of us are on edge with everything that happened. I can tell he’s still on edge.

“What the fuck is Ethan doing here?” Danny ignores King’s words folding her arms over her chest. Yeah, I was wondering that, too. After King got the boy under control and told his mom he was there to keep them safe he cuffed Ethan. I’m not sure that’s legal or anything but he’d done it. Then he’d shoved him into the back of a car that Pippa took off in.

Now I have no idea, not only what Ethan is doing here, but where they took him.

“Looks like you might not be the only one with a stalker.” King’s eyes pin me with a look.

“Me?” I point to myself. “I wouldn’t call you a stalker, King.” I joke. He doesn’t smile at my small tease. Then it hits me. “What? Are you saying Ethan is stalking me?” I thought it was Danny who was being stalked, not me. This doesn’t make sense. I never even considered that Ethan would contemplate stalking me.

“Why else would he be here?” Danny mumbles sounding disgusted.

“How did he even find me?” No one knew where I was going. As soon as I got my sister’s letter I was out the door and on my way here. I only told my boss that I’d be gone for awhile. That I didn’t know when I’d be back. I didn’t even disclose to him where I was going.

“He has a tracker on your car.” King supplies. With each second that passes, he seems to be getting more angry. I’m not real sure what to say to his response. I should likely be freaked out but I know King isn’t going to let anything happen to me. I also know that King is probably only holding on by a thin string when it comes to losing his control, so I try to remain as calm as possible. Knowing that if he sees me upset, it will not end up well for Ethan.

“I don’t know why he’d track me. We hardly talk. All he wants is in my pants.” My words do not help the anger rolling off King one bit.

“He might have popped off at the mouth about wanting to be your first.” King finally gives. I can tell he didn’t want to tell me that.

“I’m guessing you popped him in the mouth for that.” Danny smiles. Her eyes go to King’s hand. I look there, too, and see his knuckles are all red.

“Lets just say we came to an understanding.”

“Is he dead?” I whisper. “The ground is way too hard to bury any bodies right now. You’ll need a lake and some chicken wire.”

My sister lets out a small laugh from beside me. She was the one who told me that you have to wrap a body in chicken wire before you throw it in the lake so it won’t float back up to the top. It is a disgusting yet rather cool thing to know. I didn’t realize that you learned these things in medical school but I guess you do.

“He’s handled.” King reaches for me, pulling me into his warm body. “Like I said. We came to an understanding. He won’t be back.”

“Is it always this eventful around here?” Danny asks, as she takes her stethoscope off, placing it on the counter.

“Not normally but we can have people show up randomly. You never know.”

“I’m staying.” Danny tells King. She looks at me thinking I’m going to protest but I’m not. I’m staying too. “Now you have to convince my sister to stay.” She tells King while she moves her eyebrows up and down in a suggestive manner. She smiles at both of us before she heads out of the room leaving us alone.

“How are you going to convince me to stay?” I put my hands on my hips.

“No convincing needed.” He is right about that one. “You’re staying.” I let out a small scream as he throws me over his shoulder. “I’m just going to show you how good it’s going to be here for you.”

The nervous jitters that I felt when I’d gone to his bedroom hours ago are gone. King is my man. He takes care of me and I know he’ll make my first time one I’ll never forget.

I’d come here searching for my sister and in the meantime I’d found my home.



seventeen

“I’M gonna talk you through this.” I press a kiss on her forehead and then her nose, her cheeks and finally a lingering one against her lips. Despite the orgasms she had with my fingers and tongue, the prospect of my dick inside her tiny vagina is making her nervous. “It’ll fit,” I reassure her.

I reach down and position my cock at her opening. “I’m breaching you right now. Just the tip is going in. See how good that feels?”

I wait for her body to adjust. “Like that?”

“Yeah,” she says breathily and the sound of her sexy voice makes me want to burst.

“Okay, now you’re going to wiggle your ass until my dick is kissing your womb.”

She chokes out a laugh but does as I order. She squirms and sighs and slides until I’m halfway in. I bite down on my inner cheek to keep from exploding. She’s so fucking hot and her cunt is so fucking tight that I want to cry like a baby.

“That’s good. Real good, Slick.” I rub a soothing hand up her back. “How do you feel?”

“Full,” she answers, her lips red and wet from her tongue. Her eyes are bright and her cheeks are flushed and I’ve never seen anyone look so beautiful. I brush my hand across her cheek and peel some of her hair away from her skin. “You’re...big,” she says.

My cock flexes in response. “It’s exactly the right size for you. Look at how your pussy is sucking me in.” I ease back on

my knees and pull her forward so she can take in the same erotic view that I'm seeing—her plush pussy lips wrapped around my hard shaft that's slowly disappearing inside her body. "Sexy as fuck," I rasp, rubbing her clit lightly as she pulses around me.

"One of these days when you're not so tiny and snug, I'm going to fuck you up against the wall. I'm not even going to allow you to take your coat off. I'm going to turn you around, press your cheek against the wall, pull down your pants and ram my cock into you so hard you can feel the head in your throat."

She shudders and creams at my words. I slide in another inch. "You like that idea, don't you? I can feel you getting wetter. You're practically dripping all over me. Tell me what else you like."

Hayden grabs my neck, her nails raking over my skin. "You...in...me...", are her breathless words. "Stop...teasing." She bares her teeth, hooks her leg around my hip and pulls me forward.

I slam home and the feeling of that wet, hot cunt surrounding my throbbing, aching cock sends my eyes rolling into the back of my head. The little control I had been hanging onto disappears. The urge to drive pulses at the base of my spine. "Hold on," I grit out. I wrap one hand around her ass and my other around her shoulders, bracing her in place as I hammer into her.

Her head falls back and her mouth parts. I dive forward and capture her pulse between my teeth. I'm going to mark her here and then when I'm done fucking her, I'm going to suck bruises all over her skin—on her tits, her stomach, her thighs. I want everyone to know she's mine.

"Yes. Yes. Yes," Hayden chants, keeping time with my thrusts. The sounds of skin slapping against skin, the wet suck of her cunt as it accepts the force of my power.

"You gotta come for me, Slick. I need you to come for me now." My orgasm presses down hard on me. I'm ready to explode. I'm ready to spill a gallon of seed inside her drenched

channel. A curse word slips from her mouth as the first wave of pleasure sweeps over her. It's harder, more intense than the release she had with my fingers and tongue. Her cunt clamps down on my dick and her fingernails dig into my shoulders. I'm going to have marks there tomorrow. It's gonna be sweet.

I come with a shout. My sperm jetting into her like a knotted hose that's just been unblocked. I come so hard that my balls ache and my dick feels raw. It's fucking glorious.

We both fall to the sheets, me twisting onto my back and letting her land on my chest. I whisper things to her, nonsense things, telling her how sweet she is, how good she feels, how much I love her.

"You love me?" She pulls her head back, surprise giving her the strength she didn't have a moment ago.

I squint at her in confusion. "Course I do."

"Oh." It's a small word.

"Did you think I didn't?" That's flabbergasting to me.

The small word is followed by a small shrug. "I thought you just wanted to have sex and then maybe you just wanted to keep me because you were in the market."

"In the market?" I can't believe what I'm hearing. "I don't run around asking to keep random women. I've never been in the market. You created the market."

"How am I supposed to know that?" She frowns. "It's not like you said anything."

I scratch my chest. Surely, I told her I loved her and that's why I was claiming her.

"Well, you didn't you big dummy," she says, reading my mind. She punches me in the shoulder.

I accept that because I am a big dummy if I hadn't said I loved her before. I pull her frame against mine, trapping her head against my shoulder with my big mitt. "I'm saying it now. I love you, Hayden, and you're mine so don't think about leaving me. I'll just chase you down."

“I’m not leaving you. I just got here.”

I slap her ass. “You better not leave me ever. Since you’re mine, it’s my job to protect you.” I roll her over and cage her between my arms. I don’t know what drives a man to hurt a woman. All I feel toward Hayden is full-on protectiveness. If a spider crawled in here and scared her, I’d fight the spider. If an alien with ten arms and more power than a nuke came after us, I’d fight the alien. No one is ever harming Hayden while I have breath in my body. “I love you. Now say it back.”

A smug, mischievous smile appears. “Or what will you do?”

I slowly start to move my newly hardened dick inside her hot, tight cunt. “Or I’ll fuck you to death.”

“I don’t think that’s a threat, King. Not at all.”



eighteen

“I LOVE YOU!” I shout as I run through the house to get away from King, laughing as I go. I barely missed him grabbing me. It is hard to get a jump on him. For a big man he can really move. I was only quick on my toes from having spent years wrestling animals. Those damn baby piglets can be hell to catch and wrangle.

If he gets a hold of me he is going to tan my ass. Not that I don't enjoy when he does but I have to let the man chase me a little. It's good for him. Who am I kidding, I enjoy him chasing me. There is something about knowing that he'll always come for me that gives me a warm happy thrill. I might have given him the 'I love you' but he is still waiting on me to agree that I'm not going anywhere. Ever. I know in my heart that I'm not but I like to keep him on his toes.

I come to a sliding stop into the kitchen when I see my sister sitting in one of the high top chairs sipping a cup of coffee with her tablet open in front of her.

“Don't you come out naked! We got company!” I shout. I hear his loud steps thundering down the hallway. I love my sister but no one is allowed to see my man naked. Ever. I hear him let out a string of curses. My sister smiles shaking her head as she goes over to pour me a cup of coffee.

“I let myself in.” She'd taken the position that King had offered her. I stopped trying to change her mind. I knew she would be good here. I've seen her work with some of the women since she'd arrived. I know that they need her here and I don't plan on standing in the way of that. Not that I'm going anywhere myself.

I walk over, taking the cup from her hands. I let out a happy sigh as I take my first sip. I glance over to the clock and see it's almost eleven. How did I sleep so late? The dogs. Crap!

"Your man went out to feed them already. I'm guessing you were snoring away." Danny says before I can run out the door into the freezing cold. I'm only wearing King's shirt and a fuzzy pair of socks.

"I don't snore." I give her the side eye. I don't snore, at least I don't think I do. If I do, I'd bet my last dollar King thinks it's adorable. He thinks everything I do is cute. I've always thought of myself as a little rough around the edges. As a little bit of a tomboy, too, but King treats me like a princess. Well, a princess he sometimes has to spank.

"Him and Isaac did it hours ago." I smile taking another sip of my coffee. I have missed feeding the pups but I'll go out soon and play with them. I do, however, love how much Isaac has taken to King since he arrived here with his Ma. The two of them are doing wonderful.

"He's good to him." I walk over sitting down. My legs swing back and forth. He's going to make a good dad when the day comes. My legs stop swinging for a moment. The thought should scare me but it doesn't. In fact, it does the opposite. It warms me to think of King and I having a family.

"Yeah he is." She eyes me. "The man seems to be good with everyone." Her eyebrows wiggle. "You going to put that man out of his misery and tell him you aren't going anywhere?"

"I'm not going anywhere while that Brandon dick is still an issue. I wanna be around if he tries to show up."

"First off, he'll never find me here." Danny sets her coffee down. "I got word he was arrested. I wasn't the only woman he's done this to. King put pressure on the hospital and the police department to look more into him. I'm sure he'll make sure they throw the book at him. Your King isn't one to trifle with it seems."

“I mess with him all the time.” I try and tease. My throat goes tight.

“He’s a good man.” I shake my head in agreement with my sister. “We’re staying.” I keep on shaking my head.

“I love it here. I love him, too.” I admit.

“I heard you yell it.” She smiles. “I think everyone did.” She walks over to me giving me a hug. I hug her back tightly.

“We’re home.” I tell her.

“We are,” she agrees before letting me go. She glances to her right. “I’ll leave you to it.” She gives King a smile before heading out the back door.

“Where is your shirt?” I ask. He’s got on a pair of sweatpants that hang too low for my liking. Well, when others are around at least.

“You have it on.” He comes over picking me up and putting me on the kitchen counter.

“You have more than one.” I hiss. He steps between my thighs making my legs spread wide for his massive size. “I’m guessing you heard I’m staying.” I fake an eye roll trying to look annoyed but my smile wins out.

“Cute you thought you were going somewhere, Slick.”

“Then why do you keep asking, if you know so much?” I reach out putting my hands on his chest. God, I love touching him. I love everything about him.

“Cause you like when I spank your ass.” He leans down brushing his mouth against mine. I don’t rebuff his comment because it’s true. “And because I love you and you know it would break me if you left me.”

“Ahh. King.” My eyes sting with tears. Him and my sister are both trying to get me to spring a leak this morning.

“I love you, too. If you left me it would rip me in half. I know I look tough and all but-” He cuts me off.

“You’re all sweet inside. I know. I’ve tasted it.” He kisses me. I moan into his mouth as he deepens the kiss, leaving me

breathless. It takes me a moment to realize what he's done as he steps away from me.

"Pancakes? I need to feed you before I have you again." I don't answer him. I stare down at my hand. A ring now sits on my ring finger. It looks like diamonds have been crushed into the band. The light hitting it makes the whole thing sparkle. "Figured you'd want a band with nothing sticking out of it. Wouldn't want you to catch one of the animals on it." I nod in agreement. I did want something I could wear all the time but was still beautiful. It's perfect.

"Pancakes it is. You want bacon or sausage?" I look up at him. "Alright, Slick. I'll make both but only for you." He starts pulling stuff out of the refrigerator to make us a very late breakfast.

"You didn't ask?"

"Wasn't going to." He shrugs putting everything out on the counter.

"I think I should at least know your name if I'm going to marry you." King puts the pan down on the stove coming back over to me.

"I guess you're right."

"I always am. You should remember that since we're getting married and all."

"I'll make a note." He says with a chuckle. I poke his hard stomach.

"Spill."

"Fine." He lets out a long sigh. "I'll never live this one down." Oh god. How bad could it be?

"We don't have to name our sons after you." I offer. He closes his eyes shaking his head but still he's smiling.

"Castle." He opens his eyes and finally gives in.

"Like King of the castle?"

"Yeah, Slick." I try to silently giggle but my whole body shakes with laughter. I should have known better. In one

second flat I'm bent over the counter with my bare ass in the air. I gasp as King's hand comes down on me. It turns to a moan as he rubs the spot before his hand drifts lower to between my thighs.

“Fucking wet. I just ate you.” He had.

“I want more.” I raise my ass higher into the air spreading my thighs so my King can give me more. He always does.



epilogue

“I CAN’T DO THIS!” Slick screams. Her grip on my hand is harder than a lumberjack’s. I think I’m losing feeling there.

“It’s alright.”

Her free hand flies to the neckline of my shirt. “It’s alright? That’s what you’re saying right now? How would you like to pass a watermelon through your penis?”

I would not like that at all. I try to tug her hand away but her hold is immovable.

“It’s painful,” the nurse with the short gray hair chimes in.

I give up and let my wife strangle me.

“You’re going to hell you know,” she hisses.

“Yes, straight to hell.” I wipe a cloth across her sweaty forehead. I wish I could take this pain away but I can’t.

“After today you’re not allowed to touch me everrrrrrr.” Her eyes close and her back bows slightly off the table as the next contraction rips through her body.

I promised I wouldn’t lie to her but these are extenuating circumstances. “Never touching you again,” I agree. “You got this. Keep breathing.” I don’t need to go to hell. I’m already there. Seeing her in this much pain breaks my fucking heart. I’d trade places with her in a heartbeat. The contraction wears off and her lower lip trembles. The hand at my throat falls away and while I can breathe again, I’m worried. “What is it?”

“You’re not ever touching me again?” She wails. “Are you saying I’m not sexy anymore?”

“What?” I backtrack a few seconds to catch her train of thought. “No, I—“

“I can’t believe that in the first sign of any kind of hardship you’re just going to abandon me.”

“That’s not right,” inserts the nurse.

I glare at the woman in the shapeless blue scrubs. She is not helping.

“I will touch you everywhere as soon as the doctor says I can,” I hurriedly reassure her.

“What if I don’t want you to touch me?”

“You shouldn’t touch anyone who doesn’t want to be touched,” adds the nurse.

She’s fucking with me. I know it, but I can’t do anything about it.

“I won’t touch you. Unless you want it. Then I’m touching you everywhere.”

“If you’re just touching me because I want you to touch me, then you should keep ittttttt.”

The next contraction hits so I don’t have to answer which is a good thing because I don’t know what to say at this point. When the pain passes, she’s moved on.

“Do you love me?” She demands. Her lips are dry and her eyes are glassy and she’s never looked more beautiful.

“With everything I’ve got.”

“Good. I want you to get rid of the doctor and reach in and pull the baby out. Like a calf.”

“You’re not a cow, babe.”

“Did you just say I’m a cow?” She says, her voice perilously high.

The nurse snickers and even the sober doctor’s face twitches slightly.

“No, but, Slick, I cannot pull our child out of your womb. I’m fairly sure that every medical journal says that that is not

the way to birth a child.”

“All those fucking manuals are written by men, that’s why,” Hayden yells. “Get this baby out of me before the next contraction hits or I’m going to—“ She pushes herself up on her elbows and glares at the doc. “Rip it out,” she orders.

The doctor laughs. “No, I’m sorry but your husband is right. We can’t remove the baby like that, but I have good news. I can see the crown of the baby’s head so a few more pushes and you’ll be done.”

“Can I kill my husband? Is that allowed in the birthing room?” Hayden asks sarcastically. At least I hope she’s being sarcastic.

“Absolutely,” the doctor replies. “Do you need some tools or just want to choke him?”

Hayden grabs my shirt. “I’ll choke him.”

All the women in the birthing suite wear varying expressions of approval. We are definitely only having one child.

“All right, time for you to push,” announces the doctor.

“I can’t,” Hayden moans. The fight seems to have been drained out of her.

“Yeah, you can. You can do anything, even this.”

Tears roll out of the corners of her eyes. Maybe she would protest more, but the contraction comes again. She alternates between screams and cries, threats of violence and pleas for help. It’s a pleading that gets me. I won’t touch her again. I can’t put her through this.

I pass the cloth across her forehead, let her squeeze my fingers so hard they might break off, whisper words of encouragement. What a warrior she is, how strong she is, how no one but her can do this. I’ve never been so worthless in my entire life.

“It’s coming! It’s coming!” announces the nurse.

“One last push,” instructs the doctor.

Hayden gives it her all and the baby slips into the doctor's hands. There's almost complete silence and then a thin wail fills the room.

Hayden begins to cry. My own eyes feel damp.

"It's a boy," they tell us. It's a blur from then on. The nurse does something with the baby. The doctor tells Hayden to push one more time to rid her body of the placenta and then finally, a tiny bundle of skin and bones and a shock of dark hair is placed on Hayden's breast.

"A son. We have a baby boy," my wife says in hushed, reverent tones.

The boy is tiny. His fingers are wrinkled and his toes are curled tight against his foot. His eyes look glued shut and his little mouth opens and closes. Hayden guides the baby to her breast and he latches on, suckling on the nipple without any encouragement. She sighs in relief and falls back against the hospital bed. Her arms droop to the side. My girl is exhausted. "You did good, Slick. You did real good."

"Is everything alright?"

"It's perfect," the nurse tells us.

Relieved, Hayden allows her eyes to drift shut. The nurse nudges me aside to take the baby. I watch as he is bundled up into a blanket burrito. A little hat is tugged onto his small head and then I get to hold him.

"I know you're going to be strong because your momma is made of steel."

"I'm still not going to let you touch me again," Hayden says from her hospital bed. Her eyes are still closed but there's a smile on her face.

"Too bad," I reply, hitching my son's small body higher against my chest. "Because I'm going to need about ten more of these little ones."

"Maybe once more," she concedes.

I lean down and press a kiss against her forehead. "At least nine of them."

“Three.”

“Eight.”

“Three.”

“Seven and a half.”

Her eyes flick open. “How do you plan to have a half of a kid.”

“I don’t know. I was just throwing numbers out there.”

“You’re silly.” She closes her eyes again.

“Silly in love with you.”

“Four.”

“A total clown in love with you.”

“Four.”

“Four, then.”

* * *

Thanks for reading my luvvs! And thank you so much for the review. Every single one helps. I hope you’re having a good new year. I have another book coming out in a couple of weeks. Keep your download finger ready.

heart Ella

oh snowy night



It took one look for Rowan to fall for Charlee. He wifed her immediately—as in two weeks after their first meeting. Shocked by his own lack of self restraint and the dark thoughts of possession and ownership that filled him, Rowan fears his precious wife will leave him if she finds out how he really feels, how crazy in love with her he really is.

It took one look for Charlee to fall for Rowan. She said yes when he asked her to marry him—even though it was only two weeks after they met. It was her fairy tale in the making. Her happily ever after doesn't last long though. The ink is barely dry on their marriage certificate when her hard pursuing husband suddenly becomes cold and distant, off on business more than he's at home. Fed up, she hands him divorce papers.

Rowan knows he's in for a fight but he's not signing those divorce papers and he's not letting Charlee get away, even if it means kidnapping her to a small cabin in her home town in the dead of winter. If she's snowed in, she can't leave him. He

knows he can never let her go and all the control he's barely held onto snaps. His wife is about to find out how truly obsessed he is with her.



one

“THIS IS A...” My gaze runs from the smoked stained exposed beams in the ceiling to the dirty oak floors that appear as if they haven’t been cleaned since the cabin was built twenty years ago, and I try to conjure up something complimentary about this ramshackle contraption called a home that realtor in town said was the only place available for the low price of eighty grand. “Place,” I finish.

This is Charlee’s hometown, and I convinced her to take this trip with me to hash out the details of our divorce. It was a stalling tactic. Besides, it’s Christmas Eve and we should be together. She’s still my wife.

I’ve been stalling successfully for the last two years of our four-year marriage. Every time my wife has turned her sad eyes in my direction and asked for us to talk, I’ve conveniently had a business meeting, a deal to close, a property to see.

For two years, over seven hundred days, I’ve spent more time away from my wife than with her for the sole purpose of saving my marriage. I think I’m losing my mind at this point. And now, in a last-ditch effort to convince her that divorce is the worst decision she could make, I bring her to what amounts to little more than a dilapidated shed in the middle of a snowstorm in her hometown. At least she’ll be trapped here for now. We barely made it in the snow already coming down so hard.

Rule number one in a business setting: never show weakness.

I take the bag from her slackened hand and march toward the bedroom. Charlee trudges behind me. Her childhood home is occupied by her brothers and sisters with all their kids. We'd never have a moment alone there.

“Only one bedroom.” Her tone is flat and resigned. It's the defeat in her voice, as if marriage to me has sucked the life out of her, and that cuts me to the core. She tried to move into the spare room in our main home. I couldn't have that. I moved my shit to the other room to not have an all-out fight with her. I still slip into the bed at night. As much as I try and give her space, it's damn hard, especially when we're under the same roof and I'm not traveling for work.

“We'll make the best of it.” The odd thing is that once we are in bed, our defenses down, our clothes off, I can make myself believe she's still in love with me. Or at least in lust. She's maddeningly responsive to every touch and caress and kiss. She's eager, too, willing to do anything I want and asking for more. If she only knew all the dark, fucked-up shit I've wanted to do. I'm always fighting for control in our bedroom. My Charlee is so sweet and pure. I'm not so sure she'd be so eager if she had any clue to the dark thoughts I have when it comes to her. She's the only one to ever draw them from me.

Outside of bed, we barely talk. She rarely smiles, rarely initiates a conversation, and when she does bring up a topic of conversation, it's change. She wants to move, she wants to get a job, she wants more friends. The message is clear: life with me is not satisfying. She's searching for something else. The same as when I'd met her. Though that stopped when we got married. She was happy and content. Until she wasn't. We can't seem to find our way back to that place.

I've tried to make myself absent. Leaving her alone seems like what she wants, but even that does not make her happy either. I'm at a loss as to what turned my beautiful, vivacious bride into this sullen, silent housewife. It's killing me.

“I don't understand why we had to come all the way to Winter Falls to discuss the divorce.” Her clear voice slices through the air.

I stiffen so she can't see how hard the blow lands. "You grew up here. I thought you might like the change of scenery. Besides, it didn't make sense to have it in the house. I still live there and plan to do so in the future."

"Of course you do." Derision drips from her words.

"What does that mean?"

"Nothing." She inspects the bathroom and then the kitchen. Her finger swipes along the side of the small stainless steel sink and comes up blackened. Even during all this, she still wears her wedding ring. Mine will never leave my finger.

"Sorry," I say stiffly.

She shrugs. "It's not bad. Dirty, but charming. At least it's got character."

I don't understand her. This shack is nothing but a few sticks and nails, while our home is a stately three-story mansion with a storied history. When she first moved into the home my grandmother passed down to me, I thought she loved it. She exclaimed over the garden in the back with its intricate hedges and beautiful fountains. She loved the third-floor attic with its vaulted ceilings and nooks tucked into the circular turret like structures at the corners of the old mansion. But somewhere along the line, her love for the home, much like her professed love for me, turned to distaste.

Now the home is old and drafty. The woodwork overwhelming. The patterns dated. I don't know how it can be dated. The entire place was overhauled by a famous decorator. The woman had won some prize one of my real estate firms sponsored. She designed the interior of the new headquarters, and it was wildly different than the steel and glass and leather that every other commercial enterprise has adopted. It felt warm and inviting and perfect for my grandmother's home built a century ago.

We'd had a dinner party, and I'd introduced Charlee to the decorator, thinking she would like to meet other women in the area, but Charlee took an instant dislike to the designer and demanded I stop working with her. I tried to explain to Charlee

that I'd never hired her in the first place—one of the subsidiaries I own did, and I didn't have jurisdiction over who they work with.

She was angry after that and accused me of not listening to her. I sent a message to the real estate firm to move on to another decorator, but they had a four-year contract with a fairly large penalty clause. Four years isn't a long time, I decided. I never had Arabella invited to another house party and never mentioned her again, but since then, Charlee has hated the house. I think she sees it as an extension of myself, and everything associated with me turns her stomach. She doesn't like my sports car, my motorcycle, my office. Frankly, she doesn't like me.

And I want nothing more than for her to be happy.

Suddenly, the door bursts open, causing the wood to bang sharply against the wall. Charlee jumps in surprise right into my arms. Instinctively, I wrap her tight against me. "It's just the wind."

"I know." Her heart's thudding fast. She looks up at me, delicate and vulnerable. Her pink lips part slightly as my cock, always at half-mast when she's around, hardens at the contact.

"Charlee," I groan. My hand sweeps up to the base of her neck and tugs her head back. I lower my mouth to hers. She might hate me, but she still loves this.



two

I SHOULD PUSH HIM AWAY. Instead I cling to him, allowing him to kiss me with all the passion he has for us when we're in the bedroom. The bedroom has never been a problem for us. It's the one place I know I have all of my husband's attention. It's also the one place I always feel desired when it comes to my husband.

"Charlee. Sweetheart," he groans my name as he lifts me. My feet leave the floor. He pins me to the nearest wall. "Get me out," he orders. A rush of excitement fills me. It always does when Rowan turns into his dominating self in the bedroom. My body falls under his control. There is no stopping it. I go for his belt, freeing his cock. Memories of our wedding night flash through my mind.

We were so desperate for each other that we'd barely made it back to the hotel suite that night. I'd still been in my wedding dress when he slid inside of me, making me his wife in every way. I'll never forget that.

Rowan was angry with himself for taking my virginity that way. I hadn't cared. The way his control shatters for me is one of the reasons I'd fallen in love with him so quickly. It's crazy how fast things can change. But I don't want to think about that now; I want to focus on this moment. This could be the last time I make love with my husband.

"Always ready for me," he says when his fingers dip into the front of my panties to grab a hold of them. I grip his shoulders as he yanks them from my body. A second later, he's thrusting inside of me.

“Rowan!” I gasp as my body tries to adjust to his massive size. My Rowan is big everywhere. He’s a force to be reckoned with.

“Fuck, you’re always so damn tight. Should have eaten you first.” I close my eyes, trying to fight back my emotions. My sex contracts around his cock, wanting him to move. He holds me pinned to the wall with his cock deep inside of me.

“That’s what happens when you’re not having sex on the regular.” I can’t stop the tart reply from slipping past my lips. Oh, we still have sex on occasion when Rowan slips into my room. I could never tell that man no when he got his hands on me, but it’s been a few months. Four very long months. My eyes fly open. “Fuck me or put me down,” I challenge.

My words shock both of us. I’m not a prude. Well, not so much anymore. A lot of my shyness slipped away during our first year of marriage. When your husband makes love to you like he can’t get enough, it helps with that. Rowan also tends to have a very dirty mouth. Or he had.

“Oh I’ll fuck you, *wife*.” He pulls almost all the way out of me.

“Don’t call me—” My words are cut off when he thrusts all the way back inside of me. A moan leaves me instead as he starts to pump in and out of me.

His thrusts are almost brutal, but I welcome every single one of them. The Rowan of our first year of marriage is coming through. The one I had fallen head over heels in love with. I’m getting a glimpse of that possessive man that could never get enough of me. But I know better than to hope that this side of him will stick around. Believing that will only lead to disappointment.

“Miss you,” he grits out between thrusts. My heart flutters in my chest. Why can’t he say those things to me when he’s not inside of me?

My orgasm is already building. It’s been too long. No matter how many times I try to get myself off, it’s never the

same as what Rowan can do to me. The man owns my body. I think he even will after the ink is dry on the divorce papers.

He grips my hips, lifting me and angling my hips to hit that sweet spot inside of me. “Rowan!” I cry out his name when the orgasm slams down on me. I cling to him as the pleasure rolls through my body in waves. He groans my name as he spills his own release deep inside of me.

He buries his face in my neck as he thrusts a few more times. More of his seed spills inside of me. Neither of us move as we try to catch our breath. Some of his release slips out, spilling down my thighs.

When he starts to kiss my neck, I begin to drift back down to reality. I release my hold on him. I was pretty much clinging to him. I let my legs drop. Rowan stiffens for a moment before he shifts, letting his cock slip free of me.

“Did I hurt you?” he asks, setting me back down on my feet. I hate the question.

“Does it matter?” His head jerks up, his eyes locking with mine. It’s a low blow. I know Rowan would never intentionally want to hurt me. Somehow, he still manages to though.

“Charlee. I’d never want to hurt you.”

I shake my head. “No, *that* didn’t hurt. In fact, that’s the best thing you’ve done to me in a while.” I smooth my hands down my dress, righting it the best I can.

“Charlee—”

“You didn’t use a condom,” I blurt out. It’s a ridiculous thing to say, and I know it, but I’m poking.

“When have I ever used a condom?”

“You know I’m not on the pill. It messes with me.” I’d told him that before we got married. He told me it didn’t matter. That he planned on knocking me up anyway. That never did happen. I should be happy about that since we’re now about to get divorced, but I’m not.

“You’re my wife. I don’t need a damn condom.”

“I don’t know what you’ve been up to. Or who you’ve been up to it with.” The second the words are out of my mouth I know I went too far. Rowan isn’t a cheater.

I’m poking again. I’m not sure why. It’s not my nature, but I can’t control it at this point. I’m always a pleaser when it comes to him. I adored dotting on him. I hate fighting, but for some reason I’m itching for one now. I shouldn’t be. I came here to get the papers signed.

Liar! My heart and brain scream together at me.

“You’re lucky I know you haven’t been with anyone.”

“How do you know that!?” There I go again. Poking the bear. Wanting him to snap. Then what? Then you get that darkness Rowan tries to hide from me. The darkness I see lurking in his eyes when we’re in bed.

“I know.” He steps into me, pressing me back until I hit the wall. “I’m a married man. My dick belongs to my wife. A wife I’ll never divorce.”

I gasp. “You lied. You said you’d sign the papers.”

“I said we’d talk. So I didn’t lie. You’re the liar.” I flinch. “You vowed to be mine. To love me in good times and bad. Until death do us part.” I fight back tears because he’s right. “I need some air.” He turns, stomping from the room. It’s not long before I hear the front door open and slam shut.

I see some things never change.



three

MY PARENTS NEVER FOUGHT. Their hatred was a silent but palpable thing. They stayed together because they had nowhere else to go. They were miserable people, and their unhappiness spread like a contagious disease until they lived on this island that no one else cared to visit. As their only son, I was trapped there, only escaping through a football scholarship to a small college with an excellent academic record. I played sports like it was my job and spent the rest of my days taking as many finance and economics classes as possible. I made connections, and with some savvy decisions and a fuckton of luck, I ended up with a fortune.

I bought my parents a new home, new cars, new everything, thinking that without the pressure of wondering where the next paycheck was coming from, they could close the distance between them. It didn't work. If anything, the money allowed them to retreat further into their solo spheres.

I vowed I wouldn't entangle myself with another person, and I was able to keep that promise until I met Charlee. All it took was one look at her. We arrived at the cash register at the small sundry shop on the first floor of my building. I was buying the newspaper like I do every morning. She was buying a package of mints before an interview for a job she didn't particularly want but needed so she could pay the rent. Her roommate had abruptly moved out, leaving Charlee with a two-bedroom apartment that she couldn't afford. She was younger and too trusting. I had an instant urge to protect her from the world. Growing up in a small town, she wasn't ready for a big city.

I rode up the elevator with her, babysat her purse while she was interviewed, and bought her lunch afterwards. I also took her home that night and slept on her sofa. I wanted to be in her bed but decided we would be married soon and would do it right. It was torture to be near her, to kiss her and hold her and not bury my cock inside her wet heat. I managed to make it until the vows were said but not much after.

Her virgin blood stained her wedding gown. I still feel like a dick about that.

I wasn't born into money. My dad was a laborer, making concrete forms for bridges until he hurt his back. I worked as a teen at a local gravel pit, shoveling rocks into dump trucks, and then as a part-time construction worker in college during the summers before football camp started. After graduation, I did as many odd jobs as possible during the nights and weekends to get enough money to start an investment fund. I have calluses on my hands, and my manners aren't as polished as the Wall Street boys who grew up on the coast and attend Hahvahd and Yale.

If I had had that upbringing, maybe I would've been able to control myself, to hold off long enough to get her dress off, lay her down on a bed of roses, and softly, gently take Charlee. But she doesn't inspire soft feelings in me. Instead, I'm filled with animalistic desires to hold, conquer, possess. I hate seeing her talk with other men, even the clerks at the convenience store or the gas attendant who fills her Land Rover.

I know it's wrong, but I still hate it.

I scrape a hand through my hair and then circle the house to see if I can find some wood for the fireplace. The wind is picking up, and there's a sharpness in the air that smells of snow. In a lean-to next to the cabin, there's a small stack of cut logs. I pile them into my arms and bring them inside.

Charlee is in the kitchen, elbow deep in the sink. She's done a lot of work in here while I've been mentally wanking myself outside.

"Looks good," I say as I walk past her toward the fireplace.

“This is a nice place. It just needed some cleaning. Mrs. Cunningham used to live here. When I was a little girl, the older kids told me she was a witch and would eat you if you walked in her yard.”

I set the wood down and arrange a few pieces of kindling on the iron grates. “Did you walk on her lawn to see?”

“No. I was a good girl.” She gives me a half smile. “And a chicken. I stayed away, but Hank Porter did on a dare. He walked across her lawn for an entire week and nothing happened to him.”

I try to keep my jaw from twitching at the name of some kid who poses zero threat to me. “So she wasn’t a witch.”

“Well, I wouldn’t go so far as to say that.” Her lips turn up a tick higher. “After that week of beating a path across Mrs. Cunningham’s back yard, Hank broke his arm falling off his bike when he was riding to school. He swore that the sidewalk rose up and bit his tire to pieces and that’s why he crashed. Anyway, after that, we all believed she was a witch and stayed away.” Her lips fall suddenly. “I guess, though, she must’ve been lonely. No kids. No husband, and everyone avoiding her. I should’ve brought her some cookies.”

“You were a kid, Charlee. It wasn’t your responsibility.” I light the fire.

“Still—”

“You were a kid,” I repeat. I throw two logs on. She takes too much responsibility on herself. She’s always overextending herself to help others and then getting run down because of it. Twice during the first six months of our marriage, I came home to find her nearly passed out from exhaustion, having covered the shifts of her coworkers, who always had more important things to do that they couldn’t work. She was going to end up in the hospital at the rate she was going, so I told her she couldn’t work anymore. I needed her at home.

At first, she resisted, but I could see how good it was for her. She was no longer falling asleep at the dinner table or

nodding off in the middle of a movie. She started gaining weight and generally looking a lot healthier.

For a while, it seemed like everything was going well, but somewhere along the road, our marriage got off track. And here we are with me trying to pull the locomotive back on to the rails and her trying to detach her car and go a different direction.

If I have to blow up the whole world to keep her with me, I'll do that.



four

I STARE OUT THE WINDOW, watching the snow start to come down more. My sister Marley texted me a bit ago and asked if we had enough supplies to last a few days because an unexpected storm is rolling in quickly. She became the deputy of Winter Falls about six months ago. It was a bit surprising. She'd gotten a degree in social work, but so far she's been enjoying it.

Everyone in town loves Marley. She's easy to love. Except for some new man that moved into town. He's always calling the police station with a reason to get her out to his place. He's really crushing on her. She claims he's a grump. I think he's a bit in love with her. Not that I told Marley that. She'll need to learn that on her own. She can't seem to see herself how everyone else does.

I'd been a bit surprised when Rowan asked for us to come out here to hash out some of the divorce details. I thought once we got everything situated that I'd be able to go spend Christmas with my family. I don't think that is going to happen now. Not only because of the snow either. Rowan is up to something.

As much as I love the town of Winter Falls, we never come here anymore. It's hard to make things work with Rowan's schedule. The man works so damn much. He's never home, and even when he is, it feels as if he's distracted.

Though when I think back, it's hard to recall if he always worked that much or if it started about the time I began to push away. I don't know how the past two years have felt both painfully slow but are still a blur as if they'd gone by fast.

“Want me to make dinner?” Rowan asks after he gets the fire going.

“A storm is rolling in. They said we’ll be stuck here for a few days.”

“It’s Christmas. I wasn’t planning on going anywhere.”

“Maybe I was.” I fold my arms over my chest. It’s the only way I can try to maintain the wall between Rowan and me. I need to keep my guard up, or we’ll end up in bed together.

“I’m spending Christmas with my wife.”

“Stop calling me that.” I roll my eyes.

“No.”

“It hurts!” I snap. Rowan lifts his brows in surprise.

“What’s gotten into you?”

“What’s that supposed to mean? What, you care that I have a backbone all of a sudden?”

For so long I worried about making everyone happy but myself. Until one day, I decided that I was going to do what I thought was best for me. I was tired of waiting for Rowan to make me a priority in his life. I never knew if he’s coming or going. He can be so hot one second and cold the next.

“I care a fucking lot.” A slow smile pulls at his lips. “It’s sexy. I rather like it,” he says, surprising me. He walks over to stand in front of me. “I saw some Christmas decorations in the closet. How about I go get us a tree? If we’re going to be stuck here, we might as well do it up.”

“Rowan.” I close my eyes, dropping my head to his chest. It doesn’t matter how mad I might be, there is always this pull I have to him.

I’m starting to see what’s going on here. If I didn’t know any better I’d almost bet he set up this snowstorm. I know it’s impossible to control Mother Nature, but I don’t put anything past Rowan. Not when he’s a man on a mission. I’m not sure what his plan is, but I know he has something up his sleeve.

“Please.” That one word breaks my resolve.

I simply nod my head in agreement because I know I'm fighting a losing battle. If we are going to be stuck here with each other for the next few days, we might as well make the best of it. A pang of sadness hits me out of nowhere at the thought of this being our last Christmas together.

"I want to come with you. To pick out the tree."

"It's cold, and it's really coming down." His brows furrow together.

"I'm not asking, Rowan." I tilt my chin up. "I'm not a child."

"Trust me. I know you're far from a child, but I can't stop wanting to take care of you."

"I know." I shake my head. "It's one of the reasons I fell in love with you, Rowan. But taking care of me doesn't mean putting me in a box to pull out when you want to play with me." He opens his mouth to say something but closes it, seeming to think over his next words.

"I didn't know you felt that way."

"I do. That box gets lonely. Especially when I don't think you hear me."

"Charlee."

"No, that's not all on you. That's on me too."

"Okay. Bundle up. I'll go check the shed I saw out back for an ax."

"I'll hurry." Without thinking, I lean up and kiss him before I dart back toward the bedroom, where he put our bags. I quickly find something to wear and layer up. When I come out the front door, Rowan is stepping out of the shed with an ax over his shoulder.

My husband has always been hot. His suits are always sexy on him, but right now he's really pulling off that whole lumberjack thing. I swear he can pull any look off.

From the first day I met him, I've been a bit shocked how into me he was. He wasn't only out of my league in the looks

department but everywhere really. He was rich, educated and extremely successful. Rowan could do anything he put his mind to. I'd been more than lost and always thought of myself as a bit homely back then.

Except when I was in Rowan's arms. No matter how busy he might have been, whenever his eyes were on me, I felt like I was the sexiest woman in the world. That's the thing with Rowan. When he has all his attention on you, you'll never want to be anywhere else. But when it's gone, you'll never feel colder. I'd been a bit addicted to his obsession with me. I still am. In brief moments, I'll think I have it again, but as soon as I think I see it, he's gone.

"You got a hat?" he calls, making his way toward me.

"In the car." I hop off the porch. It's slicker than I expected, and I slip, falling a bit forward but catch myself on the fluffy snow with my hands.

"Charlee!" Rowan shouts.

I can hear the irritation in his voice. I'm sure it's really fear but still. I'm okay. He rushes over toward me. I grip a handful of the snow in my palm and pop up before he's halfway across the yard. I nail him right in the chest with a snowball.

He stops dead in his tracks, and his head drops to stare down at the snow stuck to the front of his very expensive coat. "You wanna play?" A smirk pulls at his lips. I lean down and pick up another ball of snow.

"I think I do," I say before I throw another one at him. He drops the ax, letting it fall into the snow. I watch as he bends down to grab his own handful of snow. I turn, taking off toward the woods.

"When will you learn, wife?" he calls after me. "You can run, but I will always chase."

I pray he catches me soon. I'm not sure how much more I can bear.



five

PUFFS of white trail behind Charlee as she screams with laughter. I pelt her with one snowball after another until she collapses on the ground, her hands covering her face. “Enough! I surrender!”

I drop the snow in my hands. “As you should.” But when I lean over to lift her to her feet, a giant block of snow is smashed into my face. She giggles with glee and wriggles out of my grip, slipping and sliding until I catch her again. I swing her into the air and then over my shoulder, giving her ass a solid thwack before moving swiftly toward the house.

The chase has raised my blood pressure, and my cock can’t handle much more teasing. It needs to be inside her, surrounded by her snug, hot cunt.

“Put me down,” she yells, batting her fists against my back.

“When I’m ready,” I reply.

“I don’t want to go inside,” she whines when she notices the direction of my feet.

“It’s too cold to make love out here.”

She goes still, and the air takes on a sudden chill that has nothing to do with the weather.

“What?” I ask even though I don’t want to know the answer.

“I thought we were having fun out here.” She kicks and wiggles until I lower her to the ground.

“We were, and now we’re going to have fun inside.” I take her hand and start up the steps to the front door. When she doesn’t move with me, I tense and look over my shoulder.

Her happy face has grown tight. “But we are more than sex, Rowan. I mean, we have to be more than sex, otherwise we won’t survive.”

I clench my jaw. What I’m hearing her say is she doesn’t want to have sex. Or maybe fucking is fine, but it’s me that’s the problem. “Are you seeing someone else?” I spit out. “All those nights that I’m working to provide for us, are you spending those with someone else?”

Her face grows blank and then hard with fury. “Are you serious right now?”

Why is she angry? I’m not the one who turned her down. I’m not the one who filed for divorce. “What else am I supposed to think when you’d rather sit out here freezing your tits off than go inside and lie down by the fire and make love?”

“It’s not even that cold out here, and I wanted to spend some time with you that didn’t involve us taking our clothes off! We can’t spend every minute we’re together naked. We have to learn how to talk to each other.”

I cross my arms. “So talk. Who are you sleeping with?”

She throws her hands in the air. “No one, including you!”

She spins on her heel and dashes into the house, slamming the door behind her. The little house shakes on impact. I could storm up the stairs and wrench the door open, which will end up in us making love, and then she’ll be angry, accusing me of only wanting her for sex. I force myself down the stairs and back to the chopping block. It takes me two hours to work out my frustration and sexual energy, and by that time, I have enough wood to last us an entire winter. I carry a load into the house. The kitchen is spotless, and the small living room is clean too.

I dump the firewood beside the fireplace and throw two more logs onto the dwindling flames.

“Charlee?” I call.

“In the bedroom,” comes the quiet response.

I find her tucking in a pretty quilt with colorful patchwork.

“Sorry,” she says without looking up. She tosses a pillow on top of the quilt and makes a show of plumping it until it looks like a stuffed turkey.

“What are you sorry for?”

“Shouting at you, I guess. I don’t want to fight.”

“I don’t like that either.” I reach across the bed and tilt her chin up. “What’s got you worked up?”

“Why did you accuse me of cheating on you? I would never do that.” There’s a real wounded look in her eyes.

My heart squeezes. “Sorry. The thought of you with another man makes me crazed. I can’t take it. You know how possessive I am. I don’t even like seeing the clerk talk to you at the convenience store on the first floor of the building.”

“I know.” One side of her lip whisks up only to fall again. “Are you having an affair?”

“No,” I reply swift and sharp. “Is that why you asked for a divorce? You were my first, and you’ll be my last, Charlee. It’s until death do us part for me. When I said my vows, I meant them.”

“You’re implying that I didn’t mean my vows?”

I rein in my temper. I know I have a fearsome one, and I need to keep it at bay. At least she’s talking to me, and that’s the whole point of us coming here. No divorce until we talked through the fine points. “I can only judge things by your actions. Telling me you want to end our marriage, going to a lawyer behind my back and getting papers drawn up says that you don’t believe in the things you swore to. What am I supposed to think?”

“Right.”

Silence falls. I wait for her to say more, but her mouth seems zipped shut. My fingers clench and unclench at my side as I contemplate reaching across the mattress and throwing her

down on the bed. When she's nude and under me, there is never any talk of divorce or separation. There's only want and need. Is there any question as to why I'm constantly taking her clothes off, sliding inside her body, rutting into her until neither of us have energy to move? I raise my hand and she startles, skittering back until she's more than an arm's length away. I let my hand fall to my side. Sometimes in business, you have to take a risk to get a big reward. It feels like you're jumping off the top of a building with no safety net, but if you don't make the leap, you'll never get to the jackpot. I curl my fingers into my palm and jump.

“I'll give you a divorce on Christmas morning if you do everything I say until then. No questions asked.”



six

I STARE at Rowan in shock, trying to get my anger under control. How can I go from laughing and having the best time with him to wanting to scream and cry in rage? Only Rowan could ever draw all these different emotions from me.

I know it's because of how deeply I love him. With him, I always feel so much more. When it's great, there is nothing better in the world. When it's bad, I want to curl up in a ball and hide from the rest of the world.

This was the last thing I'd ever thought I'd hear him say. It's a double-edged sword. It hits me that I never actually thought I'd follow through with this divorce. That I figured Rowan would always sideline it.

I could push and say I was going to. That I am strong enough to go through with it. But I know I'm only lying to myself. I realize now that there was no real fear when I sought out a lawyer. I could pretend to myself that I was pushing forward. Give myself the illusion of control knowing he'd never let it happen. Now he's changing the game by offering me what I've been asking for.

I know getting a divorce would be like losing to him, and Rowan never loses. He'll fight for things till the bitter end. It's a quality I loved in him generally until recently. I hate the idea of him staying married to me because he thinks getting out is a failure.

I open and close my mouth as I try to wrap my head around everything. This has to be a trick. I must be missing

something. Or maybe I just don't want to face the fact that he is actually willing to let us go.

"I don't believe you," I challenge.

"When have I ever lied to you?"

"You just did." I call him out.

"You don't believe I'll follow through with this..." He pauses for a bit. "Divorce." If I wasn't so worked up, I might laugh at how much he doesn't want to say the word divorce. It's almost adorably sweet.

"I wasn't talking about that. I wasn't your first." I never asked Rowan about his past lovers. I didn't want to know. Not only is my husband handsome, but he's very successful too. I've seen the way other women look at him. How they try to get his attention whenever they can. I've always wondered how I held it so easily in the past. Until I started to question if I really did. I hate that.

"I might be a lot of things, but a liar isn't one of them."

"Rowan. I've met one of your past lovers." I glare at him. "You know what? It doesn't matter. Forget it. You have a deal." I throw up my hands, not wanting to talk about this anymore.

Truthfully, I never wanted to talk about that. About her. I just don't want him to think he got one over on me. I might be naïve in a lot of things. I know that. I even counted on Rowan to keep me a bit hidden at times from things, but he's not getting off on being some saint. Especially after he just accused me of cheating.

I gasp when Rowan all but leaps over the bed like some lumberjack ninja. The hell? He's on me, pinning me to the bed in the blink of an eye. My body immediately heats, the same way it always does when he's near.

"Don't move," he orders.

"I will—"

He covers my mouth with his hand. "You made your deal, wife. Nod if you understand." I glare at him but nod. "Don't

move.” I watch as he slips from the bed. He opens his suitcase. A moment later, he comes back with a few of his ties.

“Rowan?”

“I’ve always wanted to tie you to the bed. Did you know that?” I shake my head no. Rowan has always been a bit dominating in bed. I could sense that he was holding back, but I was unsure why. It was almost as though he was trying to hide a darker part of himself. “There are so many dirty things I’ve wanted to do to you but held back,” he says as he ties one hand and then the other. “But now I’m going to do every single one of them. I’m going to get my fill of you.” As mad as I am at him, his dirty words already have me growing wet between my thighs.

Once he’s got my wrists firmly tied, he grabs my shirt, ripping it right down the center. My bra is next to go. He’s pissed. Good, he’s letting go of all that control and doing what he wants.

“Rowan.” I lick my lips as my breathing grows heavy.

“Am I scaring you or turning you on?”

“I’m not scared of you, Rowan.”

“You should be. If you knew the dirty things I’ve wanted to do to you.” He goes for my pants next. “Only you,” he adds, stripping the rest of my clothes off until I’m naked. He trails his fingers up and down the inside of my thigh. I part my legs, inviting him to give me more. I whimper when his fingers stop right as they get to my sex then drift back down my leg.

“Don’t tease me.”

“You’ve been keeping things from me, and I don’t like it. I’m going to have to change how I get information from my wife. Now tell me. Who lied to you? I’ve only been with you, Charlee. Even if you leave me, there will only ever be you.” I want to call him a liar again, but the intensity of his stare stops me. “Don’t make me do it,” he warns as he grips my thighs and pushes them apart as he moves between my legs.

“Rowan,” I whimper when he brushes his mouth against my clit. He lifts his head. I can see the desire in his eyes, but

there's something else there too that I can't place.

"Charlee," he warns. I buck, trying to lift my hips. A yelp pops from my mouth when his hand slaps down on my sex.

"You did not just do that."

"I did," he says before he does it again. The loud smack would make you think it's painful. Truthfully, it's anything but that. My clit starts to throb with need and an intensity I've never felt before. "Someone lied to my wife, and I want to know who."

"It doesn't matter," I grit out between my teeth. "You're not going to do anything. I already told you once to get rid of her, but you didn't."

His eyes widen in realization of who I'm talking about.

Arabella Moore.

The woman was all too happy to tell me she'd been with my husband in the past and she'd be there again when I was gone. She went around spreading stories about us. When I tried to say something to Rowan, he waved it off as if my feelings about it didn't matter. He made sure we didn't run into her, but that wasn't enough. It started to mess with my head that maybe they did have something at one time. It didn't help that I felt like he was pulling away. That he was hiding something from me.

"I'll handle it," he vows.

I shake my head no. "She's not the point, Rowan. My request was silly to you. I'm silly to you. Your little wife you put away and bring out when it fits you best."

A darkness seems to fall over Rowan at my words.

"I told you not to move."

"Fuck me or untie me," I hiss, wondering if I've gone too far this time.



seven

“I’LL FUCK you on my own schedule. I want to hear more about this woman I’ve been sleeping with before you. While I’m preparing you, feel free to tell me all the details.” I rip my T-shirt into strips and then wrap one piece around her pretty ankle. Seeing her laid out for me like this is messing with my head. How many times have I dreamed of doing this to her? Only her. But I need to focus. So much is starting to become clear in my mind now. I had no idea it had gone this deep. What the fuck did Arabella Moore say to my wife? I will end her whole fucking career.

“Why would I have to tell you anything? You were there.” She tries to halfheartedly kick her way out of my grip, but it’s not happening.

“Remind me again because my memory is bad. When and where?” I fasten one leg to the bed. She writhes wildly with the other leg but can’t escape my grip. This is turning her on.

“How would I know the details?” She pants. “I wasn’t there.”

I slide my hands up her inner thighs until I reach her core. She’s wet. Very wet. I should’ve tied her up before. We would’ve never reached this point. “Neither was I, which is why I need some help remembering details.”

She averts her face. “I don’t want to talk about it. Why are you hurting me like this?”

I stop what I’m doing. “Are the ties cutting into you?”

“I’m talking about my heart! My heart is what hurts. I’ve tried to forget that you had another woman. It was before me, right? That’s all that mattered. It would be unreasonable of me to expect you to have waited. You’re hot and rich, and women are constantly throwing themselves at you. It’s normal for you to take up a few offers before you met me. I’m not mad about that. I just hate that she’s been in our home. Put her touches everywhere. Then you wouldn’t get rid of her.” The anguish on her face says something different than her words.

“It would be reasonable.” I reach down and quickly untie her legs and arms. Being bound turned her on—and me too—but now’s not the time for that. Or for ultimatums. She’s finally opening up to me. I pull her upright and sit down on the mattress, drawing her onto my lap. “I hate the idea of you with another man. I was fucking happy when I was your first. I have never touched another woman, never been inside another woman, never wanted another woman. You have my word against hers. Why are you believing her over me?” It’s the truth. Seeing my parents had me staying clear of anything romantic before Charlee. With her I knew I’d go through anything to have her. She changed everything for me.

Her eyes widen at my question. She’d never thought of it that way. “Oh, baby.” I cup her face. “Why are you so ready to believe stuff that hurts you? What’s going on?”

Tears slip down her cheeks. “I don’t know. I don’t really know. You’re hiding something from me. Holding back. I can feel it. Maybe not her but something!”

I thumb a few tears away, and when the waterworks continue, I start to kiss them away. “Charlee, there is never going to be another woman for me. If you leave me, it’s going to be a mess. I’ll sit outside your apartment, waiting for you to come out. The business will go to hell. People will lose their jobs. Families will be wrecked. The world will stop spinning.”

She chokes on a laugh, a watery hiccup escaping from her throat. “The world will stop spinning?”

“Yes, scientists have said that if one true love is thwarted, the world stops. I know you don’t want to be responsible for

that.”

Charlee laughs again, swipes her cheeks, and rests her head against my chest. “You’re right. I don’t want to be the one responsible for ending the world.”

I stroke a comforting hand down her back. “I don’t want the divorce, Charlee. I think you know that by now. I came here and put all these conditions on you because I wanted to make the divorce as hard as possible, so hard that you gave up. I love you. I want to stay married. Can’t we do that? If you want things to change, if you don’t like the house, if you don’t want me to work so hard, I can change those things. We’ll move. I’ll cut back. Tell me what you want, and I’ll make it happen.”

She stops breathing for a second. I can feel her still under my hand. Then she lets out a deep sigh. “All right, Rowan. You win.” She lifts her head and cups my face. “I’ll set aside the divorce.”

I win? That’s not what I want, though. But she fits her mouth to mine, and I can’t think anymore. This is the first time in a while that she’s initiated lovemaking. Words and explanations and questions can come later. I kiss her back, angling her head so I can dive deeper into her mouth.

She swings around on my lap so that her sex is pressed against my hard cock. Her hands go to work on my zipper. I cup her ass and rise up so she can pull my jeans down far enough to extract my shaft. Her warm soft hands around my dick make me groan.

I’m feverish with want and need. “Put me inside you.” It’s an order. A plea.

She positions herself above the shaft head and slides down slowly, enveloping me in a hot, wet vise. My eyeballs roll back in my head. She begins to ride me slowly. I let her set the pace, letting my hands rove all over her bare skin, kissing her deeply, trying to show her with my body that I’m following her lead.

Her back tightens under my hold, and her thighs quiver around mine. Pleasure sinks into every pore, wiping away my doubts and filling me with an overload of sensations. The friction she's creating with every clutch and slide of her cunt around my erection makes me dizzy. I dig my hands into her ass and pull her close.

She grows frantic; her movements become fractured, wild. She can't control her reaction, and I don't want her to. Her pussy convulses, and her cum covers my cock and spreads along my thighs. I pull her off and toss her onto the bed.

"What—?" she starts to ask, but I answer her with my mouth on her sex. When our clothes are off and our defenses are down, when all we are doing is feeling, we are one. I can't give that up. Not yet.

I flatten my tongue and drink down her essence. Her core is wicked hot and sticky. I eat it all, filling my lungs with her scent and flavor until she's thrashing on the bed. Mouth and heart full, I strip off all my clothes and plunge into her. She throws her head back and screams as her third orgasm catapults her back into the plane of ecstasy. I let myself go this time.

"You'll never leave me," I vow, thrusting so deep into her that I can feel her womb against my cockhead. "I'll never let you go."



eight

“LET ME.”

“Sit.” I bat Rowan’s hand away from trying to help me. He doesn’t look like he wants to listen to me. He’s fighting himself. He does that far too much for my liking, and it’s time for that to change if he wants to do more than put the divorce papers away. “Sit,” I say again with more force this time. “I enjoy taking care of you, Rowan. I’ve missed doing it,” I admit. He relaxes, taking a step back.

“If you didn’t, you’d tell me, right?” he asks, putting those kid gloves back on. I enjoy them at times. Especially when he’s trying to protect me from the world. But I don’t want him to do them in every aspect of our lives. I do know he enjoys taking care of me, the same way I do doting on him.

“Yes. I’ve learned my lesson. I need to be clearer in the things I say and want. I need to speak up more.” I finish putting the cookies onto the plate. “Start us a fire.”

“We never got a tree,” he points out as he goes over and does as I ask him.

“Tomorrow. It might be fun to put the tree up on Christmas.” The last holiday season hadn’t been our best one, so the thought of us having this one together gives me hope for our future.

“It’s nice being disconnected from the world,” Rowan says.

“It is.” I bring the plate over to the coffee table. “Hot chocolate?”

“If you’re having some.”

I return to the kitchen and make us both a cup. He comes to take them over to the sofa for me. I grab a throw blanket for us. Even after my orgasm induced nap, I’m still a bit worn out. Cuddling in front of the fire sounds perfect. Especially with the snowstorm raging outside.

“I want to get everything out in the open, Rowan. I don’t want there to be these unspoken things between us anymore.”

“I want that too.” He pulls me to sit in his lap. “This last year has been hell.”

“I know. I’m sorry. It just really hurt when I told you I didn’t want anything to do with that girl, and well...” I take a deep breath. “You didn’t do anything about it.” I let the words I’ve wanted to say for so long slip past my lips.

“Sweetheart—”

“Rowan.” I cut him off. The last thing I want to hear is excuses.

I get it. I might have been a bit extreme, but I’d felt as though he was disregarding my feelings. He didn’t get it because he knew he wanted nothing to do with the woman. He didn’t return her feelings in any way. But I know if it had been a man who had come on to me, he would have been long gone. It wouldn’t have mattered if they were under someone else’s contract or not. “Please don’t—”

“She’s gone. I should have made it happen then. I get it now. You never ask for anything really. Before this I can’t remember a time where you were so upset. I vowed to take care of you, and I fucked up. I made a mistake. I underestimated how much it hurt you, and it was stupid on my part. Like I said, you never ask for much. I should have known.” I’ve waited so long for him to say those words to me.

My eyes fill with tears. “I’m sorry too. I know it’s my past. When I met you, I felt heard for the first time in my life. You never dismissed me, and I think in that moment when that happened I freaked out. It’s not all on you.”

If I'm being honest with myself, I have to admit that I bear some of the blame. I could have easily spoken up and told him how I felt instead of holding all of those feelings inside. That him not doing more made me feel second in his life. But once I went down that path, I couldn't seem to find my way back. Then he was giving me space like I'd asked, and I hated it. It let my insecurities grow in my mind.

"You're being too kind. You always are. One of the million reasons I fell in love with you." He pulls me in closer to him. "I'll do better, but know I've never stopped loving you, Charlee, and I never will. But we're not going to make it if we can't be honest with one another."

"Or if we hold back," I add with a challenge.

"I never want to hurt or scare you."

"You don't scare me." I shift to straddle him. "What scares me is when you pull away. That didn't help with any of this. I honestly thought if I pulled back from you and threatened you with a lawyer, you'd come bulldozing your way back to me. It shocked me when you gave me space." He closes his eyes for a long second.

"It scared me. The things I wanted to do when you told me you wanted a divorce. Hell, some of the fantasies I'd had even before then I was worried would send you running."

"What did you want to do?" I can already feel Rowan's cock thickening under my ass.

"Kidnap you away. Tie you to my bed. Hell, those nights I've been sneaking into your bedroom and seducing you to be with me I've been praying to get you pregnant. I know it's crazy, but I knew you'd never be free of me then." His possessive words have an ache forming between my thighs.

"I've fantasized about that." I lick my lips. "It's why I was so shocked when you'd asked for that deal in the bedroom. I kept thinking you'd snap. Tell me I wasn't going anywhere. When you asked me to come here I thought maybe..."

"I was going to take back what is mine." He grips my hips. "Did you like being tied to the bed? Or how about when I

smacked your pussy?” I nod my head yes.

“I’ve always loved when you take control, Rowan. I rather enjoy the bubble you put me in to protect me and keep me all to yourself. I like being there,” I admit. I’m sure a therapist would tell me it’s unhealthy, but I don’t give a crap. I know what I want, and I have a pretty good idea of what my husband wants. It’s one and the same.

“You might want to be careful what you ask for, wife,” he warns. That only turns me on even more.

“I’ll be happy where you put me as long as I’m always number one to you. That you don’t hold back when it comes to us. I want all of it. When you hold back, I feel it here.” I put my hand over his heart.

“You are number one to me, Charlee. Always. None of this other shit matters without you. You want all of me, you’ll have all of it.”

He stands with me in his arms, carrying me toward the bedroom, where he strips us both down to nothing.

“There will never be anything between us again,” he vows. “Now get on the bed, wife. I’m going to give you everything you asked for and so much more.”



nine

“ON YOUR KNEES.”

Immediately she moves into position. I don't even need to ask her to put her hands behind her back. She places them, back of the hand to palm, right at the base of her spine. Blood rushes downward as I stare at her bent head, her folded legs, the prim positioning of her hands. She wants this as much as I do.

“Head up, babe. I want you to see what I'm doing.” I snap the hemp rope between my hands. “I'm going to tie your wrists because when you get aroused, you can't keep your hands to yourself. The rope will loop around your waist and between your ass cheeks. When you shift, the rope will tighten and rub against your pussy. Once you're bound, you will sit on my lap while I suck your tits, but you can't come.”

“Why can't I come?” She shakes her ass, bouncing her unbound hands lightly.

“Because the longer you can last, the sweeter the release will be.” I wrap the rope around her wrists and then her waist. She moans when the hemp makes contact with her sex. Her lips are swollen, and the rope grows damp. I pull the binding tight until it's slightly uncomfortable so that Charlee is forced to squirm and wriggle to find relief, but each movement only intensifies her ache. I draw her onto my lap and onto my shaft so that the rope and her pussy are in direct contact with my sensitive skin.

I grip her breasts, taking one into my mouth and massaging the other. I kiss her skin and lick her nipples, bringing her to

the edge and then pulling her back. She arches toward me but I tip her backward, making sure that she doesn't have any balance. Her only stability is my hand on the rope, my mouth on her body.

Her cunt convulses over my cock, firing my need. I'm hungry for her. I devour her tits, her shoulders, her neck, her ears. I eat at her lips, then shower kisses on her eyes and cheeks and jaw. I pull at that rope, rocking her back and forth, and when it feels like she's about to explode, I stop.

I bring her to the edge again and again until her cheeks are wet with her desire, and my cock is soaked with her need.

“You want my cock? Nod if you want me.”

Her head bobs.

I tug on the knot, and the rope falls away. Surprise colors her face. “How?”

“Years of calving, darling.”

“I want to tie you up,” she declares.

I laugh softly. “We'll see.” I swing her around, ass up, elbows down. Her forbidden pink hole flares exotically. I lick my thumb and circle the puckered skin. She shudders under my touch. “One of these days, I'm going to take you here.”

Her response is to wiggle her ass. “I hear a lot of talk back there, but I don't feel any action.”

That earns her a whack across one round cheek. She yelps and tries to scoot away. I haul her back. “Brace yourself,” I warn and then drive my cock into her sopping pussy in one swift, hard motion.

She comes immediately. Her pussy convulses, tiny tremors sending shockwaves against my sensitive tissues. Her swollen lips stretch to their limit as she is forced to accommodate my girth. I hammer into her, slapping her ass, squeezing her tits. She keeps orgasming, one after the other, floods of her pleasure drenching my groin and thighs. I grab her hair and twist her up and around so I can claim her mouth. Our tongues parry in an exotic duel. My cock is a column of steel, driving

into her fast and hard. I am hardly more than an animal at this moment, reduced to chasing down that fiery sensation of total oblivion.

I wrench my mouth away. “Say you’re mine, Charlee. I can’t come until you say you’re mine.”

“I’m yours,” she cries.

“Say you belong to me,” I demand.

“I belong to you. I love you, Rowan. I’m yours. Always.”

Always. The climax hits me like a fist to the head. My vision blurs, and a dull roar fills my head. I come, spurting streams of fluid inside her cunt. Her back bows as my hot fluid pours out and sets off another climactic response. This is a new beginning. The first day of an adventure for the two of us. She’s not afraid of me. There’s nothing I want that will scare her.

“I love you, Charlee. I love you.” I chant those words over and over even after I’m spent, after her shudders turn to small shudders. I slip out of her and draw her into my arms, stroking my hands over her shoulders and down her slender back. She gulps at the air, trying to find her breath. Her forehead burrows into my neck as she allows me to soothe her.

“I think we should keep this place,” I say after a while when we’re both settled under the covers. The snow is falling outside, the bright moonlight making the flakes sparkle like tiny crystals.

“And build a new house?”

“No. I want to keep it like this. Uncluttered and simple. When things are going crazy, we can escape here—just the two of us. I can tie you up and tease you for hours. No one out here can hear you scream.” A sadistic grin spreads across my face. “I have things I want to do to you that need proper planning.”

She giggles. “I think I’m up to it.”

“I know you are, baby. That’s why this is going to work for us. We were meant to be together. There was a small speed

bump, but we're over that."

"Smooth sailing from here on out?"

"Nothing we can't solve together." I tilt her head up. "We're partners, you and me. As long as we stick to each other, our waters won't capsize us."

"I appreciate you adopting the ocean metaphor."

"Always happy to oblige you."

Her giggles turn to laughter, and I know it's more than just her finding me funny but her being filled with joy. I know because I'm feeling the same awesome sensation. Inside this cabin, we let ourselves go and found our true love once again.



ten

I SIT up holding the blanket to my chest, wondering where Rowan went. Hell, I'm not even sure what day it is at this point. It should be Christmas, but who knows? Everything has been a bit of a sexy blur.

We made love, then we snuggled in bed and talked for hours. Now that everything was out in the open between us, we had so much to catch up on. The only time we left was to get food, which we brought back to the bed.

I feel closer to Rowan than I've ever felt, including before everything went to hell. There is nothing between us now. No hidden desires or need to walk on eggshells. Rowan was worried that he might be too much for me to handle. But now that he knows that's not the case, he has an ease about him.

It's silly really to think we could have had this all along but we'd both let things from our past cloud our minds. We might not have had past lovers, but we still had baggage. We know now that we both need to be clear in the things we want because the reality is we both have deep needs to please the other. Not to mention I crave every dirty thing my husband wants to do to me. Even his over-the-top jealousy.

I kind of understand a bit better why he was so confused about Arabella. To him it's crazy for me or anyone else to think he wants another. In fact, he worries more over how much he wants me. His fear is that he'll scare me away with his intensity. My fear is being lost or forgotten.

Having grown up in such a large family, I understand how that can easily happen. It's crazy how you might not have past

lovers, but things from your childhood can still drag over to mess with you.

When I hear the front door open, I jump from the bed, laughing when I see that Rowan put socks on my feet. It's the only thing I actually have on. My toes always get cold. I snatch his shirt from off the floor and slip it on to go find out what he's up to.

"Sorry, sweetheart," Rowan says as he kicks the door shut behind him. A Christmas tree lays at his feet. "I know you wanted to come get it with me, but the storm was rough, and it was getting late. I pretty much grabbed the first one I found. I didn't want you to not have a tree on Christmas."

"I love it, Rowan. It's perfect." I walk over, helping him out of his coat. "You want some coffee?"

"I was going to bring you breakfast in bed."

"You're a terrible cook." I laugh. "Leave the cooking to me." He slips his cold hand under my shirt, grabbing my ass. I try to wiggle away but get nowhere.

"Watch it." He gives my ass a squeeze before he releases me. "I'll put the tree up then. Make me some food, woman." I laugh, scurrying off toward the kitchen to get breakfast going. With how the sun seems to be setting, I'm wondering if dinner would be more fitting.

I put on some coffee and decide to make a French toast casserole. I slip it into the oven. It should give us time to decorate the tree.

"I miss doing these small things together. I don't think I could bear you going back to work so much."

"I won't be." He hands me an ornament to put on the tree. "I worked to give you space even in the beginning. I recall you telling me I better get back to work. I thought I was too overbearing. I made you quit your jobs."

"I hated my jobs, and you knew it."

"I wanted you home."

“I loved being home, Rowan. Don’t have yourself believing anything other than that. It was nice being taken care of.”

“I felt like you were taking care of me.”

“We take care of each other in our own ways. People might think it’s old school but—”

“Fuck ’em,” Rowan finishes for me.

“Yeah, fuck ’em,” I agree, walking over to him. I grab his hand and pull him to the sofa, dropping down into his lap. “Rowan, I remember that. Me telling you that you better get back to work. I thought you were staying home so much because you worried over me after you had me quit work. I didn’t want you staying around because you felt like you had to.”

“I wanted to be there.” He strokes my jaw with this thumb. I’ve always loved the feel of his rough fingers on my skin.

“We’re so stupid.” I laugh.

“What we are is madly in love. Our problems are fixable and are only problems because we love each other so much.”

“I do love you. More than anything in this whole world.”

“That’s good because there’s no getting rid of me. It’s you and me for eternity.”

“And maybe a few little ones added in there,” I add. Rowan brushes a few hairs out of my face. “You still want that, right? To have a family?”

“Pretty sure I admitted that I was hoping I knocked you up so you’d be stuck with me.” He smirks, not the least bit ashamed of that anymore.

“As if that mattered.” I laugh. His face grows serious.

“I want it all with you. A little girl with your eyes and heart.” This man melts my insides.

“I think I’m pregnant,” I blurt out. “I haven’t had a period since the last time you snuck into my room.”

“That was four months ago.” I nod. My period comes like clockwork usually.

I’ve always kept track of my periods because I don’t take birth control. It makes me sick. Since the day we got married, I’ve kept track of them knowing it was only a matter of time. I didn’t think it would take this long, but really the timing couldn’t be more perfect.

Happiness lights up his handsome face. “Fuck, I’ve been rough with you.”

“Don’t even start. You’ve been perfect with me, Rowan. I don’t think we have to worry about your kinks until I’m further along, but we’ll check with a doctor when we get back to town.”

“They’re your kinks too.”

“Don’t put that on me. I’m an innocent little angel here.”

“Your wet cunt betrays you.” He slips his hand between my thighs. “I’ll have to keep track of how many spankings I’ll owe you next Christmas.” I let out a squeak when he gives my sex a light smack. “Look how soaked you are for me.”

“Not my fault. You’ve made my body crave these dirty things.”

“To crave *me*.” His finger slips through my folds, playing with my clit.

“I’ve always done that, husband,” I say with a moan, my head dropping back.

“Always such a good girl.” He thrusts a finger inside of me. “Good girls do get rewards, you know.” He nips at my neck.

“I’ve got everything I could ever want. As long as you never let me go.”

“Never,” he vows.

The last two years might have been rough, but I know we’ll last forever. We both are willing to fight for each other. Being young and in love comes with challenges. But I know

now, no matter what life may throw our way, Rowan and I will handle it together. Nothing will ever stand in our way again. Not even us.

I don't care what anyone says. Love is always enough.



epilogue

CHARLEE

A FEW YEARS LATER

ROWAN HOLDS me close as we stroll down Main Street. It's Christmas Eve and Liam, our oldest and my baby girl Ava are spending the afternoon at my sister's house. They are making cookies for us to put out for Santa tonight.

I love how close her kids and mine are. While Marley and I both want a somewhat big family we know there's a fine line of having the perfect size. Growing up with all the brothers and sisters we had, we knew how easy it could be to get lost in the shuffle. Our parents did their best but we'd always wanted more attention from them but there is only so much to go around.

Marley and I have always been the closest out of all of our siblings. I know that will never change. We decided together that we would have around three kids each. Making sure our kids were all close so we could have a big family when we were together but a smaller one on our own. It might sound silly to some but it works for us.

I also love that our husbands get along so well. They've even ventured into a few small tech companies together. They both tend to be a lot alike. Especially when it comes to their women. My Rowan isn't as much of a recluse as Saint but they are both very possessive and loving husbands. It was easy for them to bond when they quickly realized how they could be each other's allies. Most times that works in mine and Marley's favor, so neither one of us is complaining.

"There is something I wanted to show." Rowan says when we pass the last shop on main street and don't turn back around. Instead we stay on the sidewalk heading into the older section of Winter Falls which has the most beautiful historical homes.

It's one of my favorite spots in town. All the homes are decorated for Christmas. They even do inside tours of some of

them. To tell the truth, it can get a bit competitive around here this time of year. Especially because while all the homes might be older they are all grand and very expensive. I love the history they are all filled with.

“Oh? A surprise?” I smile up at him. I love surprises. Doesn’t matter how small or big. Rowan knows that too and tries to do it pretty often. I swear one of my husbands’ kinks is getting my face to light up at a surprise.

It’s amazing how much things have changed. And how much Rowan and I have grown as a couple. Looking at us now, no one would ever believe that a few years ago we were fighting to hold onto our marriage.

“I thought about waiting but I can’t. A few things still need to be handled but it’s a done deal.”

“You’ve got all my attention.”

“I better always have your attention.” He grumbles. I elbow him in the side.

“You know you do.” He stops walking to lean down and presses a kiss to my mouth.

“Liam is going to start kindergarten next year.”

“Why do you have to remind me?” I huff. My baby isn’t a baby anymore. Not only is he leaving me for school he’s built like his father and looks like he should be in the second grade at this point.

“You’ve got a new baby on the way.” He rests his hand on my stomach. This will be our last one. Pregnancy has been relatively easy for me. It might have taken a moment for me to get pregnant that first time but my body took to being pregnant. Even labor had been a breeze.

“Charlee! How have you been?” I turn my attention away from my husband to see Ben. His family owns one of the biggest real estate agencies in Winter Falls. He strolls down the stone walkway from The Nottoway Mansion. It’s my favorite. It reminds me of a small castle. “I swear you don’t age.”

“Do you want an ass beating?” Roman growls.

“Oh stop!” I laugh, elbowing him in the side. “I’m not his type. Trust me.”

“You’re everyone’s type. Trust me.”

“You are a beautiful woman, Charlee.” Ben agrees with Rowan.

“Don’t rile him up.” I say to Ben as I wrap myself around my husband’s arm. “He’s poking you. He wants to get you all worked up. You are his type.” Ben winks at Rowan.

“I’m married.” Rowan keeps on growling.

“I know. I’m your real estate agent.”

“Wait. What?” I ask. My heart starts to race.

“I told you, when it was time to start school we should move back to Winter Falls.”

“I thought you meant the cabin. You’ve done all that construction.” He’d recently did a bunch of updates.

“I love our cabin but that’s not practical for every day. We need more room. We’ll still go there for Christmas but this will be our family home.” He’s right. It’s a bit off the beaten path out in the mountains. As much as I love it I’m not sure I could live there year round. “This is your dream home.”

I told Rowan about this place. Even had him drive by it a few times. As a little girl I dreamed it would one day be mine. That I’d find my king and we’d live out our fairy tale happy ever after there.

“Rowan.” Tears start to spill down my cheeks.

“But your work and-”

“Trust me. It’s all handled.” He wipes the tears from my cheeks. “Work isn’t my life. My family is. We’ll keep the penthouse in the city but your heart is here.”

“I’ll leave you guys to it.” Ben hands me over the keys. “Welcome back, Charlee.”

I hand the keys over to my husband. “Show me.” He tangles his fingers with mine, leading me towards the front doors.

“This place is incredible.”

“I have good taste as you can see.”

“I was the lucky one, Charlee.” He opens the door for me.

When I’d left Winter Falls all those years ago I knew I was searching for something out in the world. I’d started to doubt that after I’d graduated college having felt more lost than ever. That was until Rowan found me.

“No, it was you that gave me everything I ever dreamed of, Rowan.”

“And you made me dream.” My heart melts. Even after all these years he can still leave me speechless. I yank him down for a kiss.

“Why don’t we act out some of those dirty dreams I know you always come up with in our new home?”

“Careful what you ask for wife.” He warns.

I don’t need a warning. Not from my husband. I know every second of whatever he plans to do to me will be pure heaven.



epilogue

ROMAN

MANY YEARS LATER

“THE SNOW IS COMING DOWN FAST.” Liam, my oldest, presses his 10 year old nose to the glass.

“Is Santa going to see our cabin?” asks Olivia, our littlest one.

“He sees better in the snow,” says Ava. The eight year old always has the right answers.

“Come over here and put your coats and boots on,” calls my wife. She shakes Olivia’s purple puffer coat to get the kids’ attentions.

The little girl toddles over and shoves her arms into the coat. “Can I make angels.”

“Yes.”

“Can I throw a snowball in Liam’s face?” Asks Ava.

“No.”

“Can I?” Olivia says.

“No. Not you either.” Charlee glances over the kids’ heads, pressing her lips together to suppress a laugh.

I cross my ankles and lean back against the counter and watch as the family gets bundled up. Charlee is taking the crew out to play while I finish filling the stockings with candy, small toys, and video games.

Liam rolls his eyes and gives a long suffering sigh. He knows, as we all do, the minute the three are outside the two girls will gang up on him and even though he could run away or overpower them physically, he will allow himself to be taken to the ground and smeared with snow. He’s a good brother.

I set down my coffee mug and walk over to ruffle his hair. “Don’t let them be too hard on you, son.”

“Nah. It’s fine. How are they going to have fun otherwise?” He dons his snow pants and shoves his feet into his boots. I bend down to tie them. Once I’m finished, I tuck a heat warmer into his pocket, give the girls kisses and then wave as they troop outside.

As I hang and fill the stockings, the sound of screaming laughter echoes outside the large picture window. Little bodies zoom by. A snowball strikes the front door. My mouth curves into a smile. When I first saw Charlee at the newsstand outside my office, I knew instantly I wanted her in my life. I didn’t have a full idea of what the future with her would look like but it didn’t include a small cabin in the woods of Winter Falls. In the years since I first trapped Charlee here, we’ve done some improvements. The exposed rafters have all been clean of the smoke damage. Two new bedrooms and bathrooms were added. The kitchen has been upgraded but it’s still a small space compared to what everyone is used to. Even so, I feel like the family is closer when we’re here. Maybe it’s partly due to the holidays, maybe it’s the coziness of Winter Falls where the town is full of kind and friendly people, or maybe it’s the memories of how we almost fell apart and if it wasn’t for this town, this cabin, this space, we wouldn’t have made it this far.

The family spills in, a pile of snow, laughter and gusts of cold.

Olivia rushes over, nearly falling on her face when she reaches me. “Daddy, Liam hit me with a snowball.”

I catch the little girl up in my arms and rub her cheek against mine to warm her up. “I’ll take him out behind the shed later.”

Olivia rears back. “No! Don’t hurt Liam!” Her fists come up. “I’ll fight you.”

Liam laughs and pulls Olivia into his arms. “He’s just joking. Aren’t you dad?”

There’s a slight quaver in his voice as if he’s not sure. I wink. “Since it’s Christmas, I’ll let it go.”

“Come on, Little Liv. Let’s go get washed up for dinner so we can open presents.”

“I’m not little!” She squeaks but tucks her hand into her brother’s and hops down the hall. Ava follows sedately behind as if she’s eighteen and not eight. The three are my pride and joy. I feel so fucking lucky I could explode.

Charlee comes over and tucks herself under my arm. Her fingers burrow under my shirt, the cold digits sending chills along my spine.

“You’re an evil woman,” I say, pulling her hands out from under my clothes and bringing them up to my mouth so I can blow some hot air onto them.

“Everything all taken care of?” she asks.

I kiss her fingers and then her cheek and then her mouth, her cold lips parting under mine. My tongue slips inside, sweeping around the warm cavern to tangle with her tongue. I place her warm hands back under my shirt and pull her closer.

“The kids,” she whispers against my mouth.

“I know.” I kiss her again and then lean back to stare at her rosy mouth. “Damn, but how are you more gorgeous today than when I first saw you?”

“It’s the snow and cold. My cheeks are pink.”

“No. It’s just you.” I press my lips against her forehead. “Aging is better than wine. Can’t wait to bend you over the sink tonight and fuck you until you’re breathless.”

“You sweet talker, you,” Charlee teases.

“I’ll let you wear my Christmas gift.”

“I don’t know whether to be excited or scared.”

“Both? It’ll make your orgasm better.” I grab a blue velvet box and hand it to her. “First gift of the season.”

She arches her eyebrows and opens the lid. Her eyes pop wide and she gasps. Inside is a delicate choker of diamonds, shaped like snowflakes falling off thin chains to look like snowfall. “What is this?”

I pluck the necklace out and toss the box aside. “I told you, first gift of the season.”

The necklace looks even more beautiful draped around her neck.

“Mommy, you look like you’re wearing snow!” shouts Olivia as she runs down the hall and launches herself into Charlene’s arms.

“It’s so pretty,” Ava remarks.

Liam pretends he isn’t interested and gives only a nod but his eyes fall to her neck more than once.

“I bought it because your mom and I renewed our vows here about eleven years ago during a big snow storm,” I share. “Snow is like love falling down.”

“Daddy, that’s so pretty,” says Ava in a surprised tone.

“Hey, I can say nice words now and again.”

All four look at me like I’ve sprouted horns.

“Not really. No offense,” Liam add. “You’re just not that type.”

“I saw I love you all the time.” I protest.

Charlee smothers a laugh and then drags me over to the dinner table. “Let’s eat and open presents.”

“I’m practically a poet!” I take my seat.

“Of course you are,” she soothes.

I pick up my fork. “Maybe I’m better with gestures.”

Charlee pats her neck. “You’re very good with the gestures.”

“We know you love us,” Ava adds.

The other two chime in and then they all fall over themselves to declare that it doesn’t matter what words I use, that it’s the thought that counts. I guess I’m not ever going to be one who is overly effusive or full of words but as long as my family knows I love them that’s what is important. All year long we spend time in our busy lives, rushing from school to

work to sporting event to ballet lessons. It's good to come here and unwind, throw snowballs at each other, chase one another down the ski slopes and come home to a hot drink and even hotter love making. All it took to make us realize this was one night snowed in.

* * *

Want Marley's story? Check out [Their Snowy Night](#) by Lucy Darling

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Make Me Yours

She's All Mine

Pretty Prize

The Wolf's Mail Order Bride

Beauty in Summer

Three of Us (Twins #1) and Belong Together (Twins #2)

I wrote a few motorcycle romances when I first started out.

Their Private Need (Michigan, Easy and Annie)

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