

Dee Lagasse & Cruel Ink

PRESENT

**BLUE
COLLAR**

Babes

A CHARITY ANTHOLOGY

BLUE COLLAR BABES

A CHARITY ANTHOLOGY

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FOREWORD

Hey, babes! We are so excited to be sharing Blue Collar Babes – a romance anthology celebrating men and women who work hard... and love harder - with you. With stories ranging from sweet to extra spicy, this collection has a little something for everyone!

On behalf of Dee Lagasse and Cruel Ink, thank you to all of the participating authors and the readers who support us!

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THE BAD APPLE: VICTORIA
ELLIS AND DEE LAGASSE

PROLOGUE

Red and blue lights flash in my rearview, and I let out a long, irritated, pissed off grunt.

“Fuuuuuck, man!” My cousin Josh slurs from the passenger seat, and it takes everything inside my body to not reach over and knock him upside the head. “Pigs! Floor it!”

I glance over at him as I coast to the side of the road, and he cackles.

The fucker actually cackles.

“I swear to God, Josh, if you have shit on you...”

My brain goes to the worst of places as I remember the bag slung on his shoulder as he got into my car. I check the backseat and see it’s spilled all over the place now—God fucking forbid he take two seconds to zip it up. Junkie. He’s lucky I still give a shit about him.

“Oh, shit.”

Josh sobers up, and it’s damn near like a lightbulb goes off above his head.

“Josh...” My hackles rise as he visibly starts to lose his shit.

“Shit, shit, shit!” he whisper-yells, his eyes growing wide. “Sam...fuck,” Josh panics, his voice raising a few octaves. “Courtney’s pregnant, dude. I can’t go to jail.”

“Of course you have shit,” I yell at him. “Of fucking course.” I hit the steering wheel as he reaches toward the

backseat but stops short when a knock sounds on my window.

I turn my attention toward the officer and roll down the window. A bright flashlight is pointed in my face, temporarily blinding me until the focal point moves toward Josh. It's then that I see it's Lyle, my buddy from high school.

"Sam Blackwell," Lyle smiles. "Dude...you do know you have a taillight out right?" he says as he reaches out his hand to shake mine. "Long time no see, buddy. Why haven't you been down to Ma's?"

He references his grandmother's restaurant that's been a staple in this small-town for as long as I can remember.

"Nice to see you, too, man," I say with a shrug. "Just been busy."

He doesn't need to know what I've been working on.

"Busy keeping your shithead cousin out of jail, I see." His eyes move over to Josh, who gracefully flips him off.

"Knock it the fuck off, Josh," I grit out as I turn back to Lyle. "Sorry about the taillight, man. I had no idea. I'll take care of it first thing in the morning."

Lyle nods but flashes his light in the backseat, just like I was afraid he would.

My eyes stay on his as his face visibly falls.

And I know.

I fucking know.

"You've gotta be fucking kidding me, Josh," Lyle says, moving the flashlight from the spilled bag to Josh. "Thought you were gonna stay out of trouble after the judge gave you a break last time."

I let my head fall against the seat as I clench my eyes shut.

I could let this happen.

I could let my cousin go to prison.

The judge let him off last time under one condition—he got sober, completed a narcotics class and went to a halfway

house while recovering. Josh did. To save his own ass. But he never stopped dealing and as far as I know he's never stopped using either. I just can't quit on him like everyone else has. I don't have it in me.

But it looks like that's going to be my biggest fucking mistake yet...

And I've made a lot of mistakes.

Am I really going to do this?

How can I not...my stupid fucking idiot of a cousin is going to be a dad. He can't be locked up for three years, which is the max sentence according to the judge. The judge made it crystal clear that if Josh didn't complete the tasks he was given and stay out of trouble he'd get the max sentence with no possibility of early parole.

He'd miss out on the first few years of his daughter's life.

Lyle opens the door and pulls baggies of pills out of the backseat and Josh looks at me with tears in his eyes.

"Out of the car, Josh," Lyle says, his tone switching from light to stern.

Josh doesn't move.

But I do.

I step out of the car and Lyle turns toward me.

"Fuck are you doing, Blackwell?" he asks and I shrug.

"The pills are mine."

He knocks me in the shoulder with a chuckle. "Fuck off, man. Get in the car. We all know who the addict is here. It's my pleasure to get him off these streets."

Josh stays quiet and I turn toward the car, placing my hands behind my back.

"Come on Lyle. Let's get this over with," I say, my stomach churning.

Cars buzz past us, causing Lyle to yank the two of us off to the other side of the car.

“What the hell are you doing, Sam? I’ve known you since we were kids. You don’t fuck with this shit. You leave it to your dopehead cousin. You’ve never even had a goddamn traffic ticket. Why are you doing this?”

I stare at him, unblinking.

I’ve never been a great liar but I guess now’s a good time to start.

“Don’t know what to tell you, Lyle. The pills are mine.”

He shakes his head as he pulls cuffs from his side.

“Don’t make me do this, Sam. Come on.”

I turn around again, placing my hands around my back so my old friend can cuff me, knowing I’m fucking myself but quite literally maybe saving my cousin’s life in the process.

ONE

LUCY

There is *nothing* more exciting than the first day of school. Even as a child, I looked forward to this day more than any other day of the year - including Christmas and my birthday.

Growing up, we didn't have much money, but my mom always made sure my sister and I always had a new outfit and shoes for the first day. It's a tradition I've kept for myself as a teacher. It's also the one day of the year I don't bring coffee from home and splurge on an iced caramel macchiato from Starbucks.

I feel a little rebellious in my plaid trousers and beige knit Oxford shoes. The Blackwell Academy, where I teach kindergarten, is known for its high standards when it comes to education. Standards that extend to members of the staff as well. While there's no specific rule stating that women teachers should not wear pants, I've never seen any of my co-workers in anything but dresses and skirts.

When I pull into the parking lot, I have my choice of spots. The only other vehicle in the faculty lot belongs to the headmaster herself. I chuckle to myself as I step out of my used little Honda Civic. It's a good, reliable car, but it looks like a beat up Matchbox car next to the brand new big, black Cadillac Escalade parked next to me. Not too long from now, this lot will be filled with the likes of Mercedes, BMWs, Audis, and the occasional Tesla.

When I first started at Blackwell last school year, it bothered me that I was, very obviously, in a class below most of the other teachers. I couldn't afford clothes from Nordstrom

and to go out for drinks at the swanky martini bar downtown after parent-teacher conferences, but I loved my job. I loved my students. That's what matters. Or at least, that's what I keep telling myself.

Before I head to the teacher's lounge, I head to my classroom and give it one final inspection. I spent the last week perfecting my Eric Carle-themed classroom. From the paper lantern caterpillar hanging from the ceiling to the hand drawn name plates, the room is full of bright pops of inviting colors. A calming wave of lavender hangs in the air from the diffuser plugged in at my desk across the room.

This is going to be a good year. I just know it.

Pulling the door closed behind me, I glance down at my watch. There's still a half hour before most of the staff will begin to find their way to the teacher's lounge. Just enough time to drink my coffee and read a couple more chapters of the latest Kandi Steiner novel on my phone.

The door to the lounge is open, so I walk right in, but stop short of the plush couch I usually settle into Monday through Friday during the school year. Sitting at a table, with a white Blackwell Academy coffee mug in front of him, is a man I've never seen before. He greets me with a scowl and I pull my bottom lip in, fighting the smile threatening to expose my intrigue.

Red hair and a bad attitude... must be a Blackwell.

Madeline, the school's other kindergarten teacher and my only real friend here, was a Blackwell by marriage. She told me over brunch last week all about how her husband's cousin took the fall for her brother-in-law a little less than a year ago when they were busted with drugs at a traffic stop. Everyone knew they weren't the cousin's drugs, but they let him take the blame because her brother-in-law had a kid on the way.

Apparently, this poor guy lost everything when he was in jail. His job, his apartment, his girlfriend at the time... So, Madeline's mother-in-law, who happens to be the school's headmaster, made sure there was a job waiting for him when he got out of jail. No wonder he's miserable.

Which is exactly why I decide to go over and say hello.

I remember how thankful I was when Madeline invited me to take a seat next to her on the couch on my first day last year. It was time to pay the kindness forward.

Placing my iced coffee on the table, I extend my hand. “You must be Mr. Blackwell. Hi, I’m Lucy Heart. I teach kindergarten.”

His brows quirk, unimpressed that I have interrupted his solitude, but he takes my hand anyway. Our eyes connect, and I swallow. He has the most beautiful green eyes.

“Just Sam,” he answers. For a split second, his upper lip curls into something resembling a small smile, but it falls back into a flat line almost immediately. “Mr. Blackwell is my father.”

At the deep, smooth vibrato of his voice, a flutter of butterflies dance inside my stomach. They only seem to move faster when we break our handshake, and I catch a glimpse of the tattoos covering both arms. I swear, his biceps are as big as my head. I never understood the term “arm porn” before this morning, but I get it. *Good Lord*, I understand it now.

I’m not sure what’s happening right now. I have a “type.” I have since I first started crushing on boys as a teenager. Brown hair, brown eyes. Tall. Shallow as it is, I only date men that make good money. I’m not a gold digger or anything like that. I don’t need or expect them to take care of me. My therapist says it’s my way of ensuring that I don’t have a relationship like my parents. So, it’s really throwing me off that I am incredibly attracted to this ginger wearing khaki pants and a Blackwell Academy polo—the school janitor uniform.

“Okay,” I start with a nod. “So, before anyone else gets a chance to pull you into their activities, I was wondering what you’re doing on Saturday...”

“I’m not sure.” He chuckles. “It’s only seven thirty on Monday morning.”

“I’m the event planner for the academy’s back to school fall festival this year,” I say, getting ready to give him my best

infomercial spiel. “We sure could use a set of muscles to help us with—”

I stop short when I realize what I’ve said. Aw, poop.

“I just mean that you have muscles,” I continue, only making matters worse. “Not that I noticed them or anything.” Warmth flushes over my cheeks as I cover my face. “Oh, God. Please don’t report me for sexual harassment. I just meant...”

“It’s fine.” He smiles. A real, genuine smile. “I can make myself, and my muscles, available on Saturday, Ms. Heart.”

I’m about to correct him, to tell him it’s “just Lucy” when I hear Madeline’s voice behind me.

“Of course, you overachievers are the first ones here.” She laughs. “I brought donuts! Come and get them before the rest of the vultures attack them.”

TWO

SAM

The fuck did I just agree to?

The fall festival?

Not my scene...not at all.

But that gorgeous woman—the one hiding behind long strands of perfectly placed blonde hair and those pretty baby blues—had some kind of hold over me as she practically bounced over like she hadn't a care in the world. How can someone be that full of sunshine and fucking rainbows this early in the morning? I watch her walk out of the teacher's lounge with an unbelievable amount of pep in her step, and then I gather up my toolbelt and coffee.

I yawn just thinking about how tired I am. These early mornings are going to be hard to get used to again. But I did it just fine during my jail time, I can do it again. Shaking my head as I think about the sacrifice I made for my cousin, I make my way out of the lounge as the first bell of the day sounds throughout the academy.

After meeting Louie, the head janitor of Blackwell Academy, in our supply quarters, I get my first assignment of the day.

Louie runs his palm over his balding head and looks at a sheet of paper with chicken scratch littering every square inch.

“Ya gotta AC unit in Ms. Wilson's class. It's on the fritz. You'd think with the money this place is bringing in they could afford a new unit. She's been having trouble with it since last school year. Maybe you'll be able to finagle it for the

next few months while I convince the board to shell out some more dough.” He pats me on the shoulder and walks out, and I load up my cart with the items I think I’ll need to start on the project before sliding the school map out of my pocket. How doesn’t this place have an online map?

Ms. Wilson is a fourth grade teacher, I learn. I’m hoping she isn’t the kind that likes to talk. If I look into her class and don’t see any of the kids, I’m coming back later. I don’t need them at recess and Ms. Wilson trying to talk my ear off while I work. I’m not here to make friends. I’m here to reintegrate into society.

Fucking hell.

What has my life turned into?

I used to have a good fucking job. Cyber security. A position I felt was my calling. I was so damn good at it, too. And it felt like I was helping people.

Now I’m a goddamn janitor at a school for preppy socialities.

Talk about a downfall.

After peering in and seeing a bunch of little kids swarming about in the classroom, it seems safe, so I knock on the wooden door and let myself in.

“Janitor Sam,” I announce myself just as Ms. Wilson—I assume because she’s the only other adult in the room—looks at me. I’m not an oblivious man. I know when a woman is thinking shit she shouldn’t think, and Ms. Wilson already has hearts in her eyes as she stands and crosses the room, heading toward me.

“Kids, work on your buddy projects. Give Ms. Wilson a few minutes, okay?”

No one acknowledges her.

God, I cannot stand when people talk about themselves in third person.

Reminds me of a frat guy I used to know—one that was drunk about 90% of the time.

Ms. Wilson saunters over, and by *saunters over*, I mean... seriously. She is sauntering toward me with a look in her eyes I'd recognize anywhere: desire. I haven't been making rounds since I've been out of jail, but prior to, I could pull any woman I wanted—and easily. Not that I did, not often. I preferred a deep conversation over a quick fuck—still do—but every now and then I scratched the itch from that animalistic side of me.

But that was before.

Before lock up.

Before I fucked myself over.

I look down at my name badge with the word janitor embroidered underneath and sigh.

What a fucking waste.

By the time I look back up, Ms. Wilson is done sauntering and has broken out into an all-out sashay. In her defense, the room is big. She's had a decent amount of ground to cover.

“Well hello, Sam,” she purrs. The only silver lining I can come up with here is that she's used my first name. Point for Ms. Wilson. “I've heard all about our new janitor.” She raises her eyebrows before blinking rapidly a few times. *There goes your point, Ms. Wilson.*

“Hello there, Ms. Wilson,” I say, putting on my best *I'm not an ex-con, just a friendly janitor* voice. “Just came to fix your air conditioning unit. Boss said it's on the fritz again, apparently this is a recurring issue for you. I won't get in your way, I'll just be in the back here working on the unit. Please, go about your day like I'm not here.” I give her a smile and go to turn toward the unit but suddenly feel cold fingers grip my bicep.

“Sam, we're all so glad to have you here this year.” She makes no move to hide her bold move of checking me out, scanning my body up and down with twinkling dark eyes that are full of mischief. “Especially me.”

“Certainly glad to be here,” I say, once again turning around. I roll my cart over to the unit and begin to work but she's in my space again.

This is so wrong of me to think, but honestly...

She's like a fucking flea that won't go away. Jumping around and getting in my fucking way no matter how hard I try to avoid her. Doesn't she have a job to do? Why can't she let me do mine?

I mean, it's not that she isn't a beautiful woman.

She is.

She's all legs with a skirt that looks like it costs half my damn salary. Her long dark locks are curled and styled to perfection, and she looks like she takes damn good care of herself and her body.

But I'm just not interested.

And if I'm not interested...I'm just fucking not.

A lot of my old guy friends wouldn't give a fuck about if a woman was their type. If she was ready and willing, and able to consent, they'd be balls deep inside of her.

It's just never been my style.

A knock on the door echoes throughout the room and we both look to see who's come to save me from Ms. Wilson. Sure enough, it's the fucking apple of my eyes.

Okay, so that was corny.

Ms. Lucy Heart walks in with a smile on her face and an arm full of folders and books.

I rush over to her to help her set them all down before they topple out of her arms and we work together to get the pile onto a vacant desk.

"Always right on time, aren't you, Ms. Heart?" Ms. Wilson drawls. Something in her voice makes me wanna tell her to fuck off, but there's a bunch of kids around, so I refrain.

"I'm on my flex period, and I ran down to the main office for something and saw you left these for the secretaries to put together. They were done so I figured I'd drop them off for you!" Ms. Heart flashes another smile and I can't help but want to fucking trace every single one of the pretty little

freckles on her cheeks. Why does this woman turn me into a fucking pile of mush? We've said like...six words to each other for fuck's sakes.

Ms. Wilson totally disregards Ms. Heart's nice gesture, and instead, turns to me.

"So, *Sam...*" she says, making a show of using my first name as she twirls those long tendrils of hair around her index finger. "A bunch of us are going to the martini bar after school to celebrate our first day of the new school year. Wanna come? It'll be so much fun. I can introduce you t—"

"Sorry, Ms. Wilson. Not tonight," I say, glancing from her to Ms. Heart. "That was nice of you to bring all of that down here for Ms. Wilson," I say to Ms. Heart, acknowledging her since apparently this floozie won't.

The apples of Ms. Heart's cheeks redden, just a bit, but I notice.

I notice everything about her.

Dangerous as it may be.

I watch as Ms. Wilson, visibly flustered, walks over to the supplies while shrugging, muttering something under her breath. Ms. Heart turns to leave but not before she gives me one last look. When I wink at her, I swear those pink cheekbones turn a crimson shade of red as she hurries out of the room.

What a fucking year this is going to be.

THREE

LUCY

After catching me in the hall just moments after Sam fucking winked at me, Madeline convinced me we should meet her husband at the local Italian restaurant for “first day of school beers and pizza.”

By the time I walked into my apartment after being on bus duty after school, I had two and a half hours to stress over what to wear. Normally, it doesn't matter. I've gone in my work clothes, but I've always showed up in leggings, an oversized sweater, and Ugg boots when I just wasn't feeling it. Before now, there hadn't been the possibility of running into the new janitor who happens to kind of be related to my best friend and makes my insides feel like hot mush, though.

After dumping half my closet onto the floor of my bedroom and changing three times, I made it out the door. Thankfully, Ma's is only a ten minute drive from my apartment.

The only standalone restaurant on Main Street, Ma's is a River Pointe staple. Most of Blackwell Academy's staff chose to go to The Lemon Drop, but there is a small group of us that choose to stay away from twenty dollar cocktails and entitled attitudes. Instead, we hang out with the rest of the townies and the public school teachers for pizza by the slice while we drink buckets of beers.

As soon as I walk into the restaurant, the welcoming smell of garlic, tomatoes, fresh bread, and hot cheese hits me. I'm greeted by Brooklyn, the cutie pie of a hostess, who comes in

and works after school. I only know this because she's friends with my little sister.

We've gotten to the point that she stops whatever she's doing to acknowledge me, but she never offers me a menu or asks if I'm meeting anyone anymore. I guess that makes me one of the regulars now. Even Rosie, the weeknight bartender, knows me by name now.

The lounge is full already. Not surprisingly because it was also River Pointe High School's first day of school today as well. If it weren't for the constant chatter, Ma's would be such a cozy spot to settle in with a book and a big bowl of their famous lobster chowder. I'm fairly certain that very thought crosses my mind every time I come in. Every time I tell myself that I'll have to come back on a Sunday afternoon for lunch, but I have yet to do so.

Madeline sees me before I can make my way over to the corner booth at the back of the lounge—our favorite spot—and points toward the ladies' room. Her husband Theo waves hello from across the room. In the booth across from him, I see the back of a very bright red head of hair.

I don't have time to let my nerves settle before Madeline is practically pulling me into the bathroom. Relief washes over me when I see that she changed into jeans too. Her faded Nirvana graphic tee makes me laugh a little. We were barely a part of them, but she swears the 90s were the best decade she's lived in. And, as usual, she's rocking her black high-top Converse.

When she catches up to me, she slides her arm in mine and lets out a quiet squeal of excitement.

"Where did those come from?" she asks, looking down at the cleavage popping out of the black bodysuit I paired with the tightest jeans I own, a maroon cardigan, and a pair of black wedges.

I shrugged. The bodysuit has a built-in bra with underwire and light padding, and it pushes up the girls more than the T-shirt style bras I normally wear. Not to mention, I don't wear plunging scoop necks to school.

“Did you seriously drag me in here to talk about my boobs?” I asked, raising my brows at my best friend.

“No.” She laughs. “But, once I saw them, I couldn’t not say something. They look good. *Boobalicious*, even.”

“You’re an idiot.” I shake my head. “So...?”

“Oh!” An ear-to-ear grin spreads out across her face. “Someone was asking about you.”

My pulse begins to race, but I stop to clarify before I get my hopes up too high.

“Someone?” I ask. “Care to elaborate?”

“Don’t play dumb.” She rolls her eyes. “You know it’s Sam.”

Madeline is my best friend, but I don’t want to look like I’m desperate for his attention. I’m not. I just certainly wouldn’t mind having it.

“Oh, is that who that was?” I ask, knowing damn well who was sitting in the booth with Theo. “What exactly was he asking?”

“If you’re married or have a boyfriend,” Madeline answers as she fluffs her hair in the mirror before walking toward the bathroom door. “We should probably get back there before they start to think we’re in here talking about them.”

“But, we *are* talking about them.” I laugh, following her lead back to the booth.

As soon as Sam’s face is in my line of vision, my stomach tightens. I can’t remember the last time a boy—*ahem*—a man, gave me butterflies. By the time we reach the booth, my heart is racing.

Madeline, of course, slides in the booth with her husband. Leaving me to share a bench with Sam. With as much grace as my shaky little legs will muster, I plop down next to Sam. Even with the smells of Italian food swirling around us, there’s no mistaking how good he smells.

Fresh pine and all man.

Oh, jeeze.

I'm starting to sound like those romance novels I used to sneak out of my grandma's house when I was far too young to be reading about a woman's heaving bosom and a man's desire.

Though, I wouldn't mind being the object of Sam's desire.

Reel it in, Lucy. Reel. It. In.

"I appreciate you trying to hype it up, man." Sam sighs. "But, let's be real. It's a hard fall from having government clearance to pushing a mop and bucket around."

Knowing a little bit of his backstory, I can understand why he might feel a little defeated, but I can't sit here and let him belittle himself or his current job.

"There's nothing wrong with being a janitor," I say, shifting my body slightly to face him. "My grandpa was a custodian for years. He worked right up until he retired at almost seventy. He is the hardest working man I've ever met."

"I don't doubt that, but," he starts, and I cut him off before he can finish.

"No buts," I say. "So, it might not be exactly what you pictured yourself doing with your life. It's still hard, honest work."

I don't realize my leg began to bounce until Sam gently places his hand on my thigh. It's the smallest gesture, but I find myself being comforted by his touch. When I glance down, he quickly pulls back and apologizes.

"No, it's fine," I assure him. "I don't even realize I'm doing it sometimes."

With his eyes fixated on me, I don't process that the server has come over and taken our order.

"Hey!" Madeline waves to catch our attention. "Earth to Sam and Lucy!"

Theo looks back and forth between the two of us. He smirks when they have our attention again. "While you two

were staring into each other's souls, we took it upon ourselves to order pizza.”

There isn't much I won't eat when it comes to pizza, but I'm a little disappointed I didn't get to order my favorite.

“Luckily for you two, you're the only weirdos we know that order bacon, jalapeños, and pineapple,” Theo continues.

“Listen,” Sam starts. “It's not my fault you have bad taste and can't recognize that pineapple does in fact belong on a pizza.”

“Thank you!” I raise my hands in victory. “I have been trying to get them to understand that for the last year.”

As Madeline and Theo start listing off all the reasons why we're wrong, Sam leans in.

“While they're trying to justify why they're wrong, let's go pick the next song on the jukebox.”

FOUR

SAM

I definitely didn't mean to damn near grope the woman I just met, not that I wouldn't mind groping her, but consent is key and I just randomly reached over and grabbed her leg.

I don't know what kind of a spell the woman has over me but she causes me to do shit without thinking—like grab ahold of her shaking thigh and suggest we go pick out songs on the old fashioned jukebox when I haven't so much as spoken to a woman that I'm interested in years.

She leads me, because she was sitting on the outside of the booth, and I should be a gentleman, I know this, but instead, I admire her delicious curves. She's got a perfect ass, and I have to force my eyeballs away from it as we reach our destination.

“Let me guess, you're a country type of guy,” she guesses. “But not new country, you like the old stuff. Tim McGraw, Kenny Chesney, Garth Brooks...” She looks at me with a twinkle in her baby blues, and I almost hate to burst her bubble, but country music? Not a chance.

Shaking my head, I pretend to blanch and her eyes grow wide.

“Seriously?” I totally thought I was onto something. I'm usually good at this kind of stuff.

I chuckle as she visibly deflates.

“Listen, it was a nice try, and I definitely need to know what about me puts off that I'm a country music type of guy”—I narrow my eyes—“but I'm definitely an alternative rock, punk rock, really most kinds of rock type of man.” I

smile as I place one hand against the side of the jukebox and lean toward it. “I’m kinda disappointed I don’t give off an edgy, I’ve done time kind of guy,” I tell her. “That’s what I was going for.”

She steps closer to me and I inhale her, something sweet, like cherries, wafting off of her. “Thanks for the story about your grandfather. I’m still trying to adjust to being a criminal, you know. Petty shit or not, follows a guy around.” I think about it for a minute, about the fact that I just joked about my incarceration days. “I haven’t told a joke about being locked up until just now, and it feels weird but...”

“It’s a small town, Sam,” she interrupts as she tucks a strand of hair behind her ear. “It was pills. No one thinks they were yours. You did it to cover for your cousin, didn’t you?”

“You two picking three songs or fifty?” Madeline yells over the currently playing music, causing us to both break our intense stare.

“She’s a pain in my butt,” Lucy says, and I smile, too.

And it feels so fucking good.

I feel like I can talk to her about this, and it’s either going to be a mistake or something real amazing, so I do something else I haven’t done in a long time...

I take a chance.

“Yeah. I’ve never done drugs. I like rock n’ roll but I’m not about the lifestyle. Yeah, I wanna be edgy but I’d rather just look the part than play it, you know? But my cousin...I had just found out about his baby being on the way. Couldn’t let him go down for his shit. He had a lot more to lose than I did.”

“Well, I’d say you’re a really good man, Sam Blackwell,” Lucy says just before biting down on her plump bottom lip.

I’d give just about anything to claim that pretty mouth of hers right about now...but I don’t want our first kiss to be at Ma’s.

And there will be a first kiss.

I'm sure of it.

I decide to change the subject. We can talk about my past in more depth eventually, that is if she wants to, but it's been a long day and I'd like to show her a thing or two about what good music is.

I turn toward the jukebox, and she follows suit.

“So, I'm going to do everyone in this place a favor and play an old Green Day jam,” I tell her. “And if you tell me you don't like old school Green Day...” I shrug, shaking my head as I feign disinterest. “I mean, it just means no matter how pretty I think you are, Ms. Heart, it's not going to go anywhere.”

She playfully slaps at my chest, and I hit accept on “When I Come Around” so it's next up.

“Can't believe you'd reject me for not liking Billie Joe Armstrong, Trey Cool, and Mike Dirnt.”

Damn I think I could love this woman.

She plays an invisible guitar as the opening chords of the song sound from the speakers, and I swear I really do feel my heart seize in my chest. Music is the way to my heart. Music and a pretty woman like the one in front of me? I'm fucking set.

A tendril of hair falls in front of her face again, and we can't have her hiding behind her hair. She's far too beautiful to hide.

I tuck the stray strand again and she smiles up at me as she chooses our next song: a Sublime song.

“And to think I took you for a pop princess.”

FIVE

LUCY

Between getting back into the groove of being back in the classroom after having the summer off, the adjustment for my students, and this growing infatuation with a certain member of the janitorial staff, my second year of teaching at Blackwell Academy has certainly started off with a bang.

Ha. A bang. I know someone I'd like to bang.

I cringe at my inner monologue as I finish putting all of the little chairs upside down on the tables. It's not expected of me, but it takes two minutes and it makes the weekend cleaning crew's job easier. Madeline pops her head in to say goodbye and asks one more time if I want to join them at Ma's tonight for karaoke and dollar wings.

As much as I want to say yes, knowing there's a good chance Sam will be there, I have to be up early to set up for the Fall Festival tomorrow. So, I thank her, again, for the invite, but turn her down.

Her dramatic sigh is nothing out of the ordinary, but I do find myself a little surprised when she says, "You and Sam are perfect for each other. You're both responsibly booooooring."

I hear his laughter before he sticks his head into the classroom. It's the first time I've seen him all day. Which is probably for the best because I wouldn't have been able to get the vision of him in the dark denim jeans and solid black T-shirt out of my head. I wasn't sure there was any way for me to be even more attracted to him, but the tool belt fastened

around his waist and the little smudges of dirt and grease on his arms and hands prove otherwise.

God Bless Casual Fridays and men who aren't afraid to get a little dirty.

“Hello, Ms. Heart,” he greets me. The corner of his upper lip curls into a smirk and my insides flutter. I swear he does this shit on purpose. “I see that, you too, are being peer pressured into going to karaoke tonight.”

“I wasn't peer pressuring!” Madeline scoffs with a playful roll of her eyes. “But, fine! I'll see you two fuddy duddies in the morning.”

“Did she just call us ‘fuddy duddies’?” Sam chuckles with a shake of his head. He walks the rest of the way into the classroom and starts to put the chairs on the other side of the room on the tables. I didn't ask him to help, he just did it on his own. I don't know what's more attractive—his initiative or the way his arms flex every time he grabs one of the little plastic and metal chairs. “Anyway. I know you're not going to karaoke tonight because of the festival tomorrow, but you still have to eat, right? Would you, maybe, be interested in having dinner with me? We can make it an early one.”

“I would love to do you,” I answer and immediately wish I could crawl under one of these desks. “Do that *with* you. Damn it. I would love to have dinner with you.”

“Ms. Heart!” He exclaims feigning shock. “Did you just curse?!”

I fight a smile as I narrow my eyes and send a glare in his direction.

“Very funny. Give me your phone.”

My breath hitches as he closes the space between us and hands me his cell phone. As I put my number in his contacts, it takes every ounce of willpower not to inhale the scent of him like a lunatic. How does he still smell so good after working all day?

“I have a few things to finish up here, but I should be leaving in about ten minutes. Text me the time and address and

I'll meet you there."

The entire time we've been in close proximity, I've felt his eyes raking across my body. The hunter green bodycon dress clung to my body, showcasing my curves and, my best feature, my ass. I made it "school appropriate" by pairing it with a light denim jacket and a pair of canvas sneakers, but there was no hiding the junk I packed in my trunk.

The embarrassment I feel from word vomiting that I would like to "do him" subsides and is replaced by an empowering self confidence knowing I possess what it takes to have a man like Sam look at me like he'd like to devour every inch of me.

"I'll text you," he says, taking back his phone before leaning in close enough that I can feel his breath on my skin. "Just so you know, I'd be down for Option A too."

It's been three hours and I have yet to recover from Sam basically telling me that he wanted to have sex with me. What am I supposed to do with that information now? Of course, I'd love to just jump into bed with him. It's been a hot minute since I've been properly fucked. Actually, come to think of it, I don't know if I've ever been properly fucked in my entire life. You're not supposed to fake an orgasm every time you have sex and that's been the case each and every time for me.

The knots in my stomach tighten when I realize the GPS, which is directing me to the address Sam texted me a little while ago, is bringing me to a condo complex. His unit is the last of the row. He told me to park next to his red Pontiac GTO. I'd seen the muscle car parked in the faculty lot at school, but had no idea it was his. Makes sense that a sexy man would drive a sexy car.

I wish I had known we were going to be at his house. I would have stopped and gotten a bottle of wine or something. Showing up empty handed is not my style. If I had given myself a little more time, I would make a u-turn and head to the grocery store I passed on the way here. But, once again, I

spent way too much time sifting through my closet before settling on what to wear.

After parking my car, I head up the walkway toward Sam's condo. With every step I take, my heart begins to beat faster. I allow myself one deep breath in and out, before I ring the doorbell.

Within seconds, Sam answers the door and I'm met with a smell I'd recognize anywhere. Grilled cheese. It's so basic. Just bread and cheese, but it's my favorite.

"Grilled cheese?" I ask, already knowing the answer as I step into his house.

"A smart man does his homework," he answers. "Especially when he's trying to impress a teacher."

SIX

SAM

I walk toward the school carrying our coffees, still impressed by how much of a gentleman I was last night. My brain was on a whole other level and was definitely not gentlemanly but outwardly? Damn, I was good.

It took a lot of restraint.

A fucking lot.

Because as she sat at my kitchen table, all I could think about was wanting to take her right there on top of it.

It's a feral kind of attraction—the one I have for her—but last night I learned it's more than skin deep. She's such a genuinely good fucking person it's almost unbelievable.

The woman is a teacher, first of all. Taking care of other people's kids all day for a shitty wage? She's a goddamn angel.

She volunteers at our local food bank...saint.

And she rescued a damn baby raccoon that was hit on the side of the road last week.

Seriously, the woman should win some kind of do gooder award or something. But I think, unlike a lot of people, she does these things out of the kindness in her heart, not to be thanked or given accolades.

She's hanging up string lights when I spot her, although it isn't hard because we're the only ones here. The volunteers are supposed to check-in at 7:30 a.m. and the overachiever of my eye has us here at 6:45. The tight blue jeans she's wearing put

me in a chokehold, and when she bends down to grab more lights, I swear I almost spill our coffees.

Her eyes connecting with mine pull me from my intense eye-fucking moment, and the look of relief on her face makes me chuckle.

“Please tell me that coffee is for me,” she says, her eyes widening as I finally make it to her. She already has her booth set up, complete with the game she told me about last night.

“I may have asked you about your coffee order last night under the guise of just wanting to know but I was already scheming.” She smiles as I hand her the still steaming caramel macchiato.

She grasps it in both hands before pursing her lips and blowing, attempting to cool it off.

“I could seriously kiss you right now,” she says and her cheeks immediately darken to an almost burgundy shade of red. I step forward and place my coffee on the table as she starts to rattle on, acting like she never said anything about me claiming what’s mine. “I mean, God. I was going to stop at the coffee shop but then I realized it was already 6:15 and I didn’t want to be late so I just skipped it and headed—”

I grab ahold of her chin in my hand and bring her lips to mine, shutting Ms. Heart up in the most effective way I know how. Not that I mind hearing those frantic words fall from such sweet lips, but I can’t resist her any longer.

Her body goes rigid at first but not even a second later, she relaxes into me as I cup the back of her head in my hand, tugging on her long hair just slightly. She tastes exactly like she smells, and I realize she has on cherry Chapstick.

Not for long.

I devour her mouth, and she eagerly reciprocates as my tongue slips between her plump lips. Her palm slides underneath the back of my shirt as she grabs at me, and I pull her in closer until my hardening cock is pressing against her stomach.

She pulls away and looks into my eyes, panting.

“Well good morning to you, too, Sam.”

We both laugh as I start to back away, knowing I need to calm myself down before the other teachers and volunteers start arriving. I’m sure others will be here early, too.

Something flashes in her eyes, although I can’t quite pinpoint what, and as I step backward, untangling myself from her, the pit of my stomach swells with fucking need.

“You aren’t getting off that easily,” she says, and I realize now that the look in her eyes is her own growing desire. The pretty blue hues darken as she closes the distance between us that I’ve created to keep my sanity. “Why do you think I wanted to get here early, Sam?” She bites down on her bottom lip and every single ounce of my self-control dissipates.

I grip her ass and pick her up easily, and she wraps her legs around my waist.

“Shoot,” she says, panic overtaking her features. “Cameras. I didn’t think about the cameras. There’s two pointing back at this field.”

I smile as I plant a quick kiss on her lips and then gently bite down on the bottom one, softly tugging it.

“How bad do you want this right now, Ms. Heart?” I ask, hoping to fucking god that she wants it as bad as I do, because I have an idea.

She grins and I have my answer.

“It won’t win any awards for the sexiest place to show you how badly I need you right now, but it’ll definitely be the most scandalous.” I set her down, begrudgingly, and lead her toward the one place I think we could get away with all of the dirty things I want to do with her.

SEVEN

LUCY

The janitor closet.

Prior to Sam, I would have found this incredibly un-sexy.

With Sam, it's making me feel all types of ways...

This is dangerous. So freaking dangerous.

Knowing any person could come in at any time, especially the janitor on duty for the weekend, for some reason just takes this entire thing up a notch. This isn't me. I firmly believe that the me who walked into that teacher's lounge before introducing myself to him is not the me who is being pulled inside a small supply closet.

But I'm not going to lie...I think I like the reckless version better.

"Not many places considering where we're at," he grits out as he yanks his shirt over his head, exposing endless abs and a beautiful chest piece tattoo.

I gasp, unsure if it was out loud or only in my head, but I don't care at this point.

The man is like a freaking Greek god.

And I will gladly allow him to pull me into a closet and devour me.

"I could care less as long as you keep doing that," I tell him, referring to the way he's peppering quick kisses and alternating between nipping and sucking at the tender flesh on

my neck. He lets out a moan as I move to unbutton my jeans but he promptly stops my hand.

“You sure about this?” he asks, and I nod. “Definitely need words right now, Ms. Heart. Give me words,” he coaxes.

“I’m sure,” I say, and then tease him with, “What are you waiting for?”

The next thing I know, he’s unbuttoning my jeans and sliding them down my thighs as he kisses down my body. When the only piece of fabric separating the two of us is my small red thong, he looks at me and I nod again.

My jeans are around my ankles, and as I step out of them, he moves the fabric to the side and drops to his knees in front of me. I’ve always been a confident woman but I’ve never been in a small, dimly lit closet with a semi-stranger before. For some reason, though, I’m not getting stuck in my head. Maybe it’s how desperately I want the man kneeling in front of me, maybe it’s because it’s been so long since someone has looked at me with pure, unabashed need in his eyes, I don’t know.

I run my nails over his scalp before settling my hand on the back of his head, feeling like some sort of powerful seductress, and just as I tug him a little closer to me, he slides two fingers inside of my already dripping pussy.

“My, my, my, Ms. Heart.” He starts to slide his fingers in and out of me in an ungodly rhythm as I suck whimper. “All this for me?”

I nod as my head rocks back, the feeling of his fingers coaxing my most sensitive spot almost too much to handle. He pumps faster as he kisses along my thigh, and I realize I’m going to spiral over the edge if this man doesn’t get inside of me.

It’s been way too long, and Sam Blackwell is too much to handle after such a dry spell.

“Sam,” I moan out as he brings his other hand up and starts to circle my clit with his index finger. “Fuck, Sam. Please...”

“Sam, please?” he asks. “Please what, baby? Use those words of yours. I know you have them. Tell me what you want me to do.”

When I don't immediately divulge that I want him deep inside of me like I want my next breath, he moves his mouth to my clit and sucks. Hard.

“Shit, shit, shit!” I cry. “Please, Sam. I need you inside of me. I'm on the pill. I'm clean...”

I pull him up and he obliges as he removes himself from his jeans.

“I'm clean. And I wasn't planning on putting anything between us. I need to feel you. All of you.”

I gulp down my nerves that are mixing with my desire as I get a glimpse of just how big he is. Thick and long, with the sexiest curve that I know is about to make me have to hold my screams in.

“Good girl,” he says, narrowing his eyes. “You ask for what you want and I swear I'll always give it to you.”

He pumps his shaft a few times before sticking his fingers back inside of me and then rubbing my wetness all along his cock.

“So fucking wet and ready for me, aren't you, Ms. Heart?”

Before the words have even finished tumbling from his lips, he thrusts inside of me, hitting a spot I swear I've never felt before. He rubs my clit tantalizingly fast as he creates a punishing rhythm, and before I can fully even get used to his width, I'm coming on his cock and he's moaning into my neck to try and muffle his pleasure.

“Fuck, Lucy,” he grits the words out as I ride the waves of the insane orgasm he's giving me. The aftershocks ricocheting through my body as I cry out. “So fucking tight and needy. My cock is drenched with your cum.”

His words are enough to build up the anticipation again, my core clenches as he continues pumping in and out of me,

his grunts and moans only adding to my heightened state of arousal.

I squeeze his cock as my pussy pulsates around him, and I'm coming again as he continues thumbing my clit, his cock deep inside of me hitting my G-spot over and over and over again.

"I'm coming again," I tell him. "Fuck, I can't..."

He continues his pace, then bites down on my earlobe before whispering, "I'm about to fill up this pretty pussy of yours, Ms. Heart. You ready for my cum?"

This man's mouth is going to be the absolute death of me.

Just as I go to tell him that I'll never be ready for him to finish...that the high he has me on is one I never want to come down from, we're both releasing, both coming together, a mess of lust and endorphins and complete and total chaos.

I cry out and he stifles my moan by claiming my mouth just as a knock sounds at the door and a voice calls out, "Uh, hello?!"

EIGHT

LUCY

My body stills at the sound of someone's voice on the other side of the door.

“Calm your tits, you sluts, it's just Mad,” Madeline laughs when her husband adds, “And Theo!” before continuing, “When you're, uh, finished, how about you meet us by the Dunk Tank?”

Before now, I never would have even gone into the supply closet with Sam but now not only did I just get properly fucked in a janitors' closet, I don't feel any regret even after getting caught.

“What's the opposite of the walk of shame?” I giggle as I pull my jeans up.

“I don't know.” Sam shrugs with a smile. “But I'm about to do it.”

Once we're both dressed, I sigh. As much as I love the Fall Festival, I know opening that door means this moment is over.

We don't say anything as we walk the halls together making our way outside to where the Dunk Tank is stationed. Rows of booths are set up between games and demo stations from local companies. This is one of our biggest fundraising events of the year. I need to get my head in the game.

“Hey honey! Look! It's Sam and Lucy,” Theo chuckles as we approach them. “Where'd you guys come from?”

“Oh, Luce,” Madeline's eyes widened at the sight of me, pulling a hair elastic from her wrist. “We need to do something

with that hair.”

Sam and I have still yet to say anything about what just happened when Theo decides to just drop a bomb of a question on us.

“So, are you two like together now?”

My stomach flutters. Are we? I mean, I don’t make a habit of fucking dudes at my place of employment, but I don’t think that means we need to start picking out engagement rings either.

“I’m going to leave that ball in Ms. Heart’s court,” Sam smirks.

Three sets of eyes turn to me, waiting for me to give them some kind of answer.

“Whatever happens happens.”

The End. Maybe. For Now.

If you loved The Bad Apple, please be sure to follow us on Instagram and let us know if you want more Sam and Lucy. We’re not saying we’ll make a full length novel for them, but we’re not *not* saying we’ll make a full novel for them if enough people want it. ;)

[Keep Up With Victoria](#)

[Keep Up With Dee](#)

A FOREVER ACCIDENT:
MIGNON MYKEL

ONE

BEN

“Yes, yes, yes...” Each word is higher pitched than the last—her voice catching in her throat—with each slap of my hips against her raised ass.

Keeping a grasp on the ample flesh of her hips, I glide my other over the gentle curve of her spine until my hand cups the back of her neck. With the slightest pressure, I push so her face presses harder into the pillow.

Ellie turns her head though, pushing her cheek into the cotton as she squeezes her eyes shut.

“Fuck, Ben,” she moans. My name on her lips makes me want to take her over and over again.

Claim her as mine.

Fuck.

Her hands, fisted in the sheets, loosen and tighten like a cat kneading in contentment.

It’s been too long since I’ve fucked. That has to be why this feels a thousand times better than ever before.

“Your pussy feels so fucking good,” I let her know, and she squeezes those slick walls around my dick tighter. I grunt in satisfaction but don’t break my rhythm.

Instead, I slip my hand to cup her throat and apply enough force to let her know I want her kneeling in front of me.

She pushes from the mattress and now it’s the back of my neck and ass that get to feel the way her hands flex and relax

as she fights to keep from climaxing.

Her body is a fucking masterpiece and she hasn't once shown she's embarrassed about her curves. She wasn't apprehensive about taking off her clothes in front of me. She didn't request the bedside lamp to be turned off.

And she sure as hell hadn't been uneasy when I spread her lush thighs to taste the pussy I'd been craving since the moment she'd brazenly dared me to take her back to her hotel.

"You take my cock so fucking nicely," I growl into her ear. "You feel how good we fit? Yeah, you take it like a good girl." Her nails bite into my ass and when I lower my eyes to watch her tits bounce with each thrust, I'm treated to a show of her nipples tightening.

They go from mostly peaked and pink, to a tight, dusky rose-colored bud.

Fuck, I want to suck on them again. I didn't nearly get my fill of them.

Instead, I release her hip so I can roll one of the peaks between my thumb and middle finger, which causes her pussy to flutter around my cock in response.

And when I squeeze gently but only so I can hold her nipple in place, quickly strumming the tip of my forefinger over the sensitive peak, I'm rewarded with more fluttering and pussy-clenching.

"You gonna come for me, Ellie?"

"S-so c-close..." She presses the back of her head into my shoulder, not even caring that her ponytail must be digging into her scalp.

After one additional squeeze to her throat, I drag that hand down between her breasts, over the natural swell of her belly, and across her surprisingly smooth mound, until my fingers encounter her wet folds.

"Ben!" Ellie yells out. Like the way I continue strumming her nipple, I hold her folds apart with index and ring fingers, and tease her engorged clit with my middle one.

“Oh my God, oh my... Oh...” She drops her hand from my neck and now both ass cheeks will have her nail marks imprinted, but I couldn’t care less.

Fuck, I’d tattoo them there, if it meant I could fuck this woman again.

The way her body responds to mine is an aphrodisiac I wasn’t aware I needed.

God knows I’ll crave this like the vices I gave up years ago.

It’s not much longer before she’s trying to fold herself down toward the bed, her scream of satisfaction echoing in the small room as her orgasm takes over.

I don’t let her get away though.

I keep teasing both erogenous zones and push my cock through her now incredibly tight walls, her orgasm bringing mine closer...closer...

Until, “Fuck!” I yell out, my own orgasm hitting me hard as cum spills into the condom.

This time, I let her collapse to the bed, but only because I’m following closely behind.

She rolls to her back, a satisfied grin on her face and bright flush to her cheeks, and when I slip my still hard, still covered, cock back into her warm heat, she doesn’t protest.

I don’t want to leave her yet.

With her arms wrapped around my neck, my cock cocooned in her warmth, and her foot running lazily up and down my calf, we makeout lazily for minutes. Hours. Who the hell knows how long.

Until finally, I know I have to leave.

I have to open the shop in the morning.

Shit. *In five hours*, I realize, as the green numbers of the room’s clock catch my peripheral vision.

I don’t do sleepovers with hookups.

The last all-nighter I pulled with a woman was shortly out of high school, and now I can't stand when I run into her in our small town.

"I have to head back home," I whisper against Ellie's plush lips.

"Okay." She doesn't ask me to stay. She doesn't protest me leaving.

She just presses her lips to mine once more before rolling the opposite direction I do. She walks bare assed naked toward the bathroom, reaching past the pocket door to turn the light on in the smaller room.

After removing the used condom and tying it off, I drop it into the small trash can I pass as I walk around the hotel room, picking up my discarded clothes. I feel her watching from the bathroom doorway as I dress. When I look up at her, she's leaning against the jam, her arms crossed under her bare breasts, and fuck if I don't want to bend her over the bathroom sink and take her again.

Standing to my full height, I stalk across the room and into her space, but she doesn't back away like I'm crowding her.

Instead, she tips her chin up and gives me a sultry smile.

"I had fun tonight."

"Me too," I tell her. "If you're ever in town..."

She shakes her head. "Won't be. Told you, I was here for business. I don't do snow."

I don't take it personally...

Even if the aloofness in her words pokes something primal in my mind.

"Well, if I'm ever in LA or Vegas, or wherever warm you hail..."

Amusement shines in her bright eyes as she lifts her brows. "A cowboy like you?"

I don't need to look down at my boots and flannel to know why she assumes I'm a cowboy out here in Montana.

“Could surprise you.”

She regards me for a moment before nodding. “Yeah, I think you probably could.” Then, before I can say anything more, she steps back into the brightness of the bathroom and slides the door closed between us.

TWO

NELLIE

I really freaking hate snow.

And winter.

And *fucking black ice*.

I slam my hands against the steering wheel in frustration.

Thankfully, all I did was a couple of full three-sixty turns before sliding into a small-ish ditch, and *more* thankfully, a browning snow pile stopped my car from rolling—and roll, it almost did, if that hard, settle-from-rocking motion the car did was any indication.

But that's about where my thankfulness stops.

Geraldine won't start again, and even if the engine would turn over, I'm not entirely sure how to get the car out of its current predicament.

My gray Corolla is quite literally stuck between a rock—err, a solid snow pile—and a hard place...the ditch.

A small ditch.

But a ditch nonetheless.

Today has gone to hell in a handbasket, as my grandpa used to say.

It all started when I was asked back to Montana for a follow-up interview I did a couple weeks ago—but only so they could tell me they were hoping to go with someone local.

Why the hell did you invite me back then, assholes?

But I guess, yay for letting me know ahead of time so I can open my spring schedule. Silver lining, and all that jazz.

Then, not even thirty minutes into my trip from Billings to Idaho Falls where I'd stop for the night, I was being tailed by a lifted black truck. Big truck energy, if you know what I mean.

And maybe I made sure my cruise control was set to the posted 55. Perhaps even 54, for good measure. Can't be too safe, you know.

The ass zoomed around me and laid on his horn, rolling down the passenger window so he could lean as far over as he could to give me the bird.

All while yelling, "Move over, you fat bitch!"

I swear I'm not this petty in normal life, but it'd just been a no good, very bad day, and I'm not proud of what I did next.

It's not that I have road rage.

It's more that I sometimes not always have full control of my feelings, and I was pissed and angry and back home on the 101, it's perfectly normal to let your anger out by tailing someone back while going ninety miles an hour.

Okay, maybe not normal, but I haven't been killed yet, so there's that.

So I gunned it.

And *immediately* hit black ice.

Karma's a fucking bitch.

With my heart rate finally calming to a far reasonable cadence, I push open the driver's side door...

And it doesn't budge.

"Jesus, Mary, and Joseph!"

I slam my shoulder into the door this time, as if the force of my body will help unjam the door, but it's of no use.

It's stuck.

"What the hell, Geraldine?" I mumble.

Yes, I named my car.

Right now, I have two choices.

Either I can take all my shit off the passenger seat and toss it in the back to get out the passenger door, or I can finagle my body into the back and exit that way.

Everything on the passenger seat is placed in the best position possible for my eighteen hour road trip home. How none of it budged in all the round-and-around activity is beyond me but I'm thankful because I'd rather not re-configure the suitcase, backpack, and cooler.

I was never all that great at Tetris.

Looks like I'm crawling out the back.

I reach between my seat and the door to press the powered position button and I move backward, inch by very slow inch.

"Is it always this pokey?" I ask, as if the car will respond.

Finally, I feel like I have enough room between the steering wheel and seat to not-so-gracefully crawl into the back.

And, assuming the rear driver's side door is in the same state as the front, I exit from the passenger side.

I'm barely upright as a truck pulls to the side of the road. Briefly, I fear it's the guy I pissed the karma gods off with—because that's how my luck runs—but while this truck is also black, it isn't lifted.

Like myself, he'd been traveling westbound. I wonder if it's illegal to pull over on a highway in the wrong direction? Surely it's not.

"You all right?" the man calls out as he opens the door. "Saw you go down..."

Shrugging, I lift my voice to answer, "Me? I believe so. The car? I haven't gotten around to assessing."

Tugging my long sleeves to my palms, I hold the ribbing in place as I cross my arms under my chest. At least I'd had the

foresight to put on comfy clothes for driving so I'm not in the slacks and satin blouse I wore to my interview.

Although now that I have an audience of one fine looking specimen of a man donning a cowboy hat, I'm not so sure I'm thrilled to be in his graces while wearing sweatpants from the men's section.

They're only a little baggy on me but would probably swallow that man's bottom half whole.

And he's not skinny, by any means.

There isn't much snow on the ground but what white stuff there is finds its way to the mesh in my tennis shoes. Gosh, I hate wet socks.

What a shitty day.

Sighing, I ignore the man's descent into the ditch and toward me as I walk to the driver's side to figure out why I couldn't open the door. The browning snow pile is quite literally the thing that saved me, and when I lift my foot to push at the top of the three foot mound, I realize it's frozen solid.

"You were pretty lucky," the man says, his voice closer now. When I look over my shoulder, he's nearly to us. Err. Me and the car.

When my eyes meet his, he tips his head in the direction the front of Geraldine is facing. "One more spin and you'd have hit that power line."

Following his gaze, I see the large wooden utility pole. I don't even want to imagine that being the hard place that stopped me...

"I have a chain," he continues. "I can get you out of the field."

"Is that what this is?" I ask, looking around at the desolate ground that has a sprinkling of old snow throughout.

He chuckles. "Yes, ma'am. Give it six months and life starts again. It doesn't look like much..."

It takes me a moment to realize he's no longer talking about the field but the car. "I don't suppose AAA comes out this way?"

The man continues to walk around Geraldine, bending and kneeling at different points. "I'm sure you could get a tow from a place in Billings, but I have a buddy only five minutes away. The car not starting?"

"No."

He stands tall again and adjusts his cowboy hat. "Yeah. A tow from the city will take easily an hour to get out here. Ben'll be faster."

That name causes my breath to hiccup.

Ben...

I'm instantly taken back to my last trip to Montana and the night I brazenly took a stranger to bed. I was feeling great about the interview, about the direction life was going, and was on top of the world.

I'm not a one night stand kind of girl but I bent my rules with him.

And what a great few hours it had been.

Well-worth the rule-breaking.

But I gave him a semi-fictitious name. It's just as likely that Ben isn't actually a Ben.

"Especially considering they'd probably take you to his shop, anyway. Guessing you don't have a local mechanic to tow to?" he continues, and when I snap back to attention, he lifts his brows. "You need a paramedic?"

Blinking rapidly, I shake my head. "Oh. No, sorry. I was just..." I uncross my arms and swirl a finger around my temple. "Lost in my head. It's been a long day."

"Not the end cap you wanted?" he jokes, pulling a phone from his back pocket.

"I'm supposed to be heading home. I was here for... business. But," shaking my head, I wave him off, "none of it

matters. I appreciate you stopping to help.”

“Of course.” Both thumbs fly over the screen and then he brings the phone to his ear. “I’m Max, by the way.”

“Nellie.”

“Nice to meet you, Nel—Hey, Ben. It’s Max.” He turns his back and I pretend to look at the car like I know what I’m looking for while he has his conversation. “Yep. I’m helping a lady who spun out. Car won’t start... Sure. Yeah. Okay, yeah, I can grab it. Thanks. See you in a minute.” After a pause, he continues, talking to me this time so I face him once again. “I’ll have to grab the truck. He’s at the shop alone and in the middle of an oil change. I’ll get you pulled out and head to his shop. I can bring you with, if you’d rather hang out in a warm vehicle. It’s actually a pretty nice day but I’m guessing your blood is thinner.”

With a self-deprecating laugh, I shake my head. “What gave that away?” Out of habit, I cross my arms again.

Max points to me. “You keep hugging yourself. You got a jacket?”

Well, I’m not hugging myself to stay warm, but he doesn’t need to know that.

I *tsk* my tongue. “I do not.”

“All right, well. Give me just a moment.”

When he comes back after moving his truck and attaching a chain to it, he also brings a dark green hooded sweatshirt, *Granger Masonry*, in large letters on the back. “I promise, it’s clean.”

“Thank you.” I pull the hoodie on and when it’s a little tighter than I prefer for my hooded sweatshirts, I know better than to look a gift horse in the mouth.

Max gives me instructions and it isn’t long before Geraldine is back on the side of the road. The driver’s side door opens roughly, but at least it isn’t permanently jammed.

The car, unfortunately, still doesn’t turn over.

Max offers to let me ride with him to and from the shop but in the end, I decide it's better to stay with the car.

"You know, in case someone on this busy highway decides to take my things," I joke, looking down the empty roadway. With as few cars that have passed in the time since my single-car accident took place, I realize more and more how lucky I am that Max happened to be driving by.

"I shouldn't be more than ten minutes," he promises. He gives me his phone number before leaving—going as far as calling himself, so I know it's a legitimate number. "B-R-B."

When his truck pulls away, I pray I'm not being stupid for accepting help from a stranger.

Yet wait on him, all the same.

THREE

BEN

Old Man Winkler honks his horn twice as he pulls out of the bay. Through the clear glass windows of the newer model Buick Regal his kids made him get, he lifts a weathered hand and waves as he drives off.

Grinning, I wipe my hands on the shop rag that's always on my person.

Jerry Winkler was good friends with my grandfather and has been coming to my family's auto shop since Grandpa opened it sixty years ago.

When Grandpa passed away, it became my dad's, but it only stayed in his name for a few years. When Mom was diagnosed with an aggressive breast cancer my tenth grade year, I dropped out of school to help. It wasn't a rarity in our small ranching town. Kids left school often to help keep the family legacy going.

But when Mom passed away, Dad could no longer focus on the shop to the degree in which he knew Grandpa wanted.

So it became mine.

Before I can head back inside to clean up, my tow truck comes into view.

Max Granger is one of my best friends from high school. I don't make it a habit to let random folks from town take my tow truck to help someone, but any one of my close friends?

Not a problem.

If anything, it helped me so I didn't have to rush through Jerry's service.

I step into the garage enough to toss the shop rag onto a blue plastic chair and wave the truck over.

There's a passenger in the cab of the truck. Probably the car owner.

But my attention is on the car hooked to the rig.

It's a gray Corolla.

My eyes narrow as a night a few weeks ago hits front and center.

When Max slows the truck, I let curiosity win and walk to the back. I take off my cap only to put it back on backwards.

Ellie's car was a gray Corolla.

I know better than to expect to see a yellow bumper sticker on the back, announcing "The dog is learning to drive." But I still look for it.

And fuck me, but it's there.

Hers was on the right, I remind myself, as I register the decal is in the center, right above the license plate.

Besides, what would she be doing in Montana? She was from somewhere warm...

The sunset-style license plate with purple cactus on the left catches my eye.

No fucking way.

Arizona is somewhere warm.

I know, I know. I paid enough attention to her car that night to notice a bumper sticker but not her license plate. Hell, I'd half thought she was in a rental.

Yeah.

That's what it was.

A rental.

And this is the same rental car.

Not the same woman.

“I know shit about cars,” one of my oldest friends in the world announces as he gets out of the cab, “but I think it’s the battery.”

Chuckling, “And how did you come to that determination?”

“Nellie, the car owner, Googled it.”

The name hits me square in the chest.

Not Ellie.

But close.

Really fucking close.

Could I have misheard her name that night?

Or could she have given me a fake name that was close enough to hers she wouldn’t be distracted?

I let Max unhook the car and walk to the front to greet the car owner.

The passenger door opens and I watch as a woman in sweats—and Max’s sweatshirt—steps out.

“I’m—” I start, holding my hand out to introduce myself, but she looks up and...

Holy fuck. It is her.

Ellie.

No. Max said Nellie.

“Ben,” she says for me. The tone of my name on her lips tells me she’s just as shocked as I am.

“Ell—” I start, but she corrects me at the same time I correct myself. “Nellie.”

I have to know. “But you did give me the name *Ellie*, right?”

She starts to nod but as her lips part to likely explain herself, Max interrupts, stepping to my side. “All right. I gotta

run. I have a meeting with Hennessy and some big wig production company.”

“That bed and breakfast they were talking about at last month’s town hall meeting?” I ask, accepting the truck keys from him. Landon Hennessy is a local general contractor here in town.

Helped remodel many of the buildings in downtown Forever, when the town went from practically a ghost town to the thriving small town it is today.

The next big project in town is taking an old house just on the outskirts of town and transforming it into a bed and breakfast. The townspeople decided a bed and breakfast fit Forever more than some chain hotel would.

Then, in an effort to put Forever on the map, its remodel is going to be featured on some home and garden channel.

“Yeah. Guess they’re in the final stages of all the outside companies. You’re good here, Nellie?”

She nods but I swear her face has paled in the two minutes since I saw her step out of my tow truck.

Concerned, I reach for her elbow to guide her into the garage to sit. “You okay? You need to head to the clinic?” Thankfully, she comes with me easily and sits in the chair after I remove my rag.

“I’m...” She shakes her head. “No, I’m fine. Just...” She puts a hand over an eye. “God, this day.”

“You said you weren’t going to be back in town.”

“Yeah, well... Surprise.” She drops her hand and closes her eyes.

I can’t help myself.

With a hand that needs a decent orange scrub washing, I tip her chin up with two fingers and wait for her to open those blue bonnet eyes that have haunted my sleep the last three weeks.

“Nellie,” I urge when she keeps her eyes squeezed shut.

“I think I might be sick,” she whispers.

I get her to the single bathroom where she indeed is sick. I hold her hair back while trying to hold my irritation at seeing one of my oldest friend’s last name on her back.

Between that strange jealousy and the near embarrassment at the bathroom that hasn’t been remodeled in easily twenty years, I’m hit with an unexpected surge of emotions.

“This is so embarrassing,” Nellie murmurs, blindly reaching to flush the toilet as she moves to stand. I let go of her hair to give her room.

“You should probably go to the clinic, just in case. Might have a concussion.”

“I didn’t hit my head.” She avoids my eyes as she moves to the sink, washing her hands.

“That you know of.”

I watch as she scrubs her hands, the foam-soap bubbling due to the friction. After, she dries with paper towel and when she looks around for the garbage, I point to the can in the corner.

“I think it’s just the shock of...everything. I swear, the karma gods are laughing at me today.”

I raise my brows, and she continues—although she still avoids my eyes, which does nothing for the emotions warring inside me.

“It’s been a rough day. I’m sure I’m fine. I just need my car to start and then I’ll get out of your hair.”

“Did I give you the impression I wanted you out of my hair?”

“Well, no, but—”

“You have somewhere pressing to be tonight?”

Finally, she meets my eyes. “No. I was heading home.”

“Arizona?”

“Arizona.”

I want badly to ask if she's been in Montana this entire time, but I don't want to hear her say yes.

When I want sex, I go into Billings. It's better to go into the city than to stay within the town limits of Forever. Everyone knows your business in Forever.

And if I want to fuck someone, I don't need my neighbor knowing about it.

I rarely go into Billings.

Three weeks ago, though, I convinced myself to drive the thirty minutes into the city, and when the brazen, buxom beauty asked to take me back to her hotel room, I accepted.

It had been a long time since I fucked someone.

And hell if a few hours with her ruined me for anyone else.

I haven't been interested in sex since my time with her.

I'm not sure how I'll feel if I know she's been in town, practically under my nose, this entire time.

I may have grown up in a town called Forever, but watching my dad become a shell of the man he was before Mom passed, I know love isn't for me.

I'm not sitting here, pining over this woman. I don't think sex equals love.

But it was a fun night and it would have been nice to do it again.

"Well, you're not getting to Arizona tonight. Let's just head to the clinic, make sure your head is actually okay, and then we can get a plan to get your car fixed. If it is just the battery, I should have you up and running in no time. You have commitments at home you need to be back for?"

"My dog, but I have a pet sitter coming to the house. I was hoping to be home tomorrow but—"

My eyes pinch as I look at the car. "I can't say anything without actually looking at it, but it doesn't sound like you were in a major accident. Hit a snow bank?"

“It was small.”

“I’m not sure that you’ll be home tomorrow, but probably the day after. I’ll do my best to get you on the road tomorrow.”

“I guess that’s all I can ask,” she sighs. “I’ll just let my sitter know. And I don’t need a clinic. I’m fine.”

FOUR

NELLIE

Someone above is laughing at me.

I just know it.

After leaving a message for my dog sitter, I end up letting Ben talk me into going to the clinic after all.

“Just for peace of mind,” he says again, maneuvering his truck onto the road. “As the shock wears off, you may start to feel sore or other things. Whiplash can take you by surprise.”

“I already agreed with you,” I respond, maybe a touch more defensive than I intended.

I don't do well with changes in plans. And I certainly don't do well when that change in plans puts one of the most gorgeous men I've ever met right in front of me again.

I peek over at him with just my eyes. He washed his hands before we left the shop, and he removed the blue coveralls he'd been wearing, but there's still a touch of grease on his face.

And that backward ball cap...

This blue collar man is a far cry from the well-dressed cowboy at the bar all those weeks ago.

And heaven help me, but I think this version gets me in the girly parts even harder than the put together man did.

“What brought you back to Montana?” he asks, probably making small talk to pass time.

“That business I was here for a few weeks ago? They asked me to come back for another interview.”

“So was it business last time, or an interview then too?” His eyes leave the road for a brief moment, meeting mine.

“An interview.”

“Can I pry and ask what for?”

Sighing sadly, I look out the passenger window. “That same project Max was talking about, I guess.”

“Really?”

I begin to nod but realize he probably won’t catch it. “Yeah.” Adjusting in the seat, I cross my arms over my stomach. “I do landscaping. They invited me to interview and bring my portfolio. That was last month. Then a week or so ago, they asked me to come back and bring a proposal for the project, specifically. That was this morning.”

“And what happened?”

“Ultimately, they decided they want to keep the project local. All vendors from the area.”

He’s quiet for a moment as he slows the truck for a stop sign. When I look over at him, I see he’s looking at me. “I’m sorry,” he tells me. “It sounds like you wanted it.”

“It would have been great for my career but...” Shrugging, I pry my eyes away from his gaze. “It is what it is.”

“What does landscaping look like in Arizona? Rocks and cactuses?”

“Cacti.”

His chuckle is short but amused. “I know. I was trying to crack a joke. Make you smile.”

Oddly enough, it’s not his “cactuses” that has me smiling, but his *wanting* to make me smile.

“You have to be good at what you do, if a desert landscaper was asked back for a second interview here. Landscape is different.”

“It is, yeah, but most of my summer projects are up in Flagstaff. Arizona isn’t all dirt and cacti, you know. And people are moving from out of state and wanting grass, so I get my share of challenging projects.”

“You enjoy it?”

“I do.”

“Good.”

Conversation ceases but it’s only a few minutes before he’s pulling the truck into a small parking lot in front of a standalone building, a wooden sign on the front stating it’s the Forever Health Clinic.

“If I thought something was seriously wrong, I’d have taken you into the city,” he explains, putting the truck in park. “At most, I think we’re looking at a minor concussion, if even that. But they’re usually quick to get people in the back, so we shouldn’t have to deal with any small town gossip.”

Inside, there aren’t many people waiting in chairs, and I’m brought back to be checked with hardly a wait at all. I don’t stop Ben from following behind.

I just peed in a cup and am waiting for an MRI now. I’m not the most comfortable sitting here in a hospital gown, and have my arms crossed protectively over my stomach. Even my legs are crossed, with one foot hooked under the other as my legs hang over the side of the bed.

“Where do they even put imaging equipment in this building?” I ask into the quiet room. Ben is sitting in a chair beside the cot, his denim-covered legs stretched out in front of him and crossed at the ankles.

His hands are locked on his stomach and he grins crookedly. “Forever’s small but this new generation is trying hard to make it the best place to live. And that means the best medicine equipment possible. That said, there’s a helipad out back for those more emergent times.”

“Did you grow up here?”

He nods once. “I did. It’s not nearly the same as it was ten, fifteen years ago. It was about five years ago that someone came in and decided to fix it up. The changes brought in more young people. I swear, when I was a kid, the townspeople were mostly old ranchers and ranch hands. Hardly any kids. The town was slowly dying.”

“I didn’t get much chance to explore but I did research the area a little when I applied for the position,” I admit. “I’ve never lived in a small town.”

“I swore I’d leave. Started high school with plans to do that but I ended up with the auto shop and... Well, here I am. Still in Forever.”

“Is it your family’s?”

“The shop?”

I nod.

“Yeah. My grandpa started it and it’s been passed down since then.”

I want to return his question earlier about enjoying his work, but the doctor knocks and enters the room. He’s an older gentleman but when he was in here before, I thought he was one of the kindest doctors I’d ever encountered.

Thoughtful.

Good bedside manner.

“Well,” he says, his tone laden, as he shuts the door behind him. “An MRI is not advisable.”

Frowning, I straighten my back. “I’m sorry?”

“You have a high level of HCG in your urine and blood. I’m not sure if congratulations are in order, but at the very least, you are pregnant. MRI’s are safe in pregnancy, but we typically advise to not do them—”

His voice drowns out as those three words echo in my head.

You are pregnant.

My eyes dart to where Ben sits, and I realize he's staring at me. But where my lips are parted in shock, his remain tightly closed.

"...we can continue with an X-ray of your shoulder and neck area. Your range of motion is good but sometimes things pop up after the adrenaline of the day wears down. If this had been a two-vehicle accident, I'd push for some sort of imaging, for sake of insurance, but as it is...I'd be comfortable forgoing it."

"Okay," I answer robotically, tearing my eyes from Ben and back to the doctor. I'm too shocked to keep my tight hold of myself and now, my hands grip the edge of the cot. "How..." I frown. "What are the next steps with pregnancy? I wasn't... I've never been pregnant. I don't know what I'm supposed to do." God, that sounds so stupid.

"We can do a dating scan, if you'd like. When was your last menstrual cycle?"

When I give the date, it doesn't take a rocket scientist to know I'm pregnant with Ben's baby.

Ben's baby.

I don't even know Ben!

My heart starts to race uncomfortably and I have to bite my tongue to keep from crying. When the doctor leaves the room to get an ultrasound tech, I can no longer hold myself rigid.

Slouching my back, I bring my hands to my eyes even though I'm too frozen to cry.

I startle when a hand rests on my upper back.

"It's okay," Ben says softly. "Clearly not what you expected but it'll be okay."

I drop my hands. They slap against my thighs and I look up at him. No doubt, my eyes are wide and wild. "I can't be pregnant, Ben. I don't know you! Hell, you thought my name was Ellie until an hour ago," I whisper the last sentence as if my words will travel in the small building.

The man doesn't even have the audacity to look repulsed by the thought. Instead, he shrugs. "Looks like we have a lifetime to get to know each other."

"This isn't funny, Ben," I scold between clenched teeth.

"Not laughing, Nellie. Just accepting the world changed. And you know something?"

When I don't answer, he puts his hands on the sides of my face and tips my head back. His thumbs rub gently up and down over my cheeks. "My world changed three weeks ago. I walked out of that room and knew life wasn't ever going to be the same. Then you show up today? And now this news? Yeah. Life is changing—"

"My life is in Arizona," my voice shakes. He sounds like all of this is a sure thing. Like he's actually on board with all of it.

"Why did you want this job?"

I frown at the change in subject.

"Your life is in Arizona, but you wanted this job. I've talked to Max. I know this project is going to be a six-plus month endeavor. Maybe not so long for the landscaper, but still... It's not just a week in Montana. Why did you want this job? And not because of your portfolio..."

Swallowing, I admit, "Because I'm tired of the desert. But I can't just *move* here! My life—"

"Is in Arizona. You keep saying. Listen though, Nell. This is your chance at the job. We take the next nine months getting to know one another and you get to become a resident of Forever. Win-win."

"You can't mean any of this, Ben!" I whisper-yell. I can't get past the scared, frantic mess of my emotions.

"I do. I want to explore what's between us—"

"Nothing is between us! We had sex—"

"Really good sex."

“Yes. It was good. Great, even. Is that what you want to hear? But relationships aren’t built from *sex*.”

“I know that today scared you. Three weeks ago, you were the most confident woman I’d ever met—”

I scoff at that.

“You were!” He has the audacity to grin.

“Only because I was feeling on top of the world and knew I’d never see you again.” I lower my voice to add, “So who the hell cared if I was fat?” His eyes darken and he frowns, but I push on, “If you wanted to fuck me, then I wanted to fuck you, because you’re the most gorgeous man I’ve ever met.”

“You are not fat,” he practically growls.

I throw my hands out to my sides. “Look at me, Ben! I probably weigh as much as you, if not more.”

“You’re curvy and so goddamn beautiful, I can’t take my eyes off you.”

“Because you’re holding my face.”

He drops his hands and damn if that doesn’t make my heart skip a beat in fear.

Ben takes a step back but keeps his eyes on my face. “Still can’t take my eyes off you.”

I let hope fight with the fear of the future. “You can’t mean any of this...”

Once again, his hands are on my face. “I mean every word. My world changed, I just didn’t know how pivotal of a change it was. I want this, Nell. Let’s get to know each other. Move into my place. We’ll get your dog. Become a resident of Forever. Take the job. Have my kid. And if after the bed and breakfast project is complete, you’d rather be in Arizona... I’ll go to Arizona.”

Knowing the auto shop is a family business, I wouldn’t ever let him do that.

But the idea...

“This is crazy,” I whisper.

“Some of the best stories start out a little crazy.”

“What if we hate each other?”

“But what if we end up loving each other?”

“You sound like you read romance novels,” I try to tease, but my world is spinning.

“I don’t, but I know of a bookstore in town that sells ‘em. I’ll brush up on my romance, if that made you happy.”

“Okay, I retract my statement. *This* isn’t crazy but maybe you are.”

Instead of taking offense at my jest, he winks an eye.

Winks.

An.

Eye.

Between the tired look on his face from working all day, and the backward hat, his rough hands on my face...

The wink sealed the deal.

“Okay,” I whisper. “Let’s give this a try.”

BIG DADDY: KL DONN

FROM THE AUTHOR:

Big Daddy is every bit as filthy as he seems, and he'll stop at nothing to lay claim to his baby girl, even if it means filling her with his baby batter.

ONE

MATILDA

Staring at the dials on my dashboard as smoke billows from the hood of my car, I don't know whether to cry or scream. Maybe laughter is an option. A good maniacal outburst might make me feel better. I doubt it, but a girl can dream.

Today was supposed to be my big break. A way to get out from under the thumb of my current manager/agent and break out on my own. I've been modeling since I was ten, and my momager has been the bane of my existence ever since. Leaving her in California to move to Jacksonville, Florida, with my dad was the only decision I've made that was acceptable to all parties.

I took this gig for a new magazine and swimsuit line knowing it was a gamble. I was okay with that. When I arrived in Wilmington, North Carolina, late last night, I met the designer of the line and the director of the shoot—both women—which eased my anxiety. Everything was going great today, too, until the photographer cornered me privately and tried to force his hand into the bottom of my bikini.

When I shoved him away, he called me more vile names than I even knew existed. Thankfully, we'd already gotten the shots needed, and the director backed me up. She laced into the man without hesitation because she'd heard rumors circulating around, but nothing had been proven. Well, they were now. It was caught on one of the security cameras in the condo we were renting. After the threat of a lawsuit, he released the images to her and walked away.

I opted to leave, nonetheless.

I was gifted the bikini I'm currently wearing, and stupidly decided to take off early without changing. All I wanted was to get home and into my own bed, wash this trip off, and hope for the best. Instead, I'm stuck on the side of a two-lane highway, praying my pain-in-the-ass car will turn over and not be broken down like it's indicating. The fact that I decided to take the scenic route home, wanting to stop in Florence, Columbia, and Augusta, was stupid. I'm not far outside Florence, just past the Darlington Raceway, hoping to see the track, but it was all shut down for the night already.

My car should have been fine all the way home, but nooooo, it just had to act up. Pressing the button to pop the hood, I step out of the vehicle into the sweltering heat and lift it. Smoke smacks me in the face like a bad night of drinking, and all I can do is stare.

I don't know anything about cars. I grew up in the lights of Hollywood, behind a mother chasing fame and realizing she could use me to do it. My father has lived in Florida for most of my life—since the divorce I have no recollection of—and he's a realtor. He wouldn't know a damn thing, either.

Leaving the hood raised, I hear the sound of a big rig rolling along, and I have a decision to make. See if the driver can help me or let him drive on by in the hopes my car troubles will magically resolve themselves. *Fat chance.*

Just as I make the choice to toss on a shirt before waving the guy down, the truck comes around the corner faster than I thought possible, and I wave my hands wildly, hoping whoever is behind the wheel will stop for me. He doesn't have a load on the back, so it's not as jarring when he halts so suddenly.

Pasting a smile on my face, I try not to think about the fact that I'm wearing a thong bikini, and the top barely covers my nipples. *God, what if he tries something?* I'm an idiot. I'm the dumb girl in horror movies who dies first because she's just too stupid to live. *Great.*

It takes a minute, but the driver steps down from his truck, and I get a good look at him. Flannel shirt unbuttoned,

showing off an impressive body with mouthwatering abs I'd like to lick, and sleeves rolled up and exposing corded muscles covered in dark ink. Sunglasses shade his eyes, a beard covers the bottom half of his face, and those thighs... Oh my god. I'm a sucker for big, thick thighs. They ripple with each step he takes, and I find myself not so upset over the idea of him trying something with me.

What is wrong with you, Matilda?

If only my mother could see me now.

“Car trouble?” My nipples erupt like a volcano at the rough rumble in his voice.

“Uh, yeah.” Gosh, he's tall. So very tall. “Something blew under my hood.” Mortification turns me ten shades of red as his lips quirk up at the side, not missing my blunder. “There's a lot of smoke,” I try to recover.

“Lead the way,” he offers. My thighs quiver and rub together as need and desire throb between them for the first time in my life.

I'm in so much trouble.

Turning away, I completely forget my state of undress until I hear his cursing. It's too late to do anything now; he's seen far more than most men have tried as I lead him to my car.

“Dangerous greeting a strange man looking like that.” I jump, my back hitting his chest as his hands settle on my ribs. I didn't realize he was so close.

“It wasn't intentional.” I turn my head to look up at him. He'd have to bend down to kiss me. *Where did that thought come from?*

It's official, I'm broken. My brain is fried. I'm blaming the heat. Why does it have to be so hot, anyway?

“You won't find me complaining, little girl.” *Was that whimper me?* When was the last time someone called me little girl?

Stop it, Matilda!

“What’s your name, sweetness?” He leans forward, forcing my body closer to the engine with one hand on the car’s fender, and the other has managed to move down my thigh and is just inches from my pussy. My very wet and aching-for-him pussy.

His hands are oh so huge.

I have to lick my lips before answering him, “Matilda Grape-Vine.” My parents just had to give me both of their surnames.

“Bet you’re sweet like one too.” Before I can respond, his tongue travels up the column of my neck before he whispers, “Come for me, little girl.” And dear god, like the hussy I’m turning out to be, I do.

TWO

BIG DADDY

I didn't expect her to actually do it. I muttered the words, and it was fucking instantaneous. Cupping her cunt with one hand over her tiny bottoms, I can feel her pussy throbbing, begging to be filled with my huge cock. The other holds her to my chest so she doesn't fall into her car's engine.

"Fucking beautiful, little girl." She whimpers again. It's how I knew she was mine. She just begs to be dominated by a Daddy who knows how to take care of her. "You're soaked for me, aren't you?" She mutters something about being the dumb bitch who dies, and I can't help chuckling. "No plans on killing you, sweetness, but I'm definitely fucking this pussy tonight. You a virgin?" Pressing my forehead into the back of hers, I pray to fuck she is. I don't know why, I just need to see her blood on my dick. *I'm a sick, sick man.*

"Never been touched." She barely breathes out the words, and my dick damn near punches a hole through my jeans to get at her. "How did you manage that?" She turns in my arms as she asks that, and I grip her closer so her bare ass doesn't hit the sizzling grill of her car.

"Make you come?" She nods at my response, her bright green eyes wide with curiosity. "You're mine. Your body knows it, respects my command." Squeezing her cunt in my hand, her gasp turns into a moan. "Your radiator is shot. You need a new one."

"Wh-what?" Her glossy eyes can't focus beyond the pleasure I'm supplying her.

“You need a new radiator. Helps regulate your engine. Can’t move without one.”

She lets out a strangled groan as she deflates in my arms. “What the hell am I going to do now?”

I don’t believe the question is for me, but I answer anyway. “I’ve got a buddy in Darlington. I’ll have him come get the car, take it back to his shop, and see what he can do.” *Fucking junk it for all I care.*

“Thank you.” She relaxes slightly before muttering, “Maybe he’ll drop me off at a hotel.”

“I don’t fucking think so,” I bark out so roughly that she jumps in my arms, sliding away from me in her haste. “No man gets to come near you, especially dressed like that.” I realize my anger is reflected on my face. I can see it in the widening of her eyes and the way she’s backing away from me, but I can’t help it. I need her to understand that she’s mine, that no other man around will ever do.

“I think that’s my choice.” Her chin juts up in challenge, and my palm itches to wail on her round ass.

“Not anymore,” I correct her. She lost that choice the minute my gaze settled on her. I haven’t felt this animalistic and possessive since prison.

As I prowl closer, I catch the fire in her eyes and lick my lips. I want her to fight me. I want her to scratch and claw her way to getting what she wants. “What’s that supposed to mean?” She smacks her hands on her hips and stops retreating. I notice how her breathing picks up, though; she likes this.

I don’t say anything as I move nearer, watching her pupils dilate, and her thighs rub together. As soon as I’m close enough, I reach out and snatch her throat in my grasp, fingers wrapping nearly all the way around her delicate neck as her hands grip my arm.

Lifting slightly so she’s forced onto her tiptoes, I lick across her lips as my free hand slides down the front of her bottoms, swiping through her dripping wet folds.

“You’re a horny little slut for Big Daddy, aren’t you.” There’s no doubt about it when she whimpers while leveling me with a glare.

“You’re disgusting.” There’s no heat behind those words. She likes this game, and I’m willing to bet she had no idea she would until I came along. She’s been waiting for me.

She was right. Two strangers in the middle of the highway, no other cars in sight, and the sun slowly creeping lower and lower; I could be a killer. But the only thing I want to do to my sweet Matilda is fuck her until all she sees is me.

Dragging her abruptly into my body, I bite her lip until she tries to pull away. “I might be, but you, my sweet little girl, are loving it. I’m willing to bet you’ve never been challenged by a man before. Wouldn’t know what to do with one who wants to control you.”

Gripping her thigh, I drag it up until she’s wrapped it around my ass. “You’re so fucking tiny. Like a pretty little doll, I could manipulate you into doing anything I wanted.”

Her glare intensifies, and my fingers tighten.

“All I want, however, is to claim you as mine.”

“Why?” After all that, she finally speaks.

“I’m a forty-two-year-old man who spent ten years in prison for nearly beating a prick to death, and the only thing I’ve owned...wanted to own...is that rig over there. Until I saw you.”

“You’re older than my daddy.” I growl at her use of the word in reference to another man.

“The only one you’ll be calling Daddy, little girl, is me.” Her tongue peeks out to wet her lips, and my eyes follow the action. “Now, you’re going to sway your fine ass over to my truck, climb all the way in, and settle in for a long fucking ride.”

“What are you going to do?” She’s finally getting the big picture.

“I’m going to call my friend to come get your car and grab your bags before we head into town. We’ll spend the night in my truck, where I’m going to worship your golden pussy until you pass out from pure pleasure.” She’s rubbing against me now, hands on my chest instead of where I’m holding her throat.

“And tomorrow?” Her eyes search mine, begging me without words to decide for her.

“Tomorrow, you’ll give me this pussy until we get a call on your car. We’ll fuck all damn day before I teach you how to suck my dick.”

“I should be running for the hills.” Her eyes lower.

“Yet you’re not. Why?”

Her supportive leg lifts, circling around me, forcing my other hand to cup her ass so I don’t choke the life out of her.

“You make me feel...cherished.” I grin at this response. She is, will be, for all the days I have breath in my body. “I’ve never had someone quite so aggressive with me before, and I find I’m rather enjoying it.”

“Good.” I slam my lips over hers, sucking her tongue deep in my mouth as I take what I want from her before allowing her body to slide down mine. “Now get in that truck before I start fucking you right here.”

Slapping her ass, she yelps before turning to look at me just as another car comes around the bend. “Would that be so bad?” Her giggle when I growl makes my dick spurt a little cum, begging that we take her right now.

The car slows when the driver sees her climbing into my truck. “Everything okay here?” he asks as he steps out. A young fucking punk who can’t take his eyes off her bare ass. I want to rip his skull from his body and piss down his throat.

“Just fucking fine,” I growl. He swallows nervously but doesn’t look away from my girl.

Matilda takes a seat in my rig, turns to the side, spreads her legs nice and wide, and grins at the man. “Perfect! My Daddy

will take care of me.” She’s playing a dirty fucking game.

“That so? Surely he can’t take care of everything.” His voice is filled with desire as he steps closer to her.

Slamming her car door shut after I grab her bag, I squeeze his shoulder as I pass, growling a warning, “Trust me, kid, you can’t handle her.” Dropping the satchel on the ground, I step up between her legs and dive in. Tearing her bikini bottoms off, I let them float to the ground as I eat my sweet treat.

“Oh, Big Daddy, more!” Matilda cries, and I hear the boy mutter before driving off. She comes apart as I suck her clit so fiercely, she tries to push me away.

Drawing back, I pick up her bag before slamming my lips over hers again, letting her taste herself on my mouth. “You’re a naughty girl,” I grunt as she moves over to the passenger seat.

Yanking the door shut, I unzip my pants and free my dick. Swollen, angry, and ready to blow, I grab her by the hair and drag her over. “Open your mouth.”

She eagerly reaches for me, both of her hands unable to wrap around my girth, but as soon as her mouth touches the head, I blow my load straight down her throat, forcing her to take more of me until she’s nearly gagging.

Euphoria rushes through my veins as I watch her squirm and struggle to swallow the amount of cum shooting out of my dick right now. It’s been a long fucking time since I’ve touched or been touched by a woman, and it’s all spewing out now.

“Such a good little whore for Big Daddy.” Petting her head as she sucks and licks up the mess surrounding my dick, I leave her be as I start the engine and begin the drive back into Darlington.

THREE

MATILDA

I shouldn't be self-conscious, but I am. I can't help it. I've never in my life done anything so daring. So...

Explicit.

I don't know who that girl was, but she is a *slut*.

I liked it.

And the way he called me his whore? I *should* be insulted. There are so many ways I should have made him stop, made *myself* stop, but I couldn't. Didn't want to.

You don't even know his name, Matilda!

It's true, I don't. But I feel like I know his soul.

Pulling on a pair of shorts and a tank top, I step out of his truck. My feet haven't even touched the ground, and his eyes are zeroed in on me. Immediately, I notice his hackles rise, and he's ready to tear off the face of any man who dares look at me.

Danger lurks in his eyes as I slam the door shut harder than needed because I want to poke the bear. I have this insane desire to be a brat, to push him to his limits.

I'm slow in walking over to him, twirling in circles to see where we are and what this shop looks like. At least four sets of eyes focus on me as I sway my hips more enthusiastically than necessary.

The man with Big Daddy says something to my savior and earns himself a withering glare, which he ignores and releases

such a raucous laugh that it catches everyone's attention.

"Little brat," Big Daddy grunts when I'm almost within reach.

Crossing my ankles, I hook my hands behind my back and tilt my head to the side, flashing my lashes at him. "Yes, Big Daddy?" Swiping my tongue across my lower lip, his carnal sight follows the movement.

"You fixin' to get an ass-whoopin'?" I shiver at the threat in his tone.

Yes, please! But I don't say that out loud; instead, I giggle and play clueless. "For what, Big Daddy?" *What is wrong with me?* This man could crush me like a bug.

And still, I like it.

Snapping his hand forward, he grips me around the back of my neck. Grasping a chunk of hair, he cranes my head back so I'm forced up onto my tippy toes. "Don't fuckin' play with me, Matilda." His eyes flash with fire, and for the first time, I have an inkling of fear.

"Yes, Daddy." I pout, trying to temper his ire.

He snarls before letting me go so abruptly that I nearly lose my balance. I should have known better, though, because, in the next second, he was wrapping an arm around my waist and pulling me into his chest. The top of my head barely reaches his shoulders, he's so freaking tall.

His shirt lays open, so I wrap my arms around him, unable to clasp my hands together; he's just that massive. Instead, I shove my hand in the back pockets of his jeans and grip his muscular ass. A second later, I feel his larger-than-possible dick swell between our bodies.

Closing my eyes, I rub my face across his chest as he talks to his friend. His voice rumbles in my ears, and I'm entranced. It's hypnotic the way I'm swept up under his spell. Kissing his chest, the salty taste of sweat is prominent, but there's something more as well. Something that is all Big Daddy.

Licking at him like a kitten, I hesitate when I reach a nipple before taking the bud between my teeth and flicking it with my tongue, then sucking on it.

He groans, and his hand tangles in my hair again, dragging me far enough away that I'm forced to look into his stormy eyes. "Unless you want to be on your knees in front of all these men, sucking my dick all the way down your throat, fuckin' behave yourself, baby girl."

My thighs tremble as they rub together. I'm a hussy. I never thought it was true. I'm eighteen and still a virgin, never been kissed before today, and yet, I'm throwing myself at a man more than twice my age and ready to do anything he asks of me, if only so he'll call me his good girl again.

"Please, Daddy," I beg. For what, I have no idea, but I need something I sense only he can provide.

"Fuck, man, you got this girl on lock or what?" his friend asks, but neither of us looks away.

Swiping the thumb of his free hand across my lips, I open wide for him, allowing his sizable thumb to press into my mouth and all the way to the back of my throat. Wrapping my lips around the digit, I close my eyes and suck on it while massaging it with my tongue.

"Yeah, Mack, I've locked this little slut down. Anyone ever touches her, and I'll fuckin' kill 'em and scatter their body parts on every highway I drive." I swallow roughly at his vow but can't help how my body squirms.

He hasn't even popped my cherry, and already, I need him more than my next breath.

"Lucky bastard," Mack grunts. "We'll get her car taken care of. Get out of here before you're forced to make good on that threat."

In the next second, I'm slung over Big Daddy's shoulder, and he's striding towards his truck. After helping me in, he follows behind.

"Get your fuckin' ass on that bunk and strip." I bite my lip at his snarled directive, trying to stifle my need for him.

Something must be wrong with me; I shouldn't be this turned on by a stranger. But then he gives me a look, and I glimpse beyond the layers of his frustration. His lust is at the forefront, sure, but it's more. It's the warmth and safety I feel in his presence. I've never known anything like it before.

Instinct tells me to trust him. I feel deep down in my soul that Big Daddy would never hurt me, not for anything. I know this in the same way I know my mother will exploit me again the first chance she gets.

That thought spurs me on because, more than anything, I long to please this enormous beast of a man. I want him to want to keep me around because, after the way he's touched me and fed me pleasure, I don't think I can ever go back to a normal life again.

More importantly, I don't want to.

FOUR

BIG DADDY

I'm fucking fuming with rage.

Not because my sweet little girl came out to tease me.

Not even because other men saw her perfection in the skimpy top and shorts.

But fucking Mack. I could kill him for what he said back there.

"Aren't you too old for her? What if this is her having daddy issues?" The words repeat in my head. Of fuckin' course I'm too goddamned old for her. I know that. I don't need this jackass pointing it out to me.

What really got me was the fucking envy in his eyes. I could sense his desire to steal her away, and I wanted to rip his damn head off.

Mack has been one of my closest friends since middle school, and the fury boiling my blood isn't foreign—it's why I went to fuckin' prison—but it's new in the sense that it's aimed towards Mack. He's one of the few people who stuck by me when my life went to shit.

"Daddy?" Matilda's timid voice soothes some of the frenzy inside me.

"Yeah, baby girl?" I glance at her in the rearview mirror. Why the fuck they put those in a rig like this is beyond me.

"I'm sorry," she whispers, and I want to smash my fist against the wheel, but I know if I do, I'll not only break the damn thing. I'll frighten her, too.

I remain silent until I park in the back of the truck stop. Shutting off the engine, I lock the doors and spin around to face her, dropping to my knees as I maneuver her body towards me. I drag her hips to the edge of the bed and bury my face between her luscious tits, kissing the side of each one before drawing back to look into her vivid green eyes. She's so fuckin' perfect.

"Nothing for you to be sorry about, little girl," I tell her as her hands brush through my thick hair, calming me even more.

"But you were so angry." Her voice remains barely a whisper.

"Not at you." I shake my head. "Never at you." An adorable smile works its way across her lips. "Now tell me, baby, you got anyone you need to call so they know you're safe?" I hate giving her an easy out to leave me, but I'd be pissed if this were my daughter and her man didn't offer the same options.

"I should probably call my father." She doesn't sound enthused about it. Grabbing her phone off the dash, I hand it to her.

Once the phone is to her ear, I don't think, I act. Spreading her legs wide, I kiss up and down her silky thighs, savoring the sweet taste of her flesh.

"Hi, Dad," she says when the man answers. There's a catch in her throat, and I meet her stare before burying my face in her center. I can tell she wants to squeal her surprise. To further torment her, I rub my beard back and forth across her soaked lips, making sure to brush her little clit that peeks out, wanting to play as well.

"No, Dad, I'm fine." Her breathing stalls when I clamp my lips over the pearl, sucking it deep into my mouth. "My car broke down outside the racetrack." She bites her fist as he responds to her.

Slipping a digit inside her gloriously tight channel, I grin when she moves the phone away from her ear, puts it on speaker, and then mutes it. I want to curse the man out for the

way he's yelling at her, but Matilda leans down and whispers in my ear, "Please, Big Daddy, make me come."

Slipping a hand around her neck, I slam my lips over hers, fucking her mouth with my tongue until she's breathless. "Your wish is my command."

Shoving a second finger into her cunt, I hook both and begin rubbing on her g-spot as my lips wrap around her tender clit, and in less time than it took her to dial her father, she's screaming my name and covering me in her sweet, sticky fluids as she squirts all over my face and bare chest.

"Matilda? Hello! Did I lose you? Matilda!" Gently lapping at her lips to ease her out of the climax, her limp arm reaches out for the phone, pressing the button to unmute the man.

"I'm here, Dad. I just got tired of you yelling at me, so I put the phone down." Her sass makes me grin as I withdraw my fingers and lick them clean. She tastes so fucking good.

"You're making foolish choices, Matilda. What do you expect?" Her entire body flushes with embarrassment, and as tempted as I am to lose it on the man, the tears in her eyes stop me.

"You're right, Dad, I am stupid. Wanna know just how dumb your only child is? I'm going to let this buff, burly trucker own me until I can't breathe." She hits the mute button again so she can finish her thought without scarring them both, "He's going to ravish the fuck out of my body until I'm too sensitive to touch, and when he's done with my pussy, I'm giving him my ass." She then hangs up on him after an abrupt goodbye, filling his stunned silence and looking like she wants to throw her phone, but instead, she shuts it off and drops it on the floor of the cab. "Some days, I want to strangle him," she mumbles, and I can tell she's about to cry.

Stripping out of my clothes, I drag her up the bed so we're both vertical, and I settle between her splayed thighs. Kissing along her shoulder and up her neck, I suck on the sensitive spot behind her ear.

“Daddy’s got you now, baby girl. I’ll always take care of you.” Brushing the crown of my dick through her folds, Matilda’s eyes close as she gasps. She’s so fuckin’ hot and tender. I could lose myself in her body and die a happy man.

“Take me, Daddy, please make me yours.” Circling her wrists with one hand, I hold them above her head, trapping her beneath me as I hook one leg over my shoulder and slowly push into her tight entrance.

“I’m too fuckin’ big for you, little girl.” When I begin to withdraw, she sobs. “Sshhh, baby, I’m not going anywhere; just need to go slow so I don’t rip you apart.”

“Please, please, please,” she cries out again, thrusting her hips up at me, forcing me to sink deeper than I want to at the moment. Her chest lifts like an offering. Capturing a nipple between my lips, I suck intensely, drawing the stiff peak into my mouth until I feel another surge of wetness from her pussy.

Punching my hips forward, Matilda screams until she’s hoarse, as I’m seated all the way inside her. My hips rest against the back of her thighs.

“Fuck. Fuck. Fuck,” I hiss. She’s too tight. Too perfect. Too goddamned everything.

“Daddy, it hurts.” I notice the tears rushing down her temples as her body fights my intrusion.

“Had to be done, baby girl. Just hold still for Daddy. Relax and breathe.” Letting go of her thigh, I slip a hand between us and strum her clit lightly. I know it won’t take much to get her off, even though she’s in pain. I just want to transition her from the pain to the pleasure faster.

“Ohhhh,” she sighs as I feel her walls loosening around my impressive dick. “You’re so big.” Her awe-inspired tone makes me grin like I’ve won the fuckin’ lottery. “I’m so full.”

“We’re a perfect fit.” I kiss up her chest before taking her lips as I slowly begin to move in and out of her.

Christ, she’s so damn tight that I can barely move. Releasing her hands, I grip both of her legs behind her knees, tilt her ass up, and spread her wide as I lean back.

“Would you look at that?” Pride swells in my chest as I capture the creamy red streaks coating my dick as I thrust in and out of her restrictive heat. “Your blood looks so fuckin’ good on my cock, baby girl.”

Encircling my wrists in her grasp, Matilda’s neck arches elegantly, and all I can think about is wrapping a meaty hand around her throat and holding her still. Fucking her like the wild beast she’s turned me into.

Sliding almost the entire way out, I watch her delicate petals bloom for me as I slam back in. All semblance of gentleness is gone. I need this hot little whore claimed until she’s gushing with my cum.

“Such a pretty little slut for Daddy, aren’t you?” Her head nods as our eyes meet. “Fuckin’ takin’ this massive man-meat like your life depends on it.” Her walls constrict more the more I talk, and I can’t delay the geyser of cum that’s straining to blow. “You gonna come for Daddy? Show him how much you like being his little whore?”

“Yes, Daddy!” she wails as her pussy gushes with her release. Her body goes taut, and I’m afraid she’ll snap in half until I crash back into her cunt and brush her cervix. The feeling is unlike anything I’ve ever known, and I force her body to bend farther so I can delve deeper.

Just as I feel the relaxation of her pussy muscles giving me greater access, semen rushes through my stalk like a volcano, and I fuckin’ erupt. Roaring out my release, I don’t let up, and I force her to take more.

“Take it all, you dirty little cum slut. Such a good fuckin’ whore for Daddy, aren’t you, baby girl?” Gazing down into her eyes as I finally stop ejaculating, the emotion shining back up at me is almost more than I can handle. She’s fuckin’ perfect.

Her hands begin to rub up and down my arms, and despite what I know must be some discomfort from our position, I can’t move. I need my swimmers to get as deep inside her as possible. I need my girl bred.

Leaning forward, I suck her bottom lip into my mouth, biting it just enough that it stings. “Tell Daddy thank you for all his baby batter.” Her eyes flare, and her cheeks blush, but pleasure melts her body, and I slip out and back into her constricting warmth, releasing another stream of cum.

“Thank you, Daddy, for making me your little cum slut. For giving me so much batter.”

“That’s my good girl.” I kiss her gently, giving her the love and praise she deserves after taking her so damn hard. Releasing her legs, I ease them down gently. Spotting some of my cream dripping out, I flip her over so her ass is in the air. “Go to sleep, little girl; Daddy will take care of the rest.

Shoving my cum back into her channel as it keeps trying to escape, I use the same fluid to slip a finger in her ass. She gasps and squirms but doesn’t protest.

My nearly flaccid dick flares to life at the possibility of fucking her other virgin hole. Instead, I settle for pumping my digit in and out of her ass, getting her used to the feeling, and stretching her because I know I’ll have to go as slow as possible before I can take her here.

FIVE

MATILDA

I groan as my body wakes me up. A shaft of sunlight shines through the tips of the curtain between the cab of Big Daddy's truck and the bunk. I want to crawl back under the covers and hide until I realize the thing keeping me warm isn't a blanket at all; it's my impressive man curled around my body, covering more than he's not.

"Go back to sleep," he grumbles in my ear, tickling my neck with his warm breath.

"I can't," I grumble back, being bratty and mocking him.

I already feel his member swelling between my legs. It was nestled up against my aching pussy all night long. "You don't, and I'll take that as an invitation." His threat is no threat at all.

Turning in his arms, I throw my leg across his hip and cuddle into his chest, nibbling on his nipple again. "Who says that's not exactly what I'd like?" The hand on my breast is now sliding down my spine, cups my ass cheek, squeezing it before pulling me open, baring my forbidden hole to the cool space.

His pinky finger moves to brush across the tight ring of muscle, and I gasp, not at all prepared for the way he pushes past and allows the digit to slide right inside. With his other hand, he tilts my head up to meet his hungry stare. "I want to fuck this ass so goddamned badly."

"You'll break me in half." I'm not even kidding. The man is a beast, and his dick nearly shredded my pussy last night. So why am I wet just thinking about it?

“I know.” He flashes a predatory grin.

“You want to do it anyway.” I try to glare with my comment, but my squirming body gives me away.

“Don’t you worry, baby girl, Daddy will get you ready for the good, painful kind of fucking I want to give you.” I swallow at his words, excitement coursing through me. “For now, I want your mouth around my dick. Suck me like I’m your favorite lollipop.”

Licking my lips, I do precisely that, his finger still in my ass. I swallow down his dick like it’s my very own sucker and don’t stop until he’s thrusting past the point I can fit him into my mouth and growling out his orgasm. I gulp down as much of his seed as I’m able, but it still slips down my chin and onto my breasts before I sit back, and he rubs his mark into my skin.

“My good girl, such a filthy little whore.” The affection in his tone warms my heart. I love the way he speaks to me. I recognize that I shouldn’t, mainly because we just met, and I had no idea this was something I was into, but he makes it special.

By the time we’ve eaten breakfast in the diner that primarily caters to truckers and we’re on the road to his next pickup, I’m dying to ask him a million questions.

“I see you squirming, princess. Ask me.” I love that he picks up on my cues so well.

“What’s your real name, Daddy?” I know how much he loves me calling him that, so I don’t stop.

Tapping the license clipped into the visor, he replies, “Joshua Stergen.”

“Sexy,” I murmur as I grab the hard plastic and recite his information in my mind. He’s turning forty-two in three months. Maybe I’ll be ready for anal by then. I bet he’d love that.

“Have you always been a trucker?” Replacing the license, I sit back in my seat.

“I was a kid once,” he jokes, making me smile. “Grew up in Darlington, actually. Mack and I have been friends since we were punk kids.” The smile falters as he glances at me from the corner of his eye. Traffic is light this morning, so I’m not concerned. “I was locked up for a decade in my twenties.” I swallow roughly at his confession, staring at his big hands, those bulging biceps. I can only imagine why.

The mood has shifted, but I ask anyway. “How come?”

His lips thin into a flat line, and despite his apparent dislike of this conversation, he’s forthcoming with the answer. “I was in with a rough crowd in my youth. Bucked authority and hated life in general. I was dealt a pretty shitty deal with drunk parents who only cared about whether I made a run to the liquor store before school.”

“I’m so sorry, Joshua.” The name feels funny on my tongue; I’m so used to calling him Daddy. His sideways glare tells me he doesn’t like it either. “Daddy,” I correct with a little smile.

“Make sure it stays that way, baby girl.” *That sure heated up fast.*

“I came upon some asshole in a bar treating his girl like shit...beat the crap out of her. Wasn’t the first time I’d seen them or her all bruised up, but it was the first time I stepped in.” His throat works roughly as he maneuvers the truck into another lane to pass a slow driver. “He was choking the girl, would have killed her. I beat him to an inch of his life. He’s still being fed through a tube.”

“I bet you were her hero.” A sardonic bark of laughter bursts from within him.

“Not even fuckin’ close, baby girl. That bitch took the stand against me and said it was a game they played, and she was into it, despite evidence proving otherwise. She hammered the nail in my coffin.” His head shakes as though trying to brush the entire ordeal off his shoulders.

“Bitch,” I hiss. His eyes whip to mine in shock. “She should have been on her knees before you. I hope she got the

kind of life she deserved.” Folding my arms, I realize I’m angry at this woman. She has no idea how decent, sweet, and dirty my man is, and she nearly ruined him.

“Awe, princess, don’t you worry about me. I got my shit together. Was released from prison two years early, readied myself for a life as a trucker, and got a surprise inheritance from my grandparents when they died, investing in this beauty and a nice little place on the Florida coast...I’d always wanted a place there.” I do smile, then.

“Well, I’m glad something good came out of it.” Sliding onto my knees beside his seat, I lay my head on his powerful thigh and stare up at him.

“Oh yeah, what’s that?” Lust fills his eyes as his free hand brushes quickly through my hair before it’s needed back on the shifter.

“I got to meet *you*.” I’m breathless with anticipation for the future, and all the things being his baby girl will bring.

SIX

BIG DADDY

After stopping for a late lunch at some burger and shake place along the way, we picked up the scheduled load of produce heading for Jacksonville, and the closer we get to the city, the more nervous Matilda becomes. I want to relax her, but she's got all this pent-up energy thanks to the messages her parents have been sending her since last night.

They range from love and concern from her father to hateful and everywhere in between from her mother. The hate coming from her mother makes me want to give the bitch a piece of my mind, but Matilda is too damn sweet and won't allow me to respond.

Hoping to distract her, I decide to flip the twenty questions over to her since I've been answering them all day. "So, do I finally get to know why you were broken down wearing that skimpy bikini last night?" Christ, was it only last night? I feel like I've had this girl in my truck for months.

Her face lights up at my question, and I realize it's the only one I've asked about her, and I want to kick my own ass. "Well, I'm a model. My mom was my manager and agent for, well, basically everything in California, and I hated it; it's why I moved in with my dad. I've always wanted to branch out on my own but never got the chance...until now."

"A model?" I can see it. She's gorgeous.

"Yeah, my mom got me into it when I was ten, and it blossomed from there. But recently, she wanted me to transition into doing nude shoots, and I couldn't stand it." A

blush stains her cheeks as she glances at me. “I realize I was nearly naked yesterday, but the important things were covered. I’m just uncomfortable sharing that part of myself with the public.” Her hands twist, and I reach over, bringing one to my mouth to kiss the inside of her wrist.

“You shouldn’t be forced to do anything you don’t want to, baby girl.” Her entire body slackens as she continues.

“Right. Well, after I told my dad—who’s really not that bad of a guy—what she was trying to do, he bought me a plane ticket, had a lawyer and the sheriff show up, and I was escorted to the airport an hour later.”

“Your mother must have been pissed.” I can almost imagine the fit the woman would have thrown based on the messages she’s been sending.

“She was. She made all kinds of threats, but thankfully, my dad is the one in control of my finances, and he hired a guy years ago to make sure my mom couldn’t take more than her fifteen percent. So I have a nice nest egg to hold onto until I find my way in the world.” There’s a tinge of sadness to her tone.

“What’s that for?” I ask, gesturing to her frown.

She shrugs a shoulder. “I just wish my mom would love me for me and not the money I’ve made for her.” In this moment, curled up on the seat, my oversized shirt engulfing her tiny frame, I see the little girl who desperately craves her mother’s approval.

“Princess,” I growl, dragging her over to sit in my lap. Unconcerned that I’m driving, I hold her close. “I’m sure she does, but maybe she got lost along the way.” I fucking hope that’s the case because I’d hate to have to be the one to put my foot down and tell the jaded bitch to stop contacting her only child.

“Maybe,” she mumbles into my throat, her breath tickling the hair on my chest.

“Daddy?” I groan at the sound of her voice; I recognize that tone. She needs my dick.

“Yeah, baby girl?” I’m already pulling into the next rest stop. We’ve got less than an hour of driving left.

Curling a hand around the back of my neck, she lifts up to breathe into my ear, “Will you fuck your cum into me, please?”

Fuckin’ hell.

In a flash, she pulls up her tiny skirt and unbuckles my jeans. “Since you asked so nicely.” I kiss the top of her head as I get my rig into park and shut down. I barely have enough time to let the seat shift back before she climbs on my swollen cock.

Watching her slide down the beast, her sweet little honey pot flowing with her desire is nearly more than I can take.

“Daddy?” she moans as I fill her up unhurriedly.

“Matilda,” I hiss when she squeezes my dick with her slick pussy. “What do you need, sweetheart?”

“Will you put a baby in me?” Her wide, innocent eyes stare up at me, and my heart almost seizes in my chest.

“What?” I croak.

She nibbles her lip before sliding completely down my cock and rocking back and forth. “I told you I had breathing room to decide my future, but all I want is you. To hold all the pieces of you inside my body.”

Goddamn.

Gripping the back of her neck, I force her head back so our eyes clash, and in hers, I see the certainty, the need, the absolute desire to bind her life with mine. “Fuck, baby girl, you own me.” A brilliant smile flashes on her face as she twists her hips, making me go blind for a minute. I’m so fuckin’ deep in her cunt that I can feel her cervix trying to keep me out. “If you ain’t got a baby in you yet, you will soon,” I promise her as I use her body to fuck myself.

Slashing my lips over hers, I claim the woman in my lap like she’s a tender morsel of meat, because she is; she’s all fuckin’ mine, and I’m never letting her go.

“Come all over Daddy’s big dick, baby girl. Cream him up so I can get deeper.” She whines in the back of her throat as she plunges over the edge, her body limp as she lights up, and I force her down as far as she’ll go on my length, using her hips as leverage.

“Oh, Daddy,” she purrs. “It hurts so good.” Wrapping her arms around my back, she leans her head on my chest, kissing and biting along the way as she thrusts with me, tightening that pussy like a fuckin’ goddess. “Come for me now, Daddy; it’s your turn.”

“Fuck!” I roar as load after load of cum shoots out of my dick, her pulsing walls telling me she’s gone over the edge again, too, but I can’t focus long enough to register her cries.

When we come down, my eyes open to find the world is still intact, and a couple of other truckers are standing a few feet in front of my engine, having watched and heard the show. Smirks cross their faces as they walk away. I tilt Matilda’s chin up and ravage her lips in a kiss meant to show the world who she belongs to.

“Mmmm, Daddy, I’ll be feeling that all month long.” My dick kicks inside her body, making her moan again.

“You’re coming home with me tonight,” I tell her. It was my plan all along, but I was waiting for her to ask for what she wanted. I’m no longer giving her a choice. She wants to bind herself to me with a child. Well, it’s for fuckin’ ever now. I’m never letting my baby girl go.

“Yes, Big Daddy.” Glad she fuckin’ agrees.

SEVEN

MATILDA

“Yes, Dad.” I inwardly groan as I flop down on Big Daddy’s inviting sofa. It’s nearly the size of my queen-sized bed in width. Staring at him shirtless and barefoot in his kitchen, I feel my sex pulse and leak with desire.

“I just want you safe, Matilda. You don’t know this man.” *But I do.* I know his heart and soul. It’s only been twenty-four hours since he rescued me on the side of the road, but I feel in my heart that I was born to belong to this mountain of a man.

“I do, though, Dad. He’s everything I never knew I needed in my life. He takes care of me in a way I’ve never known before.” And after what I said last night, I understand why my dad’s skeptical. It’s my own doing, so now I’m responsible for undoing it. “Wait until you meet him to reserve judgment, please?” I affect a pout in my voice that I know he won’t be able to resist.

“Fine,” he sighs. “Tomorrow night. Dinner, here. Please don’t be late, Matilda.”

I frown at this comment. “When am I ever late for anything? I’m not with Mom anymore.” The woman believed fashionably late was on time.

“Fair point. Call me in the morning so I know he hasn’t murdered you.” I burst out laughing at his joke and promise I will before we hang up.

Slipping into the kitchen, I’m immediately assaulted by the spicy aroma of marinara sauce and melting cheese. “That smells divine.” Kissing Big Daddy’s back as I wrap my arms

around his front...or attempt to...he's too broad for my hands to reach each other. I feel so at home with him here.

“How'd that conversation go?” He glances over his shoulder at me, his chocolatey eyes alight with concern.

“Good. I apologized for what I said last night. I still can't believe I did that. He forgave me and said it was only natural after the way my mother stifled my teenage years, but he wants to grill some steaks for us tomorrow. Is that okay? I should have asked if you had to leave first. Shoot. Do you have to leave?” My heart pounds with the possibility that he might. I don't want him to, not yet.

Turning around, he grips both my wrists in one of his powerful hands, and the other, he cups the back of my head and drags me closer, forcing me up onto my toes. “Baby girl, breathe.” I nod and do as he says. “It'll be fine. I pick up loads when and where I want to. Besides, my sweet little girl begged her Daddy to put a baby in her belly, and I aim to do that before I go anywhere else again.”

“Oh my.” I sag against him and blush, thinking about that moment. I don't know what came over me, but it felt so right and was exactly what I wished for. “Do you think we could try again tonight?” Kissing the center of his chest, I flick my gaze up to his.

“Baby, we'll be going all night long because I'm determined to make it happen before the morning.” I giggle at the seriousness of his tone, loving his determination. “But not before I feed you a proper meal.” He grunts as he picks me up, placing me on the island counter opposite where he was prepping.

“What are we having?” I glance at the stove and spot a box of pasta. “If my mother were here, she wouldn't let me within ten feet of that.” For so long, I was on a restricted diet, and I resented it. I never got to enjoy food. And since coming to Jacksonville, I have found that I have a very untried palate. Pasta, however, is my kryptonite.

“Chicken parmesan tonight, with garden salad and a toasted garlic butter baguette.

“That sounds like heaven,” I sigh and flutter my lashes at him.

His lips quirk up in amusement as he goes back to cooking. I steal a carrot before he can grate it into the salad and start munching. “How can I help?” I eventually ask. “I’m not very good in the kitchen, but I can try.” It’s a bone of contention for me because I’d love to be able to whip up a good, hearty meal for my man after he’s been on the road all day. “Will you teach me?”

I give him an earnest look as our eyes meet. “Let me take care of you tonight, princess. In the morning, we’ll make breakfast together.” Planting a kiss on my lips, he licks me until I open for him, and slowly, he plunders my mouth the way he does between my legs.

I don’t know how long we kiss, but he reluctantly backs off when a timer beeps. “Mmmm,” I moan, licking my lips to get more of him.

Pressing his thumb against my bottom lip, he pulls it down, and I open my mouth. “Fuckin’ delicious,” he growls, and I smile as he pulls away to take the chicken out and finish up getting the rest of dinner made.

We eat leisurely, stealing touches and sharing heated looks before cleaning up quietly together. Big Daddy has dessert delivered to the house—a double chocolate cake with ice cream that is nearly orgasmic. Before Daddy, I would have said completely orgasmic, but I know better now.

Sitting on the back porch, overlooking his slice of the beach, we feed each other bites while I sit in his lap before I become too worked up and slip my clothes off, not caring that someone could see me. I need my Daddy, and I need him now.

“I’m ready for you, Daddy.” Turning around, I give him my back, popping my ass in the air as I bend over, standing between his legs. Stretched forward on the lounge, I wiggle until I feel his fingers dig into the soft globes of my ass.

“Yes, you are,” he mutters, tugging me back and lifting me to my tippy toes. I squeak in surprise as he dives face-first into

my pussy like I'm his last meal. Resting my head on the seat, I savor how he devours me. Sucking my lips, flicking his tongue across my clit, pushing his tongue into my hole.

When he moves back, I'm so surprised I can't breathe. He kisses my rosebud, licking across it and groaning his pleasure.

"Daddy?" My voice quivers with uncertainty and bliss. I never imagined I would enjoy this.

"Close your eyes and breathe, princess. Daddy's going to take good care of you." And he does. Such good care. He spends the night dumping load after load of built-up baby batter deep inside my body, tilting me into position so it sinks lower and stops dribbling out.

By the time morning rolls around, I'm too exhausted to get up and help with breakfast. Instead, I sleep until noon and barely move when I do get up. We spend the afternoon on the deck talking about the future and how many babies we want until it's time to get ready to go to my father's house.

The End...For Now!

<wink wink>

Thanks for reading Big Daddy. But don't worry, there's more coming oh so very soon. Want updates on when Big Daddy and Matilda's full book is arriving, just signup below.

[Blue Collar Daddies release info.](#)

If you don't know me, I like to write to my own drum. Romance is my jam, whether it's dark, dirty, or everywhere in between, I like to write it. Check out my website or newsletter to get all the delicious details.

[KL's Confessions Newsletter](#)

Website

IF ONLY: RENEE DYER

ONE

ASH

It's a normal Tuesday. No different than any other. Insignificant, really. Started my delivery route in Marshwood and moved on to Birch Creek. Mrs. Fields asked if I wanted to make an old woman happy by spending the rest of her days with her. Just like she always does. I responded with my usual: "*Sorry, Mrs. Fields, but I'm already in love with someone. Have been for years.*"

She faux pouted but couldn't hide her smile. "*Make sure she knows that*" were her parting words as she patted my rear end, feigning innocence as I side-eyed her over my shoulder. Innocent is the last word anyone would use to describe Mrs. Fields. She's known for hiring the youngest, fittest men to work around her home while she flirts with them relentlessly.

I mowed her lawn as a teenager—and that's not innuendo for anything sexual. Though, plenty of people believed I was one of many in a long line of boy toys.

Stories ran rampant of her torrid affairs with young boys then, and they still do today.

She loves every minute of stirring up the gossip. I love delivering her packages. Just to see the spark she still has at eighty-two years old. I may even enjoy her unsolicited advice.

Someday, I might actually follow it.

If only I had years ago, I wouldn't be staring at the packages for Dig It, trying to prepare myself to see River, driving myself crazy over all the ways things could be different, the ways things *should* be different.

River has no idea the joy and frustration she brings to my life. Not that she'd ever admit it if she did. So damn stubborn, but kind to a fault. Beautiful and smart. The only woman I've ever wanted to notice me.

Too bad a jackass stole her heart years ago.

He never deserved it. Not that I do, but he sure as hell doesn't.

I don't know why I let Craig get to me. He's a silver-spoon-fed dickwad who's been convinced of his superiority since he was old enough to say "I come from money." I didn't care about his money when we were kids, and I care even less now. I only care that he won the affection of the girl I fell in love with in kindergarten and he's been reckless with her heart.

It has been fun watching his irritation over her and I remaining friends. How dare his wife enjoy conversations with a delivery driver. Then again, he's never been a fan of her chosen profession. She gets too dirty.

He never understood getting dirty is part of her charm.

I've lost count of the number of times I've brought packages to her shop and she's had soil on her cheek or the tip of her nose. Always in her red polka-dot gardening gloves so she doesn't risk getting human oils or bacteria on the plants.

She's most radiant when she's messy.

I approach the shop, looking around. Her SUV isn't in the lot. Disappointment seeps through me, but I remind myself to smile despite not seeing the one person I look forward to each day.

Margie and Brielle have their heads together, talking about the latest gossip in the tabloids. They're an unusual pair. Margie is in her late sixties, conservative with her clothes and silver-bobbed hair, while Brielle, on the other hand, changes her hair color on a whim. Today, she has a rainbow mohawk paired with black lipstick and heart-shaped glasses.

"Oooh, our hottie delivery man is here! I can say that since the boss isn't around to yell at me."

Eyes rolling, Margie sighs. “Good afternoon, Ash. What do you have for us today?”

I shrug and turn to Brielle. “With how you behave, I’m surprised the boss left you unattended.”

“Please. Nothing was keeping her here today. She’s finally a free woman.”

“Brielle!” Margie shakes her head.

“What? Don’t pretend you aren’t thrilled she’s no longer shackled to the douche-pickle.”

“I think Margie means you shouldn’t tell other people her business.”

“Please. River may not have told us how you know each other, but it’s obvious you’re close. We’re going to figure it out, though, aren’t we, Margie?”

She’s still shaking her head, but the twinkle in her eyes says she’s down for whatever trouble Brielle can get them into.

I’m leaving before they corner me. If River didn’t tell them who I am, I’m not filling in the blanks. Although, I’m not sure why she’s felt the need to keep our friendship a secret.

Before I can think too long about it, Brielle sidles up next to me, her lips quirked up on one side. “So…” she clucks her tongue, “is it because you’re the hotter younger brother? Is that why he’s so jealous?”

“What? Who? I—”

“Jason Momoa. Is that why I’ve never seen you pictured with him or on the TV at red-carpet events? I knew he had a flaw. He’s mean to his little brother.”

Margie’s sigh could blow over every plant in the shop. All I can do is laugh.

“He’s got nothing but love for me. Best big brother ever.” I wink at Margie before I grab the door handle. “Have a great day, ladies. See you with the next delivery.”

I’m almost out the door when Brielle tosses out, “I hope you’re on your way to see her.”

If only I could.

As much as I want to go straight to her, congratulate her, hug her, say all the things I've held back over the years...I can't. I still have packages in my truck. Customers don't care that the woman of my dreams got a divorce and I need to check on her.

That's a lie. I don't need to check on her. I want to.

I want to pull her into my arms, kiss her until we're breathless, and beg her to admit she thinks about me as much as I think about her.

If only that were true.

The theme of our story. *If only* I had asked her to prom, maybe Craig wouldn't have had the chance. *If only* I'd told her I had a crush on her, maybe she wouldn't have said yes when he asked her out. *If only* I told her the truth about loving her, maybe she wouldn't have married him.

So much could have been different...*if only* I hadn't been a coward.

It was never that I thought Craig was better than me. That his money made him more deserving. River is precious. She should have the best.

I was never sure that was me, and I'm still not.

I'm a good guy, but the best? Saying that would make me sound like Craig.

That's why I've stayed on the sidelines all these years—to give River time to decide if she wants to choose me.

So many times, I was certain she was going to. Especially throughout these past few years. But each time she seemed ready, a wall would slam in place between us. It's time for that wall to come down.

Not crashing down, but brick by brick.

Thoughts of us building new walls occupy my mind the remainder of my route and well after I get home to shower. With every passing minute, courage grows. Before I walk out

the door for her house, I snag up the Begonia Maculata I bought from her store the day she and Craig separated.

The plant made me think of her with its polka-dotted leaves.

Pot in one hand, I ring her bell with the other. A soft, “One second,” comes through the door a minute before it opens.

I can barely breathe. Her red hair sticks out everywhere from the bun it’s in no way contained in. Soil streaks her cheek. Her amber eyes question why I’m here, but her lips tilt into a smile despite my unexpected intrusion.

“Ash?”

“Happy divorce day.”

I push the plant between us, and she looks from it to me.

“But you bought this for you, and how did you know?”

My head shakes from side to side. “Dottie was always for you. A gift to celebrate your freedom.”

“Dottie.” She lifts her polka-dot-gloved hand to her face and giggles. Just like she has since we were young. “Because of the leaves? Oh, Ash. You’re too much.”

Disheveled hair and dirt on her face, River has never been more beautiful. This is her. Perfectly content with who she is. It’s why she’s always been the one.

Make sure she knows.

Mrs. Fields is right. I’ve made excuses for too long. I was worried I would complicate River’s life. It’s always going to be complicated. We can’t avoid that—I *don’t want* to avoid it.

“Too much for you?”

Her eyes go wide as we stand in silence. She peers from the plant to me. “Ash?”

Before she can question what I mean, I make it clear. “I don’t want to be too much. I want to be just right for you.”

TWO

RIVER

Ash, the man I've been dreaming about for years, is standing in front of me, a beautiful Begonia Maculata in his hands, asking me if he's just right.

Is he kidding?

He's perfect.

He always has been.

If only I had told him in middle school I had a crush on him, maybe we would have dated then. If only I had said no to Craig when he asked me to prom, maybe I would have gone with Ash. If only I hadn't married Craig, maybe we'd be together now.

There are so many things I wish I could go back and change. So many years wasted. So much unhappiness.

It's all so complicated.

But damn, he looks good. Why does he always look good? When he smiles. The way his green eyes light up. I'll never admit to how much time I've spent fantasizing about pulling his dark hair out of the bun he keeps it in and wrapping my fingers in those curls. Bringing him close. Feeling his heat against me. Having him kiss me.

Ash has consumed my thoughts. Without him, I never would have survived my marriage. He has no idea how many times he saved me.

"Can I come in, River?"

I step back and let him by, holding the beautifully thoughtful gift he brought like a shield in front of me. It's silly. I don't need protection from Ash.

Kicking the door closed, I put Dottie on the floor and go to my supply room, seeking out a plant stand, then set her up in an east-facing window where I know she will thrive.

Ash says nothing as I welcome her to her new home, checking her soil to make sure she doesn't need water, looking her leaves over, adjusting her so the sun hits her just right. When I can no longer stall, I turn to him.

His smirk says it all. I'm busted for being a coward. But I don't care. Probably because there's no judgment in his stare. Maybe he needed a minute too.

I can only hope.

“Can we talk now?”

I don't know what to say. What to ask. I've wondered—no, hoped, I hadn't messed up any chance I had with him by being with Craig. I still don't know how this can work because of Craig.

It's such a mess. I made this mess.

Tears burst forth, and I can't stop them. I'm finally divorced and thrilled about it. Ash is here and he wants to be my “just right.” In the movies, this would be the happy ending.

So why am I so confused?

“Shhh. It's okay. I've got you.”

His arms wrap around me, and I sink into his chest, frustration and anger flowing out of me. Three years of fighting Craig to sign the divorce papers. Him using his influence as our town mayor to keep me married to him. My inability to forge a personal life out of fear for him.

I gave up so much for a man who never truly loved me. He coveted power, verbally attacking me the four years we were married before separating, continuing to emotionally and mentally abuse me after that.

How on earth did I choose him over this wonderful soul?

“You shouldn’t be here. I don’t deserve you.”

His chest muffles my words. It hurts to admit, but the truth is, I doomed us both. I knew how he felt about me growing up. I knew those feelings lingered throughout my marriage. It’s been obvious he was waiting for me to make the move since I left Craig.

Ash has been patient, putting his life on hold for years, and I’ve let him.

I thought he would give up, find someone better. My heart ached thinking about him moving on, but I wanted that for him.

At least, that’s what I told myself.

But I’ve stayed close to Ash. Called on him when I’ve needed help. Asked him for advice. Gave light touches. Flirted. Sent signals only to back away.

I’ve been unkind to his heart.

“You deserve so much better.”

“No, no, no. I...you...uh—”

He caresses my cheek with his fingers, and I lean into his embrace, getting lost in his gaze. Green eyes that remind me of stems and leaves. *Life*. The life I wish we had lived together.

“You deserve everything that makes you happy. Don’t let a man who never loved you rob you of knowing that.”

Before now, words had been used to hurt. I didn’t realize they could feel like a gentle breeze. Sweeping across my skin. Leaving remnants of their existence. Reminding me there’s good out there.

On an exhale, my shoulders drop, and I close the inch of space between us, pressing my mouth against his. His stubble tickles my skin, and I smile against the softness of his lips.

It should be awkward, my face in his hand and our lips pressed together, but all I can think is *finally*. This is the happiness he spoke of. I never want it to end.

When we part, it's in sync. He bites his lip and shrugs, and a giggle bubbles up inside me. There's no stopping the giddiness from escaping.

I kissed Ash. It was amazing. More than I ever imagined. I'm on cloud nine million. There's no coming down from this. I lift my hands to my face, attempting to cover my laughter, joy, and the overwhelming urge to kiss him again.

"Oh my God, Ash! My gardening gloves. I must be a mess."

"You're beautiful."

No one spends six hours in their gardens without walking away filthy. It's impossible. I'm sure there are dirt smears all over my face and soil speckled in my tangled hair.

And I have my torn-up overalls on.

Halloween stores could sell my look as "date night tragedy."

"I didn't know you were coming over. I wouldn't be wearing...well, this. I would—"

My words are cut off by his lips pressing gently to mine. Only briefly, before he pulls away. "I wouldn't want you to look any other way."

Heat blossoms in my cheeks and spreads through my chest. Not from embarrassment. I've never felt so seen. Accepted.

Even as he stares, adoration shining from his eyes, I wait for the insults to come. My stomach churns as years of abuse make me feel unworthy of his kindness.

I hate that Craig has infiltrated this wonderful moment. He spent years tearing me down. Telling me to keep my nails painted to cover the filth. Clamping his hands over his nose and saying, "A woman who works with plants should smell more like flowers." Making sexual jabs about me being the wrong kind of dirty.

He used all my *flaws* as excuses to sleep around. I was the worst wife. Every affair was my fault. Every insult brought on

by my failings.

Yet, he wouldn't let me go.

Once you belong to Craig Mathison, you always belong to him. He made sure to remind me of that today. The malice in his dark stare after our divorce was finalized sent shivers down my spine, leaving no doubt in my mind he meant it.

Worrying over what he'd do to anyone who gets close to me has kept me from pursuing anyone.

Especially Ash.

“Stop thinking about him. He's not here. He has nothing to do with us. With what just happened. With what could happen.”

His words are almost enough to make me forget it all. The compassion in his eyes and way his warm hands envelop mine are almost enough to chase away my worries.

“I wish it were that simple, Ash.”

I want it to be. There's nothing I want more than to embrace this moment, but the reality is, Craig will never let Ash and I be together. He'll find a way to destroy us. Ash knows it as much as I do.

We stand in silence, neither of us ready to admit the truth. The heaviness of how much we wish this could work is strangling. When two people care about each other as much as Ash and I do, nothing should keep them apart.

“One date,” he says before I can fall any deeper into my thoughts. “Just one. If you want to walk away after that, I'll let you. I promise you that. I also promise you won't want to.”

Determination and excitement dance around him. His green stare doesn't waver from mine, waiting for me to decide, not pushing me to agree.

That makes the decision for me. His kind and patient nature deserves more than me simply agreeing to what he asks. But I also don't want to say no. A date with Ash is too tempting.

After, I'll figure out how to help him understand we can only be friends. I don't know how, but I have to try.

For both our sakes.

“One date.”

He lights up like the sun shining over the ocean. His head bobs up and down, and a sigh of happiness rushes from him.

I want to cry. Because of how happy he is and how sad he'll be.

“Text me the day and I'll take care of everything else.” He places the softest kiss on my cheek and smiles again. “You won't regret this, Riv.”

Ash walks out my door without looking back. He doesn't see me holding the spot where his lips just were. He doesn't see my frown. He doesn't hear, “I think I already do.”

THREE

ASH

River thought she was hiding her reservations from me, but they were written in the crease in her brow and the stiffness of her posture. Her smile, though. That was real. I didn't turn around because I knew it was short-lived.

She's a worrier and an even bigger protector. Her need to do what's right is going to force her to try to push me away. Her stubborn nature will make her push harder.

What she's never understood is I'm a mountain. And mountains don't move. Not for relationships that never should have been. Not for fear over a cruel ex-husband. Not even for the fight in her amber eyes. Especially not that. I'll stand tall and face them with all the love I've been holding inside, waiting to show her.

I understand why she's scared. No matter how hard she tried to cover it up, I saw the way Craig treated her. I'd have to have been blind not to. So many times, I wanted to step in and rescue her, but she always had the power to save herself.

I'm hoping tonight will be the beginning of her realizing that.

That's why I'm taking her to the place she's most proud of.

Taniyah Reid's family moved to Birch Creek from Jamaica when we were in seventh grade. She became friends with River and me instantly. Her sense of humor and kind heart made her an easy fit. The fact that she took shit from no one made us like her more.

Everyone learned quickly not to pick on her for her accent, to try the food she brought into school, and to listen when she spoke about her homeland. We learned so much from her. Even those who tried to ignore her.

When she decided to open Taniyah's six years ago, she went to River for help. Taniyah was determined to bring Jamaica to the people dining in her restaurant. The beauty. The heritage.

I've dined there once a week since it opened. To keep in contact with Taniyah. For the ambiance and amazing food. And in hopes I would see River more.

I haven't seen her there once.

I'm happy we're going tonight. And nervous. It's weird to be nervous about taking River on a date. I've known her since we were five, and we've always been connected in some way.

Even her being married to an asshole couldn't separate us.

I don't believe anything can.

Nine days ago, I stood at her door with a plant in hand. Now, I stand with an orchid. It's both familiar and different as I raise my hand and ring the bell again. Nervousness and anticipation war within me. My palms are sweaty. Each second feels like hours.

When she opens the door, I nearly scream, "Finally!" But all the air rushes from my lungs at her radiance. Her hair is pulled into a simple ponytail. Her shoulders beg me to kiss them in an off-the-shoulder emerald jumpsuit that makes her eyes brighter than ever.

I shove the orchid forward with a complete lack of grace. No hello. No telling her how stunning she is.

"Oh my, orchids, Ash. The ocean breeze is my favorite. And this pot is gorgeous. Thank you."

My brain is still playing catch-up as my lungs try to remember how to function. "The florist was mad that you're my sunshine."

"The florist...what?"

You're a fucking moron.

“She thought a white or cream pot would showcase the color of the flowers better. I wanted yellow.”

“And she was mad because I’m your sunshine?” River asks, a smirk on her face.

I sigh and shake my head, embarrassed at how easily she flusters me. But not too embarrassed to tell her the truth. “Nah, just that I wouldn’t take her advice. I never told her you’re my sunshine. I thought I should tell you first. You are. Since the day I met you in kindergarten, you’ve been brightening my life.”

A million emotions run through her eyes as she blinks back tears. Her fingers entwine with mine, and she pulls me inside. “Do you mind if I find her a spot before we go?”

“Not at all.”

“Thank you.”

She releases my fingers and sets about moving plants around until she has the perfect place for the new addition to her family.

Stepping back, she stares, her head tilting to the side. Then she turns and walks toward me, determination in her eyes.

When she stops in front of me, I breathe deeply, steadying myself.

“You are the most wonderful, amazing, beautiful soul I’ve ever known.” She presses a soft kiss to my lips then pulls away.

Without another word, we walk hand in hand to my truck and drive to the restaurant in silence.

There are a million things I want to say. Years of things have piled up. But that kiss...the meaning, emotion, intention behind it. I’m not sure how to start a conversation without knowing what she’s thinking, and I’m afraid of what she is.

Taniyah’s husband, Jerome, shows us to our table—the table Taniyah has reserved as mine. It has the best view of the

landscape she and River created. It brings me joy, and our friend knows that.

“I’m always in awe of how beautiful this place is.”

Her words shock me. “I didn’t realize you eat here.”

The way her eyes widen, I’d say my words shock her too. “Why wouldn’t I?” She raises a brow at me, but I refuse to say his name and ruin our night. So, I shrug. “The food is incredible and I come here weekly to take care of the plants and catch up with Taniyah.”

Of course she does. She doesn’t just sell plants, she checks on them for her customers to make sure they’re thriving. It’s why her business is so popular.

“I’m sorry. I’ve just never seen you here.”

Sadness sweeps across her face, and I regret the comment instantly. “I asked Taniyah when you come in so I could avoid those times.”

Her lips open to say more, but she closes them. She doesn’t have to say anything else. She was trying to protect me. Telling her it was unnecessary will only hurt her feelings. I’m ready to move beyond the time we missed.

Taniyah walks out before either of us can respond. “It’s about time this happened.” She points to us. I want to smile, but the tension in the air is thick. Strangling. “Do you want your regulars?”

We both nod. She hugs us and heads back to the kitchen, but not before adding, “It makes my heart happy having you here together.”

My smile is forced. River’s is too. This date is not going at all how I planned.

“I love these tables,” I blurt out, searching for any way to get things back on track. “Taniyah told me her uncle made all of them. Handcrafted from Blue Mahoe trees. Did you know they’re the national tree of Jamaica?”

Her head tilts slightly to the side as she inspects me. She knows what I’m up to. She smirks, which makes me happier

than she can imagine.

“I did know that, but I’m sure you already knew that I knew that. While we’re playing trivia, did you know the Lignum Vitae, that one right there,” she points to a tree with purple flowers, “is the national flower of Jamaica even though it’s a tree? It’s also endangered. Taniyah is helping to save them by having four here.”

“I did not know that.”

“Taniyah and I also started a non-profit to help save trees and plants like this and others around the world.”

My heart swells with pride knowing she’s been doing what she loves.

“When did you start that?”

“Two years ago. It’s all in her name. We didn’t want Craig to be able to use it against me in court.”

The desire to rage about him consumes me, but I push it down. She knows he’s a bastard. The last thing she needs is for me to remind her of that.

“I’m proud of you, Riv.” Reaching across the table, I wrap her fingers in mine. “I always knew you were meant to change the world, and here you are, showing everyone that kindness leads to great things.”

Pink colors her cheeks, and she struggles to keep eye contact. She shakes her head as if to argue, but no words come out. I’m about to tell her it’s okay to accept a compliment when a hand clamps down on my shoulder. “You always were chasing after my sloppy seconds, little cousin.”

River’s hand trembles beneath mine. Fear darkens her eyes. Fury flames through me. I rip Craig’s hand off my shoulder, knocking him off balance as I stand to face him. Not willing to allow him to feel like he towers over me.

People stare at us, but all I care about is keeping him away from River.

“A little birdy told me my wife was on a date with another man.”

“Ex-wife,” River and I say in unison as I scan the area around us, my eyes landing on Craig’s best friend Roger watching in amusement. Fucking piece of shit. Always lurking in the shadows, starting trouble.

“Slumming with the delivery boy, River? It’s so beneath you. You’re the mayor’s wife. A business owner. Why would you be seen with someone who cares so little about their future?”

Incoherent words flow from River’s lips in mutters behind me. I’m not sure if it’s fear or embarrassment holding her hostage, but she isn’t functioning. Someone has to stand up to this prick.

“You will walk away from this table right now, Craig.”

My voice is calm, but there’s a tone that says I’m not fucking around.

“Oh, yeah? What are you going to do if I don’t, little cousin?”

I hate when he calls me that. I’m four days younger than him. He’s always felt four days makes him superior. That and his family being wealthy.

“Remember senior year?” I say quieter. Calmer. With more threat. “I will not let you hurt her again.”

He laughs and spins around with his arms in the air, making even more of a spectacle of himself. He wants everyone watching.

“And I won’t let you have her.” He stops to face me. “She will always belong to me.”

“She never belonged to you. She’s not property. She’s a fucking human being. What the hell is wrong with you?”

He laughs again, like we’re having a fun-loving conversation. Then he leans in close. “She’s belonged to me since the moment she said she’d be mine. She sealed it when she rode my cock, and oh how beautifully she did. I’m her stallion.”

“Stop!” I warn, the rage becoming too much to handle.

Imagining the two of them together is overwhelming. Not that I didn't know they were. They were married, but it was unhappy. Fractured. He was cheating all the time. Abusive to her. It was easy to believe they weren't intimate.

"She's mine, little cousin. No matter how much you wish it wasn't true. She's always going to come back to me. Begging me. I've ruined her for you. I've ruined her for all men."

"No." I shake my head, refusing to buy into his bullshit.

"She can never love you. I taught her what having the best means. She'll never settle for a lowly delivery driver." He sneers as the words fall from his twisted lips. "River knows she deserves better than a family of nobodies."

My blood boils at the attack he's made since we were kids. My mom being a teacher and my dad a postal worker, he and his family look down on us for doing honest work while they lie and cheat and think they're better than everyone.

"You will never be good enough for her."

"You never were," I seethe through gritted teeth as my fists clench at my sides. I step closer to him. "You think you're better than me because you're the mayor of this town. How do you think the people of this town would feel if they knew about your affairs? If they knew how you really treated your wife. If they knew—"

"That's enough!"

River's chair screeches against the floor as she jumps up, her chest heaving with anger.

"You're all the same, trying to pretend you care when all you want is control of me. You two are exactly alike."

Pain explodes through my chest as my heart shatters. Nothing could hurt worse than her words. Not even if she struck me.

All I wanted was to protect her. To love her. Keep her safe. How could she not see that? How could she compare me to him?

To a monster.

She looks at me with such hurt and hate. Her eyes say everything she's been too afraid to: we will never be together.

So, I walk away.

And she doesn't stop me.

I guess mountains do move.

FOUR

RIVER

It's been five days since Ash walked out of the restaurant. Five days since I saw the destruction my words caused.

There hasn't been a moment I haven't thought about that night. Relived his pain. Regretted not running after him.

I was so caught up in my anger. Over Craig disrupting our date. The horrible things he was saying. Ash throwing the truth about our relationship at him.

The carefully controlled dam of emotions I'd constructed crumbled in an instant, leaving me lost to the fury I've wanted to unleash for years. It was only seconds that I spoke, the words hurtling out of me with such force, nothing could stop them. I had no time to think about what I was saying until it was too late.

Ash walked away before I could get my emotions under control. Before I could say none of it was meant for him. Before I could stop Craig from adding to his pain.

The image of his retreating back as my asshole ex continued taunting him will forever be burned in my mind. That I did nothing to stop him from leaving will haunt me.

I thought I wanted to push him away, but I was lying to myself. A life without Ash is pure misery.

A tear rolls down my cheek, and I wipe it away before anyone can see. Breaking down at work is the last thing I need. Craig has enough people talking about us. I refuse to add to it.

That bastard had the audacity to try to play the jilted husband card. Pouting and going on about his baby cousin chasing after the love of his life. He doesn't love me. He wants to control me. Own me.

"Fuck him."

"I'm all about swear therapy, boss lady, but that's not how we get plants to grow." Brielle slides up to the planting table and eases the pruning shears from my fingers. "Now may not be the best time for you to propagate either."

More tears prick the backs of my eyes. I blink rapidly. Brielle whistles, and Margie's head swivels our way. I can't see the look that passes between them, but Margie heads toward us.

Great. They've noticed how unstable I am.

Margie pats my shoulder before asking, "Do you want to tell us what happened between you and Ash?"

"How do you—?"

"You two make goo-goo eyes at each other every time he's in here."

"Brielle," Margie sighs.

"What? It's true." She shrugs and looks at me. "What happened to our better-looking version of Momoa?"

I want to laugh at how preposterous she can be, but tears break free instead. All the hurt I caused him at Taniyah's and over the years punches through me.

"We went on a date at Taniyah's."

"That doesn't sound so bad," Margie says.

"Craig showed up."

"Fucking douche-pickle. God, I hate him. What did he do now?"

It would be so easy to tell them all the things he said. Let them be angry at Craig. But I'm the one who hurt Ash.

“I compared Ash to Craig.” My voice breaks on a sob. “I said they were exactly alike.”

They gasp. I understand their reaction. It was the same as mine after I realized what I had said.

“I all but said he was a piece of shit.”

“What did he do?” Margie asks.

“He left.”

“Wait,” Brielle cuts in. “He just left? He didn’t say anything? Didn’t fight? Didn’t ask for an explanation?”

I shake my head, not knowing how to explain what happened. I didn’t give him anything to fight for.

“The evening started so beautifully. When he picked me up at my house, he showed up with an ocean breeze orchid. My favorite. We kissed before leaving for dinner. There was some awkward silence on the way to the restaurant, but soon enough, we were having a fun conversation. Then Craig showed up.”

I take a breath, trying to brace myself. Reliving that night hurts more every time.

“He started saying horrible things about me. Ash stood up to him. Stood up for me. Craig went after Ash about not being good enough for me. Kept making cracks about being the little cousin who wanted his leftovers. He attacked Ash’s family. Then Ash...um...Ash...he—”

Margie lays her hand over mine and stares me in the eye. “Whatever it is, we’re here for you. You are more than our boss. You’re family.”

Brielle nods and places her hand on top of Margie’s. “I can’t believe they’re cousins.” Margie side-eyes her. “You know you didn’t see that plot twist coming either. Although, douche-pickle would be the one to play the evil family member in any story.”

“Are you done?” Margie asks her.

“Yeah. Sorry, Riv. What happened next?”

“Ash told Craig he knew all the awful things he’d done to me. I didn’t know Ash knew. It broke something deep inside me, and I snapped. I said horrible things, and he left.”

We’re quiet for a second, then Brielle throws her hands up. “That’s not fucking right!” Margie and I stare at Brielle as she begins pacing. “I get that you shouldn’t have said what you did, but he abandoned you at the restaurant with the king of all dicks. Uh-uh, not excusable. He’s no longer the better Momoa brother.”

I love that she’s protective of me, but that’s not how it went. If he were Jason Momoa’s brother, Jason would be in awe of him.

“He didn’t abandon me, Bri. He went into the kitchen and asked Taniyah to call the police to have Craig removed. He paid her for both our meals and my favorite dessert. Then set up a ride for me to get home. Even though I compared him to a piece of shit, he isn’t one. He’s the best man I’ve ever known.”

She stops dead in her tracks. “Oh, damn. He is the better Momoa brother.”

The three of us chuckle. It feels good, but I’m still hollow inside.

“I don’t know what to do. He’s made it clear he wants nothing to do with me.”

Brielle cocks an eyebrow as Margie asks, “Why do you think that?”

“Um, because he traded his delivery route with someone else so he won’t have to see me.”

Brielle starts snort-laughing. “He didn’t trade shit. If you paid attention to any delivery driver besides Mr. Momoa, you’d know he had vacation time and took some. It may be to nurse a broken heart, but he obviously hasn’t given up on you. He’s trying to figure things out.”

“I pay atten—wait...you think we could still have a chance?”

“Duh. Time for an epic romantic gesture.”

Hope starts to fill the emptiness. Ash isn't gone. He's ten minutes away. But...

"I have no idea how to fix this."

Margie sighs. One of the big ones she normally reserves for Brielle's ridiculousness. "You apologize, River."

"And then the epic romantic gesture. Don't forget that."

My head bobs up and down so fast, I feel like a puppet on a string. They're right. I should have apologized by now. And I need to show him what he means to me. No more fear.

"Do you ladies mind taking care of the shop?"

"Do I have more colors in my hair than a box of Fruity Pebbles?"

"What Brielle means is we'll be fine. Go, but know we want every juicy detail later."

"Of course. Thank you."

I hug them and grab my purse. I'm about to leave then realize he and I have a little tradition that needs following.

FIVE

ASH

To say I've been moping since my failed date with River would be an understatement. I've been all out wallowing. Eating junk food. Watching bad TV. Listening to corny love songs.

This morning, I woke up with a new mission: get over River. I have no idea how to do that, but I had to try. So, I worked out and showered. Made a healthy breakfast. Cleaned the house. Then I didn't know what to do with myself.

A visit with Mrs. Fields seemed perfect, but she isn't home, so I'm aimlessly driving around town. It turns out, aimlessly means driving by Dig It. I'm a damn glutton for punishment and can't help but want to catch a glimpse of her through the window. To see the smile she gets when she tends to the plants. The happiness that takes over when she's in her element.

No matter what happened between us, I still want her to be happy. I need to know she's happy.

God, I'm a schmuck. Go home, Ash.

As I drive, I allow myself, for the first time, to think about a life without River. I've dated before, but never fully invested myself in anyone. My heart has always been reserved for her.

I gave up years for someone I'm not sure I can even be friends with now.

Maybe I'll try online dating.

The thought of it, of moving on, makes my stomach churn. If only Craig hadn't shown up at Taniyah's. *Who am I kidding?* River and I have played out every if-only scenario there is. Something always gets in the way.

It's time I accepted we aren't meant to be.

Ash Coolidge, pity party for one.

I wish Mrs. Fields had been home. I could use her advice today. She would know how I move on from—"River?"

I feel like I'm seeing things. Pulling into my driveway, River is sitting on my stairs holding a plant in a red polka-dot pot. Her gloves instantly pop to mind. I try to push back all the feelings that rush forward, but she's ingrained in every fiber of my soul.

My fingers refuse to release the steering wheel for a minute while I struggle to grasp the reality of her being here. I've suffered five days of not seeing or hearing from her. I could have reached out, but what the hell would I have said? *"Hey, Riv. You crushed me, but just wanted to say hi."*

Yeah, that wasn't happening.

Taking a few deep breaths, I get out of my truck and make my way toward her. Each step sends a fresh wave of pain through me. Seeing her only reminds me of our last encounter. I'm not sure I can handle her being here. I know I can't handle looking into her amber eyes. If she cries, I'll cave and comfort her. We need to break this cycle.

"What are you doing here?"

She pats the step next to her, but I don't sit. I can't. Being that close to her will mess with me.

A small sigh carries through the air, and it fills me with irritation. She has no right to sigh at me for keeping my distance. She put this distance between us. She broke my fucking heart.

"I'm sorry, Ash." She sighs again. This one sadder. "Those two words feel small in comparison to the monumentally awful things I said."

She pauses and rubs her hands over her knees. That's when I notice she's in her overalls I love so much. I have to look back to the ground. I can't think about all the times seeing her in them has made me smile. All the times I've imagined getting her out of them.

"Nothing I say can take away the hurt I caused. I can tell you why I said it and that the words were never meant for you, but you're still going to feel the pain of hearing what I said. I don't know how to fix that, but I want to. I want to more than you know."

She chokes up at the end, and it takes everything in me not to fall to my knees and pull her into my arms. That's what I've always done. Hugged away her pain. I hate that she's hurting. I hate it so much. But I can't pretend I'm okay.

"I didn't know you knew how Craig treated me. I thought I was damn good at covering it up."

I look at her now. At the tears streaming down her cheeks. At how broken she is about her secrets being exposed.

"I planned to tell you someday. I'm not sure when, but on my terms. It's devastating to find out the most important person in your life knows the worst things about you. Things you wished they never had to know. I didn't know how to react to that. I handled it all wrong. I'm so sorry."

Sadness, anger, and pain mingle inside me. I want to kill Craig for all he's done to her, tell her she's not responsible, shake her for thinking she could ever hide how much she was hurting from me. Most of all, I'm furious that I don't know what to say or how to be around her.

Maybe that's what I should tell her, but I can't find the words.

"This is an anthurium." She stands and walks a couple steps toward me. "It's also called the Heart of Hawaii."

"Why are you giving me a plant lesson right now? With everything going on with us, don't you see how this hurts me more?"

Her tears haven't stopped, and that's killing me. I need her to go.

"Please let me finish."

I close my eyes, trying to block out her pain, and nod.

"It's also the symbol of love and adoration. It's believed gifting it can make people fall in love with you."

My eyes pop open as I try to process what she's saying.

"I have adored you since we were five years old. I've loved you just as long. Like a fool, I didn't realize I was in love with you until I lost you. This plant can't make you fall in love with me, but I'm hoping every time you see it, you know someone loves you. She loves your kind heart. How your eyes brighten when you smile. That you still drive that old Chevy because you appreciate everything in your life. You don't just replace things because you can. She loves you because you think of others all the time. She—"

"Can you stop saying she?"

My broken heart starts piecing itself back together as her lips tilt up in the most beautiful smile. She takes the last step toward me until the only thing separating us is the plant.

"I love you, Ash. I have for so many years. I couldn't admit it because I thought it made me a bad person."

"Do you mind if I put this on the ground?" I point to the plant, and she shakes her head. I take it from her hands and place it down. "Sorry, Aphrodite. I'll find you a home inside soon, but River and I need a minute."

"Aphrodite?"

"The goddess of love seemed fitting for a plant meant to make people fall in love. If you think I should name her some ___"

Her arms go around my neck, and her mouth crashes to mine. Gone are the sweet kisses we've been sharing. This one is filled with passion and years of longing. A soft moan crawls up her throat, firing every need within me to get her inside my

house and continue whatever is happening between us in private.

The cutest pout greets me as I pull away. “Want to help me show Aphrodite her new home?”

“You have no idea how much I would love that.”

I pick Aphrodite up and reach back for River. She bites her lip, trying to hold back her grin. I don’t bother hiding mine. “Maybe you could stay for a while after,” I offer as we enter the house and I close the door.

“I would love that too.”

I squeeze her fingers, and we walk around, seeking out the perfect home for Aphrodite. River stops in front of the sliding glass door. “Why do you have an empty plant stand?”

“That’s where Dottie was.”

Her eyes brighten with happiness. “Well, it’s the perfect spot for Aphrodite.”

She holds her hands out, and I put the plant in them. Gently, she places Aphrodite on the stand. Then she steps back. “She looks beautiful here.”

“So do you.”

River turns to me, uncertainty written in the straight line of her lips. I don’t know how I thought I could send her away earlier. I’ve never been able to live without her. I’m never going to be able to.

“I love you, Riv. I’m in love with you. I’d like to tell you the second it happened, but there’s no definitive moment. It was a million moments over the years. A smile or a laugh. How you listened to me. Watching you help others. Even your stubbornness. I fell in love with everything about you. There’s never been anyone but you for me.”

“Ash.”

“No more apologies. Can we just move on to the happily ever after?”

Her smile nearly brings me to my knees. Happiness and love shine so bright, my heart wants to burst with joy.

“If only our happily ever after meant you showing me to your bedroom.”

She doesn't have to ask me twice.

Picking her up, I wrap her legs around my waist and carry her to my room. Her eyes don't leave mine as I lay her on my bed. The intensity in her gaze has me ready to explode, but I've waited years for this. I'm going to cherish every second. Cherish her.

“This is one ‘if only’ I'm happy to make right.”

EPILOGUE

River and I have barely left each other's side the past week. Margie and Brielle have been taking care of the store while we've mostly been in each other's beds. We've never been more connected. Not because we've made love, but because we've been fully honest about all our hurts.

She told me everything about Craig, and I admitted that I never got serious with anyone in hopes of forcing her hand. She begged me to forgive her for losing years of my life. I told her we had to forgive ourselves. We both made choices that hurt us, but in the end, we're exactly where we should be.

Today, that's at Dig It, building one of the new outdoor greenhouses. River revealed she has a few expansion phases for the shop, starting with outdoor greenhouses and eventually an addition.

She applied for the permits the day after her divorce.

It wasn't even a question of whether I would help. There's nothing I want more than her happiness.

"Water break time," River says, offering a water bottle with a quick kiss.

"Get your lips off my wife."

"Ex-wife," River, Margie, Brielle, and I bark out in unison. It's almost comical.

Craig disregards us as he storms in our direction, waving a paper in the air. "You've gone too far this time. First him—" he looks at me in disgust, "—then this." He shakes the paper

in River's face. "How dare you change back to your maiden name."

His face is red as he spits the question like an accusation.

River smirks and stands tall.

"Actually, the name change came first. Then I started dating Ash. Though, I should have been with him a long time ago."

"Him? He never deserved you. You've always been out of his league."

She snorts and rolls her eyes. "No, you never deserved me. You're an abusive, womanizing piece of shit. The only thing you deserve is jail time."

He stomps his foot like a child seeking attention and scans our faces, wondering if we know what she speaks of. I do. I'm not sure about the ladies beside us.

"You hold no power over me anymore, Craig. You sure as hell don't own me, but someone may own you soon."

"What the fuck does that mean?"

She smiles a beautifully mischievous smile. "I turned every bit of illegal activity you were involved in while we were married over to the authorities."

He stomps again and puffs out his chest. "I've never done anything illegal."

"Really?" she asks calmly. "How did you get that paper in your hand?"

His eyes go from her to the paper and back again. "I'm the mayor. I can ask to see anything about the town and people who live here."

"Not quite how it works, but thanks for admitting it on my cameras." She points behind her. "Now leave." He starts to say something, but River cuts him off. "Don't make me call the police. You're in enough trouble already."

Crumpling up the paper, he throws it at her before slithering back toward his car. Before he gets in, he yells,

“This isn’t over. I told you you’ll always be mine. Changing your name doesn’t change that.”

I’m about to step in, having had enough of his shit, but River places a hand on my chest, telling me she doesn’t need me to be her hero.

“I was never yours in the first place. There’s one last truth I’ve been waiting to tell Ash. I got engaged to you because I thought I was pregnant. I married you because your father threatened me. It was never about love. I was only there because of fear. You never owned me or my heart. My heart has always been his.”

She turns to me and smiles. “You can’t steal something that never belonged to you. You can try, but it always finds its way home.”

I don’t need to stick up for River, but there is something I need to say to Craig. I take a few steps in his direction, and his eyes darken. He prepares for a fight I won’t give him. This is closure.

“I want you to know something, older cousin. I’m going to marry her someday. And when I do, I’m going to erase every bad memory of you. Every bad word. Every insecurity. I’m going to make her happy. She will know love and kindness. She will know she is the greatest gift I’ve ever been given. So, thank you for being who you are.”

“Yeah. Suck it, evil cousin.”

For once, Margie doesn’t sigh at Brielle. Instead, she high-fives her. “Time for you to go, douche-pickle. You’ve wasted enough of our time.”

I burst into laughter hearing those words come from Margie. River and Brielle laugh too. Craig peels away from the shop, and we embrace in a group hug. After a minute, we let go and get back to work, showing Craig how insignificant he is.

“Thank you for saving that secret for last.”

“If only I had told you the truth years ago.”

I brush off her comment with a wave of my hand. “Fuck ‘if only.’”

“Hell yeah, better Momoa brother.”

On a chuckle, I look at Brielle. “You do know I’m not related to Jason Momoa, right?”

“Don’t be a dream killer. That’s not very Momoa-ish of you.”

My hands up, I back away.

River wraps her arms around my waist and puts her head on my chest. “You want to marry me, huh?”

I place a kiss on top of her head, smiling into her hair. “Are you asking me to propose to you, River Osbourne?” She giggles and snuggles into me more. “If you are, then maybe you should propose to me.”

She steps back, confusion in her amber eyes.

“Guys don’t hold all the power in proposals. You are my future. How we get there is up to us.”

Sniffles sound from behind us. I ignore them while what I said sinks in. She had a man steal her power and her voice. I will never do that. I’ll help her become everything she wants to be.

“I will marry you one day, Ash Coolidge.”

With a kiss, we seal the deal to let this play out. Though, I’m going to be the one to propose first. Hell, I bought the ring while she was still married.

It’s the last secret I have to tell her.

THE LUMBERJACK IN THE
NEXT CABIN: SHANNON
O'CONNOR

ONE

CARRIE

I swear it's been a week from hell, and the only thing keeping me from jumping off the bridge I'm currently driving across is my manuscript. My readers mean more to me than they know, and I wouldn't want to leave them guessing where the characters in my next book are. So I'm sitting in the back of this cab, driving across the bridge to upstate New York, and hoping this weekend away at a cabin will be helpful. My therapist and my editor both seem to think so. I'm on strict orders to stay here for the long weekend while I get at least a new idea to my editor and I get over my cheating ex-girlfriend.

"We're almost there, miss," the cab driver announces, and I smile politely. I know he means well, but there is one of the last places I want to be. Couldn't my editor have booked me a hotel in the city? No, she had to go and book some rinky dinky little cabin in the *woods*.

"Thank you," I say back. And then go back to scrolling on my phone when I suddenly lose service. *What the fuck?* There better be good wifi at the cabin or we're going to have some real issues. I mean how the hell am I supposed to post to TikTok and Instagram without any wifi?

"Here, miss," he says a few minutes later and as we pull up to the grounds, I'm actually impressed. The cabin is anything but small and the view from behind it is amazing, like something off an Instagram ad. I get out and start taking pictures right away. The cab driver gets my luggage, and I pay him before he takes off.

There is a pathway up to the house, luckily, so I don't get my boots all muddy, but there is no one else around. I check my phone for the passcode and unlock the front door. Inside is even more beautiful. Fully furnished with a real life fireplace and a fully stocked kitchen. I am impressed to say the least, maybe Freya, my editor did know what she was talking about. I leave my suitcase by the door and head upstairs to check out the rest of the house. It is bigger than my NYC apartment, and I am not used to all this space. There are two bedrooms, one clearly bigger than the other, and a view outside that is to die for. The master bedroom has a bed in the corner with wall to ceiling windows next to it. I don't know how that will work when the sunshine breaks in, but for now it looks amazing. The bathroom is huge with a tub and a shower, so I peek outside the windows and what I see makes my jaw drop. There is a huge ass hot tub outside. I almost want to dive right in right now but I know I at least have to get some words in for the day.

I head outside with my laptop, taking in the heat. It is thankfully that good kind of sunshine, not the muggy weather I hate that makes my hair frizz. I'm sitting on the deck, laptop on my lap, while I struggle to focus on my document that's open in front of me when a dog comes running up to me and almost knocks my computer off my lap.

"Axel! Axel!" I hear a woman yelling.

"Down," I tell the dog, and she sits nicely so I can pet her. I let her sniff my hand and then pet right behind her ears. Something she seems to love.

"Sorry about that!" the woman says, running onto the deck. She is gorgeous, long blonde hair pulled into a pony tail, tight jeans that show off her thigh muscles, and a flannel that hangs open over a black tank top.

"It's okay, I love dogs." I smile.

"She usually knows better than to bother the guests," she says with a humph.

"Oh, are you not a guest too?" I ask, confused.

“No, I own the cabins and the land here,” she says proudly. “Chris.” She holds out her hand and I shake it. I can’t help but notice how rough her hand is, like she does a lot of yard work or something.

“Carrie.” I smile.

“Nice to meet you, I think I spoke to your partner or someone named Freya?”

“That’s my editor. I’m a writer and she arranged the trip for me,” I explain.

“Ah, well, if you need anything just knock on the cabin next door.” She turns to go, calling Axel behind her when I remember about the wifi.

“Oh! Actually, I didn’t see a wifi password posted anywhere.”

“That’s because there isn’t any,” she says seriously.

“I’m sorry, what?” My jaw drops.

“I mentioned it to your, uh, editor, she said that wouldn’t be a problem.”

“Oh.” I clench my jaw and grumble. Of course Freya knew and sent me somewhere I couldn’t be distracted by the internet.

“Come on, Axel,” Chris calls and Axel goes running with her back to the woods and apparently the cabin next door. I hadn’t seen it when I came in, but if you squint beyond the trees, you’ll see the outline of a cabin similar to mine.

What the hell am I going to do without wifi while I am here? How will I check social media? How will I do any research for my books? How will I check on my ex who clearly might be moving on without me? Ugh. This was probably all part of Freya’s plan for me to actually focus on my work in progress and not get distracted like I usually do.

Flipping open my laptop again, I begin writing a very strongly worded email in my notes. Only to realize by the time I am done with it, there is no way for me to send it to her. Grumbling, I open the document to my current novel and try

to get some words in. Maybe her plan was to bore me into working. Something that seems to be working all too well.

TWO

CHRIS

I don't make a habit of introducing myself to the people that stay in my cabin. I like it better when they don't know I am here and we both just go about our businesses. But when Axel went running over, there was nothing I could do. I had to introduce myself or else I was just being rude. Of course the woman seemed to be a little flirty. That's how all the city women are the second they aren't in their realm. It is like they think just because they are on vacation they can flirt with anyone. I wasn't impressed. Sure, Carrie is beautiful if you are into the obviously gorgeous kind of thing, but I'm not looking for a fling or really anything.

I go back to chopping wood on my side of the trees. If I squint, I can still see her sitting on the deck, typing away on her laptop. But I don't want to look, I want to get this wood cut and then go back inside and curl up with Axel for the night. It is hot as balls out when you are doing actual manual labor and I am sweating. I take off my flannel, throw it on the ground nearby, and stretch my arms out. It is October, which should mean there will be a chill, but thanks to Mother Nature I am still repping summery clothes and sweating my tits off.

"Axel, go sit." I always make Axel go sit on the deck when I chop, just in case any wood or debris goes flying. She doesn't love it, but she usually listens, curling up on the deck and watching me from afar.

I don't need too much wood today, considering the weather, but I like to have some extra chopped just in case. Especially with the rain coming in soon. I hate chopping up

wet pieces of wood, or worse yet, standing in the fucking rain trying to cut it in half. I take a swig of water from my bottle and then go back to chopping. It is basically a mindless activity that I can do with little to no thought. Which I appreciate. I don't have much else on my mind, except the blonde next door. Who comes out this far in nature and then asks about wifi? Ugh. I slap another piece in half and when it doesn't break, I use my hands to break it in two. I mean not my bare hands, I am wearing a thick pair of gloves for this purpose, but still.

What is it with city girls coming to upstate New York and only wanting to Instagram the whole damn thing? It is like they don't know what it means to be disconnected. Sure, I hadn't always been as disconnected as I am now. I grew up as connected as they come with my parents in the city, but once I was old enough to know better, I moved into their cabin and made this land my own. They don't even visit as much as they used to. Not caring to be away from their precious social media. I don't get it. I can go forever without validation from strangers.

"Come on, Axel," I call her over to me and she comes running. Her tongue hanging out of her mouth, knowing it is dinner time. Every day we do a similar routine and I love it that way. I know exactly what is coming and so does Axel.

I clean up the wood I've cut today and bring it to the pile on the side of the house. I didn't need to do any extra chopping like I usually do. Town had called and said they had a surplus to sell and use thanks to how efficient I had been all summer. So it is just the basics for what I might need. It is easier to cut in this weather than it is once it starts to get cold.

"Here ya go." I give Axel a bowl of dog food on the side porch and she comes running.

I grab a beer from the fridge and pop it open on the side of the counter. Taking a long swig, I let the cool liquid flow. Nothing is better than an ice cold IPA at the end of a long day. Well, maybe besides a good dip in the hot tub, but that is coming. I sit on the side of the porch, on the swing that rocks lightly, and look around the property.

But what catches my eye is Carrie. The new girl is walking around on her porch with just a bathing suit top on and is holding her phone in the air like she's going to magically get some service. Her boss or whoever should have warned her more clearly about this being a sanctuary from the outside world. I shake my head, why the hell is getting a cell signal so important to her? I can't imagine what is so important that she couldn't bear to leave that life behind, even just for a few days.

"Come on, buddy," I call to Axel who's done eating already. She climbs next to me and lays at my feet. A ritual we do every night.

But for some reason, through the trees and the branches, I can't keep my eyes off Carrie. She is addicting for some reason. Like part of a movie you can't look away from. I just want to know more about her. What is up with that? I never care this much about who stays in the cabin. But here I am thinking about the beautiful woman and what she might look like if I had her tied to my bed.

THREE

CARRIE

I don't know who thought it was a good idea to send me to the middle of the woods in the middle of a storm. But here I am, stuck inside my cabin for the second day after the rain started. Sure, I have gotten a lot of words written, and yeah my mind is finally off my ex and what she could be up to. But that doesn't help me when all I want to do is use the hot tub outside and relax some of my nerves about this book away.

The book is good, it has a good plot and characters. But I don't *love* it. It is as if something is missing from it, but I can't quite put my finger on it. I can continue writing the story as it is and hand it in to my editor, and honestly I'm sure she'll love it, but it just is falling flat with me. I don't feel the excitement I usually feel when I am writing a new manuscript.

Today, my words for the day are done which means I am hoping to enjoy all the amenities of the cabin, but instead everything is rained out. So I laid in bed for a while, looking at the rain, but when that started to get depressing, I took a shower and headed downstairs. I made a fire in the fireplace and cuddled up under some of the blankets I found in a basket by the couch. I would normally take a picture for Instagram about how cozy and cute I felt, but there was no point if I couldn't post it. This is really going to mess with my branding of posting to my fans.

I'm enjoying the fireplace crackling so I turn the tv on above it and watch some random movie on Showtime. It's starting to watch me when all of a sudden it flickers off, the lights jump and I curse to myself. Did I just lose power?! You

have got to be fucking kidding me. I stand up, flipping the switch a few times, but nothing. I think about calling the owner, what is her name? Chris? But I don't have any way to contact her except venturing out into the storm. Fuck. I knew I should've asked her for her number.

I head up to my room and immediately begin to start packing. There is no sense in me staying here with no power and no wifi. I don't wish to live like I am in the olden times. So I pack up all my stuff, throw on an old sweatshirt I'm grateful I brought with me, and head to the front door. Making sure I put out the fire, I grab my phone off the couch and am hoping I can at least manage a phone call to the cab company.

"Whoa." Chris is on the other side of the front door as I swing it open.

Before me she stands in a red raincoat, soaked through her clothes, with Axel sitting right next to her. Her hand raised as if she was about to knock.

"What are you doing here?"

"I saw the power went out and I thought you might need some help," she explains.

"Oh." I step aside to let them in, Axel shaking herself off on the rug before coming in. At least she isn't making the place all muddy. Not that I should care, I'm not staying.

"Are you headed somewhere?" Chris asks, eyeing my suitcase.

"I was trying to get a cab to get the hell out of here honestly," I admit.

"Good luck trying to get a cab during this kind of storm." She scoffs.

"Fuck," I grumble.

"It's not ideal, but I was coming over to offer you to stay at my cabin. I have a generator that will back up most of the power there. This cabin is so infrequently used that it doesn't have one," she explains.

"Oh." I pause. *Is she inviting me to come stay with her?*

“You don’t have to, but I think it’s a better option than waiting for your cab that will never come,” she says, smirking. I hate how much she is enjoying my misery in this.

“I’ll stay.”

“With me? Or here?” she clarifies.

“With you,” I whisper. The thought of the two of us alone does wonders for my imagination.

“Okay.” She clenches her jaw and looks me over.

“Give me your suitcase, we’re going to have to make a run for it. It’s not safe with the lightning out there, one of the trees could fall,” Chris explains. She holds out a hand for my suitcase, and I begrudgingly hand it over.

“Take my hand, run as fast as you can city girl.” She winks, and my heart flutters. What is it about this nature woman that sends my body into primal mode?

“Okay,” I mumble and throw on my boots. They aren’t sturdy as hers, but they will have to do.

“Let’s go, come on, Axel,” she calls after me and the dog.

We duck under the awning of the cabin and then we make a break for it. It’s probably the fastest I’ve ever run. Her hand grips my own, and I can’t help but notice how nice they feel together. We’re pelted by the hard rain as we duck in between the trees and make it to her cabin in one piece. We’re both soaked by the time we get to her doorway, and I stand in her doorway, breathless and drenched to my panties.

“You’re faster than I thought you’d be, city girl,” she says with a smirk.

“I do Pilates,” I say with a shrug. I like keeping in shape.

“Pilates are no match for chopping wood.” She chuckles. “Come here.” She pulls me by the hand down the hallway toward a closed room. I half think she’s taking me to her room when I realize it’s the bathroom. She grabs some thick towels and hands one to me.

“I figured you’d wanna shower.” The bathroom is small so when she reaches behind me to get something, my breath hitches. Thinking she is about to make a move when in reality she is reaching to turn on the water.

“T-thanks,” I mumble.

“Take your time,” she says, and I’m left wondering how bad it would be to get off to someone in their own shower?

FOUR

CHRIS

I put Carrie in the shower and then head down the hall to clean off and change into some warm and dry clothes. I towel off Axel and let her rest in front of the fire. Changed into a pair of sweats and a flannel, I feel more like myself. Sure, I could dress up to impress Carrie, but do I want to? I am still debating it when I hear what sounds like moans coming from the shower.

“Is everything okay?” I knock on the door to check on her.

“Oh! Oh!” I hear her call out. Is she okay? It sounds like she is hurt. I can still hear the water running, but I don’t want to rush in. Then again, I don’t want to find her dead in a few hours either.

“Carrie?”

“Oh! Chris!” she calls out, and this time I open the door. She definitely said my name and she needs me. So I push in, and my eyes widen at the sight in front of me.

Carrie has the shower head between her legs, the water pulsing hard on her clit while her eyes are closed and head is leaning against the wall. She moans again, this time it’s clear that she’s not in any type of pain. I try to back out slowly, but something is keeping my feet cemented in place. My thighs rub together and I’m desperate for a release. It has been too long since I’ve been touched by another woman. I’m about to speak when Carrie’s eyes flutter open and we both stare at each other like a deer in headlights.

“Um, w-what are you doing in here?” she asks like I haven’t just caught her masturbating. Masturbating to me no less.

“I- I heard you. I thought something was wrong,” I whisper. Suddenly my mouth is incredibly dry.

“Mmm, I bet you did.” She smirks.

“I-I’m sorry,” I mumble. It is as if all my confidence has been shaken and taken away from me.

“Why don’t you join me?” she says, sliding open the glass shower door. Instead of seeing her through the steam and foggy glass, I can see *everything* clearly. All of her is gorgeous. Her body is to die for and her pussy is begging to be eaten.

“I-I don’t know.” I’m not one to jump into this sort of thing. But fuck if I don’t want to.

“Don’t think about it.” She smiles and holds out a wet hand.

I nod and toss off my flannel and sweatpants. I untie my hair from its pony tail and take her hand in mine. Stepping into the hot, steamy, shower, I’m in awe. Our lips find each other’s almost immediately. I push Carrie against the shower wall and the hose falls between us, spraying both of us, but we don’t care. It is like we are in our own sexy bubble.

“Show me what you like,” I whisper, nibbling on her earlobe.

“Mmm, okay.” She doesn’t hesitate before taking my hand and dragging it between her legs. She slides my fingers up and down her soaked core. We rub light circles around her clit before she slides two fingers inside her and she gasps out.

“Fuck, city girl, I can feel how much you need this.”

“Oh I do,” she moans.

“Beg for it, baby.” I smirk and pull out my fingers to suck them clean.

“Fuck me, please, Chris. *Please*,” she begs, biting down on her bottom lip.

“Since you asked so nicely,” I tease. Then I drop to my knees and push my face into her core. Without hesitation, I’m tasting her sweet, dripping pussy and I can’t get enough.

“Oh my gosh!” Carrie screams out and tugs on my hair. She pushes my face even closer to her core, and I smile against her. I take long, languid licks of her and enjoy every second of it. It would be too much fun to tease her.

“I’m going to come!” she screams, and I slip one finger inside her, curl it forward, and watch as she comes undone on my tongue.

“Oh, Chris!” she calls out, and I smile as I finish tasting every last drip of her.

“Mmm.” I use one finger to wipe away the remnants of her and pick up the hose. I am freezing so I stand under it and warm myself up a bit.

“Fuck. You’re really good at that.” Carrie leans in for a swift kiss and then steps under the water with me.

“Thanks.” I smirk. I love being complimented on my skills.

“Give me a second and I’ll return the favor. You made my legs feel like Jell-o.” She giggles.

“Actually, can we do it outside the shower? Maybe in a nice bed? I’m freezing.”

“Of course.” She nods gratefully.

I grab the bar of soap and wash my body as best and as quickly as I can. Then she takes the bar and does the same, we both wash our hair quickly and just as the water is running cold, we hop out. I hand her a towel and grab one for myself. We don’t bother getting dressed as I lead her to my bedroom. Tossing the towels aside, I take her hand and pull her into my bed with me.

A few soft kisses to turn me on again, and she’s diving between my thighs. A long lick down my center, all the way to

my core makes me gasp. Carrie pushes in two fingers and then begins to suck gently on my clit. I can't help but be lost in this moment of how good it feels. I never have sex like this; fuck, I never have sex. Especially with people who should be staying in the cabin next door. But fuck if that doesn't turn me on more. Like this is some sort of forbidden fling. In this moment, Carrie is flicking her tongue over my clit and in seconds I'll be screaming her name like she did in the shower. I just wonder how long this can last.

FIVE

CARRIE

I wake up in the bed alone, to the sound of banging in my ears. I feel out of practice and confused with where I am until I remember last night. Chris and I had sex over and over until the sun came up and then we fell asleep in her bed together. I half expected her to still be in bed with me today, but I have to guess the banging is her. What the hell is she up to? I wrap one of the sheets around my body and peek outside the curtain covered windows.

Chris is outside the house, wearing her signature red flannel and chopping wood in half. The way her arm muscles flex with each chop is enough to drive me wild. Apparently I am someone who gets turned on watching someone chop wood. I know we haven't talked about last night, but I am dying to do it again. I mean, you can't have sex that good just one time and then call it a day. *Can you?*

I head to the front door and realize it's stopped raining. Does that mean that the power is back on? Am I going to have to head back to my own cabin by myself? The thought of that makes me frown. I'm about to get dressed and head outside when I see the hot tub on the side of Carrie's cabin. Of course hers has one too. I quickly paw through my suitcase and find my skimpiest bikini. It's bright pink and shows off everything, leaving nothing to the imagination. I decide to strut outside in it, giving Chris a show.

"Hey, Chris," I call out while I saunter outside and the cooler air hits me making my nipples harden. *Perfect.*

“Carrie? W-What?” Fuck, I have made her speechless. Chris’s jaw literally drops as she looks me over and then with a grumble she fixes her face.

“I was thinking about taking a dip in the hot tub, if that’s okay?” I say mischievously.

“Go for it.” She shrugs and turns around, clenching her jaw. I can almost hear her teeth grinding from here.

Hmm, is she not going to join me? I know what might change her mind. I reach for the string around my neck and let the pink fabric fall to the ground in front of me. Now I am completely topless in front of her and just as she turns to chop a piece of wood, she looks at me, eyes widened.

“Carrie!” she squeals. Good, that’s what I wanted.

But I don’t reply, this time just walking to the hot tub. I step up and turn it on, giving it a minute to turn on before I climb in. I can feel Chris’s eyes on me and I smile to myself. My tits are full and on display, showing off enough to drive her wild. I can almost hear her fuming thoughts. I don’t know why she won’t just give in to me and come join me? Is she always this difficult?

I close my eyes and sink a little further into the warm water, enjoying how good it feels on my muscles. I turn on the jets a little higher and relax even more. I’m still not sure if the power is back on or if this is part of the generator’s help, but I am thankful this is working. I’m thinking about how I didn’t remember to bring a towel with me when I hear footsteps on the deck. *Is Chris about to join me?* I keep my eyes closed and don’t tense or move as I feel her sliding in the hot tub beside me.

“You just going to sit there with your eyes closed?” Chris grumbles.

“I was letting you enjoy the view.” I shrug, opening my eyes. Which makes my own jaw drop when I’m met with a topless Chris. She’s wearing just a pair of black brief shorts and her chest is exposed as much as mine is.

“I could say the same.” She smirks as I eyeball her chest. I am as bad as a man. But damn if her boobs aren’t calling my name for them to be in my mouth.

“Get over here,” I command, and she smirks.

“You get over here.” She raises an eyebrow. I could fight her, but honestly, I am too horny for that. So I slide over and she takes her arm and wraps it around my shoulders.

I lean in for a kiss and she presses her lips to mine. No more is the fight for dominance, it is clear that she wants to be the alpha and damn if I’m not going to let her be. I smirk, my smile against her lips as she kisses me like no one has before. Equal with passion and desire. There is this undeniable tension between us that we both can’t hide. I love it, I *crave* it.

“Mmm,” she groans against me. She leans down to kiss my neck and slightly nibbles on my neck. Her teeth grazing along and biting down gently. I wonder if she’s trying to leave a mark behind, just as she moves down my collar bone and to my chest. My hardened nipples are poking front and center as she takes one between her lips and sucks on it softly.

“Oh,” I moan lightly as the sensation takes over.

“Mmm,” she says and moves on to the other one, with a pop of her lips against my skin.

“We should take this inside,” I murmur.

“No, I think we should stay... right... here...” she says as she dips a hand under the water and cups my core. Her fingers dance across my clit, and I gasp at the contact. Her cold fingers somehow keeping their temperature in the warm water feels like ice on my pussy. The perfect contrast to drive me wild.

“Okay,” I whisper back. If she wants to fuck me in the hot tub, I will be putty in her hands.

SIX

CHRIS

We're both sitting on the edge of the hot tub, my arms wrapped around Carrie's neck and our breasts pressed against each other's. She's kissing me with more passion and desire than I've felt in a long ass time, and it feels *nice*. Like something I didn't know I was missing. So when she presses her lips to my neck and bites down, I actually moan. I can't tell you the last time someone besides my vibrator was able to make me audibly moan.

"Mmm, I love hearing you," she mumbles against my wet skin.

I reach down and grab her nice, plump, round ass. Squeezing with two hands and pulling up to push her body into mine. She groans and then leans in to kiss me. Her lips dancing across mine as she slips her tongue in my mouth and we play a game of twister with our tongues. I reach down to her ass and she wraps her legs around my waist. Then I stand and pick Carrie up, as she throws her head back, pushing her chest in my face. I take one nipple in my mouth and she gasps. I look at her with hooded eyes, and she groans.

"Oh, Chris." We are just getting started and I can tell already how much she wants this. If it is any indication of how hard she is pushing her body against mine. She is dying for more.

She leans down for a kiss and I tease her, swiping my tongue against her lips. She frowns and tries again, while I gasp and moan into her mouth instead, not giving her what she wants so easily. Then when she tries a third time, I kiss her

with everything I've got. Our lips becoming frenzied, our tongues tangling together as one.

I slide a hand across her chest, taking her full breasts in my hands. They aren't as sensitive as mine, but fuck if I don't want to give them the attention they deserve. I pull them close to me and squeeze and tug lightly. Then I slide a hand up her chest and across her throat. I squeeze gently and she groans. If she likes choking, *will she let me tie her up later?* I can't help but wonder to myself.

"Should we take this inside?" she murmurs against my skin.

"No, I want you right here and right now," I whisper back into her ear. I nibble on the end, before blowing lightly and watching as her thighs clench against my waist. I love the effect I am having on her.

"Oh," she whispers, her mouth forming a little 'o'.

I slide a hand between us, down the front of her stomach, and down her bathing suit bottoms. She's just above the water so all I can feel is how drenched she is from all the teasing. I can't help but groan aloud and I nibble on her shoulder as my fingers explore her folds. I slide two fingers, curled, inside her and she falls into me, almost pushing us backward.

"Oof." My hand is still inside her, she slides down my body and a bit into the water.

"Don't stop," She holds my wrist and I lean in to kiss her. My lips chastely kiss hers as I pump my hand and she moans into my mouth.

"I won't, baby." I smirk and she starts kissing my neck. My head flies back and I almost forget what I'm doing when her sweet lips touch my neck.

"Oh, Carrie," I grumble. I keep my hand steadily inside her, the fingers starting to cramp but I don't care. I want to make this girl cum for me as if my life depended on it.

"Fuck. Right there!" She screams as I use my thumb to brush across her clit. It's subtle brushes that drive her crazy.

“Come undone for me baby,” I whisper into her ear and watch as she bounces, fucking my hand, and she moans my name for me. Never has hearing anything sounded quite so good.

“Oh fuck,” she mumbles as I pull my hand away.

I clench my thighs together as she slides next to me, throwing her legs on mine under the water. I can tell she needs a moment to catch her breath so I trail my fingers across her arm and watch as even the most simple, innocent of touches drives her wild. I should stop, give her a second to breathe, but the teasing is too much fun. I love watching her give up control to me, it is something I hope I’ll get to see again.

“Mmm, your turn. Sit up on the edge,” she instructs. “And drop those panties.”

“I’m pretty sure my boy shorts aren’t qualified as panties.” I chuckle but listen and drop them to the side of the hot tub, leaning on the edge, outside the water. The cool air hits my pussy for only a second until Carrie’s mouth is on it. Her warm tongue is finding its way through my folds, sucking and licking every last drop of my juices.

“Mmm,” she mumbles against me, and I buck my core into her face.

“Oh!” I call out. She is magical with her tongue, I want to give her my house and Axel if she promises to keep doing that. Fuck, I am becoming pussy whipped by a woman I barely know. But right now, I don’t care. She sucks on my clit, nibbling gently, and I gasp.

She hums against me and drags her fingers slowly up my core. Her tongue on my clit and a finger sliding inside me, I need the release more desperately than I realized. Something about being with Carrie lets me let go. I don’t have to hold back in any way with her. I don’t know why it is so simple and easy being with her, but I’m not going to let myself overthink it. I am going to stay in the moment and enjoy her tongue on me and how good her body feels pressed to mine.

SEVEN

CARRIE

As soon as we finish in the hot tub, it is clear I either need a nap or to write. Since Chris is still outside working, I decide to take out my laptop and write a bit. I take out the fall candle from my suitcase I bring for times like this and my lucky lighter. I make myself a hot coffee in her Keurig machine and then find a cozy spot on the couch. I pull a blanket over my legs and start typing away on the computer. I was going to work on my manuscript, but a new story starts calling my name, and I can't quite get it to stop. It is like that sometimes, where I am supposed to be working on one story but then another story will start talking to me and I can't work until I listen to that voice. That's what it is like for me today.

I can hear the chopping of wood from Chris outside and Axel is sitting on the floor next to me sleeping. Her soft pants sounding like a melody in the background. I type away on my computer, hundreds of words suddenly flowing from my fingertips at once. I stop to sip my coffee and read back some of what I wrote. It's only hitting me where the inspiration is coming from. A lumberjack main character and a city girl falling in love after meeting at the lumberjack's cabin. The irony isn't lost on me, but this thing between Chris and I isn't love. No, we are fooling around with a little fling, but that's all it is.

I keep writing, the story easily flowing more than my manuscript. I don't know what I'll do with this, but it can at least stay on my computer as a passion project. It's almost dark by the time Chris comes in and knocks the focus out of me.

“I’m sorry, were you working?” she asks.

“I was, but it’s about time I finish anyway.” I smile, shutting my laptop.

“Perfect, I was about to put on a campfire and make some dinner. Would you care to join me?”

“I’d love to.” I nod. I blow out my candle, carry my computer to my suitcase, and decide to change clothes. I am a little underdressed for a campfire so I grab a pair of jeans and a loose sweatshirt. It is chilly out after all, even without the rain today.

Chris is in the kitchen grabbing ingredients so I take Axel outside with me. “Do you have to go pee?” I take her around the side of the house and she pees then jumps near the fire pit.

Chris comes outside with food and long skewers, places it down on one of the logs near the fire pit, and then heads over to grab some logs for the fire.

“Do you need any help?”

“Nope, just sit your cute ass on the log and relax.” She winks. Walking back and forth between holding the heavy logs is probably too much for me anyway. I am built for yoga and Pilates, not hard manual labor. So I take a seat like she says, and Axel joins me at my feet.

“Okay, I’m going to light the fire,” she says, throwing something on it and then after rearranging the logs, she lights it with a long lighter. It goes up in flames within minutes, and the roaring heat warms us up.

“I thought we’d make s’mores and hot dogs,” she says with a shrug.

“Okay.” I nod. “I can’t remember the last time I had a s’more,” I admit.

“What?” Chris looks baffled.

“It’s been at least ten years,” I explain.

“That’s way too long. Promise me you’ll have one tonight.”

“I promise.” I smile.

“Here.” Chris places a hot dog on a stick and hands it to me, but the brush of our hands together causes me to drop it into the dirt.

“Fuck,” I mumble. I try to pick it up, but Axel gets to it first, munching on it.

“It’s okay, why don’t I do it for you,” Chris says with a chuckle. She holds the hot dog over the fire just long enough to get the skin to turn black and crispy. I’m not the biggest fan of hot dogs, but I don’t want to complain either.

“Thank you.” I take it from her, placing it on a bun and eating it. It isn’t as bad as I thought it might be. Chris makes herself one and then sits next to me on the log, we both eat in silence with the crackling of the fire.

“So, what made you move out to the middle of nowhere?” I ask.

“I was searching for something I couldn’t find in the city,” she says.

“What was that?”

“Peace. I, uh, got left at the alter and I wanted some space after that. From my old life, and that meant leaving everything else behind.”

“I’m so sorry.” I reach for her thigh and squeeze it gently. She puts her hand over mine and leaves it there, just looking at me.

“I should, uh, get some more blankets.” She stands up suddenly and rushes in the house. Fuck, *had I done too much? Pushed too much?*

“Here.” She comes back a few minutes later with some blankets and wraps one around the both of us. We huddled for warmth while she decides to make us some s’mores.

“How do you like your marshmallows?” she asks, holding me a stick with one on the end.

“Burnt.” I smile. I always loved setting them on fire, blowing them out and then eating the crunchy part of the marshmallow before I put it on my s’more.

“A girl after my heart.” She winks, and I blush.

With Chris right next to me, under the moonlight and the blankets wrapped around us, I’ve never felt more at peace. I wonder if that has more to do with where I am or who I am with.

EIGHT

CHRIS

“Are you ready for bed?” I ask Carrie when the fire starts to fizzle out. I realize it’s more of a loaded question than I anticipated. Is she staying in bed with me again? I sure hope so, but I don’t want to assume just because we are hooking up.

“Is that an invitation?” she asks with eyebrows wiggling.

“I mean, yes.” I chuckle.

“Should we talk about what this means?” she asks.

“Do you want to?” I mumble.

“We probably should.” She shrugs.

“I, uh, look, I like you, but I’m not looking for anything right now. And you’re leaving in two days so it’s not exactly like it would be smart to start anything. So I say we just enjoy this for what it is.” I shrug. It isn’t how I am feeling, but I’m not about to let another city girl break my heart.

“Oh, okay. You’re probably right.” She nods.

“Let’s go to bed then?” I ask.

“Yes.” She stands and holds out her hand for me to take. I grab the blanket, everything else can wait until the morning. I take her hand in mine and we walk back to my cabin. As we walk in the house, she strips down to her underwear. A piece of clothing left like a trail in my living room.

“Fuck, that body,” I mumble to myself. I can’t take my eyes off how good her ass and body looks.

“Come on, don’t be shy.” She pulls me by the hand so I fall into her arms.

Carrie slides my t-shirt off my body, exposing my sports bra covered chest. I should’ve put on something sexier, but this one is one of the nicer bras I own. At least it doesn’t have any holes or sweat stains on it. Then she pulls me in by my belt buckle and unbuttons my pants. Letting them fall to the ground, I step out of them and she steps back, as if to take a look at me.

“What?” I ask wearily.

“You’re hot.” She smirks. She pulls her hair out of its pony tail, her brown hair falling down her chest.

“You’re gorgeous,” I counter.

“It’s not a contest,” she says with a giggle.

“I know, but damn.” I bite my bottom lip and as she turns to walk to my room, I can’t help but smack her ass.

“Oh!” She gasps as I do. A perfect sound that I can’t wait to hear more of.

“Can I try something with you?” I ask when we make it to the bedroom. Carrie’s already laying on the bed with hooded eyes and a come hither look.

“Try what?” she asks curiously.

“I want to tie you to my bed and fuck you,” I say. I walk over to my dresser and pull out a rope used for this purpose.

“I’ve never been tied up before... but I think I’d like it,” she whispers.

“We can stop at any time,” I reassure her.

“I-I trust you,” she says quietly.

“Okay.” I head to the bed and begin tying her wrists up. First together, above her head and then to the bedpost. I make sure it’s tight enough where she can’t break free, but not too tight where it should be hurting.

“You feel okay?” I ask, checking in.

“Perfect.” She smiles. Then I lean down and begin kissing her. My body straddling hers as I grind my hips on her waist and slide off her panties. Down her legs and off the bed, they go flying.

“I want to savor my time with you,” I whisper. It’s more intimate than I anticipated, but I am starting to like her. I want to take my time with making her come for me, just in case this is one of the last times I’ll get to see it.

Slipping my body between her thighs, I take my time kissing her inner thighs. Sucking lightly on her hips and kissing her pubic bone until I can feel her wiggling under me. She is desperate for me to touch her, and fuck if I’m not too. So I slide my tongue between her thighs and taste her for the first time all day. Tasting her is like finding a new favorite food. I only want to taste her and her alone from now on. She is sweet and in this moment, she is all mine. She starts bucking her hips to my face, and I look up at her from her core.

“Oh god, you look so good between my legs.” She moans. Her breath is heavy and I lick long and slow, trying to sop up every last drip of her.

I move my hands to her chest, taking her nipples between my fingers and pulling. Just enough to feel her getting wetter from my touch. She starts to wiggle against the ropes, and I almost think she’s going to ask me to untie her, but she stays strong. So much so that I slide my hand, cupping it around her sex and press hard. Carrie screams at my touch, and I smile. There is nothing more satisfying than pleasuring a woman like this.

Going back between her thighs, I wish I had toys or a strap on I could use on her but I am so eternally single that this cabin isn’t meant for a fling. I almost wish she could stay longer and we could try more things together. But just as easily I push those thoughts aside. I don’t want to get attached to Carrie any more than I already am. I had learned the hard way that women will always let you down, and Carrie is a city girl at heart. It isn’t like she is suddenly going to uproot her life and live her for me. There is no point in even entertaining the idea. So I finish fucking Carrie, making her cum twice

before I untie her, once with my tongue and once with my hands. Before we both fall asleep laying in each other's arms, trying to convince myself that this is only a fling.

NINE

CARRIE

I wake up on the last day of my trip to the smell of bacon and something sweet. *Waffles? Pancakes?* I can't quite tell. I am alone in bed, unless you count Axel, who climbed into bed with us at some point during the night. She was curled up at our feet snoring away. It is kind of cute honestly. But I climb out of bed, searching for something to wear, and settle on one of Chris's oversized flannels. I button it up most of the way and slide on a pair of fresh panties. That is all I really need to wear anyway, right? It isn't like Chris is going to complain.

"Oh shit, did I wake you?" Chris is in the kitchen, spinning between the coffee maker and the stove. Which is cooking bacon and *pancakes*. Mmm.

"Nope, the smell did. I'm starving." I groan and take a seat at the counter near her.

"Good morning." She surprises me with a quick kiss on my lips and then she's back to cooking.

"Good morning." I smile back. She hands me a plate and then slides some food on it. Chris hands me a hot mug full of steaming coffee and I groan. I could get used to this. Fuck, this is my goodbye breakfast. It isn't like she is going to ask me to stay or anything.

"Are you up to anything today?" I ask Chris.

"I don't have any work to do, so I'm all yours." She smiles while she readies her own food.

"I have to get some writing done, but maybe you can sit with me while I do?" I suggest.

“I’d love to.” She nods.

So after breakfast, which is delicious, I settle on the couch and attempt to dig in to my manuscript again. But as I sit there with the most beautiful woman I’ve ever seen sitting across from me, I can’t help but open up the story I started about her. I’m already halfway through it, and I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t dying to add more to it. I lay my feet across Chris’s lap while she’s scrolling on her phone. I wonder what she’s doing with no wifi and limited service, but I don’t ask.

“Are you comfortable?” I ask.

“Very much so.” She smiles and puts her hands over my blanket-covered feet. I lay my laptop on my lap and start writing.

Chris is quiet and all you can hear are the sounds of Axel’s breathing and the clicking of my keys as I type away. It’s hours later when I feel like I’m finally finishing the story and wrapping up the characters, except I don’t know how to end it. I write romance, so in my blood I want the two main characters to end up together. But I also want to be realistic about this. Not everyone can end up together. It isn’t a fairytale, it is real life. But I can’t seem to get them to have a breakup either. I mean, they weren’t together so is one of my characters really just going to leave without a thought about the other? *Is that really what Chris and I are going to do later tonight?*

I need a minute to think, alone. So I leave my laptop open on the couch and head into the bathroom. I don’t want to leave today, but there is no way I can just ask Chris if I can stay. I mean, what is my plan? To just move in with her after knowing her for barely a week? That is the definition of insane plans. But I can’t help but want to stay here with her and Axel and the no wifi and the sex and the chopping of trees. All these things I have grown accustomed to. I’m just not ready to leave yet, but I am too afraid of her rejection. I mean she had just said this was a fling for as long as it lasts. It isn’t meant to turn into anything else, no matter how good we fit together.

“W-What are you doing?” My eyes widen as I walk out of the bathroom to see Chris scrolling on my computer.

“You left it open and it caught my eye... did you write about me?”

“Don’t be crazy.” I scoff, trying to play it off. But the main character I named after her is Max, clearly a similar name to hers.

“So Max isn’t me?” She stares me straight in the eye and waits for a response.

“It’s rude to go through other people’s stuff,” I reply, snatching my computer. I head for the bedroom even though I can hear Chris following me.

“Carrie, I’m sorry I read it but did you mean what you wrote?”

“How much did you read?”

“Mostly the end, I didn’t know how much time I’d have,” she admits sheepishly.

“I-Um...” I am speechless. On one hand this is my chance to tell her what I want, but on the other hand, I would be exposing myself even further.

“Carrie?” she prompts and I stare at her, even more confused than I was minutes ago. Did reading what I wrote change anything for her? I feel like I am standing naked before her, exposing all of me while she is fully clothed and shielded.

“I like you. I don’t think I’m ready to leave today and that story was my way of figuring out my feelings for you. Because I didn’t expect you or to fall for you so quickly. But I understand you don’t feel the same so you don’t have to say anything.” She holds up a finger to my mouth.

“I like you too,” she says quietly. “I’ve been fighting myself with asking you to stay and I thought you’d never want to.”

“Of course I do, I have come to love it here. Love being here with you.” I smile and she pulls my body in by my hips. Her lips press against mine slowly and we melt into one.

TEN

CHRIS

1 YEAR LATER...

“Are you sure you don’t want to install some wifi?” Chris asks for the hundredth time.

“No, I like that I have to go into town if I want to check social media. It keeps me focused on things here,” I admit.

“Okay.” She kisses my forehead and pulls her shirt over her head, exposing her white tank top and tanned, toned arms.

“Besides, why would I want wifi when I have my own personal entertainment right here?” I smirk. Then I play with the ring she gave me last night. It still feels too heavy and too much for my dainty fingers, but I also know she picked it out specifically for me.

“Oh you just want me to fuck you again, don’t you?” She pushes me onto the bed and I collapse under her. All my senses on high alert as she climbs on top of me and begins kissing me. Her lips feel like two soft pillows, while her hands, although calloused from working too hard, slide against my body.

“I want you,” I murmur into her skin. She is so much tanner than I am just because of how much time she spends outside working. Even though I spend an equal amount of time tanning in the hot tub outside.

“Mmm, we have company coming soon, remember.” She pulls me up into her. We crash into the dresser behind her with a bang and we both laugh.

“Oh right, the group from the city.” I nod. We both live in Chris’s cabin, but continue to rent out the other cabin, now

with a backup generator. Most of the time it is locals, but sometimes it is a group from the city looking for some quiet. I think this one is looking for a work getaway, but I can't be too sure.

“So tonight we will have plenty of time to do that, but for now we have to go get the cabin ready.” Chris kisses my cheek and takes me by the hand.

“I'll stay here with Axel then, I need to get some words in before tomorrow.” I sigh sitting on the couch. I don't love the set up and cleanup of getting the cabin ready, and I know Chris doesn't mind doing it alone.

“Okay, baby.” She smiles and throws on a flannel before heading out the front door.

I start working away on my next book. A new manuscript that works as a sequel to the story that happened to change my career. Although I stayed a few days more with Chris last year, I did eventually go back to the city and submit my story about us instead of the other piece I was working on. My editor and publisher loved it so much they signed me on for a three book deal with the same setting for the characters. A new set of love interests but taking place by this magical cabin. So when I pitched staying with Chris to get the books done, they all but jumped at the idea.

So my editor hired a social media manager, and once a week I'd submit photos and captions about what I've been up to. Only when I head into town for our weekly grocery shop. Then I don't have to do anything else but write the stories. Chris has been all too supportive, giving me space when I need it and making me feel like her cabin was my home too. It only took a few months before we took the next step and decided it was time for me to move in.

It all happened a little fast, but for us it just feels right. It is like there is nothing standing in our way but us, so why wouldn't we just go for it? I play with the ring on my finger and can't help but think about how happy I will be to marry Chris. I knew the ring was coming, I had found it a few weeks ago when I was putting away her socks. I mean come on,

everyone hides rings in their sock drawers. But I still acted surprised and jumped up and down when she pulled me aside last night, took me on a moonlit walk to the cabin next door, and proposed to me in front of the place she saw me for the first time. I smile just thinking about how thoughtful it was.

My editor takes the claim for me being so happy and for introducing me to the love of my life. I wonder sometimes what would've happened if I hadn't met the lumberjack in the cabin next door.

MR. SECOND TIME'S THE
CHARM: BREANNA LYNN

ONE

SHEP

Aspen Falls High School graduating class of 2011 cordially invites you to a twelve-year class reunion.

“Who the fuck plans a twelve-year reunion?” I growl in the empty garage.

My voice echoes slightly in the big room and drowns out the country song on the radio. Rolling my eyes, I spy the culprit at the bottom of the over-the-top invitation that showed up in my mail this morning.

Danielle Owens-Hart.

Of course. I should have known. I’d been gone for eleven years, but in the last year I had been back it was easy to figure out some things didn’t change. Including Danielle Owens. Owens-Hart now. She had married the captain of our wrestling team, Josh Hart, and is the same small-town busybody she was when I left. Only now she doesn’t have the boundaries that applied to teenagers. How the fuck she managed to marry a nice guy like Josh is a mystery of the universe.

My phone pings with a text.

Jagger: Did you get your invitation? ::eye roll emoji::

Me: Yeah.

Jagger: You gonna go?

The “No” in my response bar sits there mocking me until I delete it.

Me: Maybe.

Jagger: Come by after you close up. I'll buy you a beer.

Jagger owns the local bar, although with all the changes in our small town of Aspen Falls, Colorado, it is called a microbrewery now.

The few things that haven't changed?

The way Uncle Joe's radio only gets reception to one station—the same country station I've been listening to since I was a kid. The smells of oil and tires that filter through the room. The way I still imagine Uncle Joe bent over a car in one of the two bays, muttering to himself about newfangled cars with their computers.

Why do cars need a mother anyway?

“A motherboard,” I say out loud.

But there’s no one there to hear me. Uncle Joe’s been gone for more than a year. His garage is now mine.

Fuel Good Repairs.

It was hard to get used to. The pace of this town was difficult to get back into. I’d lived in Denver for so long, I’d gotten used to the choices for everything. I’d gotten used to not running into people I knew every time I went out. To not seeing the woman I broke up with over ten years ago frequenting the same places I did.

Twelve.

The invitation clutched in my grip is quick to remind me. I’d broken up with Jade Parker the last night of summer break after graduation. And I could still clearly remember the confusion that colored her beautiful bright-green eyes. The question I couldn’t answer.

Why?

If I’d told her, she’d have found a reason to stay. I didn’t want to hold her back. I wanted her to have experiences outside of a high school boyfriend who wasn’t going anywhere fast.

Instead, my silence meant she left for college the next day. Soon enough, I’d left town too. Now we are both back—her as the English teacher at the high school and me here in the

garage. And it is like I am living the lyrics to Sam Hunt's "Break Up in a Small Town."

She is everywhere. At the grocery store, at Jagger's place, at the stoplight next to me. It doesn't matter. She is everywhere. Tempting me to talk to her. To apologize for breaking up with her when the plan had been for us to stay together. To lean down and sample those pretty pink lips to see if they still taste like strawberry-flavored Lip Smacker.

No doubt she will be at the reunion.

Maybe now is my chance.

My maybe is changing to a yes faster than I can second-guess it.

The nerves don't hit my stomach until I hit send on my reply to the reunion email address.

"Too late now," I mutter as I flip off the lights to the garage.

I am going to that reunion. I am going to talk to Jade.

Even if it kills me.

"Fuck, I need a beer."

Fortunately, it's closing time, and I have a bar stool with my name on it at Jagger's. It's like those reruns of *Cheers* that Mom and Uncle Joe used to watch. Everyone knows my name. And while most of the locals know my reputation, there are plenty of tourists who don't mind hooking up with a local for a weekend fling.

The parking lot is practically empty when I pull in fifteen minutes later—not surprising given it's a weekday night at the end of summer. The summer tourist activities are shutting down, and the ski resort hasn't opened yet. But I'm not here looking for someone to share the night with. I'm here to have a beer and see if I made the right choice by agreeing to go to a reunion I would otherwise skip.

"I figured I'd see you sooner or later," Jagger says by way of greeting when I walk through the door.

I grunt and grab the stool designated as mine from my first day in the bar.

My best friend finishes filling the pint glass and slides it perfectly in front of me.

"What if I didn't want this?" I ask before lifting the glass to my lips for a long pull.

Jagger lifts an eyebrow in response.

"Since when do you not want a free beer?"

“I’ll pay for it,” I grumble.

He waves away my response.

“Nah, your money’s no good here.”

“How do you expect to keep this place open if you never charge me for drinks?”

“I’m not worried about it.”

It’s his standard answer, and he never elaborates.

“Are you some secret billionaire and I just don’t know?” I ask.

A corner of his lips lifts in a smirk.

“You’ll never...”

He stops midsentence and his attention shifts to the door. Craning my neck, I nearly choke on my beer. It’s not that I didn’t expect to see Jade—I’m always partially prepared to see her—but not looking the way she does tonight.

Her light brown hair is loose and brushes along the tops of bare, sun-kissed shoulders. Has she been spending some time by Misty Lake? As teenagers, we’d spent as much free time as we could there during the summers. And that time had always

turned her skin the same shade it is now, but set against the ivory color of the dress she's wearing? She glows.

Jagger whistles under his breath and I shoot him a glare.

He lifts his hands and retreats a step with his eyebrows raised.

Like a magnet, my attention is drawn back to her. To the way the pastel floral-print dress hugs her curves in a way that I want to. My dick twitches in my jeans, and the urge to stand up, to move closer to her, is so strong that the muscles in my legs tighten to do just that.

Until a man's arm appears and rests against her lower back followed by the rest of him. Sandy-blond hair that's styled to perfection. Dress slacks and a button-down that look freshly ironed. I glance down at my own jeans that have several grease stains and my black T-shirt.

Who the fuck is he and why is Jade here with him?

"Who's that?" I hiss.

"Brian Jessup. He's the math teacher at the high school," Jagger replies quietly.

Another teacher. He's perfect for her. They look like they belong together. So why do the two of them together make me want to punch something?

“Hey, Jade. Two?” Jagger asks.

“Yeah.”

I try to ignore the dropkick into memory lane her voice sends me to. The different ways I’d heard it through the years. The laughter of friendship, the shyness of first love, and the way her voice broke over my name when we took that next step. Then that final day when her voice had been colored with confusion and hurt.

All of that from one little word.

I am in trouble.

“How about that second booth over there?”

How can Jagger just pretend like everything is normal?

It is, dummy. You’re the only one freaking out.

Jagger hadn’t dated Jade in high school. Jagger had been here when she got back from college and started teaching at the high school—and no, it wasn’t stalking to ask my mom about her when I moved back. It isn’t weird for any of them.

Just for me.

And I need to get over myself.

We are both living in Aspen Falls now. This town is big enough for the both of us, right? Then why am I back to second-guessing my decision to attend the reunion?

TWO

JADE

This is awkward as hell.

More uncomfortable than walking into Expedition Brewing with Brian last month. On a date. In the same place my ex-boyfriend frequents.

In his defense, Shep's best friend owns the bar. Where else would he go?

In my defense, this is a small town. And I've lived here longer. Also, he broke up with me. Not the other way around. Why should I feel uncomfortable being on a date in front of Shep?

Might be because he is even hotter than Hades in a heat wave.

It had been uncomfortable. I had felt like I was doing something wrong. But on the outside, I pretended that Shep didn't exist. That should count for something.

More uncomfortable than when the reunion attendees had taken a group tour of the high school yesterday, the day before the reunion dinner. I'd managed to be professional as I showed them around. It was easier for me to do it since I worked there. At least that's what Danielle had told me when she cornered me at the grocery store to volun-tell me. Being tour guide meant I got a distraction from Shep. I was at the front of the group. Per his usual, Shep lingered at the back with his thumbs hooked into his belt loops while he swaggered through the school.

I wasn't looking...it was just hard not to notice.

Sure. Whatever you say.

But the situation that tops them all? The one that makes me wish I had caught the worst case of stomach flu ever to avoid? The reunion mixer at Glacier Basin. The dinner is done—thank God, Shep was at a different table—but Danielle has hired a DJ to “take us back in time to the best days of our life.”

I barely refrain from an eye roll. High school was full of great memories. And the not-so-great big one. But I certainly would never refer to them as the best days of my life.

“Isn’t that right?” Brian looks at me expectantly.

What are we talking about? Guilt pricks at my conscience because I’ve tuned the whole conversation out—too focused on Shep talking with Jagger at the edge of the dance floor. The way that he leaned his head back when he laughed with abandon.

“Jade?”

Shit.

What were we talking about?

“Ummm...I suppose?”

“That’s what I’ve tried to tell the parents. I don’t assign homework, because they need to be able to decompress.”

Why are we talking about homework policies in the middle of summer? Granted, we’ll be back to work in two weeks, but we’ve also talked about our agreement on homework before. I only assign one large paper as a semester project. The students can then divvy the time up as they see fit.

Just like I know Brian gives homework problems but then gives the students twenty minutes at the end of class to work through them.

“Alright, guys and gals, we’re going to slow it down now with a love song you may remember pretty well.”

The opening strains of “Don’t You Wanna Stay” by Jason Aldean and Kelly Clarkson starts and I freeze. I know this

song. I've played it hundreds of times and listened to Shep murmur it in my ear. It's our song.

Does he remember?

My gaze finds his and a faint smile plays on his lips. It's all the answer I need. Heat—a mix of memories and embarrassment that he can still make me flustered with just a look—spreads through me and makes me lightheaded in the wake of the overwhelming sensation.

“I...excuse me. I'll be right back.”

I shoot up from my chair and don't wait for Brian's response.

“Are you okay?” His words barely register.

I wave him away.

“I'm fine. Just need a minute.”

More like I need the rest of the night to lock all my Shep-shaped feelings in the box they seem to have broken out of. But I'll take the few minutes' reprieve in the women's restroom.

Fortunately, Brian doesn't follow me, and the bathroom is empty when I swing open the door. Staring at myself in the mirror, I note the wide eyes and flushed cheeks. The rapid breathing.

Brian doesn't inspire this reaction. No one has. Except Shep.

“Stop. Get yourself together,” I lecture my reflection and crank on the cold water.

I lower my hands one at a time in the stream, watching the water slide over the overheated skin of my wrist before it drains lazily down the sink. It's almost hypnotic and successfully does the job of returning both my breathing and my heartbeat to a regular rhythm.

My turn on the handle is less vicious, and the water slows to a stop. I grab a paper towel from the bin beside me and blot at my damp wrists. There. That's better. All those emotions are

no longer pushing to the surface, even if they are still trying to run amok through my brain. But I'll deal with that—

“Gah! Shep, you scared the shit out of me.”

I had turned for the door, barely catching his reflection in the mirror. Jumping back, I bump against the granite counter with a wince.

He shrugs. “Sorry.”

“You don't sound...wait a minute. This is the women's restroom. What are you doing in here?”

I glance around, but the bathroom is still blessedly empty, save for the hulk of a man in front of me who smells intoxicatingly of leather and vanilla and something more. Something uniquely Shep.

Hold your breath.

He doesn't say anything. Just studies me with those dark brown eyes that have haunted me for far too long.

The breath explodes audibly from my lungs, and I have to gulp in more oxygen and more of his delicious scent. One corner of his mouth quirks up. It's the side with the small scar at the corner—he accidentally hooked himself fishing once at Misty Lake, cussing a blue streak until I offered to play nurse and kiss it better.

Hello! Memory Lane is closed! Permanently.

“I wanted to talk to you.”

“You've had plenty of opportunities,” I huff and cross my arms over my chest.

“It wasn't the right time.”

“And the women's bathroom at our reunion while my date is outside is?”

I try to ignore the zip of a thrill when I see a muscle tic in his jaw on the word “date.”

“I don't give a fuck about your date,” he growls.

He steps closer, and the heat of his body reaches out to mine in the small distance. I could feel him again with just the smallest step on my part.

This is wrong. What about Brian? Remember him? He's your date.

Steel snaps back into my spine, and I shift to the side only for him to follow me.

“Excuse me,” I tell him with a glare.

“Don't go. Just a few minutes. Please?”

He was always hard to stay mad at. Especially when he turned on the smile he's sporting now and said things like please.

“Maybe we should go somewhere a little less...”

“Public?” he suggests with a waggle of his brows.

“Inappropriate,” I correct.

He shrugs.

“I'm serious. Someone could walk in at any minute—”

“Worried to be caught with me, Jade?” His voice drops an octave, and a pulse starts low in my core.

“N-no.”

“Liar, liar, sweetheart.” He moves closer and I step back, but there's no more floor space to retreat.

“What do you want, Shepard?”

He smirks.

“My full name, huh?”

I roll my eyes and fix him with a glare.

“What do you want?” I repeat.

“To talk about us.”

“There is no us. There hasn't been in twelve years.”

A flash of pain shoots through his expression but is gone before I can confirm it was there.

“I’m sorry.”

“You’ve apologized already.”

My mind flashes back to the horrible Saturday night before I left for college that I would rather forget.

“I miss you.”

Is it possible to feel yourself softening toward someone?
Asking for a friend.

It’s me. I’m the friend.

“Shep.”

“Do you miss me, Jade?” he murmurs.

He closes the distance and aligns our bodies the best way he can given our significant difference in height. Almost a foot.

Say yes, stupid!

“I...”

“You...?” he prompts.

“I...I don’t even know if you brought a date tonight,” I tell him and shake my head in an attempt to clear it.

“I did.”

Jealousy is a green-eyed bitch.

“Jagger.”

It takes a minute for his response to register.

His full lips twitch before they stretch into a broad smile.

“You’re awful,” I groan and push at his chest.

He captures my wrist and holds my palm against his racing heart.

“You’re the only one who’s ever done this to me.”

His words echo my thoughts from earlier and drag me back under his spell. I clench my hand, flexing my fingers against the soft fabric of his button-down shirt. It’s a big deal for a man used to T-shirts and jeans. I should push him away,

pull my arm back, something. Anything. But all I can do is stay locked in his gaze, our eyes having a conversation all by themselves.

“I...”

I should go. Those words flit in and out of my mind faster than a hummingbird. I don't want to go. Not yet.

Boosting myself onto the counter, I have a moment of gratitude it's not wet before I cup the back of his neck and tug him down.

“What are you doing?” The words mingle in the breath between us.

“Kissing you.”

“I'm really fucking glad I locked that door.”

He barely finishes the words before his lips are on mine. It's a claiming, a reacquaintance, a dance of lips and tongues that is both new and achingly familiar.

His tongue tangles with mine, and he deepens the kiss while his hands knead my hips and light a fire that filters through my blood.

I tangle my fingers in his too-long hair, the feel of the thick strands tickling me as they glide along my palms. Thank God I wore a flowy dress tonight and can widen my legs as he steps between them.

My breasts ache, begging for his touch that stays frustratingly at my hips. For my part, my legs and arms are wrapped around him like a barnacle in a desperate need to move closer and feed the fire he's sparked.

“Fuck.” His fingers tighten almost painfully and grip the fabric that prevents skin-on-skin contact.

At the first rattle of the door in the jamb, we break apart like guilty teenagers. It's a familiar look given how often my parents, his mom, or his Uncle Joe interrupted a kiss.

“Hello? Anyone in there? Why is this door locked?”

I turn panic-stricken eyes on Shep.

Shit, shit, shit. It's the last person I want to catch me in a locked bathroom with my ex-boyfriend.

Danielle Owens-Hart.

Shep lifts a finger to his lips and I nod. He doesn't have to worry. I don't plan on saying a fucking word.

"Hello?"

The door rattles again, and I swear the loud pounding of my heart is going to give us away. After several agonizing seconds, the clack of her heels fades away.

Confident that she's gone, I push Shep far enough back for me to hop off the counter. I plead temporary insanity for the last few minutes. I'll blame the nostalgia of the song, the reunion, anything I can.

I'm not waiting for Danielle to come back with a member of the staff who has a key for the bathroom. I move fast and slide the lock back to the unlocked position.

Shep's fingers wrap around my wrist and foil my attempt at a speedy escape.

"We're not done with this conversation," he tells me.

I yank my wrist free of his grasp.

"I know."

"Later then."

It's more than just a phrase.

It's a promise.

But the question is, am I looking forward to later? Or not?

THREE

SHEP

“Yo!” Jagger’s voice echoes through the bay, overriding the Morgan Wallen song on the radio.

“Under here. One minute.”

I’m flat on my back under a Subaru—it’s where I’ve been for the last three hours. I’m ready for a shower, a beer, and my bed—not necessarily in that order. Sliding out from under the little silver hatchback, I stand with a groan.

“Where have you been?” Jagger asks.

“What do you mean ‘where have I been?’” I gesture around the shop. “I’ve been busy running a business. You might want to try it sometime.”

He completely ignores the snarky comment and focuses on the excuse. Because that’s exactly what it was—an excuse.

“You’ve been hiding for the last few days.”

Four days, twenty hours, and a handful of minutes. Not that I’m counting.

“I’ve been busy.”

I lift my hand but pause halfway to rubbing my neck. It’s covered with grease and grime from the engine. Shifting tactics, I head for the sink and start to scrub.

“Sure you’re not avoiding Jade?”

With the mention of her name, the memory of our kiss in the bathroom slams into me full force. The little whimper she made when I dug my fingers into her hips, the sweet,

chocolate taste from dessert. Gone was the flavor of strawberry lip gloss. Kissing Jade was the worst kind of addiction—one I didn't want to recover from.

The kiss had been a surprise. I hadn't gone into the bathroom prepared for it. And then I couldn't get it off my mind after I returned to the ballroom where the reunion was being held. It had killed me to witness her interact with her date. He was all wrong for her. Too many times I'd had to stop myself from stalking over there and laying claim to her. She wasn't mine.

Not yet.

But first I have to convince her to give me a second chance. Pretty hard to do given that she already has a boyfriend. The image of the two of them together is finally what drove me to make an excuse to Jagger and cut out of the celebration.

“Why would I avoid Jade?”

Did he know about the kiss?

Jagger huffs a laugh.

“Maybe because that's what you've been doing for the last year.”

“I haven't been avoiding her.”

Liar, liar, pants on fire.

What the hell was I supposed to say to her? I'm sorry I was a dick and broke your heart twelve years ago, but I want a second chance? She *has* a boyfriend and I am not that guy.

You kissed her.

She kissed me. It was a technicality. But one I am not going to repeat until I know that she is single again.

What makes you think she'll break up with him?

The phantom prick of Jade's nails scratches along my scalp, and a shiver works its way down my spine.

“I think they're as clean as they're going to get.”

“Huh?”

“Your hands. You’ve been washing them for five minutes.”

I glance down, and sure enough, the layer of grease from the day’s work is scrubbed clean. There are still some stains, but they’ve been there since high school and they’re not going anywhere no matter how much I scrub.

“Do you want to know what I heard?” he asks.

“Since when did you become the town gossip?”

He flips me the bird and I laugh.

“What did you hear?” I ask, drying my hands.

“It’s about Jade.”

Fuck. Was it the kiss? Had someone spotted her leaving the bathroom and me following shortly after? I hadn’t noticed anyone when I left, but that doesn’t mean much since the only thing on my mind had been Jade and that mind-blowing kiss.

“What about her?”

I mentally pat myself on the back for the level of nonchalance I give off as I start to stack paperwork on my desk.

“She broke up with Brian.”

The papers I’m holding scatter to the floor as I spin around to see Jagger’s face. If he’s fucking with me, I’ll kill him. Judging by the look on his face, it’s not a joke.

“How the fuck do you know that?”

He shrugs, but his facial expression questions why I’m even asking.

“Small town. People talk.”

“Funny. Because you never seem to be the subject of conversation.”

“I don’t give them anything to talk about.”

His phone beeps and he pulls it out to read the display.

“Got to go,” he says and heads for the door.

“Where?”

“Have to take care of something,” he answers vaguely.

“You going to be at the bar later?”

“Maybe. You going to stop avoiding Jade?”

I throw his answer back in his face.

“Maybe.”

He barks out a laugh.

“That’s a yes,” he says.

“Fuck you.”

“See you later, Shep.”

With a wave, he climbs into his truck and backs out of the bay door. The radio breaks the silence, Cody Johnson singing about taking a chance.

For four days and almost twenty-one hours, I’ve been waiting for the universe to send me a sign.

Message received. Loud and clear.

Time to go finish a conversation.

FOUR

JADE

“You busy?” I ask as soon as my best friend, Hayley, answers her phone.

“Um, no. Declan’s at summer camp and Maisie just fell asleep. What’s up?”

I met Hayley my freshman year at CU Boulder. We were both in the education program and were partnered on a project. But while I kept going, Hayley stopped her degree when she got pregnant with her oldest, Declan. Now she is married with two kids. Even though she lives in Colorado Springs with her little family, it is often hard to break away to see each other. But it doesn’t mean she isn’t just a phone call away.

“I broke up with Brian,” I blurt out.

“To break up with someone, you have to be in a relationship with them. Could you really call Brian a relationship?”

Her question stings, but the truth always does.

“Technically, yes.”

“Uh-huh. So technically, how did it go?”

“Surprisingly, not that bad. He almost acted like he expected it.”

I liked Brian. We had a lot in common. Our relationship was easy. But if I am honest with myself, I don’t want easy. I want...more.

“That makes sense.”

“It does?”

“Mmm. I never pictured the two of you together. It was too...”

“Easy?”

“Friendly. The one time you guys came down for New Year’s, it just seemed like there wasn’t any heat. I didn’t sense any physical attraction between the two of you. There was no sexual tension.”

“Because there wasn’t.”

“But you had just started dating. You guys barely even kissed each other at midnight.”

We barely kissed at all. There were no physical displays of affection—public or otherwise. And I had been okay with that. There was more chemistry in my kiss in the bathroom with Shep than in the few kisses I had shared with Brian in the months that we had dated. It made breaking up with him significantly easier than it should have been.

“So what finally prompted you to break up?”

“Finally?”

She sighs. “Oh, Jade. I knew it was coming. You knew it was coming.”

“I...yeah,” I finally admit.

“So, what happened?”

“Shep kissed me.”

One night our freshman year, I’d told her all about Shep—my first love, my first kiss, first everything, including my first heartbreak.

“What? Way to make me wait for the good stuff! I need details, girl.”

“Well, technically, I kissed him.”

“Details. Now.”

“Remember how I texted you about the reunion?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, Danielle asked me to give a tour of the school—”

“Fast forward to the lip-lock please.”

“It all plays a part of it. This whole damn year plays a part in it. Every time I turn around, there he is, looking seven different kinds of sexy and smelling better than anybody has a right to,” I grumble.

I may have stood a chance of keeping him in the past—if I’d been able to keep my distance.

“You kissed him on the tour? Was Brian there?”

“No, not on the tour. At the reunion dinner. Well, after the dinner part. Yeah. He was there.”

“Did he see? Is that why you two broke up?”

“No, he didn’t see. We were in the ballroom and a song came on. Mine and Shep’s...”

“What song?” she asks.

“Why does it matter?”

“I’m trying to set the scene. Living vicariously through you.”

“Why do you need to do that? You’re married and have two beautiful babies.”

“We’ll talk about me later. What song?”

She’s not going to get away with avoiding the question, but I humor her.

“‘Don’t You Wanna Stay’ by Jason Aldean and Kelly Clarkson.”

“Awww. I love that song.”

“So the song comes on and I’m looking around and wondering if he remembers it, and his eyes meet mine and I just *know*. He remembered it. And knowing that? I just—I couldn’t breathe. I couldn’t think. All I could do was feel. And then all I wanted to do was run away from all those feelings—I had to get out of there. I left and went to the bathroom, and

one minute I'm lecturing myself at the sink and the next I glance up and he's there."

"What did he do?"

"Nothing. Not really anyway. He said he wanted to talk, and we basically started to argue. He has this way of getting all growly when he's worked up..."

How many times had that growl vibrated against my ear as he came? Or against my inner thigh when he—

"And you decided to kiss him?" she asks, interrupting my journey down memory lane.

Maybe more like Memory Highway since that bitch has been wide open since the kiss last week. Road closed, my ass.

"It's not like I decided. Not really. One second we were arguing and the next...we weren't."

"Because you were kissing his face off."

I giggle at her description.

"I wouldn't say that."

"What would you say?"

The way his lips had molded to mine, the way his fingers gripped my hips, there isn't a word to describe it. Not one I know of at least.

"I—I'm not sure."

"Then what happened?"

"Someone tried to come in, but he had locked the door—"

"That's so fucking hot."

"It didn't feel that way in the moment," I tell her.

But it had. That illicit sensation that we were somewhere someone could catch us. Heat filters through my blood.

"Have you talked to him since?"

"No. He said he wanted to talk later, but it's like he disappeared. And it's been almost a week. The only way I know he's still around is because his garage is open."

I'm more than a little embarrassed to admit I've cruised by a time or two.

"What if he wants to get back together? Have you thought about that?"

"I don't know. I'm sure people will talk if I jump from one relationship to another..."

Because people love to talk about drama when the hottest thing going is The Sweet Spot bakery adding a new cookie or brownie to the menu.

"Screw them. What do you want?"

I sigh. "Him. It's always been him if I'm honest. I never stopped loving him, never stopped wishing he would come back. Then he did, and I wasn't sure what to do or what to say. We hadn't talked in twelve years. It hasn't even been a week yet, but it feels like longer than all the years we were apart."

"Maybe he's giving you space," she suggests.

"For what?"

"To break up with your boyfriend."

"I did that already!"

"Did you tell him that?" she asks.

"Well, no. But it's because he's been avoiding me."

We also live in a town the size of a postage stamp, and gossip travels from one side to the other faster than a blink, but I don't go into that part. She knows, she's been here before.

"Maybe you should go track him down. He can't avoid you if you're in person. Tell him."

My doorbell rings, and I uncurl from the couch to peer through the peephole.

"Holy shit," I breathe.

"What?"

"He's here."

"Who? Shep?"

“Uh-huh.”

Heat, anger, desire, curiosity—all fizzle through my body in a joint effort that creates a clammy sensation along my palms.

“Answer the door. Call me later. I want details!”

The line goes dead, and a knock reverberates against the wood.

The smirk he shoots me when I open the door tells me he knows exactly where I was—just on the other side of the door.

“What are you doing here?” I ask.

The question comes out harsher than I mean for it to, and his smirk slips slightly before it comes back stronger than before.

“You know why I’m here.”

I cross my arms across my chest.

“Maybe. Are you finally done running from me?”

I’ve managed to push his buttons. A muscle tics in his jaw, and a flame sparks in his dark brown eyes. He brushes past me and into the house.

“Damn it, I don’t know why you want to play twenty questions with me when all I want to do is talk about the other night.” He runs his fingers in his hair like he’s done it a hundred times today. Based on how it looks, I might be right.

“Twenty questions? Are you serious? I haven’t even begun with the questions. It’s been almost a week, Shep. Why now? What does it matter?”

“It matters,” he grits out through clenched teeth.

“Why? You’ve avoided me since the reunion. Hell, actually more like twelve years—”

“I don’t go after something that’s not mine. You were with Brian.”

“Not twelve years ago I wasn’t.”

“Fuck.”

He flops down on the couch and rests his head in his hands.

“Why?”

It’s the question I’ve always had. The one I never got an answer to. Not then. But I need to know now.

He glances up and his eyes meet mine, the regret in them as clear as if he’d said it out loud.

“I...I didn’t know what else to do.”

“What do you mean?”

“You were leaving the next day.”

“We talked about that. You knew I was going to college, but I told you I was coming back. And we’d have weekends and breaks until then. My plan was always to come home.”

“I didn’t have a future. You did.”

“What do you mean you didn’t have a future?”

Understanding is starting to dawn, but I need him to say it.

“I wasn’t going to school. All I knew was fixing cars in my uncle’s garage. What kind of future was that going to be for us?”

I sit on the floor in front of him.

“So you broke our hearts for my own good?”

“I didn’t mean to. I hated it.” He reaches out a hand, and his calloused fingers rub along my jaw until he cups my cheek. “You deserved your future. Not me holding you back to your past.”

“You really believe that, don’t you?”

He nods.

“I’m just a mechanic, Jade. All I have to show for myself is an old garage and calloused hands.”

“I love your hands.”

I reach up and cup his hand against my cheek.

“You deserve better. But I can’t stay away. Not anymore. I fought it for a long time.”

“You just moved back last year,” I remind him.

“Twelve years, babe. From the second I said the words.”

“I wish I had known that then.”

His shrug says more than he does.

“Can’t change the past.”

“No. You can’t.”

We’re silent for several breaths, but we don’t move. My hand still cups his where it rests against my cheek. The scent of leather and vanilla swirls around us in a deliciously scented fog.

“Shep.”

“Hmm?”

“I broke up with Brian.”

One side of his mouth kicks up at my news.

“I know.”

“Stupid small town. So what’s stopping you now?”

His brown eyes turn so dark they’re almost black, but the fire in them is unmistakable.

“Not a goddamn thing,” he says and yanks me into his lap.

FIVE

SHEP

Her mouth is still open in surprise when her lips land on mine, and my tongue wastes no time in reacquainting itself with her taste—mint, honey, and something uniquely Jade. I'll never get my fill, but I'm damned sure I'm not letting her go. Not this time. Not any other time in the future. I gave her up once, but I won't be that stupid again.

She moans and grinds herself against my erection, and stars pop in my vision. I squeeze her ass in my hands and her mouth breaks from mine.

“Ohhh.”

My lips find her jaw and I trace them down along her neck, breathing in her citrusy scent. Her tank top is no match for my mouth, and I shift it to the side and continue to feather kisses along her shoulder and collarbone. Her fingers dive into my hair and hold me in place while her hips shift against mine.

Why did I think jeans were a good idea? Fuck, if I know. I just want them gone right now. I want nothing between us. Not anymore.

“Jade,” I whisper her name against her heated skin.

“Mmmm.”

I slowly reach up and grip her hands in mine, interlacing our fingers so I can retreat enough to see her face. Her eyelids flutter open, and her deep emerald-colored eyes are cloudy with desire.

“I want you.”

The words are simple, but the emotion they express is anything but.

“I’m all yours. You have me.”

She wiggles in my lap to prove her point and I groan.

“Fuck, baby. I want to make you mine again. In every sense of the word.”

This time when she moves, she squirms off my lap. Is it too soon? We dated for almost eighteen months before. But that was when neither of us had any clue what to do. And I know exactly what I want in this moment.

Her.

She lifts her hand and holds it out for mine. I let her pull me from the couch and bump into her.

“Make love to me, Shep.”

Scooping her up in my arms, it only takes me one wrong door until I find her bedroom. The light curtains blow in the breeze from the open window that looks out over her small backyard. She’s made a home here. One I very much want to be a part of.

Releasing her legs, I let her slide down my body. She gasps as my erection brushes her center, and her breaths are shallow when she’s finally on her feet in front of me.

“You’re sure?” I ask again.

“Yes. It’s always been you.”

The words still vibrate on her lips when I claim them, coaxing her tongue to dance with mine. Her hands tug my shirt from my pants while mine find as much warm, smooth skin as they can. I slowly pull her tank top up and over, tossing the cotton somewhere out of my way. Her breasts spill out against the tan lace of her bra, the cups barely covering them. Instead the fabric pushes them up and out, and I lift a finger to trace the smooth skin along the edge.

“Shep.” She moans and arches her back to press herself closer to my touch.

“I like this,” I murmur.

Maybe it was why her breasts had looked so amazing earlier when she crossed her arms. It had taken everything I had not to give them more than a momentary glance. But now I can look my fill.

“But I like it better off.”

I flick the center clasp and her breasts bounce free, the hard nipples begging for my attention. I slide the straps off her shoulders and she shrugs out of it.

“Touch me,” she begs.

I grip the back of my shirt and yank it over my head before I move closer to her. Her hands catalog the muscles in my chest, and her breasts quiver with the movement. Lifting my hands, I cup both of them and run my thumbs over her nipples. Her breath catches, and I use my index fingers and thumbs to pluck at the two distended tips until I can't deny myself any longer. I shift my hands to her hips and boost her until her breasts are at the right level for me to suck one into my mouth. Her legs wrap around my waist while I hold her in place to feast. Her back bows, and I lift a hand to support her while I enjoy the way her breast pushes farther into my mouth.

My name breaks on her lips and I nip at the flesh in my mouth.

“Again.”

I repeat the caress and her legs spasm around me.

My dick pushes insistently against the zipper of my jeans to remind me that I need us both naked. Moving blindly for the bed, I lower us down before I release her breast with a pop. Glancing up, I meet her eyes. They're slumberous with desire, and her lower lip is locked in her teeth.

It's overwhelming what seeing her like this—what being with her like this—makes me feel. Desire. Love. Regret. The combination takes my breath away and makes me so fucking grateful to be right here, right now.

“What?” she asks after several moments and lifts her hand to my face.

“I love you.”

A weight I didn't know existed lifts from my shoulders. A small smile quirks the corners of her mouth, and her fingers curl into my cheek.

“I love you too.”

I shift up, capturing her lips with mine. Her hands feather down my back until they dip below the waistband of my jeans. I drag my hand along her breast, catching the tip between my thumb and forefinger. Using the leverage of her hands on my ass, she lifts her hips to bump mine and breaks the kiss to drag hot, open-mouthed kisses along my jaw until her teeth nip my earlobe.

“I need you,” she murmurs.

“What do you need more, sweetheart? My fingers?” I squeeze the nipple between my fingers until she mewls. “My tongue?” I bite along her neck quickly before laving the sting with my tongue. “Or my cock?”

“Yes.”

“Yes?”

“All three. Everything. You. Now. Please.”

Her words come in pants as she struggles to bring her hands between us to fumble with the snap on her cut-offs. Lifting myself away from her, I lift my hands to the button on my jeans.

“No,” I say when she lifts her hands to finish pulling her shorts off. “I'll do that. I want to undress you.”

She's a goddess bathed in the sunlight that slants through her bedroom window with her hair mussed and her lips swollen and red from my kisses. Her nipples are hard and beg for more of my attention, and I struggle to tug my zipper down over my hard cock. Her attention is locked on the movements of my fingers as I tug the jeans and boxers down over my hips. My cock springs free and she licks her lips.

“See something you like?” I ask her and reach for the hem of her shorts.

“Mm-hmm.”

I make quick work of her shorts and panties and have to agree. The smooth skin of her pussy is the best thing I’ve ever seen.

My fingers slide easily to find the hard bundle of nerves at the end of their pilgrimage. I swirl a finger around the nub, and her legs part to grant me more room. On the second pass, her eyes flutter shut. With the third, she locks her hand around my wrist.

“Don’t stop,” she whimpers.

“I have no intention of stopping.”

I slide one finger inside, followed by a second while I rest my thumb against her clit.

“Oh god.”

“Just me, sweetheart,” I say and lower my lips to her nipple. I tug the peak into my mouth.

I apply pressure against her clit with my thumb and pump my fingers in and out while my tongue spars with the tip of her breast. Her pussy is tightening around my fingers, and my dick twitches against her thigh. But this moment isn’t about my pleasure. It’s about hers.

And she’s fucking close.

I withdraw my fingers from her pussy and she cries out, the cry turning into a gasp as my tongue replaces them. I swipe my tongue back to front and circle her clit before I tap the bundle of nerves. Her fingers tighten in my hair, and the slight tug of pain is a direct line of pleasure down my spine.

“Shep.”

My name on her lips is the sweetest sound.

I want it again. I want my name to be the *only* thing on her lips. Adding a finger to the mix, I curl it until I find the spot I want. Her hips jerk against my mouth, and I tighten my grip

on her thigh to hold her steady while I keep up the symphony of my tongue and lips on her clit and my finger in her pussy. Her muscles spasm around me, and her breath saws in and out of her lungs.

“Please. I’m so close.”

I don’t release my connection, but I know how close she is. No amount of time could make me forget the way she feels when she’s about to come. Sucking her clit into my mouth, I suction hard enough to hollow my cheeks before I bring my teeth lightly down on the bundle.

“*Shepard.*”

Her fingers tighten painfully against my hair but I don’t let up, continuing my efforts until she lies spent beneath me. I climb back up her body, and my mouth finds hers, my tongue breaking through her lips to let her taste herself on mine.

She moves slightly, and a grimace breaks the connection of our lips.

“Oh my god.”

“What?” I ask.

A warm pink climbs up her collarbone and neck to settle in her cheeks.

“Did I...did I pee?”

I smile and drop a kiss to her nose.

“No, you didn’t pee.”

“Why is it so wet?”

This time I can’t stop the bark of laughter that pops out. I roll us so that I’m on my back—thankfully away from the wet spot—and she straddles my waist. Lifting my hands to her breasts, I fill my palms with their weight and drag my thumbs over the tips. She moans and arches against my hands until I repeat the caress.

“It just means you enjoyed yourself. And there’s more where that came from.”

Our times in high school were rushed. Stolen moments in my car or her room the few times I managed to sneak in. Once at my uncle's garage when he left to make a bank deposit. This is a whole new experience. I get to take my time and savor every luscious curve of her body the way that it's meant to be worshipped.

"Mmm. Don't stop," she whispers and lifts her hands to cover mine.

"Not going to happen, sweetheart."

Her pussy rubs against my dick, and I groan at the friction.

"Fuck, sweetheart."

She bends down, and her breasts press against my chest while my hands grip her hips and continue to torture us both as I move her back and forth over my dick.

"I want you inside me."

"I want that too. I just need to grab a condom."

Her eyes open, the dark black of the pupil nearly eclipsing the green.

"I'm on birth control."

Jealousy rears its ugly head as to why she's on birth control. But I have no right to get jealous when it was my own damn fault.

"Not that there was anything like that going on. I—"

I cut off her explanation with a kiss.

"I don't need the details. Are you sure?"

"Yes. I can trust you, right? You'd tell me if we needed one."

I nod. "I got a clear bill of health at my last physical before I moved back."

"What about—"

I press a finger against her lips.

“I know what it looked like. But there’s been no one else for me since I moved back, Jade. No one else. I wanted you.”

She lines herself up with my cock and slowly sinks down.

“Does that answer your question?” she asks.

With her pussy gripping my dick like a goddamn vise, I say the only thing that comes to mind.

“What was the question?”

SIX

JADE

I can't help but laugh at his response and he groans.

“*Fuck*. You're so goddamned tight.”

He pulses his hips against me, and I suck in a breath at the overwhelming sensation of fullness as my body continues to stretch to accommodate him.

“It's been...a while for me.”

He grunts and rests his hands against my hips.

“You set the pace, sweetheart.”

Aftershocks of pleasure still tremble through me. How the hell am I supposed to move right now? He swallows and reaches his hands for mine to weave our fingers together. He squeezes them and I have no idea what black magic it is, but suddenly I *have* to move. Starting slowly, I shift my hips back and forth against his. He shifts, and the withdrawal and smooth glide forward end with his pelvis rubbing against my clit.

I cry out and he moves faster, taking control of our pace. A second orgasm is building in my toes, and my hands grip his harder.

“Jade.”

He thrusts against me and I meet him in the middle. The angle is deeper than before, the pleasure building in an inevitable, powerful wave.

“Please,” I beg.

I'm not sure what I'm begging for. More? Faster? Harder? I can't think. All I can do is feel. White-hot pleasure arcs through my blood, and the overwhelming sensation is an intensity I've never experienced before—with him or anyone else.

He sits up, capturing one of my nipples in his mouth as he keeps our hands locked together and continues to piston his hips. Heat gathers in the pit of my stomach, and every muscle starts to lock in the wake of the orgasm that's cresting.

"Shep."

His teeth sink into my breast in a sharp bite, and the lights exploding around me shatter and take me with them. I'm a million pieces of pleasure as the orgasm drags on. His release, the vibration of his growl against my breast, and the grip in his fingers sets off a third that shoots me into a universe where he and the pleasure he's created in my body are the only things that exist.

His heartbeat thuds steadily in my ear, and his warm hands are splayed along my back when I can finally move again—if I want to. But since I don't, I only grip his waist with my knees even harder. His chuckle shifts his chest against me, and I moan as it shifts something else inside me.

"Fuck, baby. You feel so good." His fingers flex against my back.

"Mmm. So do you," I murmur. "I don't want to move."

"Who says we have to?"

"Nobody. But I should get cleaned up."

His arms tighten around me.

"You don't need to go anywhere."

"Shep."

"I'm not done with you yet," he growls, and my body responds by pulsing around him. "I meant holding you, but give me a minute and we'll go for round two."

The rough drag of his fingers over my back is as much soothing as it is a turn-on.

“I can’t believe you’re here.” My arms squeeze his chest.

“Me neither.”

Lifting my head, I rest my chin on my hand to meet his gaze.

“We’re really doing this. You’re sure?”

“I’ve never been more sure of anything in my life, sweetheart.”

“Why now?” I ask the question that’s been niggling in the back of my mind.

“Truthfully?”

I don’t like that word, but I need the answer. The honest one.

“Yes.”

“I wanted to talk to you the moment I got back to town. I always saw the two of us together in the end.”

“But you didn’t talk to me for months. Until the reunion...”

One side of his mouth quirks up.

“I’m not going to lie. Seeing you with Brian? That slapped me in the face. If I didn’t get off my ass, I was going to lose you. Permanently.”

“Is that why you kissed me back that night?”

“I wanted to do more. But I’m not that guy, Jade. I wasn’t going to take what wasn’t mine.”

I nod.

“I did need to break up with him. I knew before that night that there wasn’t a future with him.”

“Your future is with me.”

The certainty in his eyes soothes some of the doubts that swirl in my stomach. But I must not have them masked as well

as I thought I did. He lifts his hand to my cheek.

“I’m going to prove it to you, Jade. I’m not going anywhere again. You’re it for me. I’ll be here so much, you’ll wish I was somewhere else.”

“Not likely,” I tell him and lean down to brush his lips with mine.

In one quick move, he rolls us so that he’s cradled between my thighs. He pulses his hips, and I cry out until his lips capture mine and his tongue licks into my mouth. Withdrawing until only his tip remains, he holds my hips from reconnecting us while his lips trace my jaw to my ear.

“Ready for round two?” he breathes in my ear.

I dig my nails into his biceps and try to lift my hips again, but it’s no use. He’s in control.

“Please,” I say.

He moves forward an inch and stops again.

“Tell me.”

“Yes.”

I expect him to drive back into me but he still doesn’t move.

“Yes what?”

“I’m ready for round two,” I tell him and mewl when he slides all the way back in.

“For forever,” he corrects.

The words are a promise.

“Forever,” I repeat.

Forever. It’s just the start for us.

Wait! Before you go! Want a glimpse into Jade & Shep’s future? Download your bonus content here! <https://dl>.

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ABOUT BREANNA LYNN

Breanna Lynn is a self-proclaimed “Jane Austen-loving, romcom addicted, popcorn eating,

gummy bear-hoarding, binge-reading, caffeinated chaos coordinator.” A classy connoisseur of all things coffee, Breanna lives in Colorado with her two sets of twins (affectionately referred to as the Twinx), her boyfriend, and his son. When not attempting to keep the Twinx from taking over the world with their sidekicks—two dogs and three cats—she can be found reading, listening to music and crafting her next swoony romance.

For the latest news on Twinx shenanigans and swoony happily ever afters you can follow

Breanna on social media [here](#).

ONE HOT SUMMER:
AUBREE VALENTINE

ONE

ALEXANDREA

Burning up, I sat up in my childhood bed and checked the time on my cell phone.

This was absolutely not the way I envisioned my Monday starting off. Especially when I was drenched in sweat and the sweat part had everything to do with a heat wave in Maryland combined with a broken air conditioner and absolutely nothing to do with an aerobic workout of any kind, if you catch my drift.

Then again, six weeks ago I didn't think I'd be divorced and moving back in with my parents *temporarily* to spend more time with my favorite person in the world, Memaw.

Desperate for relief from the scorching temperature inside (and out), I called the first phone number that popped up online when I searched for after-hours air conditioning service, hoping that *someone* could fix the situation because I did not have time for this. Apparently, neither did, JC's AC & Heating.

"I understand, Ma'am. This heat is causing a whole lot of trouble and I'm afraid you're not the only one who is without cool air. I'll put you down on the schedule for today, but I've got to warn you, I've already got four more service calls before I can get to your address," the technician warned.

"I appreciate the warning. Is there *anything* at all that I can do or try on my end? A simple solution, perhaps?" I don't know a damn thing about fixing air conditioners but I was willing to give it a shot if it meant I wouldn't be stuck

spending one minute more in the sweltering heat that had already encompassed my parents house in Ellicott City.

The man on the other end of the phone gave a gruff laugh. “The only thing you can really do that might help, is turning your fan onto the ‘on’ position, and shutting the actual ac ‘off’. That fan will keep air moving throughout your condo, but it won’t be cold air, unfortunately.”

“Damn it,” I cursed. “Well, okay. I can do that. And then I’ll just wait,” I added with a tiny pout, thankful that the man on the other end of the phone couldn’t see how childish I probably looked right now.

Clearly these extreme temperatures were making me crazy because I was pretty sure that I was about to throw an all out tantrum over something that wasn’t my fault. Or the repair guy’s for that matter.

I heard him mumble, “Good girl,” before he cursed too, and coughed, no doubt to try and cover up the faux pas that may or may not have sent my girlie bits tingling. “I, uh, I mean...great. I’ll be out there as soon as I can. When I’m on the way, I’ll call you back. Is the number called from the best number to reach you?”

If it wasn’t already hot...I would be. Hot and bothered. And damn sure not from nature’s heat wave.

“Yes. That’s the best number to reach me. Thanks. I really do appreciate you coming out.”

“Not a problem. Hopefully it won’t be too long before I get there.”

We both disconnected the call shortly after that and I immediately headed for a cold shower. Both to cool down from the weird effect some random guy seemed to have on me and to wash away the sweat that was already dripping from my skin.

Thank God that I had cold water.

Showered and only mildly more comfortable than I was before, I opt for the thinnest tank top and tiniest shorts I own to combat the heat.

Of course my parents had to be out of town, enjoying a well deserved and long overdue vacation but that meant that I would need to reschedule all of my clients for today so that I could be available whenever the repairman arrived. And since there was no way that I could call them, nor did I want to, I would be footing the bill for whatever today's little repair would cost. It was probably the least I could do since I'd been crashing at their place ever since I got back to town and I still wasn't sure where I was going from here.

By the time I downed some coffee, made some calls and rearranged my entire schedule for the day, it was a little after 11 o'clock. The temperature inside my parents house was pushing 90 degrees with the windows open and ever fan on. According to the weather, it was even hotter outside.

There wasn't enough iced coffee or bottled water to offset the heat.

The place I loved so much when I was growing up, was really welcoming me back - twenty years later - with a vengeance.

Maybe moving back in the middle of the summer wasn't my best idea. I easily could have waited until the Fall if not for Memaw. I wasn't sure *she* could have waited that long when I impulsively quit my job at Addington Ranch and flew home.

I let out a sigh and pulled a pack of frozen peas from the freezer, laying them across the back of my neck for some relief while my mind drifted back to Memaw.

My best friend in the whole world, much to my mother's dismay. It wasn't that my mom and I didn't get along. But, there was a certain bond between me and my grandmother that no one else could compare to. Memaw was here with me everyday while my parents worked.

She took me to dance lessons when I was five and decided I was going to be a ballerina. She introduced me to horses when I was barely old enough to walk. Memaw taught me how to ride my first pony, she paid for advanced lessons and for lessons when I decided I was going to be a barrel racer.

Memaw was my biggest cheerleader. My inspiration in everything I did.

It was because of her that I even dared to move to Colorado for college whenever everyone else begged me to stay here.

None of that mattered at all when Memaw fell ill and the doctors said she didn't have long. I packed up my entire life in California and came home. Leaving it all behind without much of a plan or a second thought.

Tears pricked the back of my eyes, threatening to break the dam I'd been building since her funeral.

I came home for her. But it *was* too late. Memaw died two days after I came *home* and now I felt like I was stuck here for the foreseeable future.

Because I was too damn afraid to go back to Addington.

So I was stuck. Here. Without a barn. Without the two horses I'd bought back in California, that I loved with my whole heart. Completely and utterly unsure of what my future might hold.

At some point, I'd have to make a choice, about my horses and about if I planned to stay here. Maybe even find a farm of my own and start over. Build my dream from the ground up. Or go back to what I knew.

Batting away the stray tears, I willed myself to pull it together. Memaw wouldn't want me sitting around feeling sorry for myself or contemplating my life choices as if it were the end of the world. Nope. Not at all. Memaw was probably cursing at me right now and demanding I make the absolute most of the situation and the unexpected curveball that this morning's debacle tossed my way. .

Oh I could see her now.

Memaw would probably be sitting under the fake palm trees by the pool after a dip in water. She'd have her sunglasses on, a Mai Tai and a good book in her hand.

I could add two more things to the list of things that I hadn't done since...well since I didn't know when. Another favorite pastime that I hadn't made an effort to invest in.

What's the phrase, *no time like the present?*

With nothing else to do except wait, I went searching for my favorite two piece that I know I packed. I was going to seize the opportunity, for the first time in forever, and spend some time relaxing poolside.

On my way out of my bedroom, I grabbed the latest Mignon Mykel release - Lone Wolf - that was sitting on the nightstand *begging* to be read, plucked a towel from the linen closet and headed for the pool.

At least that *was* my new plan. And I almost made it out the backdoor before the doorbell rang, stopping me in my tracks. Turning on my heels, I headed for the front door instead and nearly collided with the man I'd been waiting since 5 am for.

I may have been waiting for him. But I wasn't expecting *him*.

TWO

JAKE

Well. Shit.

When the next job on my list didn't answer, I figured I would swing by and knock on the door anyway. I was close enough to the service address and didn't want to take a chance that maybe the woman who called at sunrise just simply missed my call.

I figured someone might answer the door. After all, she'd promised she would be waiting.

What I wasn't counting on was the curvy knockout of a woman opening the door to greet me.

I knew it was hot outside and she'd been without a/c but I damn sure wasn't expecting her to be clad in nothing but a two piece bathing suit that left just enough to my own very over active imagination.

Double shit.

Didn't help that in my own heat induced delirium I managed to praise her over the phone like she was...mine.

Fuccccccck.

"I...you...*Jake?*"

My name rolls off her tongue and I'll be damned if my pants don't grow even tighter.

What the hell? Was I suddenly a teenager again? I sure felt like it.

“Right,” I clear my throat and shake the dirty thoughts from my head. “Jake, with JC’s AC & Heating. We spoke earlier on the phone. I tried to call to let you know I was heading over but...”

Before I can finish, she looks around for her phone and manages to drop everything in her arms.

I automatically put my tool bag on the floor and lean down to help her collect her things.

The sweet scent of jasmine with a hint of citrus envelopes me when she bends down too. And incidentally treats me to a full view of her ample cleavage.

A groan sneaks past my lips and catches us both off guard.

“I’m sorry,” I fumble out an apology, and *try* to keep my eyes off her tits. How the hell could I be this unprofessional right now? And why did this woman seem to have some kind of unexplainable effect on me?

“You know what, let’s just leave all this here,” she stands and kicks the towel and romance novel to the side. “I must have left my phone in the kitchen when I...nevermind, I’m rambling. Just...the a/c...it’s...”

“Through the kitchen, out the back door and on the side of the house,” I wink. “I know. I installed it.”

She pauses for a moment and gives me a once over. “You don’t recognize me. Do you?”

Her name...she told me her name when she called for service...it was Miss...Mrs...Rizzo. Right. Rizzo. Mrs. Rizzo. She didn’t give me a first name though.

Last time I checked, I didn’t know any Rizzo’s. And I damn sure knew I didn’t sleep with a married woman. *That* was not my style.

She’s also not the person who owned the home when I did the install.

I shook my head. “Going out on a limb here and risking sound like a real jerk, but no, Ma’am, I can’t say I do recognize you.”

Her lips formed a perfect ‘o’ and then she bit her lip.

“I’m sorry,” I winced, offering up what felt like a weak apology.

“No. It’s okay. Please, don’t apologize. It’s been a long time. Twenty years actually.”

Twenty years.

I would have been in high school, or just graduating for that matter. “Hm. Interesting. I didn’t catch your first name, maybe that would ring a bell?”

“Oh my gosh,” she laughed. “I guess that would help. It’s Alex, or Alexandra. Alexandra Esposito. Well, it was Esposito. Now Rizzo, not that that part matters. I was married. Now I’m not, it was a whole thing,” she...erm...Alex waves a hand in the air. “Annnnd. Now I’m rambling.”

“Alex...Alex Esposito,” my eyes widened.

Now that name *does* ring a bell.

And it all makes so much more sense. “Holy, shit. Alex!”

I knew when I did the install that this was her parents house but no one even made mention of her. Not that her parents were home. Instead they had their housekeeper here. At least I think it was the housekeeper. Totally irrelevant now.

Alexandra Esposito dated one of my friends in high school.. The dude turned out to be the biggest douche on the planet. Alex and I stayed friendly after they broke up *and* I may or may not have had a secret crush. I felt like she was the one that got away and all that bullshit. All because I was too fucking chicken shit to tell her that I liked her more than a friend.

She was gorgeous back then. Now, she’s all grown up, of course, and about a hundred and ten times sexier.

Has it really been twenty years since I ran into her?

Last time we spoke, she was moving to...

“Wait, I thought you moved to Colorado?”

“Oh, I did. Finished college, moved to California and worked full time training and caring for horses. Came back home a few weeks back,” her voice trails off. “For uh...for my grandmother’s funeral.”

“Well, shit. I’m sorry to hear about your grandmother. You two were super close if memory serves me right.”

Alex gives me a shy smile. “So, you *do* remember me.”

“Yeah. I remember.” I’m ashamed to admit it but a warm blush creeps over me as an onslaught of memories hits me like a flood.

I remember every Goddamn night that I spent jerking off with my hand, fantasizing about her when we were teenagers. And how much I regret not telling her how I felt before she left for college.

“It took me a minute, you look different. I recognize you now though.”

“I should probably let you get to work. I’m sure the last thing you want to do is stand around in this proverbial hell playing catch up with an old friend. I’ll leave you to it.”

I can tell by the way her shoulders slump and she looks down at the ground that she’s putting up a wall and trying to make herself smaller. Something she started doing when her asshole high school ex would make her feel unseen.

It pissed me off then, and it still pisses me off now.

No woman should ever make herself smaller for any man.

“Alex,” I call her name before she can retreat.

When she looks at me, I can see a glimmer of something in her eyes. Hope maybe?

“I plan on taking my lunch after I finish here. How about you join me and we can catch up?”

Her face lights up and I feel like the luckiest bastard in the world right now.

“You mean it? You really want to?”

“Fuck yes, Alex. A thousand times, yes.”

She cracks a smile that damn near takes my breath away and nods. “Okay. If you insist.”

“As a matter of fact, I do. Now let me get your ac working so we can catch up.”

Fifteen minutes a whole lot of cussing in my head, turns out that the Esposito’s damn near brand new unit is fucked.

Another thirty minutes on hold with the manufacturer and I’ve know got to tell her that she’s really fucked.

And, so am I.

The control board on the ac is bad and the manufacturer has issued a safety recall, in the last twenty-four hours. The control board is on back-order thanks to the recall which means, Alex and her parents are going to be waiting awhile for some cool air.

Fuck my life.

Alex is sitting on a stool at the kitchen counter, biting at her nails when I walk back inside to deliver the news. Thankfully, she’s now covered up with a sundress so that I can at least focus a little better.

“How bad is it? I overheard bits and pieces,” she sighs, and slides an ice cold bottle of water across the counter in my direction.

“You got a place you can stay for about a week, maybe more?” I reply before downing the water in one long chug. “Might be a great time to go on a vacation,” I laugh.

“That bad, huh?”

“That bad. The control board is bad and the manufacturer is going to have to ship you a new one. It could be a week. Or more because they’re in short supply at the moment.”

“Sounds like I’m going to be warm and toasty for a while then. My parents really did pick a great time to take a cruise.”

I’ll give her credit, unlike some other customers I’ve dealt with in the past, she doesn’t cuss me out or blame me. And she

doesn't pout or try to bribe me to somehow magically fix it. Which only serves to turn me on even more.

I think this fucking heat wave is making me delusional. That's the *only* explanation for what comes out of my mouth next.

"Stay with me. I've got a spare room."

The shocked look on Alex's face rivals my own silent shock inside my brain and has me quickly trying to somehow make my offer not nearly as weird as it feels now.

"I've got a spare room. And thanks to Mother Nature, I'll probably be working long hours so I won't be home as much. You'd have the place mostly to yourself. *And* when I am there, we can catch up. Like old times."

Alex laughs. "Like old times? Jake, you *never* invited me to your house back then. We were barely friends."

Que the embarrassment.

"Okay, that may be true. But, what kind of *friend* would I be now if I didn't show you a little hospitality?"

"Well, aren't you just a charmer? It's fine though, really. I'm sure I can crash at my parents place for a few days. Not a big deal."

"That was probably an odd offer anyway, right? Twenty years makes us practically strangers."

"I wouldn't say that. Maybe more like acquaintances, right?"

I smiled. "We'll go with that. Still feeling up for lunch? My treat since I had to deliver the bad news."

"Are you sure you have the time? I wouldn't want to hold you up or anything. And you don't have to pay."

"I've got the time," I scoffed. "And I insist on picking up the tab. There's a really great place around the corner from here that has one of the best lunch menus around. Could I use your bathroom first to wash my hands? Maybe borrow a rag to

clean my face? I normally wouldn't ask a customer that, but since we're acquaintances," I add with a smirk.

"Of course. There's a half bath right over there," she points to a door off between the kitchen and living room. Mom keeps some washcloths on the shelf in there."

"Great. Thanks, give me five minutes."

I freshen up as quickly as possible and resist the very unprofessional and inappropriate desire to rub one out. I've clearly got to get laid because this is obviously out of hand and so not like me.

Alex is waiting by the front door, scrolling through her phone when I come back out.

"Thanks again. All set?"

She nods. "Let's do this."

"I can drive if you want. Don't worry, I keep my truck pretty clean on the inside so you won't get any dirt on you," I offer while grabbing my tools.

"Oh. Okay. Sure."

THREE

ALEX

I can't believe I'm having lunch with Jake Edwards right now.

The very same Jake that I may or may not have had a crush on my senior year of high school. Not that I would have *ever* admitted to anyone at the time. Mostly because I dated his best friend before that and I had no interest in drama or rumors. Instead, I kept him in the friend zone.

The man is every bit as charming and adorable as I remember and I really do feel like I'm catching up with an old friend. Sitting at the bar next to Jake, I've got a genuine smile on my face for the first time in what feels like forever.

"So, let me get this straight...you bought out the company you worked for when we were in high school. Changed the name and now you run the whole show?"

"You make it sound far more impressive than it is," he chuckles and takes a sip of his beer.

"Well, I'd say that it has its perks. Right? I mean you are getting to enjoy a cold beer on your lunch break. I can't think of many places that would allow that."

Jake holds up a single finger. "One beer. That's the limit. And yeah, I guess it has its perks," he chuckles.

"I wasn't judging," I quickly defend. "You had pretty good judgment back in the day. I'm sure that hasn't changed."

"Think about it, how many people have business meetings and drink wine, etc. Right? I figured one beer on occasion, with a friend," he winks, "wouldn't hurt."

“True,” I raise my Strawberry Daiquiri to that.

“Plus, I’m off the clock for the day. I’ve been going since before the crack of dawn. I’ve got some guys coming in to work the later shift to keep things running smoothly. I’ll be heading to pick up my little princess from my mom’s then going home where I can just keep an eye on things in case one of my guys needs me.”

I nearly choke when he makes mention of picking up his little princess. “Little princess?” I question, already trying to picture Jake Edwards as a dad.

A huge grin spreads across his face and his eyes light up. “Yeah. Eviana, or Evi for short. She’s three. Rotten as hell, and way smarter than I’ll ever be.”

“So, she’s in fact *just* like you?” I tease. Jake may have been charming and caring but he was always playing some kind of prank or getting into harmless trouble because the guy could not sit still.

“Oh she’s waaaaay worse than I ever was. Saying I’ve got my hands full is an understatement,” he’s still smiling...like a proud father.

It’s both incredibly sexy and slightly terrifying all the same. A thousand more questions run through my mind. Starting with thoughts about his wife. What she looks like. Is she a good mother? Not to mention the fact that I may or may not be jealous of a woman I’ve never even met.

“I wouldn’t have it any other way,” Jake continues. “That little girl is hands down, one of the most unexpected blessings in my life.”

Curiosity peaked, I playfully demand pictures of the little girl - that turns out to be the spitting image of Jake with the exception of long blonde hair.

“Oh man, she could be your twin. I’m sure your wife loves that.”

Jake’s face falls for a moment and then he shakes his head. “No wife. Her mom skipped town not long after she was born. Apparently she couldn’t handle motherhood.”

I gasp. “Shit, Jake. I’m sorry.”

He shrugs and takes another drink of his beer. “I’m not. I’m only a little embarrassed to say that I didn’t really know her all that well. We may have, uhm, hung out once or twice and next thing you know, she shows up on my doorstep and tells me she’s pregnant. Ghosted me for a bit after that and came back around right before Evi was born. I felt pretty shitty for insisting on a paternity test when Evi was born, but I didn’t feel like I could trust her mother. I guess that instinct was right. If only I’d known that before I slept with her. Then again, I wouldn’t have Eviana and I would never want to go back to a life without her.”

Jake’s emotional confession has my own heart in my throat.

“I’m not really sure what to say back to that but, if you’re half the man you were back in high school, I’m sure Evi’s lucky to have you as her dad.”

“I hope so. Sometimes she makes me question my abilities and my sanity,” he laughs.

Our food eventually arrives and we spend a few minutes savoring our lunch choices in silence until Jake turns the heat on me.

“Alright, Alex. So whose heart did you break on your way back *home*.”

I let out an uncomfortable laugh and try to figure out the best way to explain my super short and mostly uneventful marriage. “Okay so, no judgment,” I warn.

Jake holds up his hands. “You won’t get *any* judgment from me. Scout’s honor.”

Normally, I’d call a guy out for pulling the scout’s honor line. Except for the fact that Jake Edwards was actually a Boy Scout. Eagle Scout if I recalled correctly.

“We met on the riding circuit. It’s really so cliché. I was barrel racing, mostly for fun, and he was a bull rider.”

My lunch partner’s eyes widen. “Barrel racing?”

“*That’s* what you choose to latch on to?” I laugh and roll my eyes.

“I’m trying to picture it, that’s all.”

“Oh, come on. I did 4-H and took riding lessons all through school.”

“I remember, Pony Girl,” he teases.

“God, not that nickname.”

“Go on though. I aired my dirty laundry, let’s hear yours.”

“Fine,” I huff. “The ranch I worked at after college had this amazingly fast horse and no one to ride him. Probably no surprise, I kept barrel racing in college for spare cash, so I figured - why not? Anyway, I made it to the PCB Circuit and we met at one of the events. Turned out he was from the same part of town, Sugarland to be exact. It was one of those whirlwind things. We were both so caught up in all of it. Living life. Having fun. We were at a championship event in Vegas. Luca and I both won the whole damn thing in our respective areas and we decided that getting married was the perfect way to celebrate.

It surprisingly still seemed like a good idea the next day. And the day after that. So, we went on like a newlywed couple. Doing all the things. I changed my name, yada yada. Life went on. I won a few championships of my own and then we realized that we actually made a huge mistake and that I wasn’t what Luca really wanted. So, we went separate ways. I kept his last name since my titles were tied to them. And now here we are.”

“Barrel Racing Champion. In the flesh. Hot damn.”

“Nothing else I said phased you?”

“Nope,” he shakes his head. “I promised, no judgment. I meant it. We’ve both got a past.”

Color me even more impressed. “We do. And they both came with souvenirs. You got a daughter and I’ve got a buckle or two,” I chuckle.

“Cheers to that,” Jake chuckles.

We both continue to eat and catch up, passing the time in the cool air, until Jake's out of time.

"You sure you don't want to crash at my place for a few days?" he asks again as he drives me back to my parents' house.

"Jake, you've got a little girl at home. Even if you did have room for a friend to crash on your sofa, that's probably the last thing you need with a three year old. I wouldn't want to make things weird for her."

"Like you said, she's three. It would be more weird for you to have to watch Cocomelon or Doc McStuffins 24/7 then it would be for her to have a new friend around. Besides, she's got a sleepover with my parents and her cousins planned for the middle of the week. And she's there whenever I'm at work. So, you'll barely know she's there. Eitherway, I promise, I'm trying to be a good friend. No pressure."

"I appreciate the gesture. But, I'll just tough it out where I'm at."

"Your loss," he jokes, pulling into the parking space beside my pick-up truck.

"Thanks for lunch."

"My pleasure. We should do it again sometime," Jake says, genuinely.

"I'd like that."

"I'll give you a call?"

"Sounds like a plan."

Jake nods and I take that as my cue to climb out of his work truck and make my way back inside to give my parents a call and pack a bag.

FOUR

JAKE

Me: I'm guessing the control board still hasn't arrived?

Alex: No ::pouty face:: I'm not sure how much more of this I can handle. My parents checked in from their cruise and I made the mistake of telling them about the a/c. Now they're calling me two times a day and driving me insane. They come home tomorrow and I'm sure it's only going to get worse.

Me: I was afraid of that. The part not being there, I mean. I just got off the phone with them and they're saying it may be another few weeks. They are offering to reimburse for two window units. It's not much but see if I can find two that I can get for you and your parents.

Alex: Oh, believe me. I thought about it but did you know they're sold out everywhere? It's like I'm meant to melt away in this heat.

Me: Evi's with my parents for the next two days. Offer still stands. It's not like we're strangers anymore, lol. We've talked every day. You can have my room, I'll crash in Evi's princess bed. It's a crisp 65 degrees at my place.

Alex: If I didn't know you, this entire thing would be weird and I'd say you were being pushy. But, I'm not made for the heat, Jake. What's your address and what time can I come over?

I quickly type out my address and tell Alex she can come by my place whenever. And then I add the lock pin for my front door.

Alex: Jake! You shouldn't just give your door code to anyone. I can wait until you get home, whenever that is.

I smile at her concern.

Me: I'm not giving it to just anyone, AI - it's you. You're the only person besides my parents that have my front door code and it changes often. Wait...you're not going to rob me blind are you ;)

I hint send and hope that my attempt at humor lands.

She responds almost immediately and says that if she were even the least bit mechanically inclined she absolutely would steal my air conditioner and hook it back up at her parents' place. Her words. Not mine.

Me: You're welcome to try. I'd enjoy watching the show from the security cameras.

Alex: Ugh. You would have cameras. Weirdo :P

Me: You can never be too safe these days. Cameras only on the outside though. Don't worry. I won't spy on you while you snoop around.

Alex: Were you always this charming?

Me: Two words. Air Conditioning.

Alex: Def going to scope out your underwear drawer after I take a nice shower and cool off.

Me: I don't wear any.

This banter with her is way too easy. And damn if I'm not enjoying every single moment.

Alex: Well now it's even warmer in here. What time will you be home? I can at least cook dinner as a thank you for allowing me to crash at your place. That is if you don't mind me also invading your kitchen.

Me: You don't have to do that, but I also don't mind. Take over the whole place if you want. I'll try to be home by 7. Is that too late? I can text when you're on the way.

Alex: 7 is fine. I really appreciate this, Jake.

With a smile on my face, I pocket my phone and get back to work. The sooner I finish up here, the sooner I can get home and hang out with Alex.

Everything I touch after texting with Alex seems to go to shit. Three more hours of work turns into four and then some. Next thing I know, it's nearly ten o'clock before I'm pulling into my driveway.

A light is on in the living room and the selfish part of me hopes Alex waited up, even though I told her she didn't have to.

Coming home and knowing someone is waiting for me... someone other than my mother or my totally adorable and spoiled rotten daughter, does something to me. Especially knowing that someone is Alex.

How the hell can I be in this far over my head so fast?

Probably because you never really got over her, Dumbass, my brain, or maybe it's my dick, warns me.

I blow out a breath, run a hand over my face and take a few minutes to pull myself together before I climb out of my work truck and head to the front door. I key in the code and the door beeps as I open it.

Cool, crisp air hits me and I let out a sigh. *Home.*

“Oh, good. You’re finally here!” Alex comes bouncing out of my kitchen and hands me a cold beer. “Not sure what your usual after work routine is, and I know you told me I didn’t have to wait up, but I did. When you said you’d be later, I decided to make this really awesome lemony chicken and pita chopped salad for dinner. It’s not too heavy if you still need a meal and I made enough that you can even take some for lunch tomorrow. If you wanted to, I mean,” she rambles on in that really charming way that only Alexandria does.

“Thanks,” I tell her with a smile, after I’ve downed a large gulp of beer. “You didn’t wait for me to eat, too, did you?”

Alex blushes and shakes her head. “I did. I may have munched the whole time I was making the salad so I wasn’t super hungry. I figured I could keep you company while you eat, if that’s okay with you, of course.”

“Hell yeah. That’s fine with me,” I take another drink then pass the bottle back to Alex. “Sit that on the counter for me, please? I’m going to take a quick shower and change out of my work clothes. I’ll be back and then we can find something on tv and enjoy this salad you made.”

“Okay,” her face lights up. “I’m not stealing your bed, by the way. And I used the guest bathroom when I showered earlier. I’ll sleep on the couch.”

“Like hell you will, Alex. No way in hell I’m making you sleep on the couch.”

She brushes me off. “You’re not making me. We can argue about this more when we eat.”

“Oh, we will,” I warn her. Meanwhile I’m already hard at just the thought of volleying back and forth with her.

At least I’m in my own damn house and can take the edge off without feeling *too* guilty about it.

And so I do. I reluctantly leave Alex and head upstairs to the master suite where I quickly strip down and toss my clothes in the hamper before climbing in the shower and relieving some of the built up sexual tension flowing through my veins.

Temporarily settled, I quickly scrub up and rinse off so that I can get back downstairs to my house guest.

Thank fuck that today is Friday and I'm not the guy on-call this weekend. Sucks for my Assistant Manager, but it was his turn on the rotation and Jeremy can absolutely handle it. That's why he's my right hand guy.

Drying off, I slip on a pair of gym shorts then head back downstairs.

FIVE

ALEX

Hanging out at Jake's house while he was at work, surprisingly, felt a lot less awkward than I thought it would. I felt..safe. Welcome. Like I was in my own home. Okay, *that* might be pushing it but I'm mostly comfortable here.

And that couch that Jake claims I'm not going to be sleeping on? It's amazing. I don't know where he found it but it feels like a cloud. A million times better than the stuffy and stiff sofa at my parents house.

Jake's house gives off a whole vibe. Like it's made to be lived in. Like McMaw's house but with a little more modern flair.

While I wait for him to finish in the shower, I make two hearty bowls of salad and gather two more beers and bottle water for each of us.

I hear his footsteps behind me as I'm setting everything on the coffee table. When I turn around and catch a glimpse of him standing there watching me, with nothing but a pair of shorts on, I almost forget how to speak.

Jake has absolutely nothing on the heroes on the cover of romance novels. Nor does he look *anything* like my ex-husband. Where my ex was scrawny and full of scars from bull riding, Jake was thicker and the only visible mark on his skin was a tattoo over his heart with Evi's name at the center of it. Looking at him, I began to fully understand the appeal of a Dad-Bod.

"Everything okay?" The smug bastard has the nerve to ask.

“Yep,” I manage to squeak.

“The salad looks great. Did you grab forks?”

“Uh, not yet.”

“I’ll get them,” he grins, walking into the kitchen and pulling out two forks. “You really didn’t have to wait for me to eat.”

“Add it to the list of things you think I don’t have to do,” I immediately opt for ruffling his feathers.

Jake shakes his head and grumbles under his breath.

“Nothing to say, Jake?”

“I’ve got plenty to say…” and I’m sure he’s about to but his stomach chimes in with a growl first. “Right after I stuff my face.”

Jake kicks back right in the middle of the sofa, leaving me no option for putting space between us. So, I pick a corner and curl up, reaching for my salad.

“Bon appetit,” I nod in his direction and dig in, too nervous to wait for Jake’s assessment of what I made.

“Damn,” he lets out a moan beside me. “Alex, this is amazing.”

Pride swells in my chest. “Thanks.”

“No, I’m serious. I’m going to need the recipe for this. I love a good salad but have a hard time mixing it up. I get tired of eating the same thing all the time.”

“Yes! Same. I mean, we all know that I love a good burger or a steak. But sometimes I need more greens in my life and I want something hearty, that is going to sate my appetite too.”

“Exactly,” he agrees, cleaning his palate with a drink.

“What about Evi? You said she’s three. Three-year-olds are pretty picky, right?”

“Oh you have no idea. A few weeks ago, she decided that she could *only* eat peanut butter and jelly sandwiches. Three meals a day. She wouldn’t eat anything else. No matter what I

tried. Now she's moved on to chicken nuggets. At least I can sneak some veggies in with those thanks to the pre-packaged nuggets at the store."

I gasp, "You mean, you don't make her home cooked, all organic, chicken nuggets, from scratch?"

Jake pauses mid-bite and looks over at me with a questioning glance. "Tell me you're being sarcastic."

I do my best to keep a straight face for as long as I can, before I can't take it anymore and burst into giggles. "Yes, I'm kidding."

"You're evil," he concludes. "Evil."

"Muahahaha. You have no idea."

"Have I mentioned that it's been good having you back? Catching up with you. Even if you're a sarcastic smartass," he says, doing his best to avoid my gaze.

"It's been good catching up with you too. Even if you're still a bit of a domineering, control freak."

"I can't be sure, but I think you said dominant wrong."

My insides flutter. *I knew it! I knew it! I knew it!*

Okay maybe I didn't *know* it. But his praise that day on the phone makes so much more sense.

"Pretending you can't hear me, again?"

"Huh?"

Jake smirks and I notice the tiniest of dimples on his left cheek. Jesus, this man is something else.

"You heard me. I know you did."

"If I didn't know better, I'd think that this whole thing was a ploy to seduce me," I go all in and attempt to feel out this sexual tension that I've been convinced that I was imagining.

He leans forward and sets his now empty bowl down then turns to face me. "Not a ploy, Pony Girl. I haven't always been so straightforward when it comes to you, I can admit that. We're both adults now though."

Following suit, I put my own things down and wipe my hands on my shorts. “And. Tell me more.”

My heart thumps faster in my chest.

“I didn’t invite you to stay at my house to get in your pants,” his voice grows thicker.

“But...”

“But, I’d be lying if I said that I haven’t felt some kind of way since the moment you opened the front door at your parents’ house. Honestly, maybe even when I talked to you on the phone, even though I had no idea that I was talking to *you*.”

His vulnerable honesty seduces me more than anything else possibly could.

“Alexandrea, I want you. So. Fucking. Bad. Have for more than twenty-years.”

As if I needed physical proof, Jake repositions himself on the couch and has to adjust his very noticeable erection.

“Jake,” my voice cracks and my entire body hums to life, reacting to Jake in an electrifying way that is almost unexplainable. “What...what are you saying?”

“I’m asking if you want this.”

Did I?

SIX

JAKE

“God, Jake. I feel so off kilter with you. It’s like I can barely think straight.”

Join the club, Alex. Join. The. Club. “I know. Because I feel the same damn way.”

Alex lips her lips and my cock grows harder. Any harder and I’m afraid it might break.

“Jake?”

“Yeah, Alex.”

“I think...I want...no, I *need* you to kiss me now.”

Brushing her short brunette locks behind her ear, I search her eyes for any hint of uncertainty. I’m met with heat and lust. Still, I need to be 100% sure we’re on the same page. “Alex, if I put my lips on you, I’m not going to be able to stop. It’s been too long.”

Alex moves closer and straddles my hips. “I don’t want you to stop,” she whispers before she boldly presses her lips to mine.

I wasn’t lying when I promised I wouldn’t be able to stop. Kissing Alex is a wet dream. An aphrodisiac come to life. My hand, my greedy and possessive hands, grip her t-shirt and rip it in half.

“Jake!” she gasps and bucks against me.

Those gorgeous tits that caught my attention the first time I saw her again, are fully exposed to me now, begging to be

touched, pinched, sucked on. And when I lick the hardened peaks, Alex purrs like a kitten and rocks against my cock again.

“Alex, I need to fuck you. Now. Right. Now.”

“Yes. Please.”

“Not here. I want to be able to take your body over and over again. All night.”

Reading my mind, Alex slides off of my lap and reaches for my hand. “Then I suggest you lead me to your room.”

I don't need to be told twice. With her hand in mine, I do my best not to drag her upstairs.

The minute we're in my room, I pull her shorts off and shuck my own before I pin her to the bed and spread her legs.

“I've dreamed about licking your pussy long before I even had a clue what I was doing,” I confess, falling to my knees to ravage her.

“I sure hope...oh...ohhhh. Jake!”

Her sweet taste is intoxicating. There's no way that I'll ever be able to get enough of her. Not now. Not ever.

“Jake!” she screams my name and grips my hair like her life depends on it but I don't stop.

Not until her first orgasm has taken over and she's coming on my tongue.

When her body stops shaking, I place a tender kiss on the inside of her thigh. “What were you about to say a few minutes ago?” I tease, rising to my feet.

“Nothing,” she sighs, sated and content. For now.

“Uhuh.” I look down at her pussy still glistening from her release, and my cock mere inches from her entrance. “Alex, tell me you're on the pill.”

She nods. “I am. I haven't been with anyone in a while... I...I'm clean.”

“Good. Me too.” I swipe my length between her legs. “I want to take you bare. Just like this.”

“Yes. Do it,” she begs.

That’s all the encouragement I need before I push inside her. Finally finding out exactly what heaven feels like.

“Goddamn. Alexandra.”

“Mmmm.”

“Better than I ever dreamed.”

“Way better,” she moans, meeting me thrust for thrust.

“All night, do you hear me? I’m going to do this. With you. All. Night,” I grunt, feeling my balls tightening.

I fuck Alex like I’ve dreamt of doing for far too long, holding out for as long as I possibly can, giving her everything I’ve got. Alex follows me right over the edge, claiming me in a way no other woman ever has.

“That...Jake...I...”

“Speechless?” I murmur, my face buried in the crook of her neck.

“A little,” she chuckles.

Alex gives herself to me two more times before I can no longer hold my eyes open. She offers to move to the couch but I’m not having it. Instead, I wrap my arm around her curvy waist and pull her closer to me.

“Stay.”

“Fine,” she gives in all too easily. “But only for tonight.”

I grin to myself. “We’ll see about that.”

She may not realize it yet but she’s mine. Forever.

No way in hell I can only have her for one night.

“We’ll see about that,” I whisper again before my eyes drift closed.

To be continued...

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ABOUT AUBREE VALENTINE

Aubree Valentine began her book world career back in 2016 as a virtual assistant for a friend/fellow author and as a book blogger. But, she began writing stories long before that. After carefully learning the ins and outs of the Indie book business, Aubree finally decided to give publishing a try for herself - with a whole lot of encouragement from the friends and mentors she met along the way.

Her first book, *Take Back My Heart*, was released in the fall of 2016, with its follow-up - *Come Back to Me* launching a year later. They were quickly followed by her breakout novel, *Hot Cop*, part of the *Too Hot to Handle Series*.

Aubree has a degree in sarcasm and resides in Pennsylvania with her husband, two children and several furbabies. She enjoys reading, chasing after her twins (or trying to keep them out of trouble), cuddling with her husband, and coming up with new project ideas that often involve power tools.

RESCUED: A.M. WILSON

Cortney

“Thanks again for helping out today.” I smile at my sister-in-law, Bree, and dust my hands off on my navy scrub pants.

She waves me off with a bright smile. “It’s not a problem. The kids are all at the daycare with Whitney, and Corjan’s helping Lee with the adoption event until this afternoon.”

“You mean you didn’t want to help my brothers use their charm to find some of our dogs new loving homes?”

Bree rubs the clean examination table with unnecessary effort before tossing down the rag. Her adorable huff brings a grin to my face. “If I have to hear one more woman ask if my husband is available for adoption too, I might just lose it.”

“There are way too many single women in this town. The men are outnumbered ten to one.” I tease while restocking supplies.

“You aren’t wrong.” She wipes the sweat from her brow. “But my husband is off the market. By his own confession he’s been that way since high school. These girls should know to keep their hands to themselves.”

“If he would just walk around shirtless, they’d all get a glimpse of your name on his chest and scatter.”

Bree laughs. “I’m pretty sure that’s against some safety violation somewhere.”

“It can’t be much different than the fire station’s annual calendar.”

“That’s for charity!”

“So? They might be my brothers, but we aren’t blood related and I’m not blind.” I run the broom across the floor, gathering hair and nail clippings into a pile. “You and I both know they’d run out of dogs if they took off some clothes, and Corjan could show off your brand at the same time.”

“And you and I both know there are some ladies who wouldn’t be deterred.”

“Isn’t that the truth.”

“Speaking of single women, how are you doing?”

My eyes snap to Bree’s before darting away. “Nice segue,” I grumble, picking up my purple thermos. The coffee is still hot from this morning, buying me precious time with each delicious sip. “I’m good.”

“Cortney.”

“What?”

Bree moves briskly into my line of sight. “You haven’t said much to anyone in weeks. Your fiancé cheated on you and you jet off on your prepaid honeymoon, coming home after an extended stay, sun kissed and glowing, as if you didn’t just get your heart broken.”

“You know I love you, right?” I reply through a tight throat.

Her brows move together. “Yes,” she answers cautiously.

I bob my head. “Good. I just can’t tell you how thankful I am to have a family who checks on me out of concern and not out of a need to gossip.”

“So with that in mind, can you tell me how you really are? It almost feels as if you met someone on your trip.”

My eyes dart for the open door as if I might find a line of waiting clients to save me from divulging too much information.

“I really am fine. I went on vacation and extended my stay for a bit of soul searching, and I found it.”

“Found what?”

I shrug and lick the rim of my mug before taking another drink. “Sebastian wasn’t right for me.”

Bree’s snort rings loud in the small room. “I’ll say. He was a downright stuck-up prick if you ask me.”

Hollowing my cheeks does nothing to suppress the smile breaking free. “He was that.” I lift my thermos to her in a

salute.

“I honestly don’t know how you aren’t drowning yourself in baked goods. This festival is full of them,” Bree says. Her suggestion sets off a rumble in my stomach.

“Speaking of…” I trail off and glance at the door to my mobile vet clinic. “There’s a lull.”

“And?” Mischief sparkles in her brown eyes.

“One of those locally baked goods sounds good right about now.”

“Say no more.” Bree moves swiftly out the door.

Needing some fresh air, I follow a few steps behind, exiting the converted RV and dodging the canvas canopy in order to soak in a little sunshine on my newly sun kissed skin.

Someday soon I’ll need to divulge the details of my honeymoon-that-wasn’t, but I’m not ready. As I shuffle and reorganize pamphlets on my table, I think about why that is.

My family is kind and tight-knit. Nancy and Terrance took in six kids off the streets and showed us what it meant to have a loving home. From day one, being the only girl in the family meant I have five brothers who vowed to protect me. A job they took seriously even more so after Terrance passed away.

Which is probably why I don’t want to tell them that I didn’t spend my Caribbean vacation drunk on a beach.

I didn’t come close to spending it alone.

“Spencer Stone. It’s a damn sight to see you strolling through Fairview Valley. First time back since graduation?”

“Something like that.” Spencer’s gravelly voice scrapes over his short reply. The truth of his words burrows like a thorn in my chest, deep enough that even a good inhale can’t displace it.

I resist the urgent need to turn around.

The man whistles. “That’s a long time. Twenty years, yeah?”

“Yeah.”

The simple response sets off a chain reaction beneath my skin. Bumps erupt along my bare arms, a direct contradiction to the midday sun beating down. My scrub top sticks to my back where a bead of sweat rolls steadily down my spine. I freeze in place. The task in front of me is nearly forgotten as my ears perk up to the voices behind me. One in particular sets a storm rolling in my stomach.

“I heard about the accident.”

“Considering your mom used to run the town newspaper, I’m not surprised.”

The little information in Spencer’s retort clears up any confusion I had about who stopped him on the sidewalk for a chat and explains the thread of displeasure in his tone. Pete Perkins and Spencer were always more rivals than friends. Growing up the two always seemed to be in competition. For school titles, starting quarterback, and, I swallow hard, *me*.

Brushing off Pete’s advances in high school came easily. I never afforded him a second thought. But something about Spencer gave me pause. Maybe because my brothers were already close with the other Stone siblings. He had an in. A leg up.

Or it could be the indisputable fact that Spencer Stone always has been downright drool worthy. With his chiseled face and muscular body, he completed the package with the bad boy persona.

The night we graduated, I finally caved to the charm. He left town the next morning and hasn’t returned.

Until now.

“You know how it is around here,” Pete says.

My musings drift off as their conversation resumes.

“Yeah.” Spencer’s voice takes on a hard edge.

“All things considered, you look good.”

Spencer swears and my stomach clenches.

“I just mean the scars are hardly noticeable.” Pete goes on.

“What’s got that frown on your face, honey?” A voice roughened from years of smoking drags me from the conversation at my back.

My chin rises from my chest, revealing how tightly I was squeezing my shoulders to my ears. The festival on Main Street resumes around me as if I didn’t just spend the last however many minutes eavesdropping.

“Oh, it’s nothing.” I laugh with a wave of my hand, forcing my muscles to relax. “How can I help you, Stella?”

She raises her arm. I swiftly move to help her settle the pet carrier on the table beneath the white canopy.

“I heard you’d be down here for the day. My Mister Fluffskateer needs his vaccines and a nail trim.”

Inwardly, I groan. Stella’s cat is old and as ornery as they come. I’m pretty sure his least favorite thing in the world is a visit to my office for his annual visit.

“Did you give him his medicine to sedate him?” I peer into the carrier. The ginger cat releases a mighty growl.

“Well, I tried, but I think he might have spit it out. You know how bad my eyesight is.”

“I understand.” I smile. “I’ll see what he’ll put up with today.”

“You only run this free clinic once a year, so I hope you can make it work.”

Every year during the Fairview Valley Festival I run a free vaccine and nail trim clinic. Many of my regular clients take advantage of the opportunity to bring their pets up-to-date and save a little cash to spend on the festival instead.

I scan the people passing around my tent. “Don’t worry, Stella. I’ll take care of him. Once my assistant returns, we can get started.”

“Do you know how long that might be? I need to get over to the square dancing competition in twenty minutes. Aiden

promised to be my partner.” Stella winks and wiggles her heavily drawn eyebrows.

I laugh at the image of my youngest brother taking her for a spin on the dance floor. Stella and her posse have twice as much energy as the rest of us despite nearing their seventies.

“Why don’t you leave Mister Fluffskateer with me and come by when you’re finished?” I offer.

“I’d rather not. He hates being cooped up in that thing.”

A wave of annoyance washes over me. Before I can point out how I’m doing my best to work with her demands, a voice rings out from beyond my left shoulder.

So close that I stiffen.

“I’m available to help,” Spencer says.

Spencer

The minute I saw Pete *fucking* Perkins, I should have turned around and gone back home. I should have known the guy would find a way to sneak in an insult or two before the conversation was over. He brought up my scars, and I gave him five minutes of a hard stare and him digging himself into a deeper hole before I turned around without a word intent on walking away.

The problem is I walked straight into *her*.

The single reason I’m back in this small town.

I’m not sure why I offered to give her a hand. It’s not the sort of thing I’m known for around here, for one. But the image of her lips, parted and pouty, and the way I could just make out her eyes darting around the street, had the words falling from my mouth before I could stop them.

What the fuck do I know about veterinary care? Not one damn thing.

Except the fact that I might just be in love with the veterinarian.

“Oh, you don’t have to do that. Bree should be back any minute.” Cortney delivers her brush off without even turning her head fully in my direction.

“My hands have burn scars but they still work.”

Her wince tells me that was a dick thing to say.

The problem is I can see Stella staring at them while she waits for this exchange to pass. That’s two people in the span of ten minutes taking note of the ways my body looks a little different.

Many around here heard the rumors about the pipeline fire at the oil field where I worked. But this is the first time they’ve seen the damage with their own eyes.

I should have known they’d whisper and stare.

I definitely should have stayed at home today.

“Come on,” Cortney says quietly.

I rub my shoulder against hers as I take the cat carrier from her and follow silently into the RV. The brief contact blooms comfort in my cold heart.

“We’ll be right back with Mister Fluffskateer, Stella.”

“You two take your time,” Stella calls after us.

“Oh, now she’s not in a hurry,” Cortney mutters, pulling out a pair of thick, black sleeves from a drawer. “Here. Put these on. They’ll protect your arms.”

My response is a cross between a snort and a scoff. I shake my head. “No.”

She thrusts the gloves at me. “Seriously. This cat isn’t known for being friendly like his owner. I don’t need you getting bit or injured.”

“I’ll just add the scar to the collection.”

Cortney slams down a small nail clipper before turning around to retrieve a towel. “Suit yourself,” she mutters beneath

her breath.

“Ready?” I ask.

She confirms with a nod, and I release the catch on the carrier. The orange cat slowly vacates the confined space with a long stretch.

We set out at a crawling pace. What seems to me like cutting one nail per minute. After the first foot is finished, Courtney breaks the silence.

“What brings you to the festival?”

“I’ve been helping Tony with his car for the race later.”

“I didn’t know you worked on cars.”

“It’s recent. I picked up some experience over the years. Tony gave me a job working at his shop. He needed another mechanic.”

Her head snaps up, bringing with it her gorgeous gaze. Our eyes lock while she works out what she wants to say next.

“Does that mean you’ll be staying in town for a while?”

I lick my lips while staring at hers. “That’s the plan.”

“I—”

The door flies open, startling us both from whispered words and secret admissions.

“I’ve brought sisters and sweets!” A voice rings out as two girls file into the RV. “Oh. Sorry. I didn’t know anyone else was here.”

A red hue colors Courtney’s cheeks. “A client stopped by with a bit of a time crunch, and Spencer was around to help.”

The blonde cocks her head to the side. “Spencer? Spencer Stone, right?”

“That’d be me.”

“I’m Bree.” She moves around us with a slight bounce to her step. “You’ll have to forgive me for not remembering. I know Silas and Sutton, but I left town for ten years and the rest was sort of forgotten.”

I chuckle dryly at her description. If only she knew how accurate it was.

Silas and Sutton are the beloved brothers in this town, rivaling the Powell siblings and their dog sanctuary. With both of them in law enforcement, the town practically bows in their presence.

Not so much with me. Which is how I prefer it.

Bree rambles on. “And this is Juniper. She’s married to Lee Powell, if you didn’t know.”

“It’s nice to meet you,” Juniper says.

The ginger in my arms startles with the newcomers. I tighten my grip and incline my head in Juniper’s direction. “Same.”

An awkward silence expands in the RV, broken only by the rumbling growls of the cat and the steady snip of Cortney’s clippers.

“Are we interrupting something?” Bree asks. The sound of a plastic bag rustling comes from behind me.

“No.” Cortney and I answer at the same time.

My brusque tone probably does nothing to convince her of that fact.

“I can take over if you’d like to get out of here,” Juniper says, moving closer to the exam table.

“I got this one.”

“Are you sure?” she asks again, her tone losing an edge of confidence.

“I got it,” I reply curtly.

Juniper shifts her attention to Cortney, who keeps her focus firmly on her task.

“What’d you bring me?” Cortney asks, changing the subject.

“Only the best Fairview Valley has to offer. Fairview fudge and Grandma Nellie’s homemade cinnamon buns.” Bree

rustles around at my back.

Without warning, the cat rolls in my arms and catches my forearm with his back foot.

“Ah, fuck,” I grumble. A streak of red grows on the surface of one of my scars.

“Done! I’m done,” Cortney declares through the commotion. I immediately scruff the cat and slide him into his cage.

“Excellent.” I locate a string of a gauzy material and wrap it around my arm twice to stop the blood. My eyes find hers once I’m done.

“I told you to wear the sleeves,” Cortney mumbles, flitting her eyes away from my stare.

“You’re welcome.”

“Thank you.” Her tone takes on a softer edge.

I want to stay and soak in her presence. But the audience makes me feel as caged as the fluffy orange cat. I can feel their curiosity like a dense fog. A suffocating presence when all I want is fresh air.

Tipping my chin, I nod to Cortney before dragging my gaze through the other women. “You seem to have more than enough hands, so I’ll be on my way. I’ll be at the shop at five if you want me to take a look at your car when you’re finished here.”

A cloud of confusion in Cortney’s eyes quickly dissipates as understanding sets in. A veiled invitation. “Right. I’ll come right over so you don’t have to wait.”

“I’ll see you later then.” With one last nod to the group, I make my way outside into the afternoon sun.

By the time I return to the racetrack, I’m sweating. My chest is tight. My quads and hamstrings ache with the need to turn around and go back to her. As I grab a beer from Tony’s cooler, I wonder if she knows this pull she has over me. That the moment I sat down beside her three weeks ago, my life was irrevocably changed.

For months, I didn't know how I was going to make it through healing from the fire. There were dark times that I didn't even know if I wanted to. I was alone and dreading every second of what the unknown future held.

Three weeks ago, that all changed.

That fire might end up being the catalyst to the best thing that ever happened to me.

Cortney

Goosebumps appear on my skin that have nothing to do with the air temperature. The heat from the summer day has only gotten worse as the afternoon fades into evening. The events on Main Street are winding down as the locals shift to the racetrack and the bars for the evening festivities. People will get drunk late into the night while watching the races and enjoying the street dances and music until midnight.

I tore down my booth around four, packing my tent and closing my RV. I drove the beast back to my brother Jude's property where we house the family dog sanctuary. The mobile clinic comes in handy there for vet checks. It has all the basic supplies I might need if there's a problem with one of the rescue dogs and saves Jude a trip into town since he's a bit of a hermit.

Without a single hesitation, I made the drive back into the heart of Fairview Valley and pulled into the parking lot of Tony's Auto Shop, where I am now.

My heart thuds at the lack of people on this end of town. The parking lot is half-filled with customers' cars waiting for parts and services, but the owners are long gone. The lobby windows reveal a dark, empty interior. The only light is the bright orange *closed* sign attached to the glass.

My desire to see Spencer again wins against the feelings of stupidity creeping in. A little voice in the back of my head nags at me to leave. To go home and check on my teenage son,

Oliver, and his friend, Lincoln. Or to find a girlfriend and head to the bar like all the other locals this evening.

But before that voice can get any louder, the big door covering the bay slides open with a grumble of a motor and cranks, and the silhouette of Spencer appears. His big hand waves me in.

I suppose he wants to keep up with the appearance of doing me a favor. With a sigh, I throw my car into drive and roll inside. The big door lowers shut behind me.

“You do know my car works just fine, right?” I say as I slip out from behind the wheel.

Spencer shuts my door with a loud bang in the large, empty garage before pressing my back tightly against it.

Without so much as a hello, his mouth slams down on mine.

I moan at the taste of him, opening to grant him access. A week without has been too long when I easily became accustomed to his kisses.

He takes advantage of the lack of resistance and slips his tongue inside, inviting me to sample the remnants of a fresh, cold beer he recently consumed.

The way his hands cup the sides of my head, fingers speared through my hair, convey a dizzying need. His desperate hold warms the cold, lonely parts inside of me. Reaching into the newly mended cracks and reinforcing them with all that is Spencer Stone. Forcing me to never forget the feelings he rouses inside of me.

Just as suddenly as he drew me in, he pulls away. His thumb swipes the moisture left along my swollen bottom lip.

“Did you miss me?” Spencer smirks, but I sense the hint of vulnerability lurking just beneath the hard exterior.

Spencer Stone isn't used to being missed by anybody.

“Do you even have to ask?” My voice is soft and breathless.

He brushes his hands through my hair and settles them on my waist. “Just checking.”

“What happened to what you said on the plane?”

“What?” He leans in and brushes his nose against mine. “Did you really think that our two weeks alone in the Caribbean was just a fling?”

My eyelashes flutter. “That *is* what you said.”

“Things were moving really fast. I believe it was you who said I was a good rebound.”

A breath leaves my parted lips. “That was self-preservation. You do have a history of leaving me after we spend a night together.”

A grumble sounds from Spencer’s chest. “That was twenty years ago, woman. I thought I more than made it up to you at our hotel.”

I release a pleasant hum. Memories flood forward, bringing an arousing clench below my waist. “That you did. But then you did it again when we arrived in Minnesota.”

“Maybe I had a need for some self-preservation as well.”

Can I blame him? Three weeks ago my fiancé, *ex-fiancé*, cheated on me, and I boarded a plane alone for our honeymoon not knowing he sold his half of our tickets to a stranger. Or so he thought. Spencer, having heard the story through mutual channels, bought the tickets and went on the trip with me.

When he sat down on the plane in first-class beside me, I was pissed at the invasion of my privacy. I wanted to lick my wounds in peace. But it didn’t take long for me to realize that a little of Spencer’s charm was all I needed to move on from my broken heart.

Apparently, somewhere during our two-week stay, he didn’t get the message that I’d moved on from my ex fiancé. For that, I only have myself to blame.

I hold his gaze as I tell him, “I wouldn’t hurt you.”

Spencer's shoulders rise and fall with a deep breath. "Not intentionally, no. I don't think you would."

"What does this mean?"

His arms tighten around me when he lifts his head to glance around the open space. "I think this means I'm here to stay for a while."

"Back in Fairview Valley."

He chuckles. "I never thought I'd say that again." Just as suddenly, the smile melts from his face as he looks like a decade of guilt settles in its place. "I'm ready to try again. I mean, I even got a job here."

"Something about oil and grease really calls to you, huh?"

The corner of his full mouth tips up. "What can I say? I like to get dirty." His eyebrows bounce, and his gaze heats.

Laying my palm flat on the center of his warm, muscled chest, I push him back. I roll my eyes at the measly inch of space I create. "Unlike you, I get dirty enough at my job, so a mechanic shop isn't all that appealing to me."

"Don't lie." Spencer yanks me tight against his torso, his mouth dipping low to the shell of my ear. "I know just how dirty you can be, kitten."

At my full-body tremble, Spencer laughs again.

"Come on." He releases me to take my hand in his warm grip and tugs me away from my car.

"Where are we going?"

Spencer turns halfway around with a full smile on his face. I'm instantly transported back in time to blue skies, teal water, and sandy beaches.

"I have to show you something."

Spencer

I never put much stock into what shape my heart was in until I started spending time around Cortney Powell. The way the damn thing hammers against my ribs has me about ready to check-in to the local hospital for a stress test. With her hand firmly in mine, I kill the lights to the auto shop and drag her out the door with me. The door locks behind us with a deafening *click*.

“Hope you’re confident in your choice to follow, because your car is locked in there until morning.”

“This feels a little bit like a hostage situation.”

I look down to search her face, finding only the sarcasm that I love. “Don’t worry. I’ll make it the sexy kind.”

“Those are my favorite.”

I roll my eyes and lead her to my truck. “I know. I’ve seen your eBook library.”

She gasps in outrage. “Spencer Stone. That’s like going through a woman’s underwear drawer.”

“I plan to do that someday too.”

She pats me on the arm with hardly any force, and I repay her by tapping her ass when I open the passenger door to my truck. “Up you go, kitten.”

She glares without heat, reinforcing her position when she swiftly plants a kiss on my lips as she settles in the seat.

“Put away the claws,” I order. Grabbing the silver buckle, I strap her in.

“Are you going to tell me where we’re going?” She asks over the purr of the engine.

“I feel like making it a surprise. It’s not far.”

I’m not lying. She barely has time to find a song on the radio before I’m pulling into the dark driveway of a modest rambler.

“Wait here.” I hop out of the cab and round the hood to open her door. Once she steps off the running board, I take her

hand. If she can feel the sweat gathering in my palms, she doesn't mention it.

She's silent on the way to the front door. The scrape of the key in the lock announces our presence in the stillness. It's almost like neither of us breathe until we cross over the threshold.

"Is this where you're staying?"

I stand in the entry and watch her absorb the space. If I know anything about Cortney, it's that she's soaking in every detail.

"Yeah," I answer nervously.

"For how long?"

"I'm not sure."

"You don't know how long your rental is?"

"I'm not...I mean, I'm renting, but it's not short term."

Confusion clouds her features. "Then what is it?"

I scrub the back of my neck. "Permanent? I don't know what else to call it."

"Spencer. I need you to spell out for me what exactly it is you're doing here." Cortney's breath hitches halfway through her sentence but she powers on.

A hesitant step carries me further away from the door. "I got off that plane and left you at the airport and realized I couldn't walk away from you without seeing if we have something real happening here. Because I don't know about you, but those two weeks felt fucking real to me. Felt like the realest thing I've felt in the last twenty years."

"It feels real to me too."

A breath of relief rushes from my lungs. "Then I don't know what you're doing all the way over there. Because if you don't come over here in the next five seconds—"

I can't even finish my sentence, because the next second she's burrowing into my chest and yanking my mouth down to

hers.

A deep groan breaks free when we resume what we started back at the shop. I yank my mouth away and rest my forehead against hers.

“I think I’m in love with you.”

Cortney nods, craning her neck in order to reach my mouth. “I might be in love with you too.”

“Shit,” I laugh, squeezing my eyes shut as I grip her against my body. Her proximity soothes the adrenaline firing through my veins.

“What?”

“Your brothers are going to kill me.”

The longer the silence stretches, the harder it is for her to deny.

“We don’t know that for sure.”

Gripping her shoulders, I put enough space between us to see her face. “Did you tell them that I fucked you after graduation and left the next day?”

She looks to the side, avoiding my eyes. “I didn’t quite say it like that.”

“Right.” I nod, resolute.

“So we won’t tell them.”

“That’s not right.”

“No, it’s perfectly right. Do you think I want to deal with all the pitying looks and the questions and the assumptions about how I’m moving on too fast? Maybe I just want to enjoy this for a little bit. Enjoy you.”

Her hand cups the bulge in my pants that didn’t escape her notice. I grunt and sink my teeth into the tantalizing strip of skin at her neck.

“Spencer,” she gasps.

“We can tell them tomorrow.” I trace the shell of her ear with my tongue.

“Then you better spend all night convincing me that it’s the right idea.”

Her round ass feels heavenly in my hands. Tight, and at the same time soft enough for my fingers to sink into as I hoist her into my arms. Her shapely legs cinch snug around my trim waist.

“Is that a challenge?”

“That depends on if there’s a prize.”

“Me,” I growl, taking her plump bottom lip between my teeth and giving it a tug. Releasing it, I lick across the red indent I left. “I’m your prize.”

The banter dies as she starts kissing me again, spurring me on a fast track down the hallway to the main bedroom. It’s the only room I’ve furnished. Lucky for us both, as I’m not the type of man to dick down the woman he loves on the floor if I can help it.

Her back bounces on the plush mattress once before I yank off my tee and follow her down. Her hands feel like heaven against my bare chest. The neatly trimmed nails scrape gentle lines across my flesh.

“Lose the shirt, kitten.”

She leans up on her elbows, giving me adequate space to wrap my eager fingers around the hem and yank it away. The fabric floats behind me where I toss it on my impatient quest to release her bra clasp next.

The catch releases beneath my nimble fingers. Cortney drops to her back, allowing me to slide her purple lace bra off her arms and toss it to the bed.

“Spencer!” she gasps, her chest arching. Her immediate reaction to my mouth on her tit sends blood surging to my cock.

I alternate swirling my tongue around the tight nipple and licking it with it flattened. Her sensitive breasts have her hips rising and falling off the bed, seeking relief from the arousal.

“Feel good, baby?”

“Uh-huh,” she pants. “Need more.”

With my elbows planted in the bed for support, I use my fingers to tease her other nipple. “Like this?”

“Spencer,” she whines. Suddenly, my cock can breathe as she flicks the button on my jeans free and yanks down the zipper.

“You taste fucking sweet.”

In retaliation, she wraps a sure hand around my solid cock. My head falls to rest against her sternum. Her thumb swipes against the slit, gathering the moisture there. A shiver wracks my body.

When she licks me off of her thumb, I nearly combust.

I kiss my way down her silky skin, pausing to run my tongue around her belly button and again to trace the dip of her hips. Even though I’ve previously explored every inch of her nakedness, I want to do it again and again.

“Spencer, please hurry, baby.”

“You want me to lick you?” With controlled slowness, I strip her pants and underwear down her legs.

“Yes.” Her fingers slide into my brown hair.

“You want me to taste you?”

Those fingers tighten.

“You want me to make you come with my tongue?”

I don’t wait for her to answer. I bury my face in between her legs.

Cortney

I convulse at the shock of his tongue against my heated center. The fingers tangled in his hair jerk so hard he lets out a grunt against my clit. The vibrations only enhance the pleasure he’s creating there. My neck arches against the plush white pillow

beneath my head, and my eyes slam closed while silver sparks dance behind the lids.

“I’m already so close,” I pant. The muscles just beneath my navel tighten with his experienced licks. Somehow he knows the perfect amount of pressure to apply to my clit. The way he slips a finger inside to gently stroke the spot that will make me see stars.

We spent two weeks together, and he surely used the time to study my body well.

My thighs clamp around his head with the next flick of his tongue, and as he sucks my clit, I just barely manage to gasp, “I’m coming!” Like a true gentleman, Spencer doubles his efforts and doesn’t crawl up my body until I’m a boneless, shaking mess.

“I love the taste of you, kitten.”

“Is it my turn to taste you?”

He presses a damp kiss on the ridge of my collarbone. “Later. Right now I need to be inside of you.”

I help him shove his open jeans the rest of the way down his legs. He settles his body like a comforting weight between my thighs. When he lifts his head, his heated gaze sends a shiver through my body.

“Keep looking at me, Cortney,” he orders.

I feel him reach between us and fist his cock. His elbow extends with a few steady pumps. The tip of him brushes against my opening, and my eyelids start to flutter.

“Eyes open. I want to watch your face when I enter you.”

My stomach hollows as the first inch pushes inside. Spencer moves with a calculated slowness. Holding us both on the edge of pleasure as he works his way in. After the next small thrust, his arm begins to shake where he holds himself above me. I want to throw my head back and close my eyes, but I hold his gaze and the intense vulnerability he’s showing me there.

When he finally seats himself, my core clenches. The aftershocks of my first orgasm rippling to life around his size, and we both gasp.

“Fuck, fuck, fuck,” he chants. “You feel so good around me, baby. I have to move.”

“Please,” I beg, finally losing the battle and slamming my eyes shut. I buck my hips to meet his.

He begins fucking me, moving with a sureness that comes from knowing my body. It’s not long until his muscles tense above me.

“I need to come, Cortney.”

Without needing my direction, he slips his hand between our sweaty bodies and strokes my clit. Within a few thrusts, I’m right there with him.

“Don’t stop,” I beg, wrapping my limbs tight around him and burying my face in his neck. The smell of pine and grease mingle with Spencer’s unique scent.

“That’s it. Come with me, baby.”

With a final swipe across my clit, I’m splintering beneath him. Spencer roars his release. The sound of the guttural groan throws me into a second peak, and I cry out his name.

A few moments pass with only the sound of our labored breaths to break the silence.

“Fuck baby. A double? Really?”

I crack open an eyelid and glare without heat. “Is that a problem?”

“Hell no.” Spencer grins wickedly. “It just means I have a record to beat.”

A frisson of energy bursts to life at his teasing. The implication is clear. He plans to be here for a while.

“So we’re doing this then?”

Spencer slips free, rolls us to our sides, and yanks the blanket over our naked bodies. “Doing what?” he asks gently.

I wave my hand vaguely. “This. Us. We’re going to be together.”

“If that’s what you want.”

“Is that what you want?”

His brows pinch together. “Haven’t I made it clear? I want you, Cortney. However it is that I can have you.”

My heart rate kicks up a notch. “No more running?”

Spencer shakes his head and presses a lingering kiss to my lips. “No more running.”

“What about my family? My son?” Just thinking about Oliver gives me a shiver, and not the good kind. He’s nearly big enough to try to kick Spencer’s ass if this doesn’t work out. Oh, boy.

“We can tell them tomorrow.”

My eyes slide to the side. “I’m not sure I’m ready for that.”

His warm hand cups my chin and tilts my face to bring my gaze back to his. “We have time.”

“You think so?” At his gentle smile, I settle into the pillows, feeling my body start to relax.

“We can tell them whenever you want.”

Thank you for reading Rescued!

If you want to keep up with Spencer, Courtney, and all the Stone and Powell siblings, [sign up for my newsletter](#).

Start the Powell Sanctuary series with [Abandoned](#).

A. M. Wilson is a USA TODAY Bestselling Author. She loves infusing her stories with real life—the good, the bad, and the steamy parts. There’s something special about that pivotal moment when two characters realize their love for each other, but she likes wading through a little angst to get there. When she isn’t furiously typing on her computer, she can be found searching for her next all-consuming read. A. M. lives in Minnesota with her husband, two children, and two dogs. [Visit her website](#).

REWIRED FOR LOVE: INDIE SPARKS

REWIRED FOR LOVE

I step off the elevator to see my ex-husband storming toward me in the parking garage. It seems impossible I could've forgotten so much about him in four short months, but once that decree was stamped *Final*, my brain wiped a lot of his annoying details from my memory, like that ridiculous long flop of hair he started rocking across his forehead six months before I caught on. My attorney calls it *affair hair*, says all men Bryan's age think that particular longer-in-the-front, boy-band style makes them look younger.

It makes my ex look like a cartoon character, and the fact that his mad face is the exact same expression as the angry emoji—mouth in a straight line, brows in a V—makes his whole approach right now comical.

Or, it would be if I hadn't just worked a ten-hour shift, caring for women in the throes of labor, some with serious complications. I added eight new babies to my delivery total today, two that went straight to NICU. Holding my hand up as a signal for him to halt, I offer fair warning. "Don't you come at me sideways right now, Bryan. I'm warning you, I'm in no mood for your shit today. What are you doing here?"

"Is it true?" He stops about three feet in front of me.

"Yes. I changed your name in my phone to Fuckface McFuckhead."

"Should I change yours to Nurse Ratchet Who is Fucking My Electrician?"

“If I were Nurse Ratchet, you wouldn’t have lived through the divorce.” The background blurs behind him. I remind myself he’s not worth going to prison. “And he’s not *your* electrician. He’s a contractor with a long list of clients.”

“Are you proud of yourself? You seriously went from someone like me to someone like him?”

My brain displays their images side-by-side: the man standing before me, who once threw his back out reaching into the medicine cabinet for his nasal spray, and the man who’s currently blowing my back out on a regular basis. “Let’s not forget you went to someone else first. Thank you, by the way, for enabling my upgrade.”

“Upgrade? I own four commercial buildings and a five-star boutique hotel. Does he even own his own house?”

“Yes, he does. He also owns a boat, a motorcycle, and his own company, but most notably, he owns this pussy in ways you never did!” I’m fully aware I am yelling on the employee level of the hospital’s parking garage, but I don’t care who hears me. “And I’m late delivering it to him this evening, so get the fuck out of my way!” Without waiting for Bryan to step aside, I go around him as if he’s worthy of no more consideration than a concrete post. Because he’s not.

“Yeah? Well, he just lost a major client. I mean it, Elise! Your uneducated fuck buddy will never work at one of my properties again!”

My laughter echoes throughout the garage. I back out of my spot, roll down the window, and coast toward Bryan, who’s walking with his back to me without so much as an occasional glance over his shoulder, like he’s sure I won’t hit him and run. The king of bold assumptions.

When I’m right alongside him, close enough I could reach out and slap the back of his stupid head, I slow even further and say, “For months, I’ve been telling people your mother should’ve swallowed you, but now, I realize not even she deserved that amount of toxicity. She should’ve spit you out instead.” I stomp on the accelerator, reveling in the squeal of

my tires as I round the corner, hoping he chokes on my exhaust fumes.

It's Friday night and I should be coasting into it with a glass of wine in my hand and nothing on my mind but *my* electrician's hot body, filthy mouth, and pleasure-dom tendencies. I sure as hell shouldn't have Bryan on my mind when I arrive at Teague's house. I'm trying to erase our earlier interaction from my memory, but it keeps coming back to taunt me.

I've showered, changed into a cute, casual dress, and curled my hair into loose waves, even though we're not going out. Looking pretty when I show up for our weekend feels important. And I feel pretty when I check myself in the rearview mirror.

Teague made me promise I would leave the rest of the world behind and let him pamper me all weekend. He's been trying to convince me to go away for the weekend with him for a few months, but I keep saying it's too soon. We don't know each other well enough. *I'm not ready to share a bathroom with you for 48 hours!*

But here I am, on my way to spend the weekend with him in his house, as if that provides some sacred boundaries a hotel destroys. Okay, he does have more than one bathroom in his house, but still. It's really not so different.

I know he intends this weekend to be a preview of what an actual trip with him could be. Add in waves or mountains, restaurants and bars, and that would be a weekend away—elevated from a weekend at home in his mind. What he doesn't realize is that it's been years since anyone has given me so much of their undivided attention. I can't imagine I'll care what's outside the walls of his house this weekend.

There's a thunderstorm rolling in, and it's supposed to keep raining through Sunday. Perfect weather for being pampered by a man like Teague.

I prepped for this. I moved my laser hair removal appointment up by a week, watered my plants a day early, and packed every over-the-counter medication from an

antihistamine to an antidiarrheal. I'm as ready as I could possibly be. And still so damn nervous as I drive to his house.

It makes no sense to be this anxious. We've spent plenty of nights together. But just the one night. Why is two nights so much more pressure than one?

And why, of all days, did Bryan have to show up and piss me off? I should've hit him. Not hard, not like left tire tracks on his forehead or anything, but a little tap of my front bumper might've felt good. I smile as I envision him jumping out of the way as my bumper kisses his bony hip.

For a while after I found out about his cheating, I had him running scared, completely unsure of my next move. It felt empowering, even though I knew he was really only afraid of how big a chunk of his assets I was going to walk away with. He was scared of my attorney, not me.

I really just want him to leave me completely alone. He had no problem at all ignoring me while we were married.

As soon as I turn through Teague's iron gates onto his ten acres, I feel a little stress melt from my shoulders. His place is only forty-five minutes outside of town, but it seems like a sanctuary on the other side of my windshield with no buildings looming and no neighbors encroaching.

His boxer, Angus, nearly knocks me down when I step out of my car. "Hey, big guy. I'm happy to see you, too. Okay, thanks for the drool." I push against his shoulders when he attempts to jump up for a hug. I'm growing to love this big lug of a dog, but he has no idea how strong he is. "Let's go inside and I'll give you loves on the couch, okay?"

Teague opens his front door and whistles. Angus runs for the house. "Go lay down." The dog minds his owner without hesitation, running past him into the living room, where I know he'll flop onto his plaid bed in the corner like a good boy.

Honestly, I can relate to the response. It's hard to deny a husky voice like Teague's. Raspy and deep, it sets a molten sensation coursing through my veins, not to mention the warm

release it never fails to trigger between my legs. I'm not saying I'd fetch or sit or stay on command for him, but I've obeyed a few other commands for this sexy, dominant man.

He has full sleeve tattoos on both arms, and looking at him filling his doorway, all I can think about is having them wrapped around me.

As he walks toward me, that scruff on his jaw sparks phantom sensations on my inner thighs. How did it take me so long to learn to appreciate a beard? Oh, yeah, because I've spent the last fifteen years married to a guy without one. *Faithfully* married to his clean-shaven vanilla ass, no less.

"Hey, beautiful." Teague's strong arms encircle my waist and lift my feet off the ground when his lips meet mine. This is a welcome kiss delicious enough to wipe the outside world away completely. The taste of iced tea on his tongue, the feel of his teeth teasing my bottom lip before he sucks it into his mouth—it's the perfect kiss to start our weekend, gentle but clear in its message: this is merely a preview of coming attractions.

"Hi," I say when he pulls away and smiles.

"Where's your bag?"

"It's on the backseat. I can get it."

"No. You can't." He opens the car door and pulls out my suitcase with one hand, causing his bicep to flex. I watch his arm work with a reverence some people reserve for sunrises and precious art. To be fair, his arm is a work of art, and the proud stag that wraps around it stares back at me. All the eyes of the animals on his arms are mesmerizing, peering stealthily from dense foliage or from behind one another, but the stag stands in the foreground, looking boldly onward as if he fears nothing.

"I hope you're hungry. Dinner's almost ready."

"You cooked? If you'd waited, I would've at least helped."

"You're not here to cook. You're here to eat." He closes my car door and nods toward the house. "And be eaten." His wink is a panty-melting promise.

The smell of a familiar meal greets me as I step inside the house, but my brain was expecting grilled meat, so it's struggling to place this aroma amidst the confusion. "What'd you make?" I inhale deeply, trying to take another stab at a guess.

"Prime rib, roasted potatoes, and salad."

"Stop. You did not."

He opens the oven door and pulls out an herb-encrusted prime rib that makes my mouth water. "Why is it so shocking that I can cook? Did you think I ate in restaurants every night?"

"No. I know you cook, but this isn't a quick and easy meal. This is ... next level cooking."

"Maybe you better level up your expectations."

Like he hasn't already exceeded them on every other front. He's an amateur chef, too? What other hidden talents does this man have? The sound of a cork popping from a bottle brings me back to the moment. "The meat needs to rest for a bit. Can I pour you a glass or would you rather wait for dinner?"

"I would love a glass of wine right now. Like seriously, right now."

"Bad day?"

I remember my promise to leave the world behind, and I feel guilty for not being able to fulfill it. Every ounce of his focus is on me, but I'm still clinging to remnants of stress from my busy day and anger from my after-work encounter with my ex. It's not fair.

"It was just really busy. Eight deliveries, and unfortunately, not all babies get the memo that they're supposed to cooperate in being born."

I smile and take the glass he's handing me, but his eyes stay fixed on mine. "You help bring a lot of babies into the world on a lot of days. Why was today harder?"

Oh, damn. He asks such thoughtful questions, and I'm not at all accustomed to having someone listen so intently or care

so genuinely about what I say. These small moments sometimes scare the shit out of me, but right now, his question makes me feel validated in a way I didn't know had been missing from my life.

“When there are complications, you don't always feel the increased stress in the moment. I mean, you're in it, and you just have to do what needs to be done. But later, it can ambush you, and all at once, you're exhausted.” Oh, shit. I hear the words leaving my mouth and realize this sounds like I'm too tired to be here, like I don't want to be here. “But I'm glad I'm here. If I was at home alone, I'd probably kid myself into thinking I should go to bed early, and then I'd just lie there, wide awake and too stressed to sleep.”

My laughter sounds fake, but it's not. I want to be laughing right now; I'm just not sure I've explained myself well, and I'm worried he might not see any humor at all in my whining about being exhausted after he cooked this amazing meal and poured me wine and—

He steps closer and tucks a section of hair behind my ear. “Your job is stressful. It's okay to talk about it. You don't have to wince like you're afraid you shouldn't have shared it with me. And we can go to bed whenever you want.” His lips grace my forehead with a slight kiss, and I get a whiff of his scent, which is better than any food smell in the world. “But I'd never let you lie awake, feeling stressed and uneasy. I would definitely help you fall asleep.”

I take my first sip of the wine. How dare he serve me wine this good while serving up words like that, rendering me unable to swallow, barely able to breathe? Who gave him the right to draw out so many emotions with such small gestures? “Thank you.”

“Don't thank me yet. You don't even know how I plan to put you to sleep.”

“I might have a decent idea.”

“If it's not indecent, you're not even close.” He takes a drink of his wine, and then he leads me out the back door to

his deck. The sun is just starting to set. We sit in his Adirondack chairs and drink our wine.

“How was your day?” I ask.

“I knocked off early because I had a hot date, and I wanted to get home in time to cook her an impressive meal.”

“You can check that off your to-do list.”

“You haven’t tasted it yet.”

“I’m already impressed though.”

“But you’re still stressed.” He sets his wine on the deck and stands. When I move to stand, he shakes his head. “No. Stay right where you are.”

I sit back further and look up at him. He’s moved directly in front of me.

“You’re not wearing panties under that dress, are you?”

“I have this strange habit of wearing them every day.”

“Well, you can make a new habit of leaving them at home when you’re with me, or removing them when you walk through my door.”

Leaning forward, I attempt to set my wine on the deck next to his, but he shakes his head again. “Keep enjoying your wine.” He drops to his knees and pushes my dress up around my hips. His cool hands against my skin make me squirm in my seat, which enables him to easily slide my panties down. By the time he has them removed, his hands are warm, and my desire for him is sizzling.

There are no neighbors visible at the wooded back portion of his land. The house faces a pond with dense trees beyond it. With my panties hung on the arm of my chair, he presses my knees apart, gathers the fabric of my dress that’s pooled between my legs in his fist and pulls it aside to fully expose my pussy.

“Prettiest pussy I’ve ever seen.”

“You’ve seen it a lot.” I take another sip of wine.

“Not nearly enough.” His smile is self-assured, and there is a wicked glimmer in his eyes that I fantasize about when I’m not with him. This look makes me putty in his hands.

The softness of his warm tongue gliding through my seam, followed by his beard against my tender skin sends a shiver through me. My wine sloshes in the glass, and I lower the base of the stem to the solid arm of my chair to steady it.

His firm hands grip my hips and pull me forward, causing me to slide down until my shoulders are comfortably slumped against the wooden slats at my back. With my hips tilted to an angle of his liking, he teases my clit with the tip of his tongue, circling it a few times before he flattens his tongue and slides it down to meet my entrance.

A mixture of my juices and his saliva trickles from my opening when he withdraws his tongue. The chilly outdoor air ghosts over me. He inserts two fingers to replace his tongue, and his mouth moves upward again to find my clit. The pressure of his curved fingers inside me, palpating my g-spot, which he finds like he designed my body every time, coupled with the rhythmic sucking of my clit is the shortcut combo that sets me on the express route to orgasm.

My glutes quake, and my thighs pull toward each other like they’re magnetized. The arch in my back increases until the top of my head is pressing against the back of my chair, and my breath compresses into hurried gasps. When my climax crests, rather than ease off, he sucks more fervently, and his fingers press harder and faster. Pleasure borders on pain as the sensations compete for attention, and my nerve endings all beg for mercy while I come all over his gorgeous face.

He slips his fingers from my pussy and immediately slides them into his mouth, pulling them out slowly, savoring my taste as I watch. “My favorite flavor. I could lick your pussy for hours.”

“I’m pretty sure you have before.”

“And I will again. But dinner’s getting cold. You need to eat.”

“How do you know I need to eat?”

“Because you never eat a real lunch when your shift is busy, and you skip breakfast far too damn often.” He takes my panties from the arm of my chair and shoves them into his front pocket before he extends his hand to help me up.

“I’ve never really been a breakfast person.”

“You will be tomorrow morning.”

“I will be breakfast?”

He grins. “That too.”

Dinner is delicious, and he was right about me not eating much today, so I have no problem eating enough to put his worries about my food intake to rest. If I’d eaten a hearty breakfast and a full lunch, I’d probably be miserable right now, but instead, I’m comfortably full and more relaxed than I’ve been since ... the last time I was with him.

We clean the kitchen together, and it feels almost too right to share this household chore. “You want a fire?” he asks as I hand him the last of the leftovers to put in the fridge.

“I always want a fire.” I don’t have a fireplace anymore, but Teague has one fit for a castle, and he keeps the rack next to it stacked with firewood—firewood he splits himself. He doesn’t pay someone else to split his firewood or mow his lawn or change his oil; he could afford to hire someone to do all those things, but says he can’t imagine why he’d pay someone else to do something he’s capable of doing himself. He is extremely capable in so many ways, and I find myself admiring that more and more.

My dad did all those things himself, too, but he always joked that one day he’d be rich and he’d pay someone to change his lightbulbs. He never got rich, but he also would’ve never paid someone else to do anything he could’ve done himself. All his “one day when I’m rich” talk was just that, talk.

I shouldn’t be sitting here watching Teague building a fire and wondering what my dad would’ve thought of him. This thing between us is supposed to be casual, my rebound fling.

But Teague makes it hard to adhere to my self-imposed boundaries, mainly because he has none. He's a whatever-happens-happens kind of guy when it comes to feelings. In business, he's more of a my-way-or-the-highway kind of guy. And in the bedroom, he's an I-know-what-you-need-better-than-you-do kind of guy. That pissed me off initially, until he proved it to be true. He turns to catch me smiling at him. "If a fire puts that beautiful smile on your face, I'll build you one all year long."

"You always put a smile on my face." I settle into his plush couch.

"That's my job."

"Speaking of jobs ... " I curl my finger in the universal *come here* sign. "Why don't you let me put a smile on your face now?"

"Not yet." He climbs onto the couch next to me and hovers his body over mine. I instinctively slide down to lie beneath him. "I need to get my dick wet in your tight little snatch before your sweet mouth takes it. I've been craving this perfect cunt for days."

His dirty talk always includes words I used to consider too crude to be sexy, but he uses them in a way that turns my legs to jelly. All I can say is when they're being delivered in his husky timbre, they hit differently than I ever could've predicted. I hardly recognize myself when his filthy praise opens my floodgates, but I like this version of me. I wish I'd met her a long time ago.

The flames leap higher in the fireplace. Teague overwhelms me with a deep long kiss that leaves me breathless. He has my dress on the rug before my pulse has a chance to recover. I'm naked, and my legs are splayed wide with his heavy body between them. Rising up to his knees, he peels his shirt off, revealing ab definition earned from hard work. The rippled muscles are visible through a layer of proof the man doesn't skip meals. He's substantial everywhere.

My fingers sink into the coarse dark curls on his chest and knead them while he undoes his jeans and shoves them down

his thighs, taking his underwear with them. His stiff straight cock begs for my touch. The silky-smooth skin stretched over his hardness entices my hand to stroke him.

He doesn't bother removing his jeans the rest of the way before he lines his swollen tip up with the opening of my already quivering pussy. I don't want him to take his time; I want him to ram into me with all he's got.

Once again proving he knows exactly what I need, he delivers with a hard thrust of his hips, driving his erection into me until he's fully sheathed in my clenching walls. He pauses there, moaning his appreciation and giving my body a moment to adjust to the fullness.

His hot mouth goes to my neck, and my arousal gushes around his hard dick the moment his lips make contact with my skin. He kisses his way down and over the swell of my breast, stopping to claim my hard nipple. The sensory gift of his tongue caressing the sensitive peak melts my spine. When he sucks, it's not gentle, because again, he knows.

Kissing his way back up to my neck, he pauses to bite just above my collar bone, which makes me writhe shamelessly under him. I should make him stop because he's probably leaving a mark, but his teeth sinking into my skin spikes a moment of pain, which he follows by lavishing intense sucking on the spot, and that sequence feels too incredible to care. The only marks I've allowed him to leave on my body so far have been his handprints on my ass, sometimes to the point of bruising. But right now, he can mark me wherever he wants.

"You keep wiggling and grinding against me like this, you're going to make me come." He says the words like a warning, but I don't need to be warned.

"I want you to come. I love when you do that."

"What do you like about it?"

"The way your thick cock surges, stretching and filling me. The way your muscles all lock right before you let go. The heat when you spill inside me."

His muscles seize, and the final seconds of his cock swelling before he erupts brings on rapid breathing that gives way to guttural groans as he empties his load, giving me all the anticipated heat that I've just confessed to liking. I do like it. Fuck, I love it, and I love what comes after: the brief window where he's spent and shaky. He recovers pretty quickly, but for a little while, he's got nothing left to give. Because he's just given it all to me.

Maybe he could've just as easily given it to any woman alive, but it feels like he's just given his whole self to me. I'm not supposed to want the whole of him, and I remind myself of that at least once a day, but I can't go a day without needing to be reminded again.

We recover and clean up, and then he marks my ass with his handprint and fingers me to orgasm twice more on his couch, bringing my total to three for the evening, and we haven't even made it to his bed yet.

"Want to watch TV?" He offers me a blanket instead of my clothes.

"If you'll watch true crime with me," I say, wrapping the blanket around my naked body.

He laughs and shakes his head. "What channel?"

After a few episodes, he pauses the show. "Doesn't watching this stuff make you feel worse about the world?"

"No," I say. "It makes me feel more informed about the world. Putting on blinders and pretending it's not a dangerous place just makes it more dangerous. That's not really a luxury women can afford."

"I fucking hate that you have to feel that way."

"So do I, but it's reality."

"You know I'd do anything to keep you safe, right?"

"But no one can keep anyone safe, not all the time, no matter how hard they try."

He kisses my forehead. "I know, but I'd try."

I never thought I'd be attracted to the protector type, but I never knew a guy who fit that bill but could also accept my independence. Teague's different. Dangerous in his own right.

When he hits his murder-porn tolerance, he doesn't ask if I'm done watching, too; he just points and clicks the remote before the next case can be introduced. "What if I wasn't done watching?" I ask.

"I can only take so much tragedy in one night." He tosses the remote onto the coffee table. "Besides, you've got a whole rainy weekend ahead of you to solve cold cases."

That makes me smile because I do try to solve them on my own before the end. It's a personal challenge to see if I can pick up on all the clues and figure it out ahead of the reveal. And I can't help but share my theories and my excitement when I think I'm getting close. It drove my ex crazy. He could never figure them out. Lousy husband, worse detective.

As soon as I stand, Teague scoops me up in his arms and starts carrying me down the hall. The first time he picked me up, I protested and said I was too heavy. It wasn't performative. I was genuinely concerned because I'm not a tiny woman. He proceeded to show me he could not only lift me, but carry me with ease, and once we reached his bedroom, he wasted no time demonstrating how easily he could toss me around on his mattress. And then he made me promise to never again balk when he picked me up.

He also tried to forbid me from saying anything negative about myself. That one proved too unrealistic for me, so we've compromised: I can say things that are less than flattering as long as I'm not beating myself up over it, and I have to accept that he's going to counter with a positive comment.

I'm not allowed to deflect his random compliments either. I had no idea I couldn't take a compliment, but deflecting them is a hard habit to break. I'm trying. I know I'm a reasonably attractive woman, but I'm not petite and I'm not in my twenties anymore and I'm not a fitness junkie or a yoga enthusiast—learning to stop the comparison game is a much bigger challenge than solving cold case murders on my TV.

Teague drops me onto his bed, and I laugh. The first time he did it, I yelped and not from delight. It wasn't like he'd shoved me out of plane or thrown me off a cliff, but it was a shock to be dropped without warning. Now, I expect it and know I've got a soft place to land, no reason to panic. I crawl between his sheets and pull the comforter up to my shoulders. I'm not hiding from him, just the chill in the room.

His warm body slides next to mine, and I can't deny the increased feeling of comfort and safety. My fight-or-flight reflex still pings when I have thoughts like this, but his firm hand sliding between my legs goes a long way toward vanquishing it. When his gravelly voice says, "Roll over," there is nowhere else I'd rather be.

I try to walk softly back from the bathroom, still half asleep. I'm not sure what time it is, but there's no sun blasting through his blinds, so I first think it has to be ridiculously early, but then I hear the rain and realize it could be too cloudy to tell.

Teague is one of the few people I know who works as much overtime as I do. His hours aren't called overtime since he owns the company, but there's no magic word that can be added or removed to make the hours any less tiring. I don't want to wake him, so I don't lift my phone to check the time. The room is serenely dim, and the brightness from my phone would splinter the twilight.

Shadows flutter across the wall, and I lie still and watch the patterns cast by leaves dancing in the rain. The wind gusts and heavy drops patter against the windows. Thunder rolls and Teague rolls over in sync with it, making it seem like he could've been the source of the rumbling. His eyes open when another round of lightning flashes.

"Good morning." I keep my voice soft.

"How long have you been awake?"

"Not long."

He drapes a heavy arm across my waist and pulls me closer to him. I roll onto my side and snuggle into place. My

eyelids drift closed, and I mentally screenshot this moment, the image of us enveloped in peace and calmness, despite the storm beginning to rage outside.

When I wake again, the room is much brighter. The rain has stopped, and birds are chirping. And I smell bacon. This is the first time Teague has ever gotten up without waking me before he left the bed.

I find him in the kitchen, pulling plates from an upper cabinet, and I watch his shirtless back and shoulder muscles work in tandem. *Art. Pure fucking art.*

“You didn’t have to let me sleep in.”

“You needed it.” He sets the plates on the table and kisses my forehead on his way back to the stove.

Sweet cotton candy clouds, those are the fluffiest pancakes I’ve ever seen. I’m never making pancakes for this man. His make mine look like crepes.

He’s made coffee already. The fact that I slept through the smell of fresh coffee brewing confirms I definitely needed the sleep. I pour myself a cup and take a sip. He smiles. “Gotta love a woman who can appreciate black coffee.”

“Why ruin a good thing with cream?”

His eyebrows shoot up, and I know he’s contemplating a dirty comment, but he doesn’t utter it, just smiles wider, which makes me smile in return. He lays the last strips of bacon onto a paper-towel-covered plate and carries it to the table.

He has real maple syrup. The only thing missing is fresh strawberries, but honestly, if he’d sliced strawberries, I’d be breathing onto a mirror right now to make sure it fogged and I hadn’t actually died and floated up to some celestial café.

“What do you want to do today?” he asks.

“It’s supposed to rain all day.” I sneak Angus a bite of bacon under the table.

“There will be breaks. It’s not raining now. We could do something inside. Go to a movie?”

“I haven’t seen a movie in a theater in so long I can’t remember what I saw last. I don’t even know what’s playing.”

“Neither do I. Let’s just go and buy tickets for whatever is starting next.”

“What if it’s awful?”

“We’ll make out instead.”

“Like teenagers?”

“Yeah, but teenagers with wisdom and skills.”

“That sounds like a fantasy.”

“I’m all about fulfilling your fantasies.”

“I didn’t say it sounded like *my* fantasy.”

“Guilty.” He shrugs. “But let’s do it.”

There’s an older, small theater not far from his house, but we arrive at the worst possible time. The last movie started thirty minutes ago, and the next one doesn’t start for over an hour. “That’s a long time to wait,” I say.

“Yeah, I guess we should’ve planned after all.”

“That would’ve ruined the spontaneity, though.”

“True.” He reaches for my hand as we walk back to his truck. The rain has tapered to a light sprinkle. We don’t hurry to escape it. He opens the passenger side door for me, and I climb up into the cab. When he slides behind the wheel, he looks over at me with that wicked glimmer I love sparkling in his eyes. “When was the last time you made out in a truck?”

I laugh. “No idea.”

“That’s too long.” He leans over the console to kiss me.

When his palm slides up my shirt, I capture his wrist in my hand. “We are not doing this in a parking lot.”

“It’s not a very busy parking lot.” He’s turned on all the boyish charm in his arsenal, but I’m not looking to flash any

innocent bystanders, no matter how skilled a teenager he thinks he can be.

“Sorry. I’m just not that kind of girl,” I say teasingly, though I mean it. We are not fucking in this parking spot.

His laughter has a twinge of villainy as he puts the truck in drive.

A vacant two-story building sits at the edge of the parking lot. Teague pulls into a space facing the expansive brick wall. The parking spots on either side of us are vacant, and it’s unlikely anyone will pull into one with so many closer spots available and the rain coming down harder.

Opening his door quickly, he hops out of the truck and jogs around to my side. His skin is cold and damp when he crowds in with me, and he smells like rain. His kiss tastes like rain, too, and I giggle like an actual teenager before I even know what’s happening. My body shudders when he slides his hand up my shirt again, his cold fingers shoving my bra up and out of his way.

My nipples are hard right now because of the cold, but if he keeps his hand on them until our skin is sizzling, they’ll still be hard because those little slut buttons can’t get enough of his attention. When I was an actual teenager, they were so sensitive I could hardly stand to have them grazed. But to be fair, no one who reached for them back then had Teague’s touch.

Damn, a teenage boy with his skills would be capable of great and terrible conquests. I’d like to think I’d be as much a formidable threat if I could go back, knowing what I know now, but I’d probably still let the boy take the lead. It’s who I am and what I prefer. Unfortunately, it took me far too many years to realize not all men were born to lead.

The one touching me now could lead me straight into the realm of Hades. If I get burned, I get burned. Worse things have happened in pursuit of lesser joys. Teague undoes my jeans, and I’ve got no desire to dissuade him. My only objection is when he attempts to fully remove my shirt. “That

is entirely too much public nudity. Below the waist, I'm at least shielded."

"Get on my lap."

I straddle him. His cock strains against his zipper, and I'd be lying if I said I didn't want to do this now. He shifts under me to unfasten his own jeans. "If anyone happens to see us, you're just sitting on my lap for all they know."

"Right. To any average imbecile, this would look totally innocent."

"The world's full of imbeciles."

The rain starts to fall in sheets, obscuring visibility to the point I can barely see the bricks beyond his front bumper. A sudden sense of security takes the place of my fears, and a stream of warmth rushes from my pussy. This just went from naughty nostalgia to raw eroticism in the blink of an eye. Yeah, I'm all in now. And he's about to be.

His jeans are shoved down to his knees; mine are on the seat next to us. His shirt is still on and so is mine, though my bra is pushed up above my tits. I lift up onto my knees and position myself to take him.

"Sink that pretty pussy down on my cock slowly while I watch."

I slide down, enjoying every inch. His erection stretches me, making me aware of a lingering soreness from last night's sessions. It's slight, but it's enough to make me pause. His hands go to my hips, and he holds me in place. "Are you sore?"

"A little. It's not bad. I just need to take it easy to start."

"You're in charge. Do what feels good for you."

While it's true that I usually like him to take control, I do like being the one to set the pace right now. His hands slide up my shirt and cup my breasts, taking a moment to feel the weight of them before he begins to squeeze and brush his thumbs over my swollen nipples.

With him fully inside me, I slide my hands under his shirt and map his firm pecs. Bands of rain slap the windshield. The wind blows harder. This truck feels like a refuge, which in a way, it is, but we're not stuck. Not trapped together. We chose this.

I pump slowly on his dick until the soreness fades enough that I can increase my strokes, really ride him, rocking my hips forward and back as I pull off and come back down. His hips start to rise up to meet mine. He's been passive as long as he can stand, but he knows I'm ready for him.

My clit throbs when he presses against it. I grind against him to chase the pressure. He takes the cue and grinds with me. I can't believe I actually agreed to fuck in a truck in a public parking lot at my age, but I'm glad I did. This is some of the hottest sex we've ever had. Being shrouded in curtains of rain emboldens me, but it also adds a level of intimacy that makes me feel connected to him on a whole new level. Leveling up in that way is probably a bad idea. Once you unlock certain things, you can't hide them away again.

His hips jerk, and I feel his dick lurch. My walls clench, and the telltale quivering starts in my core, spreading out to my glutes and my thighs. He pinches my nipples, and my breath hitches. His breathing accelerates, and mine shallows into small, quick shrieks. His body goes rigid, and mine begins to tremble all over. He moans, and I lose the ability to make any sound at all as our orgasms rack our bodies.

I collapse against his chest, still trying to catch my breath, overcome with disbelief at what just happened. I've never experienced simultaneous orgasm before. Hell, I thought it was a myth. "Holy shit. That was incredible."

He threads his fingers into my hair and lifts my face to make eye contact. "You are incredible."

We kiss, deeply, passionately ... and then we clean ourselves up using fast food napkins from his console, which is awkward and weird, and somehow, just a little bit heart-eyes-sweet and funny. There is no pretense left when you're

wiping bodily fluids in front of each other using napkins with chicken heads embossed on them.

The rain slows as we redress, as if it had been dialed up to eleven solely for our privacy.

“Pizza?” he asks.

“Definitely.”

The parking lot of his favorite pizza place is nearly flooded, but his truck is high enough that it’s not a problem to drive in it. When I open the door to step out, however, I realize I’m going to have to wade through ankle-deep water. Just as I’m about to hop down, Teague yells, “Wait!” He comes around the truck to help me down, but he doesn’t set my feet on the ground.

“You cannot carry me inside.”

“Unless somebody’s passed a law that I’m not aware of, I guarantee you I can. And if there is a law against it, I’m about to break it.” He hooks one arm around my shoulders and the other behind my knees and carries me out of his truck, knocking the door closed with his hip. As soon as we cross the threshold, I insist he put me down so I can walk the rest of the way inside.

I can see why this place is his favorite. They make their own mozzarella, pasta, and Italian sausage, grow their own basil and tomatoes, and locally source whatever they don’t make or grow whenever possible. It’s a very farm-to-table kind of place, and the freshness is evident from the first bite. High quality and great service. What’s not to love?

The rain keeps coming down, slow but steady. My phone buzzes on the table, probably an email from whatever company I most recently ordered something from, offering me a discount on the very thing I just bought.

This place also makes homemade cannoli and mascarpone cheesecake. So much for my plans to eat light this weekend.

My phone buzzes again. I ignore it again. But within five minutes, Teague and I can’t even complete a sentence without

another notification interrupting. “I’m sorry,” I say. “I’ll mute my notifications.”

Every single notification has been a text. From my ex. “You have got to be kidding me.”

“What is it?”

“It’s Bryan.”

“Y’all are divorced. Tell him to leave you the fuck alone.”

Laughter bubbles up from my chest as I read through the messages. “He’s flipping out because the house we had built last year is flooding. The house I wanted but he fought me for, the house he would’ve drawn out our divorce indefinitely over. I backed off and let him have my dream house just to be rid of him. He can’t possibly think I give a damn if that house floods! I hope it does. I hope it floats off its fucking foundation and ends up in the middle of an ocean where it sinks to the floor to become a reef for poisonous eels because they would literally deserve that house more than he does.”

“That’s exactly what you should tell him.”

“Yeah, you’re right.” I type those exact words, and then I mute my notifications. Damn, that felt good. I luxuriate in every bite of my cheesecake, with visions of Bryan’s nasal spray floating in a drainage ditch. *Sniff. Sniff.*

We drive through Teague’s privacy gate to find most of his yard flooded, but the water’s not close to the house or the driveway. No worries, just a lot of saturated ground.

Within an hour of getting back to his place, another thunderstorm moves in, and this one is angry. He builds a fire, and I curl up under a blanket on his couch. On his TV, the boyfriend has just been brought in for questioning when a loud boom outside makes us both jump. And then the house goes silent. And dark, aside from the flames.

Angus whimpers from his bed in the corner.

“Aw, fuck,” Teague says. “That was a transformer.”

“Do you think it was lightning?”

“Probably.”

A flash outside the windows lights up the room for a split second. Immediately after, a series of strikes illuminates the gray sky, casting the room in a blue-white glow for one breath, and then two. “To be honest,” I say, “this is kind of nice.”

He smiles. “If the power stays off for long, the rest of the house will get cold. We’ll have to sleep in here.”

“That wouldn’t be awful. Your couch is comfy, and we have plenty of firewood.”

“You’ll never know who killed that woman in the parking garage.”

“It was her neighbor.”

“You haven’t even heard the boyfriend’s interrogation yet.”

“He’s an asshole, but he didn’t do it. They never show the real killer this early. There’s too much time left. And the coworker didn’t do it. He was in love with her, probably would’ve eventually been the reason she broke up with the boyfriend, but he would’ve never killed her. I’m telling you, it’s the new neighbor. He doesn’t blink. Definitely a psychopath.”

“You may have missed your calling.”

“I still have time. It could be my second career. What would your second career be?”

“The same as my first.”

“There’s really nothing else you’d want to do?”

“Maybe blacksmithing.”

“That’s even more manual labor than what you do now. You wouldn’t rather do something less physical where you never had to work in a hot attic again?”

“No. That’s the kind of work I like. You’d be a detective after being a nurse. Why wouldn’t you choose something with less stress?”

“I’d choose detective because of the challenges and rewards of doing the job, which is the part I love about my current job.”

“Same. I like completing a project, no matter what obstacles come up.”

“Okay, yeah, I get that.”

He opens a music app on his phone, and I lean against him, securely wrapped in his blanket, snugly tucked under his arm, and listening to his favorite songs. His musical taste is all over the place. Mine is, too, but there’s little overlap between our playlists. I’d have never listened to some of these songs on my own, but I like them.

Angus climbs up onto the couch and lays his heavy head in my lap for neck scratches. He’s supposedly not allowed on the furniture when I’m not around to fight for his right to do it. Teague doesn’t try to make him get down, just shakes his head.

I doze off with my head on Teague’s shoulder, and only wake partially when he lays me down and covers me with the blanket. Angus jumps up to claim the space next to me, and instead of shoving him down, Teague takes the recliner.

I startle awake when I roll and nearly topple over the edge of his couch cushions. Oh, right, this is where I slept. The house is quiet, except for the fire crackling in his fireplace, and the sound of Teague moving in the kitchen. Why do I smell food cooking? He can’t be cooking. His stove is electric, and the power hasn’t come back on. It’s still raining outside, so he couldn’t have cooked out there.

With the blanket wrapped around me, I waddle into the kitchen to see what he’s up to. He’s scrambling eggs in an electric skillet. “How is that working?” My eyes follow thin cables across the countertop.

“I connected an inverter to a marine battery and plugged the skillet into that.”

“How did you know that would work?”

“It’s what I do, Elise. I make shit work. I find a way.”

He’s not talking about the power thing and the battery; I know him well enough to pick up on his meaning. My stomach flips at the implication that he could make things work with me. That we could work. But what if we could? It could all go so terribly wrong. But what if it didn’t?

I pull plates from his cabinet and casually set the table. “So, if you could go anywhere in the world right now, where would you go?”

“Wherever you wanted to go.”

“What if I told you that travel sometimes stresses me out, and I’m kind of a nervous flyer?”

“I’d tell you there wouldn’t be anything to stress about if you were traveling with me, and everybody on the plane is nervous to some degree.” He stirs the eggs. “And if it’d make you feel better, we could start with a road trip.”

“I’m very controlling in the car. I need to control the temperature and the music. And I will totally monitor your speed and tell you to slow down.”

“I don’t mind stopping at every roadside attraction or weird little shop you want to check out. Stopping along the way doesn’t bother me. It’s part of the experience.”

Damn. I love that shit. How did he know that? “What if it’s on the wrong side of the road?”

“Steering wheels turn for a reason.”

“What if we got into our first fight while we were traveling together?”

“Then I guess we’d end up having our first makeup sex away from home.” He unplugs the skillet and reaches out to me for a plate.

I take the plate full of eggs he’s returning and hand him the empty one. “What if you didn’t want to make up with me?”

“I would. Eventually.”

“What if I didn’t want to make up with you?”

“I’d try harder.” I grip the edge of the second plate of eggs, and he uses it to pull me closer to him. The glimmer in his eyes holds me captive. “It’s what I do, Elise. That’s who I am.”

“I’m going to make you take a million selfies with me. And I’m going to take a picture of my food in every restaurant. Drinks, too.”

“Do you honestly think I didn’t already know you’d be a pain in the ass to travel with?”

Thunder rattles the window over the sink. I swear I can feel it vibrate through the floor. “But you wanted to do it, anyway?”

“I don’t need you to be perfect. I just want you to be mine.” Angus galumphs in between our legs, nearly knocking us down in the process. “I’m sorry, *ours*, apparently.”

We kiss over the plate in our hands. Angus drools at our feet. And the lights flicker above us as the power comes back on.

SOMEONE TO KEEP: KELLY
KELSEY

ONE

QUINN

Tears blur my vision as my fingers race over the screen of my cell phone. Fucking Arron. I knew he was a piece of shit. Knew I should have never gotten involved with someone like him. But I didn't listen to my head. Didn't listen to my friends. Now I'm homeless and jobless.

“Quinn?” A soft voice saying my name has my head snapping up to find my best friend, Karissa. Her face is full of pity, eyes sad as she takes a seat opposite me.

“Hey.” My voice sounds weak, defeated. Dropping my cell, I look at her with watery eyes.

Leaning over, she takes my hand in hers. “I'm sorry. No one deserves what he did to you.”

I huff a laugh. “He kicked me out of my home, Ris, and moved his sidepiece in. His father fired me. I have no job and I had to move back in with my parents.”

Releasing me, she leans back in her chair. “Let me grab a coffee, then you can tell me everything. I may not be able to help with the living situation but a job on the other hand...” She trails off, wagging her brows.

Despite the mood I am in, I can't help but chuckle. “Can I get a chai tea latte? Pleeeease” I move my hands into a praying position.

Karissa laughs. Standing, she makes her way over to the counter to order our drinks. Grabbing my cell, I read over Arron's latest message before blocking him. Narcissistic asshole. My self-esteem is not low enough that I would ever

believe this whole cluster fuck is my fault. He can try and convince himself of that. But he will never convince me. I'm not perfect but I know that everything that has happened is down to him.

"There you go," Karissa says breaking me from my thoughts. She slides the mug onto the table before dropping down in her seat. Taking a sip, she looks at me. "So, about that job?"

"Go on. I'm not above doing anything at this point, Ris. I need to get out of my parents'. They are driving me mad, and it's only been a couple of days." I widen my eyes trying to get my point across.

She sighs. "Davis needs someone to help out with paperwork. He is so busy on site, building shit, he doesn't have the time anymore to do the admin. I know it's not graphic design but it's something." Her voice is hopeful.

"You mean Davis as in your brother?" I ask. I've only met him a couple times and every interaction he came across as a grumpy douche. Being twelve years older than Karissa, he was never around when I met her at sixteen.

"One and the same. We had dinner with my parents the other night. He was moaning about how busy he is with the manual side of things. Dad suggested getting help. He is desperate. You are desperate. It's a win-win." She grins.

Rubbing my temples, I try to come up with any and every reason not to take her up on this offer. I find none. Karissa is right. I am desperate.

With that realization, I say, "When can I start?"

TWO

DAVIS

Striding across the building site, my gaze lands on Quinn. My sister's best friend and my new administrative assistant. She has only been with me a month, but she is fast becoming a pain in my ass. With her smart mouth, gorgeous face, quick wit, and all-around annoying personality, I am starting to wish I'd have never hired her. Karissa, my sister, begged me to hire her. Asked me to help her friend in need out. I did. But only because I desperately needed help with my out-of-control paperwork—a job I hated doing. Invoices. Payroll. All things that need doing on the regular, but stuff I would leave to the last minute.

Sighing, I scrub a palm down my face as I make my way toward her. Her head snaps up when she sees me, a bright smile curving her lips as she greets me with a, “Good morning Mr. Pritchard.”

I nod. “Ms. Donnelly. What are you doing here?” It's not like I have an office, but she usually works out of the small den at my house. It's weird to see her on site.

She blushes, clearing her throat. “You forgot your lunch.” Glancing down, I notice the brown paper bag in her hand.

“Thanks,” I grunt, taking it from her. She shifts on her feet, and I suck in a breath as her floral scent hits my nose. Fuck. In one short month she has had more of an effect on me than any other woman I have been with. It's beyond infuriating and inappropriate. I can't fuck the girl who is helping me out. My *sister's* best friend. That will complicate things and I don't do complicated.

Her red hair blowing in the slight breeze, she stares up at me with bright green eyes. Lips parting, I think she is going to say something but then her mouth snaps closed. My cock thickens in my pants as my thoughts go to how her mouth would feel wrapped around me. Of how much of me she could take before tears spilled from her eyes and the gagging started.

Christ, I need to stop fantasizing about her. Clearing my throat, I say, "Was there anything else you needed?"

She smiles, jerking her thumb over her shoulder. "No. I'm gonna head back to the house."

Without another word, she spins and heads back the way she came. My eyes drop to her ass on their own volition and my dick turns to steel.

Jesus. I am so screwed.

THREE

QUINN

It's been two weeks since I brought Davis's lunch to him, and he has been different with me. Off. Distant. Yeah, he is grumpy, but he has been extra grouchy. I don't know what I have done to offend him, but he looks at me like I'm an inconvenience. Like one day he woke up and decided to just... hate me.

I have tried with him, even going as far as offering to celebrate with him when he won some big construction contract the other day. He declined. It's confusing and frustrating to say the least. And I've hit my breaking point. I'm fed up with his cold demeanor and I want answers.

Without knocking, I shove through the front door of his home. He converted one of the rooms into a home office which is where I spend my days. Usually, Davis has left by the time I get here, but I know for a fact he is home today because he has a video call with a new client.

Stepping inside the small foyer, I pause when I spot him coming down the stairs. In dark blue jeans that hug his muscular thighs, black work boots, and tight black shirt, he looks like every woman's wet dream. He growls, dragging me from my thoughts. My head snaps up, landing on narrowed eyes. "Can't you knock? I could have been in the middle of something important."

Ignoring him, I move farther inside the house and blurt out. "What is your issue with me? Did I do something wrong?"

He glares, before continuing down the stairs. Clearing his throat, he mumbles, “I have no issue with you.”

I scoff. “Then why the attitude? Why do you look at me like I killed your cat?”

Glancing at me, he runs a hand through his thick chestnut hair. I blink. As much as I hate to admit it, Davis Pritchard is hot. Really hot. I shouldn’t be mooning over my best friend’s brother, who also happens to be my boss, but I can’t help it. I’m only human. You would have to be blind to not see how handsome he is. “I don’t have a cat,” he grumbles. “I’m sorry you feel that way. It’s nothing personal Quinn. I’m just busy, and you know. I do have a reputation for being an asshole.”

I eye him for a long beat. It’s a shit excuse but I can either accept it or continue arguing with him. “I will take your apology. But for the record, I don’t believe you. I have been here for over a month now and everyone I speak to, including the guys you work with on-site say how nice you are,” I tease, a smile on my face as I try to lighten the mood.

His lips curve into a grin. “Is that right? Guess I better change that before people start getting the wrong idea about me. Wouldn’t want you to think I’m singling you out.”

My breath hitches in my throat. Is he flirting? I think he is. Though, I could be wrong. I don’t exactly have the best track record when it comes to men. I smile, my cheeks heating. “Good. You do that.” I’m teasing him and by the small smile curving his lips, he likes it. Suddenly, I feel hot. Lightheaded. I made Davis Pritchard smile. “Right. Okay. Glad we got that cleared up.” I jerk my finger to the office. “I’m going to get to work. Call if you need anything.” I move to the room before he can say more.

Why the hell am I having this sort of reaction to him?

To my boss.

I need to draw lines and not cross them.

Nothing good can come from mixing business and pleasure.

FOUR

DAVIS

Groaning, my head falls into my hands. Quinn has been here for two months now, and things have... escalated. The boundaries I have put in place are getting harder to ignore every day. The lines are blurring at a rapid speed, and I don't know how to put a stop to it.

I've come to know her a bit better after she stormed into my house and handed me my ass. No one has ever stood up to me like that. It was hot. So hot, I had to go back upstairs to my bedroom and rub one out as soon as she had locked herself in my office. I've never come so hard in my life as I did to images of my very off-limits... assistant? And then there is the small matter of her being my little sister's best friend. Said little sister who is right now sat in my kitchen talking to Quinn.

I want to go in there and tell Karissa to leave. It's don't know why and it's completely irrational, but I feel this odd sense of jealousy that Quinn's attention is on my sister and not me. I hate it.

Which is a problem.

A big problem.

Why, out of all the women in the world, did I have to go and be attracted to Quinn? It would be irresponsible of me to get involved with someone who works for me. Messy to get involved with my little sister's best friend—especially if it doesn't work out. Which more times than not is the case.

I grit my teeth. Fuck. Why her?

Why do I have this incessant need to go out there and kiss the shit out of her? Why do I want to take her to my bedroom, shove my cock into her pussy and fuck her so hard that she screams my name over and over. Use her body until we both can't take anymore.

My cock swells in my jeans. Shit. I'm getting hard just thinking about the things I want to do to her delectable body. What's even worse is that I'm panting over her like a lovesick teenager, not a thirty-six-year-old with his own construction company.

"Hey brother." My head whips up at Karissa's voice.

Biting back a scowl and the need to tell her to get out of my house, I grumble, "Karissa. Don't you have somewhere else to be?"

She chuckles, ignoring my words and striding inside. "So, how's it working out with Quinny?"

My brows furrow, face screwing up in distaste. Quinny? No. I don't like it. It sounds immature. Childish. Quinn is neither of those things. "Fine. Now can you leave and stop disturbing her? She has work to do."

"Always so pleasant big brother." She sighs in exasperation. "Fine. Fine. I will go. But you"—she points at me as if to prove her point—"are coming for drinks tonight. Mom and Dad insist. Usual place." It's not a question, more of a demand. With one last look, she turns, sauntering away.

I shake my head, as I watch her leave. Feeling eyes on me, my gaze shifts, locking on Quinn who is staring at me. She shoots me an apologetic smile. It's so breathtaking it makes me lightheaded.

I groan.

Fuck the lines.

I might just cross them all.

FIVE

QUINN

I shouldn't have joined Karissa for drinks. I should have turned down the invite. But a part of me was curious to see Davis outside of a work environment. He is so uptight all the time; I have begun to wonder if that's just his personality or if it's just a mask he wears.

"Don't look now, but the hottie at nine o'clock is checking you out." Karissa chuckles. We are both past intoxicated. I'm only thankful her parents left so they can't witness our drunken antics.

My eyes lock on Davis. A scowl mars his handsome face. I frown. He really needs to pull that stick out of his ass. I open my mouth to say just that, but he cuts me off.

"That's enough. I'm taking you both home." He snaps at us like we are unruly children.

We both look to him, then back to each other before breaking out in a fit of uncontrollable giggles. The man is so serious, I wish he would just let loose. "Davis, don't be a bore." I half slur.

Standing from his stool, he shoots me a pointed look. "Not a bore but I'm also not about to leave you two in here while you're in this state. Anyone could take advantage."

I wiggle my brows. "Maybe I want someone to take advantage of me. It's been a while."

"Yeah well. It's not happening. Let's go." He grips my bicep, dragging me off my seat.

“Hey,” Karissa whines in protest, but still, she follows his orders and clambers off her stool. Grabbing her purse from the bar, she stumbles toward the door.

I try to pull out of Davis’s hold so I can walk with my best friend, but he just clutches me tighter. I stare up at him, confused that he is touching me only for it to turn into complete shock when he leans down. I think he is going to kiss me but his face moves to the crook of my neck and I shudder when hot breath hits my ear. “Be a good girl, Quinn, and do as your told.” His voice is a gravelly rasp going straight between my legs. My body heats at his words and arousal pools between my thighs. Jesus Christ.

Feeling brave from all the alcohol in my veins I flutter my lashes and shoot him a saucy grin. “I can be *your* good girl, Davis. Just say the words.” It’s half purr, half slur but from the way he pauses, I know he heard me clearly.

Staring down at me, he searches my face for a long beat. I’m not sure what he is looking for and in my drunken haze, I don’t really care. His tongue darts out, running across that full bottom lip of his and I swear the way he does it is so sexy, I nearly come on the spot. “You are trouble, Ms. Donnelly. Now let’s go.” His voice snaps me from my thoughts and without another word he pulls me out of the bar and to his car where Karissa waits for us.

SIX

DAVIS

After dropping my sister off, I ask Quinn for directions to her parents' house. She is so drunk; her words are incoherent and before I can make sense of them, she falls asleep.

Running a palm down my face, I decide I have two choices. One, I can turn around and take her back to my sister's. The problem with this option is, if I know Karissa like I think I do, she will already be passed out. There is also a small part of me that doesn't want to take her back there. It's completely irrational of me, but that doesn't make it any less real.

My second option is, I can bring her to my house. It's a bad idea and shouldn't have even crossed my mind but for some reason it is the one that makes most sense. I will feel better knowing she is close by when she is so intoxicated and that I can at least look after her if she gets sick. I nod to myself. Yeah. I will do that. It's not me being a creep. I'm being a gentleman. Just looking out for my employee. It's what any nice guy would do. I'm sure of it.

A little while later, I pull up in my garage and park. Climbing out, I round the vehicle and gently pull a sleeping Quinn into my arms. Making my way inside, I stare down at her. She looks so beautiful and peaceful in sleep. Like an angel. Not being able to help myself, I lean down, dropping a kiss to her forehead. She stirs slightly, murmuring my name. I freeze, questioning whether she did say it or it's wishful thinking. I shake my head. No. She did. I heard my name from her lips as clear as day.

Studying her mouth, I wait with bated breath for her to say it again, but she doesn't. Sighing, I take a step forward only to stop when she shifts and snuggles into me further. Pulling her further into my chest, I hold her tighter, never wanting to let her go. She feels so right in my arms. So right, yet this whole situation is so wrong. I shouldn't be looking at her in this way, but I can't stop. It's like my body and soul have decided she is going to be mine and they are just waiting for my mind to catch up. Fuck. How did I get myself into this mess?

Shaking my head, I move farther into the house and make my way upstairs to the guest bedroom. Kicking the door open, I walk to the bed and shifting her into one arm, I pull the comforter back with my free hand before gently placing her down and covering her with the blanket.

I watch her for a long beat, waiting for any sign that she might get sick. But she just sleeps peacefully, without a care in the world, and unaware of the fact her boss is staring at her like a creeper.

Scrubbing a palm down my face, I briefly wonder why this woman—out of all the women in the world—has intrigued me so much. I really don't know of the whys but maybe it's time I just embrace it. Would it be so bad? Her and me? I don't know but there seems to be an attraction and maybe we should just explore it. Worst case and if things go wrong, she has to get another job.

With that in mind, I grin, knowing full well that I'm going to pursue this. With one last glance at the object of my desire, I head down to the kitchen where I grab a bottle of water and some Tylenol before heading back upstairs.

Placing it all on the nightstand, I check her over once more and then make my way to my own room.

Tomorrow.

Tomorrow is when things change.

SEVEN

QUINN

Groaning, my eyes peel open, only to close when the sunlight hits me. I scrub a palm down my face, wincing at the throbbing in my head. “Jesus,” I mumble, frowning as I try to piece together the events of last night.

A nice evening with Karissa, her parents, and Davis. Karissa’s mom and dad left. Karissa bought shots. Lots of them. We were drunk. Way past drunk. I cringe at the thought then nearly die from embarrassment with the memory of Davis being his usual grumpy self. Of him bringing us home... Wait. My eyes fly open, moving around the room. I blink. This isn’t my parents’ house. Or Karissa’s apartment for that matter. I swallow, as my pulse kicks up to an abnormal speed.

Disorientated, I fly up into a sitting position. My gaze falls down my body and I sigh in relief when I find that I’m still in last night’s outfit. My eyes dart around the unfamiliar room, my heart pounding in my chest as panic surges through me. Where the hell am I?

Glancing at the nightstand, my brows furrow when I find a bottle of water and Tylenol set out for me. My lips part. Davis. I’m at my boss’s house, the place I work. Noise outside has me pulling the comforter up my chest as if it can protect me from what comes next. A knock sounds at the door, making my stomach flutter.

“Quinn?” Some of the tension leaves my body at the sound of his deep rasp.

Clearing my throat, I shout, “Yeah?”

“Are you decent?” His voice sounds impatient.

“Yes. You can come in,” I reply. I’m not one hundred percent comfortable but I’m more embarrassed than anything. Not only because he is my boss, but I feel like death and probably look the same.

The door opens in the next second and Davis appears. His face is a blank mask as his eyes rake over me. My skin prickles, goose bumps appearing wherever his gaze lands. My cheeks heat and I really wish the bed would swallow me up, so I don’t have to deal with this humiliation. His eyes meet mine and he frowns, no doubt at the look on my face.

“How are you feeling?” he asks.

“Hungover. Embarrassed. Take your pick.” Shame hits me right in the chest and I glance away. “Sorry. It was unprofessional of me to get drunk in front of you,” I mumble.

“Look at me,” he demands, and my head snaps up, gaze locking on him. He closes the distance between us, and I scoot away, acutely aware of my alcohol-smelling morning breath. “I was more worried about you being vulnerable. Had I not been there, anyone could have taken advantage of you. I didn’t like the thought of that happening, so I took control of the situation.” He clears his throat. “Why don’t you get showered, and we can talk.”

My nose scrunches up. “Talk? What is there to talk about?”

He smirks and the look is so hot, so... dangerous, moisture seeps into my panties. “Don’t act coy, Quinn. You know exactly what we need to talk about.” He sucks in a breath, straightening to his full height as he says, “I want you. You want me. I don’t want to fight it anymore.”

My mouth drops open in shock at his words. Did he just say what I think he said or did my still-drunk mind make it up? I shake my head. No. He said those words. My eyes widen and I stare at him. Davis has never come across as arrogant or cocky, just a normal blue-collar guy. But in this moment, he is all that and more. Self-assured. Confident. Sexy. I like it. As if

he knows exactly what I'm thinking, he winks at me, *actually winks*, and I nearly melt into a puddle on the bed. Without another word, he turns and in a couple of strides, he is leaving the room.

I stare after him, long after he has disappeared, in absolute disbelief. I can't believe that just happened. Falling back on the pillows, I suck in a breath before exhaling, then jump out of the bed so I can get cleaned up for what comes next.

Guess this conversation is happening.

EIGHT

DAVIS

I don't know what has come over me, but I am past caring about the consequences of crossing this line with Quinn. I spent all night in bed, trying to be rational while thinking everything over and no matter how hard I tried to convince myself to stay away, I kept coming back to the same thing.

I want her.

I want Quinn Donnelly more than I have ever wanted any woman in my life. I don't know what it is, but there is something about the fiery redhead that calls to me on a level even I don't understand. It's infuriating to say the least. But I'm done fighting it.

Footsteps on the tiled floor has my head snapping up and landing on the bane of my existence. My eyes rake over every inch of her body. From the tips of her toes to the top of her head. She wears a pair of my sweats and a shirt, that I laid out for her, so that she didn't have to put on last night's clothes after her shower. Though they nearly swallow her whole, they look good on her, and I can't help the feeling of possessiveness that slithers through me or the fact I like seeing her in my clothes.

Quinn comes to a stop, shifting on her feet. I lean against the counter, arms crossed over my chest as I watch her with narrowed eyes. Wanting to ease some of the tension, I clear my throat, jerking my head to the coffee machine as I say, "I made coffee. Do you take cream and sugar?" I frown when I realize I don't know this bit of information even though she has been working for me, for well over two months now.

She smiles timidly, pulling out a stool and taking a seat. “Thanks. Umm, yes to both.” I nod, pouring two cups of coffee. Then moving to the breakfast counter, I drop the mug down in front of her before taking a seat across from her. “Thank you. I needed this.” She blushes, no doubt as she remembers her drunken antics from last night. She doesn’t need to be embarrassed. We have all been there.

Studying her, my eyes rake over her stunning face. I take in her long sooty lashes, green eyes, the cute tip of her nose. She really is beautiful and even more so without makeup. To be honest, I should get an award for holding out for as long as I did.

“I like you,” I blurt before I can stop myself. Pausing, she blinks. Then blinks again. Her eyes widen, mouth drops open in what can only be described as shock. I chuckle at her reaction. It’s cute. Did she really not know I was feeling some kind of way toward her? Scrubbing a palm down my face, I shake my head at the way I just divulged this information. I should have eased her into it. Not just let the words burst out of me like an idiot. Maybe I read the situation wrong, and Quinn really only does see me as her boss. I’m a fucking idiot. “Shit. I didn’t mean for it to come out like that. Just forget what I said. I don’t want to make things awkward when you come to work.”

A giggle bursts from her mouth and I pause, watching her. “It’s about time you pulled that stick out of your ass.”

I frown, repeating her words. “That stick?”

She nods, happiness sparking in her green eyes. “Yeah, you’re so serious all the time. I mean, I know building houses can be stressful and you have even more pressure on your shoulders because it’s your company. But it doesn’t mean you have to be a grumpy ass.”

I stare at her, perplexed. Is that how I have been coming across? Is that how she sees me? “I don’t know what to say to that,” I admit on a laugh.

Quinn shakes her head, a smile on her face as she takes a sip of coffee. She glances at me. Her cheeks turning a lovely

shade of pink as she sighs out, “I thought you hated me.”

“Not at all. I just didn’t know how to handle these... feelings I had for you,” I admit.

“I like you too. I don’t know why. I just do. I think my feelings started not long after I started working for you. It’s weird really. I never expected to like anyone after my ex. Let alone my best friend’s brother.” Her voice is soft and full of confusion as if she has no clue as to why she feels this way toward me.

“Glad we are on the same page. I want to take you out on a date.” I grin, getting straight to the point.

She smiles. “I would like that. But how are things going to work what with me working for you? What if things don’t work out? I need this job.”

I blow out a breath, knowing these are all valid questions. But Quinn needs to have faith. I have every intention of making this work. Now that I have her, I never plan on letting her go.

Determination laces my voice as I say, “Don’t you worry about that. I have a feeling everything is going to work out exactly as it should.”

NINE

QUINN

It's been two months of absolute *dating Davis* bliss. Two months of me, making any excuse to go to the site he is currently working at just so I can see him. I can't get enough, and neither can he. And I have never been happier. I never knew a relationship could be this way—easy, nontoxic. It's amazing.

Unable to keep secrets from Karissa, of course I told her about me and Davis. She was weirded out at first but having seen us together and how happy we are, she conceded and told me that she thinks we are perfect together. Even with a twelve-year age gap.

I can admit that I have completely fallen for my boss. In fact, I am totally in love with Davis. And I think he feels the same—Well, I hope he does.

“Quinn?” Davis calls as he pushes through his front door, after being at work all day. Pushing up from my seat, I head into the hallway to greet him. With a hand on the wall, and his brows furrowed, he kicks out of his steel toe cap work boots. I smile at the sight. My man, in blue jeans and a black T-shirt that molds to every perfect inch of him. He doesn't even realize how hot he looks and that makes me love him more.

As if sensing my stare, he glances up, his eyes locking on mine. Straightening, his brow cocks, a smirk forming on his gorgeous lips as if he knows exactly what I was just thinking. “Like what you see?” he teases with a wink.

I grin. “You know I do, *boss*. How was your day at work?”

He chuckles, shaking his head as he closes the distance between us and takes me in his arms. “Good. Made some real progress today but I missed you.”

Pushing up on my tiptoes, I press my lips to his. “You saw me a couple hours ago when I brought your lunch.” I cock a questioning brow. “You fucked me in the new bathroom you were fitting. Remember?”

Leaning in, he licks a trail up my neck before his hot breath hits my ear. I shiver, my stomach tightening with need. “Oh, I remember. Clive, the electrician, nearly caught me balls deep inside you. But there is no risk of that now, so get your sexy ass upstairs. I want to wash the day off me then fuck you in the shower.”

“Yes please,” I say breathlessly.

Pulling back, he looks down at me with a smug smirk. “Good girl. You can’t get enough of my cock can you.” It’s not a question but a fact. I can’t get enough.

“Take me upstairs, Davis. I need you.”

Dropping a kiss to my lips, he starts for the stairs. “Your wish is my command, baby.”

TEN

DAVIS

Quinn finally decided to move in with me. Though I asked her months ago, she declined my offer and stayed at her parents'. It irritated me to no end, not having her with me, in my space, but she insisted we needed the time to just date. To get to know each other better and not rush into things.

It was our eight-month anniversary yesterday and her gift to me was a packed suitcase with a note that said.

At least I will no longer have to commute to work. Yes, I will move in with you Davis. I love you.x

To say I was ecstatic would be an understatement. I have never been so happy in my life as I am with Quinn. She brings out the best in me. Makes me a better man. She completes me. I know with everything in me that she is the other half of my soul and the woman I am meant to be with.

“Quinn?” I call out as I step inside our home. I am covered in dust, adhesive and God knows what else, and all I want to do is wash the day away with my woman in the shower.

“In the kitchen.” The sound of her soft voice warms my chest and makes me smile. Toeing off my work boots, I place them down by the door, then make my way to her.

Stopping in the doorway, I grin. Quinn stands at the stove, stirring something in a pot.

Closing the distance between us, I wrap my arms around her waist and press a kiss to the side of her neck. “What’re you doing?”

She glances back at me, chewing that full bottom lip of hers. “Making you dinner.”

“Is that right? What are you making?”

She sighs. “Meatballs and sauce. I think I added too much salt though.”

“Let me taste.”

Lifting the big wooden spoon, she cups a hand underneath as she brings it to my mouth. I blow at the sauce, cooling it some before taking a tentative taste. “Well?” she asks, and I hear the worry in her voice.

“Not bad,” I say honestly.

Her green eyes light up, joy spreading on her beautiful face. “Really?”

I nod before pressing a kiss to her head. “Really. Now turn it off. I need a shower and I want you with me.”

She chuckles, rolling her eyes in faux annoyance. “Yes, boss. Give me a minute. I will meet you up there.”

Capturing her lips in mine, I give her a bruising kiss before pulling back. “You’ve got five minutes. If you’re not naked and in the shower by then, I will come and find you.”

Quinn barks out a laugh, shaking her head. Turning in my arms, she pushes up on her tiptoes and presses her lips to mine. “Maybe I want you to find me,” she teases.

“If that’s the case, be my guest and hide. But be warned, when I find you, your ass is mine.” I feel my cock thicken in my jeans at the thought of hunting her down.

Her green orbs dilate with desire, and she exhales a breath. “Another time. I want you now Davis.”

Releasing her, I slap her ass and step away, giving her a pointed look. “Five minutes.” And without another word, I turn and head up the stairs, knowing full well she will follow.

EPILOGUE

Quinn

Two years later...

Strolling across the construction site, I greet everyone I pass with a big smile. Electricians. Bricklayers. Plumbers. Builders. Good, stable, hardworking men just like Davis. They smile and wave back, shouting greetings of “Hi, Mrs. Pritchard” as I pass them.

I grin. It didn’t take long for the men Davis works with to find out about our relationship. In fact, I think most of them saw it coming before we did. Guess we weren’t too good at hiding our feelings.

Spotting Kevin, one of Davis’s foremen, I head for him.

“Hey Quinn,” he greets, with a nod of his head.

“Hey Kev. Do you know where he is? I brought him lunch.” I lift the lunchbox as if to prove my point.

He chuckles, jerking his head to one of the nearly completed houses. “He is in there, finalizing a couple of details.”

Thanking him, I stride in the direction of where I now know my man is. Climbing the steps of the small porch, I step into the open door, smiling when I spot Davis in his hard hat, jeans, white tee and steel cap black boots. His brows are furrowed in concentration as his fingers move over the tiled wall above the stove.

My heart flutters in my chest. He is so handsome and all mine. “Hey handsome,” I call, and his head snaps up, eyes locking on mine.

Straightening, his gaze rakes over my body. As if he can't wait another second, he closes the distance between us, and takes me in his strong arms. Pulling back, he presses his lips to mine in a quick kiss. “Hey baby. What're you doing here?” Stepping out of his hold, I show him the lunchbox. He chuckles. “You know I forget it on purpose, right?”

I sigh, shaking my head with a grin. “I know. And I love that you do. It means I get to see you.”

Taking his lunch from me he grabs my hand with his free one and pulls me to where a loan plastic chair sits. Dropping down, he pats his lap, silently asking me to sit.

I chuckle, shaking my head, glancing down at my very round, pregnant belly. “I will squash you, Davis.”

He cups my bump, caressing it gently with a soft look of awe and love in his eyes. “Baby, I am pure muscle. You won't crush me. Promise.”

Sighing, I gently drop down into his lap. “It looks good in here.” Pride fills me as I look around the home he built and the happy memories it is going to bring a family one day.

“It does,” he agrees. “I can't believe the projects nearly finished,” he says distractedly as his hands stroke my belly and he peppers kisses along my neck.

I melt into him only to freeze when I feel liquid trickling down my legs. Twisting my head, our eyes lock, as my heart pounds in my chest. Davis swallows, his gaze moving to the fluid leaking down my legs and onto his jeans.

“Quinn?” he whispers, his voice filled with alarm.

I suck in a breath. “I think my water just broke.”

Thank you so much for reading!

I loved being part of this anthology and writing this short story between Quinn and Davis. I hope you enjoyed them too.

To keep up to date with all things Kelly Kelsey, you can follow me on social media.

Facebook Readers Group - Kelly Kelsey Readers Group

Newsletter – [Kellykelsey.com](http://kellykelsey.com)

ABOUT KELLY KELSEY

Kelly Kelsey is a UK-based author who started her writing journey during the pandemic when her career in events came to a complete stop. The more she read the more she wanted to try her hand at writing and eventually self-published her debut novel in July 2021. She now has nine books published and has been involved in four anthologies.

SUNSHINE AND DAISIES:
KAREN CIMMS

ONE

JACK

I swing a leg over a stool at the far end of the bar and drop my tired ass onto the rickety wooden seat. A frosty mug appears, and I mutter my thanks. O'Brien knows it's all he's likely to get from me.

The first sip rolls over my tongue. Ice cold and bitter. It's the second-best part of my day; the first being the jolt of caffeine I need each morning to motivate me for another mind-numbing, body-aching day. The beer goes down easily. Before I can signal for a refill, a second Yuengling appears. In all the time I've patronized his place, O'Brien and I have exchanged less than a dozen words, yet the man gets me. I don't need much these days. A roof over my head, food in my stomach, a cold beer at the end of the day, and to be left...the fuck... alone.

That's why I come here after work. No one bugs me. No one wants to chat. There's no pool table. No dartboard. No jukebox. Nothing but serious drinking and minding your own business. Nobody cares who I am, where I come from, or why I'm here.

With my finger, I trace a drop of condensate as it trickles down the side of my glass. Burns and scars dot the landscape of my hands. Thankfully, none as serious as the third-degree burn I got not long after I started at the weld shop when a white-hot piece of slag fell into the top of my work boot and got wedged there.

I've suffered plenty of breaks and sprains over the years. You don't play football at an elite level without racking up

some bumps and bruises along the way. But the pain that day had been next level.

Wish I could say the scars you could see were the only ones, but I have a scar on my heart deeper than the one atop my ankle.

I curled my right hand into a fist, then uncurled it and stretched my fingers wide to relieve the tightness. My pinky had an unnatural bend. It broke when I'd gotten sacked during the National Championship game my junior year of college, just one day before my life turned to shit and I flushed all my dreams down the crapper.

The pain and stiffness are chronic reminders of that day.

It's been years since I touched a football. Sometimes I wonder if I could still throw a perfect sixty-yard spiral. Not that I'll ever find out. I don't even own a football anymore.

That part of my life is ancient history.

The closest I get to a game these days is when I'm stretched out on my second-hand sofa in my two-story walkup in the worst part of the city. My best days are in the rearview mirror.

A beam of golden sunlight splits the room as the door to O'Brien's swings open. I blink against the assault, and when my eyes adjust, a girl is backlit in the doorway like she rode in on a sunbeam. Her hair is a deep auburn, and her bright yellow dress is covered with red and pink roses. A grin stretches across her face.

She's so out of place that I blink twice, convinced the sun—or the Yuengling—is playing tricks on me. But nope, there she stands, her eyes searching the room. Besides me, the only other patrons are two old men who inhabit the stools nearest the door nightly and some growly bastard perched on a stool midway down the bar.

Her eyes land on me and her smile grows. I don't know this chick, but the way she's looking at me, you'd think she'd spotted a long-lost friend. She beelines toward my end of the

bar, calling a cheery hello to O'Brien and each of the regulars before plopping down on a stool one over from me.

She casts her sparkle on me, and I experience a duality of responses. On one side, I feel like a slug who's been doused in salt. My skin feels tight and uncomfortable. On the flip side, something buried in the darkest recesses of my soul is unexpectedly drawn to her light. You'd think she's towing the sun around behind her, and when she opens the purse slung over her shoulder, I expect sunbeams to shoot out of it.

Some cold, barren part of me stirs at the warmth. The rest of me, though, wants her to turn around and get the fuck out.

Clearly, she doesn't belong here.

O'Brien ambles over, sizing her up as she swivels her stool from side to side like a kid at a lunch counter.

"What'll it be?" he asks, his voice gruff and gritty.

She tips her head up toward the ceiling as if the menu is printed on the stained acoustic tiles and hums before bringing herself to a sudden stop.

"I know," she sings. "I'll have a lemon drop martini."

O'Brien looks at me, his face scrunched in confusion. I shrug and focus on my beer. I'd planned on having my usual three before heading home, but maybe this is my sign to cut out early.

"A what now?" he asks.

"Lemon drop martini?" Her response is more of a question than an answer.

He squeezes the back of his neck. "Does this look like the kinda place that makes froufrou martinis?"

I can't help it. I snort.

"No?" She actually seems surprised. "I'm sorry. How about a regular martini?"

"No martinis." He raps his knuckles on the bar. "This is a shot-and-beer joint."

She laughs, and the sound is so out of place in this dark cavern of despair, all eyes land on her, waiting to see what she'll do next.

“Sorry. I’m new.”

Brand new, I think. Like just arrived from Mars or something.

O’Brien waits and glares.

Susie Sunshine is undeterred. “Let’s see...” She swings her bare legs side-to-side. “I’ve never had a shot. Not sure I’d like it, so how about a beer?” She flashes a bright white smile and points at me. “I’ll have whatever he’s having.”

With a nod of his silvery-gray head, O’Brien nabs a mug from the cooler and fills it. He sets it before her and grabs mine before I can stop him. Once it’s refilled, he slides it to me and hightails it to the other end of the bar as if he’s afraid he might catch whatever this chick is spreading.

She hoists the heavy mug and raises it to her lips before taking a careful sip. I’m trying not to look, but it’s hard not to. Especially when her little pink tongue darts out to sweep the foam from her upper lip. I follow that tongue as intensely as I would if I were laying a bead with my welding torch.

She wrinkles her nose, and her shoulders shimmy. “It’s a little bitter,” she says aloud to no one in particular, “but refreshing.”

After a follow-up sip, she catches me staring and asks me what I think.

What do I think? I think I need to get out of here. Happy, bubbly girls are no longer in my wheelhouse.

I clear my throat. “What?”

Her smile widens. “The beer. Do you like it?”

I look down at the full mug in front of me as if I’m surprised to see it, even though my hand is wrapped around the handle. “Um...yeah.”

She giggles that happy, girly laugh again. “Course you do.” She makes a funny face. “Duh, Emily. Why would you be drinking something you didn’t like?” She slides onto the stool beside me and thrusts out her hand. “I’m Emily. I’m new in town.”

I stare at her hand and then back up at those expressive green eyes. You’d think I was raised in the wild for all the manners I’m able to demonstrate. She gives me a gentle shove with her outstretched hand. “Whatsa matter? Cat got your tongue?”

The last time I shook someone’s hand was when I was hired at the welding shop three years ago.

I clear my throat. “Jack,” I say. I hold out my hand, and she grasps it with her small one. It’s soft and warm, and the longer we’re connected, the warmer I feel. My cock twitches. The rest of her is probably soft and warm as well. A handful of freckles dance across the bridge of her nose. *Why the hell am I so taken with this bouncy little nutjob?*

“You lost?” I ask, releasing her hand and returning to the familiar cold of my mug.

Her face puzzles. “Lost? No. Why?”

I wave my hand, encompassing the dingy bar. O’Brien leans in the corner, watching us, as do the two misfits seated on the end. The third guy couldn’t give a fuck.

That should be me—the one not giving a fuck. Why this chick glommed onto me, I have no clue. Maybe because I’m the only other person here who isn’t on Social Security.

She beams at me, and no matter how cold and solid that block of ice in my chest is, it’s feeling the heat.

“I’m not lost. I just checked into the motel near the K-Mart.” She gestures toward the ramshackle motel up the road located across from an abandoned shopping mall. The place is a shithole. I know because I’ve rented a room there a few times. I don’t take girls back to my apartment, and it’s the only place in the city that advertises an hourly rate. It’s also not the

kind of place this girl, with her sunny yellow dress, fiery red hair, full pink lips, and smiling green eyes belongs.

“How’d you end up there?”

“I don’t have a car, obv’s.”

“Obv’s.” I roll my eyes at the abbreviation.

“And it was within walking distance of the bus station.”

Is she kidding? “The bus station is at least six miles from here.”

“I know,” she huffs. “I could’ve done it in under two hours, but dragging two suitcases and hauling a backpack slowed me down.”

“Wasn’t there someone you could’ve called?”

“Nope,” she chirps. “I’m new, remember?”

“You don’t know anyone?”

She hits me with that smile again, and I expect rainbows and glitter to shoot out of her eyes on laser beams. “I know you.”

Not possible. I did everything but change my name when I went off the grid.

I take a deep swallow from the mug in front of me. “Nope,” I say as I wipe my mouth. “You don’t know me. I don’t know you.”

She drops her shoulder and leans into me. “Emily, remember? And you’re Jack.” She points at the stool beside her. “We met a few minutes ago when I was sitting over there.” Amusement dances in her eyes. “Did you forget? Maybe I should have you cut off.”

I drain my mug. “No need.” I stand and yank my wallet from my back pocket and pull out a few bills to toss on the bar. “I’m outta here, sweetheart.”

Her smile dims as she grabs my arm. Her pale hand looks stark against my sun-burnished forearm. “Please don’t go. I

really don't know a soul here. I've come a long way, and I really don't want to be alone."

"Look, sorry to disappoint, but I'm not good company."

She rolls her lips and her brows lift as she scans the near-empty room. When she looks back at me, she's still smiling, but only a fraction as wide as when she'd first arrived. "All things considered; you're my best option."

I'm no one's best option these days but given the three drunks lining the bar and O'Brien, who keeps sneaking peeks at Little Miss Sunshine between innings of the Mets-Phillies game on the TV above the bar, she isn't wrong.

"Stay and eat with me." Her eyes grow bigger and rounder. "I'll buy you dinner."

"The food here sucks."

She shrugs. "Beggars can't be choosers."

"No need to beg." I tuck my wallet into my back pocket and decide that the minute I get the chance, I'm kicking my own ass.

"C'mon. Least I can do is take you somewhere that the food won't make you sick."

TWO

JACK

The sun has set, but the day's heat radiates off the stucco walls of O'Brien's and rises from the cracked macadam. I don't need shades, but I slip them on anyway. They're another layer between me and the rest of the world.

Emily hesitates, not knowing which piece of crap belongs to me. I place my hand against the small of her back and guide her toward my Ford F-150 pickup. The truck is older than me, but it gets me back and forth to work. It's not like I'm going anywhere else.

"Over here," I say. "The red truck."

I feel the urge to apologize for the shitmobile, but before I can decide if I will or not, she's skipping up to the door. "A pickup truck! I've always wanted one," she gushes. "I'd paint it pink and put the name of my farm on the doors." She holds up her hands, framing my truck as if she's imagining its reincarnation. "And I'd paint my name right under the window so that everyone would know who I am."

"You have a farm?"

"Not yet, but someday." Her smile grows wistful.

She has no home and is staying in the shittiest motel in the city. She doesn't own a vehicle of any kind, let alone a pickup truck, and it appears she's also jobless. She should be as miserable as I am, but instead, she's bubbly and bouncy as I unlock the door and she climbs up into my truck. I'd think she was on something if her eyes weren't so clear and bright.

She's probably a little off her rocker.

“I can’t find the clicky thing for the seatbelt,” she says after I get in on my side.

“Don’t usually have anyone riding with me.” I lean toward her and jam my hand into the space next to her hip and catch a whiff of vanilla with a hint of something floral. My dick twitches, and I inhale deeper.

She swivels toward me, watching me fish out the seatbelt, and in the process, exposes her creamy, white neck. I fight to keep my head from dropping to her shoulder like a fucking creep.

My fingers graze the hard plastic clip. I tug it out and sit back before I do something crazy. This girl didn’t climb into my truck to be assaulted.

“Here,” I say gruffly. “Buckle up.”

“You too, buttercup.”

“What?”

“You said, ‘buckle up,’ and I said, ‘you too, buttercup.’”

I’m not sure how to respond, so I nod and buckle my own damn seatbelt. I know she said she walked to the motel from the bus station, but if she told me her unicorn was parked behind the motel, I just might believe her.

I fire up the truck and take a left onto the highway. We’re not going far; just to Friendly’s. It’s not like I can’t afford better, but I’m not trying to impress her. This isn’t a date. I’m going to feed her and drop her off at her motel.

During the ten-minute drive, Emily entertains herself by looking out the windows and giving me a play-by-play commentary on everything we pass. She makes note of the Walmart, the half-empty shopping mall, the Verizon store, and the adult sex shop. She sees Rita’s and yelps as I’m turning into Friendly’s parking lot. I nearly jump the curb.

“Sorry.” She grimaces, although her eyes still sparkle. “I got excited. I’ve always wanted to go to a Rita’s.”

Another guy would offer to take her. I’m not that guy. I’m still not sure why I’m taking her to Friendly’s. I park and

climb out, but by the time I come around to open her door, Emily's already hopped out. Just as well. Reminding myself—again—that this isn't a date, I jam my hands into the front pockets of my pants to keep from touching her back as we cross the parking lot. I open the door to the restaurant, but she's no longer beside me.

Instead, she's standing at the edge of the sidewalk, taking pictures of an oversized container filled with daisies. Pink and purple petunias spill over the sides. I'm hit with a wave of nostalgia. My mother's garden in Virginia was a riot of color from April through October. It's then that I realize the floral scent I noticed earlier, combined with subtle whiffs of vanilla, is jasmine. The garden behind our house had an arbor that was covered with confederate jasmine. Probably still has one, although I wouldn't know. Haven't talked to my parents in years.

When she's finished, Emily skips over to me. "Sorry, but they're so pretty, I needed to take a picture." She shows me her phone. "I love daisies. They're my favorite. Someday, I'm going to plant tons of them so I can cut them and put them in every room in my house."

"On your farm, right?" I didn't mean to sound sarcastic, but I've been jaded for so long, it's my go-to mechanism.

The wattage of her smile never dims, but I catch a flash of sadness behind her eyes.

"Exactly." She shrugs. "I have dreams, Jack. Big ones. Other than the few things jammed in a suitcase I found at Goodwill, they're all I have. And I'm okay with that. I left my former life behind and chose myself a new one. That new life comes with a whole new set of dreams."

It's been a long time since someone put me in my place, yet this five-foot-nothing wisp of sunshine does it with ease. If we were sitting, I might be squirming in my seat.

"There's nothing wrong with having dreams, Jack."

I can't help but snort.

"Yeah, right."

Her eyes narrow and her face scrunches. She studies me harder. Enough that it's almost uncomfortable, but she struck a nerve.

“What if you never get that farm, Emily? Then what? Or what if you finally buy yourself a dozen acres of land, plant your flowers and your vegetables, put up that white picket fence, raise a fuck-ton of animals? But then there's a drought and nothing grows. And the animals get sick, and the vet bills are astronomical, and you have no choice but to put them down so they won't suffer. The taxes come due on the farm, but you can't pay them, so you're forced to pack up your shit in your second-hand suitcase and take the bus because that old, pink pickup with your name painted on the door won't start.

“Then what, Emily?” I practically spit out her name. “Huh?”

The hostess chooses that moment to appear and, after giving me an icy once-over, leads us to a booth in the back, far away from the other diners.

I snatch the menu off the table. I stare at the pages, but I'm too wound up to see anything.

Emily slides into the booth across from me and brightly thanks the hostess while I count to a hundred in my head. This is what I get for trying to be a nice guy—a lecture on dreams. I had big dreams too. So big that when they imploded, they took me and everything around me down with them.

We sit in silence. I'm up to the mid-eighties when a finger with chipped pink nail polish hooks and lowers my menu. Emily leans in closer. Her face is serious, her eyes wet and glassy. Of course I hurt her feelings. It's what I do—hurt people.

This was a mistake.

I drop the menu and am about to pull out my wallet and give her money for an Uber so I can get the fuck out of here, but she speaks and virtually knocks me on my ass.

“Who did this to you, Jack? Who hurt you so badly that they stripped your dreams from you and left you empty?” Her

eyes fill, and I'm speechless. She's not upset with me. She's upset *with* me. A dainty hand covers my rough, red, scarred one and squeezes. She doesn't have a clue what I've been through. Usually, anyone who's in my presence for more than a minute or two knows I'm a mean, angry sonofabitch and steers clear.

But no one, not even my parents, has bothered to concern themselves with how my world falling apart destroyed me. How it hurt me, changed me.

Changed the entire course of my life.

No one cared until this girl—Shitville's new ambassador of hope—landed here and flooded the dark with her light.

For a moment, I forget what a sorry excuse of a human I am. I forget about counting down my anger. I even forget that I was about to bounce.

This girl is getting to me. My lungs feel heavy, and a hard lump forms in my throat. I struggle to swallow while the backs of my eyes prickle and burn.

I feel like I did on my tenth birthday when my father arranged for me to stand behind the bench during the Army-Navy game. I watched the Midshipmen trounce the Black Nights and knew from that moment I wanted to be a quarterback. I set my sights on the NFL and never looked back.

Not until the night after the National Championship game, when it all turned to shit.

But right now, this beautiful empath, who as far as I'm concerned has nothing to be happy about, is somehow finding joy everywhere and asking about feelings I'd rather not deal with. Between the tears in her eyes and her recognizing my pain, I need to lock my past down tight before I break.

I never thought I'd say this, but I want one night as the old Jack. One night to forgive myself for the past. Tomorrow will be here soon enough. Tonight, I give myself permission to live; to steal a little of Emily's happiness, because God knows, I have none of my own.

I reach across the table and, with my rough, calloused hand, wipe away a tear as it tracks down her cheek. I touch my finger to my tongue and taste her anguish. My pain has touched her somehow, and I feel the need to absorb a part of her.

“You’re too pretty to cry, Emily.” I haven’t spoken this gently in years. “I don’t deserve it but thank you.”

Before she can argue, I press my fingers to her lips, and for the first time in what feels like forever, I smile. It’s a little strange using those long dormant muscles, but it soon feels as natural as if I do it every day.

After a few blinks and more tears, Emily returns my smile. The light returns to her eyes, and it feels good knowing I put it there.

The waitress returns and Emily orders a turkey club and fries as well as soup and a salad. I opt for a cheesesteak and fries.

I unroll my silverware and spread the paper napkin onto my lap. “Tell me about you,” I say. “What are your plans now that you’re here?”

“First, I need to find a job,” she says. “Then a place to live.”

I shake my head. “I still can’t believe you got on a bus and came to a strange city with no prospects.”

“It’s called adventure, Jack,” she says, scolding me. “Haven’t you ever had an adventure?”

I think for a few moments. “Can’t say that I have. My life was pretty much laid out for me since I was ten.”

“Not me. If I accepted what my life looked like when I was ten as my future...” A shiver shakes her shoulders. “Who knows where I’d be?” She lays out her silverware in front of her. “But I did dream. Every New Year’s Eve, I’d write down my dreams and send them out into the universe.”

“Any of those dreams come true?”

“I’m here, aren’t I?”

I can't help but laugh. "No offense, but it was your dream to come to Hazlewood?"

"Not exactly. I looked at a map and figured out how far I could go and what I could afford when I got there based on the money I'd saved." She sweeps her hand. "This is where my adventure begins."

If getting mugged or finding a dealer on every street corner is her idea of an adventure, she's in the right place. Since I can't say that without sounding like a dick, I keep it to myself. I do, however, encourage her to proceed with caution.

Our food arrives, and I watch in amusement—and then concern—as Emily dives in like she hasn't eaten in days. Given that she walked miles from the bus station to her motel, and that it sounds like she's counting pennies to stay there until she finds a job, I'd bet anything she didn't treat food as a priority. There's no way she's paying for dinner. In fact, I'll be stopping at the market on the corner to load her up with some snacks and drinks to store in her room.

"Was it good?" I ask after she drags the last french fry through a puddle of ketchup.

Shoulders back, she rests a hand on her belly and smiles. "Delicious."

The waitress arrives and asks about dessert. I'm about to tell her no, thinking Emily couldn't eat another bite, but she surprises me.

"Yes!" she gushes. "Jack, would you share dessert with me?"

Images of me licking whipped cream and chocolate syrup off her tits and her treating my cock like an ice cream cone pop into my head. My dick hardens and I have to resettle myself before I embarrass us both.

Do I want dessert? Only if it's the way I'm picturing it, but I have a feeling if I decline, she won't order any for herself.

"Sounds good," I say. "Get whatever you want."

Emily practically squeals. “We’ll have the Jim Dandy with vanilla, chocolate, and strawberry ice cream.”

Internally, I’m groaning. A gigantic banana split with five scoops of ice cream? Where is she putting all this food?

But the smile on her face is contagious. If I have to suffer through chunks of banana and strawberry sauce, then for her, I might just be happy to do it.

THREE

JACK

Emily presses a hand to her belly as we walk across the parking lot. “I shouldn’t have had that last bite.”

I can’t help but laugh. “That last bite, huh? You think that’s what did it?”

She bumps her shoulder into my arm. “Yes...yes, I do.”

“Oh-kay,” I say.

She giggles as I unlock the door to my truck. I hold out my hand to help her up and she takes it, but instead of climbing in, she groans. “Gimme a second.”

“And here I was glad I didn’t have to roll you across the parking lot.” I wrap my hands around her waist and lift her up to set her on the seat, but I don’t let go. Her gaze widens, and she instinctively spreads her legs to accommodate me while my heart beats out a long-forgotten rhythm.

There’s a tiny bit of chocolate syrup tucked in the corner of her mouth. I lean in and flick it away with my tongue. Her hand snakes up my chest and settles at the juncture of my neck and shoulders. Her fingers twirl the longer strands of hair at the base of my neck. Her eyes meet mine and without words, what I read is permission. At least I hope that’s what I’m seeing.

I move closer. Her sweet breath caresses my lips, but I wait. Our eyes are still open. Our noses practically touch. Another second passes. Her eyes close, and she whispers, “Jack.”

My hands cradling her face, I tilt her head and take her mouth. Her lips part and our tongues tangle. She's dinner and dessert rolled into one, and I go at her like a starving man. Because I am. I'm starving for affection and love and the warmth of a woman's touch; everything that has been missing from my life.

One night. If she's offering, I'm taking.

She wraps her legs around my waist and crosses her ankles behind me. I grab her ass and pull her to where I need her. She moans when her pussy meets my cock, and I nearly lose my damn mind. It's been a while, and I hope to hell I don't come in my pants like a fucking teenager.

"I want you," I say, ready to take her right there in the parking lot. If we were parked at O'Brien's, I wouldn't think twice, but this is a family place, and I don't need anyone calling the cops.

She blinks, but then she nods. I untangle her legs and slide them into the cab of my truck.

"I'll take you back to your motel, and if this is still what you want, I'm yours, but just for tonight." I reach in and buckle her seatbelt, then race around to my side and jump in, praying that she won't change her mind.

I start the truck, but before I pull out of the parking lot, I reach for her across the console and kiss her again. If I'm giving myself one night, I'm going to be a greedy bastard and take everything I can. I'm breathless by the time I pull away. "Fuck, Emily."

Her cheeks are red from the scruff on my face, and her lips are wet and swollen. My mind wanders to another pair of wet and swollen lips, and I slide my hand under that yellow dress and don't stop until I find her center. I want to tear those panties right off her, but I control myself. Instead, I slide two fingers under the damp panel and find her wet and ready. I nearly blow my load without her laying one finger on me.

"Damn, baby, you're so wet." I run my fingers over her swollen bud. Her breath quickens and despite the seatbelt

holding her in place, her hips rise and chase my hand. I slip two fingers inside her and curl them. She lets out a high squeak and bites her lip. Surprising me, her hand snakes between us. She presses it against my bulging cock, giving it a tentative squeeze.

I remove her hand from my crotch and set it in her lap. I hold it there, enjoying the feel of her soft skin against my palm. I've been with women over the past few years, but none I wanted to hold hands with.

The drive to the motel takes only minutes. I pull into the parking lot and Emily guides me around to the back of the motel, which faces a creek and a wooded area. I'm immediately pissed and want to go to the front desk and demand they move her to a more secure area. This place is bad enough without them sticking a woman who's on her own in a first-floor room in a poorly lit area. Guess as long as they get paid, they don't give a shit.

Before I can suggest we get her room changed, Emily is out of the truck and unlocking the door to her room. I follow her inside and feel as if I've stepped onto the set of a slasher film or a cheap porno. The walls are a dirty beige. Two queen-size beds are covered in a dark, nondescript print that matches the drapes on the front window; drapes that are shredded on the inside edge. An unpleasant smell hangs in the air, and I don't even want to think about what would turn up if I had access to a blue light.

"Fuck this." I grab her suitcase. "Get your stuff."

"Why? Where are we going?"

"You're not staying here. This is bullshit."

I practically drag her out of the room and around the front of the motel to the office. A woman wearing a Hawaiian muumuu sits behind a glass wall, smoking one of those thin, brown cigarettes. She gives me a once-over, followed by a smirk when she sees Emily. And yeah, while I'm most likely going to fuck the girl beside me, I'm not here to rent one of her rooms by the hour. For some reason, it pisses me off that she's looking at Emily that way.

“Can I help you?” she asks, her voice muffled by a layer of bulletproof glass. Freaking proof this isn’t a safe place to stay.

“Yeah, this woman wants her money back.”

Emily tugs on my shirt. “Jack...”

“Why? What’s wrong with her room?”

I plant my hands on the counter and lean in as close as I can get. “Is that a trick question?” I ask. “We don’t have all night to go over everything that’s wrong. Let’s just say it’s disgusting and unsafe for a woman on her own to have to access her room in the back of this shithole.”

The woman narrows her eyes. “Long-term guests are designated rooms in the back. It’s company policy.”

“I don’t give a shit about your policy.”

The woman hefts herself from her chair and leans on the counter, mimicking my stance. “There’s nothing wrong with her room. Looks like it’s a you problem, not a her problem.”

Emily keeps tugging on my shirt. “Jack, it’s okay. I don’t mind.”

The woman folds her arms over her ample bosom. “See, your *girlfriend*...” She has the nerve to use air quotes, which makes me want to put my fist through the glass. “...doesn’t mind. So you need to back off. There’s nothing wrong with her room.”

I turn and face Emily. “How much money did you give them?”

“Why?” She’s starting to panic.

“Because I’m taking you to a different motel.”

“Jack!” she whispers heatedly. “I can’t afford another motel.”

“Don’t worry about that right now. You can’t stay here. It’s not safe.”

The muumuu matron glares at me with a smug look stamped across her face. She’s damn lucky she’s behind that

glass. I wouldn't lay hands on her, but I wouldn't hesitate to get right up in her face.

"How much, Emily?" I demand. I'm being irrational. Where she stays is not my problem. After tonight, I'll never see her again. But I can't, in good conscience, let her stay here.

Emily fidgets and folds her arms in front of her. She looks at the woman, the parking lot, the night sky.

"C'mon," I say, trying to control the anger in my voice. It's not directed at her. Just life in general and the bitch behind the glass. I move closer. "I'm going to get your money back. And then I'm going to take you somewhere safer and make sure that you get a better room. I promise. Okay?"

She toes the gravel on the sidewalk with the tip of her flip-flop. *Jesus, I hope she wasn't wearing fucking flip-flops when she walked here from the bus station.*

When she speaks, her voice is so low, I have to lean down to hear her. "Come again?"

"A week," she says a little louder. "I had to pay a week in advance."

I take a deep breath and exhale slowly. I don't have time to count to one hundred, so I just proceed and hope the beast behind the glass doesn't push all my buttons.

I turn, rest my hands on the ledge again, and look her dead in the eye.

"Listen up, ma'am. This is how it's gonna go."

I roll Emily's suitcase into her room at another motel. It's closer to the center of town and within walking distance of almost anything she might need. It's only a few dollars a day more than she was paying at the first place, but the property is well lit, her room is on the second floor, and faces the front. It's smaller but has a king-size bed. It doesn't smell, and the

curtains are in one piece. It also has a small refrigerator, a microwave, and a coffeemaker.

“I can’t believe you got her to give me most of my money back.” Emily drops her backpack on the bed and plops down beside it. “You’re a good negotiator.”

I rest my butt on the dresser in front of her. “That, and I happen to know a lot of drug deals take place in that back parking lot. I overheard a few guys I work with talking about it. It’s small potatoes shit, but the police might still be interested in hearing about it.” I smile and it feels good. “Given the way she responded when I mentioned questionable activities, I’m betting she’s fully aware of what goes on back there.”

Emily is jazzed. Like she just witnessed a live-action episode of *Law & Order*. Her enthusiasm is kind of adorable, and her gratitude has been endless. She chatters the entire time she goes about setting up her new space. She loads the refrigerator with the things I insisted on buying her when we stopped on the way here—milk, cheese, and coffee creamer. Then goes about arranging the dry goods—cereal and snacks—on top. The way she’s bustling about, you’d think this was the nicest place she’s ever stayed. It’s only a few steps up in comfort, but I don’t question my motivations for getting her out of the other place. Any decent person would’ve done the same.

She surveys the room, and then dusts her hands, satisfied with the outcome.

When she turns that thousand-watt smile on me, I feel its warmth. I’m also a little overcome. Which means I need to set the record straight before anything else happens between us.

“Better?” I ask.

“Perfect. I can’t thank you enough, Jack. You really saved me.” I didn’t think it was possible, but her smile grows brighter. “You’re my hero.”

She wraps her arms around my neck. She looks so sweet and innocent; I’m tempted to plant a kiss on her forehead and

say goodbye. But then she presses her hips to mine, and that thought flies right out the window. Which brings me back to setting things straight.

I run my hands up and down her back. “Emily, listen. I’ve enjoyed meeting you. You’re a sweet girl, and I haven’t had a fun evening like this in a long time—except for what went down at that dump of a motel.”

“Oh, c’mon. That was fun. Especially when she slipped that cash through the window to reimburse me.”

My lips curl up. I don’t fail to note how unusual it feels to smile, not having done so in a long time. Yet here I am tonight, smiling almost nonstop.

I pull her closer, breathing in her jasmine and vanilla scent and wanting to bury my face in her neck, lift her into my arms, and toss her on that big-ass bed. She sighs and settles against me, pressing her hip bone against the bulge in my pants.

“Hey,” I say softly, cradling her face in my hands and tilting her head so I can see her eyes. “I’m not interested in a relationship of any kind. I need you to know that. Not even a friendship.” Her eyes widen so slightly, if I wasn’t looking for her response, I wouldn’t have noticed.

“I’d love to take this further tonight. I haven’t wanted anyone the way I want you in a long time. But I need you to know that once I walk out that door, whatever this is, is over. And if that’s not okay with you, I’ll say goodbye now.”

I watch her jaw work as she swallows, but then I see the grit and determination in her eyes that I’d noticed earlier. At O’Brien’s when she first told me about arriving here. And then again at the restaurant when she talked about her dreams.

I wouldn’t blame her if she opts to toss me out on my ass. She doesn’t look like a one-night stand kind of girl. And that’s okay.

She takes a deep breath and holds it before exhaling against my chest. When she looks up at me, her smile isn’t as brilliant as it was earlier, but it’s still there.

“I get it, Jack. Besides, I have an entire new life to build, whether it’s here or somewhere else. I don’t have time for a relationship right now either. Friendship is another thing. I love having friends. I love people. But if you don’t want to be my friend, that’s okay.”

The problem is, I’d love to be her friend, but I can’t imagine seeing her and not wanting her. I know from experience that relationships are dangerous.

She rises onto her toes and presses her mouth to mine. I let her take over. Let her lips warm me. She nibbles on my bottom lip, then runs her tongue along the seam, parting them and pushing her tongue into my mouth. I take it greedily. The kiss continues to heat until it practically burns me.

Our tongues duel. I slip my hand under her skirt and glide it up her outer thigh. When I reach her panties, I slide both hands inside and grab hold of the globes of her firm, ripe ass and lift her onto the dresser. Standing between her legs, it’s déjà vu as I recall our position in Friendly’s parking lot. Only this time, I’m ready to take what I want. I drop to my knees, but instead of tearing those damp panties off her, I tug gently and slide them down her legs. She watches, her pupils blown, as I kiss her ankle. Moving upward, I plant tiny kisses along the inside of her calf and behind her knee. She squirms, and as I draw closer to her pussy, the scent of her arousal makes it nearly impossible to take it slow. But I’m determined. I’ve got one night with Emily, and I’m doing my damndest to make it a good one.

She shimmies again, so I nip the inside of her thigh. “Sit still, or I’ll stop,” I say, praying she listens because there’s no way in hell I’m stopping.

She whimpers but stills as I drop to my knees. Wrapping my hands around the tops of her thighs to keep her still, I lick and kiss the spot I’d nipped and continue my path upward, ready to plant my tongue exactly where I want it to be.

I run my nose along the edge where her inner thigh meets her pussy. Her moans grow louder. Her legs vibrate beneath my hands. “Good girl,” I rasp. Without another word of

warning, I flatten my tongue and run it along her slit from one end to the other.

“Holy cheese and crackers,” she mumbles, and I can’t help but chuckle. Her hands dive into my hair. Her fingers wrap around the strands and pull. It’s just short of painful, but it spurs me to go deeper. I circle her clit, taking turns sucking on the swollen nub and running my tongue between her folds. I lift one leg over my shoulder, and then the other, taking her even deeper.

“Ohgodohgodohgod.” Her fingers tug. Her thighs tense and vibrate, and I know she’s close.

“Come for me, baby,” I growl against her pussy. “I got you.” I swoop back in, licking and teasing. I wrap my lips around her little clit, and as I give it a hard suck, she falls apart. Her legs clamp around my head as she rides the wave of her orgasm. I don’t let up until she’s nearly boneless.

Reluctantly, I pull away. The beautiful girl who’s still wearing her yellow dress smiles down at me. She cups my face in her hands, and though I still bear the taste of her arousal, she drops her lips to mine and kisses me deeply. “That was magical, Jack,” she says, surprisingly bashful. “Thank you.”

I grin against her mouth and lift her into my arms. We don’t have far to go, just a few steps, but she wraps her arms around my neck and her legs around my waist. I carry her to the bed and set her down gently. I can’t wait to get her undressed and sink my cock deep inside of her. I can’t wait to make her come again, but this time, I want to feel the walls of her pussy tighten and grasp my cock as she comes.

I sweep her hair over her shoulder and lower the zipper on the back of her dress. She slides her arms out and raises them over her head, allowing me to pull the dress off the rest of the way. I nearly jizz in my pants when I realize she’s not wearing a bra.

Emily is slim and small-boned, and her breasts are as cute and as perky as she is. I reach out to grab one when she points out that one of us is overdressed.

She rises to her knees on the bed and begins to unbutton my shirt, cooing with each button she unfastens as if I'm her new favorite toy. When she finally pulls my shirt off, I realize how grimy I am from work. I pluck her up and toss her over my shoulder and head to the bathroom, causing her to squeal and playfully hit my back, giggling all the way.

“Hey! I forgot to pack my rubber ducky,” she sings out.

I'm laughing as I lower her to her feet and finish undressing. When I'm finally naked, I turn and Emily's eyes pop when she gets the full frontal. My dick grows even harder when she gulps and asks if it will fit.

I pull her to me and close my eyes. I've missed the feel of skin on skin. My arms wrap around her back, while hers settle around my waist. I lower my chin until it rests against the top of her head. It feels intimate and comfortable. Maybe a little too comfortable. And definitely too intimate. I let go and remind myself that this is just one and done. I made it clear to her I'm here to get off and go. Yet it's seeming more and more like I'm the one who didn't get the message.

We step into the shower. Emily wets her hair and her body, and then drops to her knees. She is literally my wet dream in the flesh. She rubs that tiny bar of motel soap between her hands, working up a lather, and then hands it off to me before running her soapy hands over my dick and balls. Back and forth she strokes me, twisting with the perfect amount of pressure when she reaches the end of my dick, and then sliding her hand back again. One hand works my dick while the other focuses on my balls. Gently but firmly she cups them, tugging and squeezing and sending sparks of electricity up my spine, staying on the side of pleasure and not pain.

I rinse all traces of soap off my cock, hoping she'll take that as a sign to get up close and personal. She does. Her hot little tongue glides over the swollen head of my dick while one of her hands continues to play with my balls. Her tongue lavishes attention on the underside of my dick before she opens her mouth and slides it inside. When I hit the back of her throat, my knees threaten to give out.

“Holy fucking hell.” I’m moaning, panting. My body vibrates. I grab the safety bar and hang on for dear life. This girl. *Holy fuck*. If she doesn’t stop, I’m going to blow my load.

I bury my hand in her wet, red strands. “Stop,” I say, not wanting her to stop. “Stop.”

Big green eyes look up at me, and she pulls off my cock with a wet pop. The visual alone is enough to make me come. “Is something wrong?”

“Hardly.” I lift her to her feet and have her up against the cheap tile wall in one swoop. Her legs wrap around my waist as I sink into her tight, wet heat.

“Fuck,” I groan. I’ve died and gone to heaven.

She wiggles in my arms, settling deeper onto my cock, and I’m not sure if I’ll be able to stay upright if she keeps moving. I hold her close, wrapped tightly in my arms, and lower my head to take her mouth. Our bodies are still, but our tongues are not. My heart is beating hard enough to bruise a rib. My cock twitches as if to remind me where he is. As if I could forget.

I break away from her mouth and press my forehead to hers. “Damn it,” I growl.

“What’s wrong?” she asks, as I attempt to lower her back to her feet. She clings onto me like a second skin.

“I need a condom.” I mutter. There’s one in my wallet. We’re just getting started, and already I wish I had a sleeve of them.

“It’s okay.” She kisses my chin. “I’m on the pill. And you’re already inside me.” She kisses my jaw. “I trust you.”

There’s painful movement in my chest that I assume is related to my heart and emotions, but I ignore it. Instead, I pull back. “Why? You don’t know me.” I have a sickening thought. This girl may look like the picture of innocence, but her oral skills are top-notch. “How do I know I can trust you?”

“You don’t,” she says with a shrug of her shoulders. “You just have to believe me.”

Despite the precariousness of this conversation, my dick could pound nails. Clearly, he's not worried. As I consider the consequences of going bare, her pussy clamps around me, and again, I'm afraid my knees might give out.

Fuck it. If she's lying, it's only a course of antibiotics, right?

"Hang on," I demand. Her arms tighten around me as I step out of the tub and carry her into the bedroom. If I were a decent guy, I'd grab some towels and dry us off, but I'm afraid if I try to disengage from her right now, my dick might revolt and stay with her.

"We're going to get your bed wet," I warn before lowering her onto the mattress.

"I don't care, Jack," she says, her voice breathy enough to make my cock twitch, reminding me he's ready to get down to business. "Just give me tonight."

So I do. The whole. Fucking. Night.

FOUR

JACK

I wake before my phone alerts me it's time to rise. Despite less than three hours' sleep, I'm rested and whole. It's an unfamiliar feeling. As is the soft, creamy skin of the redhead whose legs are entwined with mine, her head resting on my chest.

Gray light spills from around the drawn curtains. I can't feel my arm, but I don't care. If things were different, I'd wake her and fuck her back into oblivion. Then I'd take her to breakfast and concentrate on getting to know her.

But they're not. And it doesn't matter what my heart thinks it wants. It'll pass.

Gently, I roll Emily off my chest and onto her side. She mumbles something unintelligible and wraps her arm around her pillow. I wait until her breath evens out and she's fallen back to sleep. I slip out of bed, grab my clothes, and step into the bathroom. I'm careful not to make a sound as I close the door and flick on the light.

The bastard in the mirror glares at me.

He wants to stay. He's not happy with this life we're living. But he doesn't get a say.

After a quick piss, I splash some water on my face and get dressed.

I stand over her, listening to her soft, rhythmic breathing as I watch her like some kind of creep. I need to leave. If she wakes, it will be that much harder to go.

Quietly, gently I touch my lips to her hair and try to memorize her vanilla and jasmine scent.

I unlock the door, but before I go, I glance over my shoulder. Her hair partially obscures her face. My chest tightens. My feet grow roots. But she deserves better than me.

Her dreams are laid out before her while mine are nothing but cold, gray ash.

I close the door with a soft click. I try never to look back. There are too many mistakes staring back at me, so I walk away, my head down, even if it's the last thing I want to do.

“Goodbye, Emily,” I say aloud. “Sweet dreams.”

Then I climb into my truck, fire it up, and drive back into hell.

FIVE

JACK

“What the fuck!”

I jump off the sofa and scream at the TV.

After Washington scored on Stanford on the opening drive, Owens throws a goddamn interception, and Washington is in place to make it fourteen-zip. I’m ready to forward spiral a six-pack of Yuengling straight through the center of the massive flat screen even though it’s the only thing of value I own.

I’ve been on a tear these past few weeks. Everything pisses me off, including myself. I haven’t set foot in O’Brien’s. I’m not sure if I’m afraid I’ll see Emily again. Or that I won’t. Besides, even if I wanted to see her, she’s probably moved on by now. Found herself a job. Moved out of the motel. Maybe even climbed onto another Greyhound and got the fuck out of here. That would be the smart thing to do.

Thinking about her—about that night—has made me a bigger bastard than usual. That’s what I get for allowing myself a taste of normal. Not that she was all that normal. My lips twitch, despite my self-imposed misery. She was so much more than normal.

Three weeks and I still can’t take a shower without thinking of her. I’ve got a bulging bicep and a near-permanent cramp in my right hand. I’m surprised my dick isn’t calloused.

ESPN cuts to a commercial break. I mute the TV and drag my sorry ass into the kitchen to grab a bag of chips and nuke something for dinner. I’m digging around in the freezer when I

hear a loud crash, followed by the sound of something tumbling down the stairs outside my apartment.

I ignore whatever's going on. One, it's none of my business, and two, I don't give a fuck. I hear another thud, followed by a low, feminine voice. "No, no, no!" The voice is muffled but seems to come from right outside my door. "Hang on. Stop! I'm going to drop you if you don't stop."

I'm about to place my frozen dinner in the microwave when a loud bang comes from the landing, followed by a shriek.

"Jesus Christ." I storm from the kitchen and yank open my front door, ready to unload on whoever is outside my door creating all the commotion.

What I find is a woman on her knees with her back to me. A one-eyed, three-legged, orange cat claws at her shoulder as she struggles to scoop soil, daisies, and pieces of a broken clay pot off the floor with one hand while holding the cat with the other. A beat-up suitcase leans against the open door to my neighbors' apartment.

My neighbors' empty apartment.

I gape at the cause of the disturbance. Red hair. Yellow dress.

No fucking way.

"I'm sorry for all the ruckus," she says, focused on the impossible task of collecting dirt with one hand. "I swear I'm not usually this clumsy and loud, but Mr. Winky doesn't like being held. We're still getting used to one another."

Mr. Winky? I had a teammate who called his dick Mr. Winky.

I can't find words, so I stand there, gawking like the one-eyed cat's got my tongue.

She looks up, and I look down into familiar green eyes.

"Emily?" I choke out. This isn't happening. How did she land outside my door of all places?

I think about her so much, it's like I conjured up some kind of twisted fantasy.

The cat sinks its teeth into her bare shoulder, and Emily grits her teeth against the pain.

And then, despite the fresh fang marks and the scratches marching up her arm, a smile spreads across her face as she scrambles to her feet. "Jack!" She peeks into my apartment. "Is this where you live?"

"How'd you find me?"

Her brow furrows. "I didn't." The cat digs its back claws into her stomach and attempts to make a break for it. She winces. "I mean, I wasn't looking for you so I didn't find you."

"Huh?"

"I couldn't find you because I wasn't looking." She resettles the cat in her arms. "What are you doing here?"

I want to reach out and touch her—make sure she's real—since her sudden appearance and this conversation are as clear as mud, but I keep my hands to myself.

"I live here," I say.

Her eyes widen. "No way! Me too."

"Me too what?" I'm certain that I've sacrificed a few brain cells to welding fumes.

"Me too. I live here too."

I stand there blinking like some kind of fool. "What?"

"Jack." With a short huff she rolls her eyes. "Why are you acting so dense?" She laughs, and the sound is way too cheerful for my sad, sorry ass. "I live here." She points through the open door. "I'm moving in. Right now, actually."

I step across the hall and peer inside. Yup. No furniture. No rugs. No nothing. My socked feet thump across the living room and down the hall. Nothing in the bedroom or the bathroom. Emily watches from the doorway, curious, as I retrace my steps and check the kitchen. Also empty.

“What are you looking for?” she asks.

“What happened to my neighbors?” I don’t know why I ask. It’s not like I care.

She shrugs. “Beats me. The place was empty when I came to look at it last week.”

Last week?

After closing us into *her* apartment, Emily sets the cat down. It takes off like a rocket. Impressive for something with only three legs.

Then, beaming like a kid on Christmas morning, she bounces across the room and thrusts out her hand. “Howdy, neighbor.”

I swallow the sudden lump in my throat as I take her hand in mine. Given my racing heart, maybe it’s me who’s like the kid on Christmas morning.

Our hands still clasped, I look down at Emily and smile. Then I pull her close and press my lips to hers. Only this time, it’s no goodbye kiss. My head’s still scrambled; my heart still damaged, but maybe it’s time to let some sun back into my life.

I break away. Reluctantly. But only for a moment.

“Hey there, neighbor,” I say, and then pick up right where we left off.

The end... for now

Want to know what derailed Jack’s future and why Emily’s such a dreamer? Find out when this grumpy vs. sunshine pair get their own book in 2024. For updates, subscribe to my [newsletter](#) or visit my [website](#). Learn more about me and my books [here](#).

TATE: JENNILYNN WYER

ONE

PEYTON

Ernest Hemingway once said, "*I regarded home as a place I left behind in order to come back to it afterward.*"

Crossing over the county line into my hometown of Fallen Brook is like a religious experience. The green of the grass is more vibrant. The trees taller. The sky bluer. With the driver's side window rolled down, I breathe in the air that seems that much sweeter. It's all psychosomatic, but I don't care. I'm home.

The scenery flying past as I do forty-five down the road blurs into one long memory of growing up here. Funny how you never realize how much you miss something until you see it again after being away for so long.

Slowing at a four-way stop, I flick my blinker and turn right. Passing through open metal gates, I drive at a leisurely pace down the private road lined by gorgeous magnolia trees with their palm-sized white blossoms that look like fluffy pieces of popped popcorn. Bright bursts of color from various flower bouquets are sprinkled among the manicured lawn, giving beauty to the sadness that surrounds this place.

Tiny pieces of crushed rock crunch under the tires as I pull up along the side of the road. I park my car, turn off the ignition, and stare off into the distance, not able to get out just yet.

Deep breath in, exhale out.

Reaching over to the passenger seat, I clutch the wildflowers I found in a field on my way here and get out of

the car. The wet paper towel I wrapped the stems in so they wouldn't wilt, drip water onto my bare toes exposed at the top of my sandals. The late spring afternoon sun shines brightly in contrast to the nip in the air that still lingers. May in North Carolina can be a seesaw, one day hot and steamy, the next, cool and comfortable.

Bright red cardinals and majestic blue jays flit from tree to tree, chirping their unique calls. A gorgeous zebra swallowtail flutters by on the currents of the light breeze. So much life in a place of death.

Deep breath in, exhale out.

Tucking the flyaway wisps of my long wheat-blond hair behind my ear, I walk around the front of the car and stop when my feet align with the curb where tarmac meets grass, hesitating for a brief second before I'm able to take the next step. Then another. And another.

My heart thuds harder with each footfall that brings me closer to the gray granite slab carved with my brother's name.

Parker Emmett Marley

May 20, 1999—August 13, 2019

Beloved son and brother

I look at the older, more weathered gravestone next to his where my mother is buried and let the tears flow freely. Almost my entire family is buried here. Mom, my brother. So much damn loss. So much heartache.

Gently placing the flowers on the ground in front of Parker's gravestone, I smooth my skirt and lower to sit, tucking my legs underneath me.

"Happy birthday, Parker," I tell my brother, the torrent of tears constricting my throat and making it hard to talk. "Hey, Mom. I miss you both so much."

It's the first time since Parker's funeral that I've been home.

"I kept my promise," I tell my brother, pulling a few dandelion weeds at the roots that have sprouted around the

base of the headstone. "I kept it, even though it broke my heart," I whisper, the pain almost choking me.

I stayed away for almost four agonizing years. And last week was the end of my purgatory. I graduated with top honors from Carolina University. A promise begged of me by my brother with his dying breath. A promise forced on me by *him*, the only man I have ever loved.

But now I'm back. For good.

That was a promise I made to myself.

When I was nine years old, I fell in love. The type of love that fills your heart completely so that no other person ever has a chance of stealing any tiny piece of it for themselves. The kind of love that ruins you because your heart will never want another. It's a forever love. A finding your soulmate love. A love that doesn't care how old you are and can take hold even at the tender age of nine. It's perfect and wonderful and completes you in a way that nothing else can. Not money or success or material things.

But that perfect love comes at a price.

There's a saying. "*If you love something, set it free. If it comes back, it's yours. If not, it was never meant to be.*"

Well, I came back.

Because I will always belong to him.

Tate Kingston.

TWO

TATE

Pain lances my finger when my hand slips. Metal cuts a thin line across the knuckle, and I call the piece of shit Honda Civic I'm working on every expletive I can think of.

"Damn, man. I don't even know what half those words are," Charlie says from under the hood of a Camaro in the next bay over. He pulls his head out and looks over at me. "You okay?"

No.

"Yeah," I grumble, my bad mood getting worse as the day progresses.

Charlie's sympathetic brown eyes hit me with a hefty dose of pity. He understands the significance of today. Everyone in the whole damn garage knows.

"Ryder won't mind if you take the rest of the day off."

"I'm good," I shout over the loud whir of an air impact wrench.

Not wanting to clean the blood off on the dirty, oil-covered towel tucked in the waistband of my work trousers, I head to the back to wash up and grab the first aid kit.

As I scrub the grease from my hands, I stare at my reflection in the small circular mirror that's mounted to the wall above the sink. Haunted blue eyes underlined with the faint bruises of fatigue stare back at me. My hair is also too long. I usually keep it cut short, but the wavy dark-brown strands have grown out and curl around my ears. I'm three

days past time to shave, and the overgrown scruff is itchy as hell.

Ripping a couple of paper towels from the dispenser, I dry my hands.

“Here,” Ryder says, shoving an open first aid kit at me when I turn around.

He leans a shoulder to the wall and crosses his arms over his chest, considering me with his shrewd copper eyes.

Ryder Cutton owns the garage, Randy’s Custom Auto, and is a street racing phenom who I have fanboyed over since I saw a video of him race at The Fields when I was a kid. Working for him has been a dream come true. Over the last four years, we’ve become good friends, something I desperately needed after my best friend Parker died. Today is Parker’s birthday, hence my shitty mood.

I dab antibiotic ointment on the cut and wrap a Band-Aid around my finger.

“Knox is racing at The Fields tonight. Be there by eight.”

Ryder doesn’t ask. He never does. He knows how difficult today is for me, and he’s doing his part as my friend to make sure I don’t spiral into the dark place I used to visit at the bottom of a liquor bottle whenever Parker’s birthday came around.

I nod my gratitude, and he slaps my back a few times before walking toward his office.

“Eight o’clock sharp! Don’t forget,” he calls out before disappearing around the corner.

Removing the shop towel from my waistband, I toss it into a bin that Ryder has a laundry service come pick up once a week.

“Charlie, I’m taking a break!” I yell across the expansive space.

A thumbs-up pokes out from the Camaro’s raised hood.

Grabbing a chilled drink from the mini fridge, I exit the side door and drop my ass down to the parking lot curb. Knees bent and legs splayed, I prop my elbows on my thighs and pop the tab to the can of soda. The smells of motor oil and rubber are quickly replaced by the sweet honeysuckle growing up the trellis against the side of the garage.

When I feel the weight of my emotions strangling me, I tune out the noise from inside and close my eyes.

Fuck, Parker. I miss you, man.

Parker and I met on the first day of kindergarten. He shared his peanut butter and jelly sandwich with me when he saw I hadn't brought any lunch—I'd forgotten the lunchbox Mom had packed in my haste to get to the bus stop, excited for my first day of school. He and I were inseparable from that day forward. Ten years after we met, a guy who was too busy texting and not paying attention while he was driving sideswiped the car we were in and took my best friend from me. Parker fought like hell to hold on, but his injuries were too severe, and I watched him take his last breath in the hospital two days later.

The rumble of an engine gets louder when my younger brother Paxton pulls up in the rollback tow truck and parks right in front of me. He presses the horn just to be an asshole, then shuts off the engine and hops out.

“You look like shit.”

I flip him off. “Kiss my ass, pretty boy.”

Pax got his blond hair and fair looks from Mom, while I'm the spitting image of Dad. Dark-brown hair, green eyes, and linebacker build, which served me well on my high school's football team.

Sitting down beside me, he takes out a smoke that he won't light up because he's trying to quit. Holding the cigarette to his nose, he inhales deeply, then puts it back inside the pack. He says smelling the tobacco helps with the cravings. It's funny as shit to watch.

“You on a break?” he asks.

“Something like that.”

He bumps my shoulder and looks out across the parking lot. A row of mature pines and hardwoods stretches across the back part of the property, hiding the industrial buildings on the other side.

“You heading to the cemetery later?”

I always do on Parker’s birthday. I used to take the day off from work and spend the entirety of it at Parker’s gravesite with a bottle of high-proof vodka. Those days are no more. I haven’t picked up a drink in over two years.

Pax angles his head and looks at me. “Want some company?”

Every year he asks, and every year I turn him down.

“I’m meeting Ryder at The Fields later.”

“Good. I don’t like the idea of you being alone tonight. You don’t feel like going back to your place after, come crash at mine.”

Pax lives a stereotypical bachelor’s life, which means his apartment is filled with empty beer cans, pizza boxes, and the occasional ripped condom wrapper discarded on the floor.

“Your place is disgusting.”

He rolls his eyes. “Then sleep at Mom’s.”

That would be a big hell no. I love my mother, but the woman is the definition of a helicopter mom. She hovers and fusses, two things I can somewhat tolerate on most days, but tonight, it would drive me out of my damn mind.

“Pass. You coming tonight?”

Pax’s grin is wide. “Nope. Got a date.”

My brother is the greatest guy you’ll ever meet, but he’s also the biggest manwhore in Fallen Brook.

“Then I’m definitely not crashing at your place. Not my idea of a fun night listening to your headboard bang against the wall.”

His grin stretches from cheek to cheek. “It’s fun for me.”

I playfully shove his shoulder, my mood a bit lighter than from minutes before.

“Thanks, man.”

Taking off his ball cap, Pax sweeps a hand through his disheveled hair. “For what?”

“For being my brother.”

He drops his gaze and sighs. Neither of us are good with expressing “*feelings*.”

“Shit, man.”

Wiping his hands down the front of his stained jeans, he pushes up to stand and cuffs my shoulder. No other words are spoken. None need to be.

The side door creaks as it opens, then slams shut, and I’m left alone to my thoughts once again.

Except, instead of thinking about Parker, I think about *her*.

THREE

PEYTON

The giant sweetgum tree comes into view as soon as I turn down the short private drive that leads to my childhood home. The iconic tree's spiny gumballs hang down from the branches like prickly cherries. When we were kids, Parker and I would collect the gumballs that fell to the ground and hit them like baseballs with his favorite Louisville Slugger.

A cool breeze whips through the open driver's side window and flutters my hair around my face as I pull in behind my best friend Adeleine's daisy yellow Volkswagen Beetle. Once parked and the engine turned off, I just sit and stare at the house I haven't seen in four years.

It looks exactly the same with the exception of the new flower beds Dad must have added. Tall purple irises that have just started to bloom stand in front of fragrant gardenia bushes. My eyes flutter shut as I breathe in the sweet-scented air that reminds me of my mother's favorite perfume, trying hard to keep the image of her crystal clear in my mind—her smile, her laugh, the way she'd push a strand of her hair behind her ear when she was lost in thought—a habit I seem to have inherited. As each year passes since we lost her to ovarian cancer, those tiny details get blurrier and blurrier. The same is happening with Parker. The details of his face aren't as crisp in my mind as they used to be. And I'm terrified of the day when they both will become shadows who only visit me in my dreams.

Getting out of the car to retrieve my suitcase, I stop when I see Adeleine sitting on the front porch bench swing, a huge

smile on her face. It doesn't matter that I just saw her last week at graduation, it doesn't lessen the effulgent happiness that explodes inside my chest.

"Welcome home!" she shouts and bounds down the front steps, her dark curly ponytail flapping behind her as she runs toward me.

We crash into each other in the middle of the driveway, all hugs and tears and watery laughter. This girl has been my rock since I was six years old.

"Dad here?" I ask when our manic welcome-home embrace ends.

"Inside fixing you a homecoming supper. Fried chicken and biscuits."

My stomach twists with a mixture of hunger and guilt. After we lost Mom and then Parker, Dad and I kind of lost each other, too. Our relationship hasn't been the best over the years. Occasional, awkward phone calls, a few emails and texts. He never came to visit me while I was at CU, but he did show up to my graduation. Holidays and school breaks were spent at my grandparents' place in Missouri because Dad didn't want to be home where he'd be surrounded by the painful absence of Mom and Parker. I often wondered why he never sold the house. Why would he want to live alone in an empty home that would only remind him of the two most important people in his life that were no longer there? I think he kept the house for me because he knew I'd return one day.

Adeleine's honey-brown eyes study me for a lingering minute.

"You good?"

I nod. "Yep."

"My offer to crash at my place until you find somewhere else to live is still open."

Our hands find each other's, and our fingers tangle.

"I know." But I want to stay here with Dad. It'll give us a chance to reconnect.

“I may have heard that a certain brooding mechanic will be at The Fields tonight.”

I know exactly who she heard it from. She and Tate’s younger brother, Pax, started hooking up a year ago. Fuck buddies, she calls whatever their relationship is, but I know my friend. I hear the subtle inflections in her voice whenever she talks about him. She’s in love with the blond Lothario but is too afraid to ask for more. Pax has a reputation. A deserved one. But the fact that they’re still sleeping together after a year speaks volumes. I’m pretty sure he feels the same way. Since I’m back, I may have to bust out my Jane Austen knowledge about matchmaking and pull an Emma.

“Have you seen him today?” I ask, knowing today will be as hard on Tate as it is for me.

Adeleine knows which *him* I’m referring to. She never voluntarily tells me about Tate unless I directly ask. If there’s one thing about my best friend, Adeleine knows how to hold a grudge. She’s still pissed at what he did after Parker died. Tate has become her Voldemort, the man whose name shall never be spoken.

“No, but Pax did.”

“And?” I inquire as we walk hand in hand up the front walkway to the porch.

“And I don’t understand why you’re still so hung up on that guy. There are so many other men out there who would trip over themselves for a chance to date you.” She taps her bottom lip in thought with a perfectly French-manicured nail. “Marcus is available.”

My bark of laughter startles a cardinal perched in the sweetgum tree.

“Marcus is my new boss’s oldest son. I don’t skinny dip in the company pool.”

No matter how gorgeous Marcus Cutton is, my heart only wants one man. And starting Monday, when I begin my new job as Ryder Cutton’s new Public Relations Manager for the

Motocross team he's building, I'm going to put myself in Tate Kingston's line of sight every freaking chance I get.

"Don't you mean, 'don't dip your pen in company ink?'"

I hip-bump her. "I like my version better."

The cherry-red front door opens, and moss-green eyes that are mirror images of mine settle on me with wariness. I hate that our relationship has become this strained thing.

"Hey, Dad."

He opens the door wider with one hand, a kitchen towel held in the other.

"Welcome home, peanut."

Without hesitation, I wrap my arms around his thick chest and hug the shit out of him.

Mending my relationship with Dad is another reason why I came home to Fallen Brook. Too much has been taken from me, and it's past damn time I take it all back.

"Something smells really good," I comment when we pull apart.

His cheeks heat, and he fidgets with the hand towel, twisting it into corkscrews.

Stepping out of the way so Adeleine and I can come inside, he replies, "I, um... I made supper. I hope you're hungry."

"Starving."

As soon as my foot steps over the threshold, a tidal wave of emotion crashes into me. I'm really home.

"Anything in the car you'd like for me to bring in?"

He silently waits while I take a look around, noting the changes he's made. New paint adorns the walls, a muted sea green with gray undertones that reminds me of the color of the Atlantic Ocean on a rainy day and good memories. Every year after school let out for the summer, Mom and Dad would take me and Parker to Topsail Beach for a week-long family

vacation. My favorite days while there were the ones where we'd play on the beach when it rained. Thunderstorms were even better. We weren't crazy enough to go out in those, but we'd sit under the stilted breezeway and watch the lightning as it streaked across the sky and hit the water's surface.

"Just a couple of suitcases. I'll bring them in later. Let me go wash up."

The car journey from CU takes only two hours, but I'd like to change into something more comfortable. Unless Dad boxed and stored my old clothes, there should still be something in my dresser drawers for me to wear.

As if reading my mind, Dad says, "Your room is how you left it. I'll go get the food plated. Eat outside on the back deck?"

Popping on tiptoe because he's so tall, I kiss his gruff cheek. "That sounds lovely. Thanks, Dad."

He blushes again and heads toward the kitchen.

Adeleine's arm wraps around my shoulders. "He may not be able to say it, but he's missed you."

After we graduated high school, Adeleine stayed in Fallen Brook. She attended community college to get her associate degree in nursing while also working part-time as a receptionist at Dad's private practice. Once she became a practicing registered nurse, Dad moved her from receptionist to full-time staff. Adeleine has been keeping an eye on him while I was away at CU, something I'll never be able to thank her enough for.

I drop my head on her shoulder. "I've missed him, too. Come help me find something to wear." Grabbing her arm, I pull her down the hallway toward my bedroom. If I'm going to see Tate again tonight, it's going to be with me wearing something sexy and tight and a little slutty.

FOUR

TATE

When I turn onto the dirt road that leads to The Fields, I'm not surprised by how many cars are already parked along the sides of the road. With Knox racing tonight, there's sure to be a large crowd from Fallen Brook and Highland, the town adjacent to Fallen Brook where Knox is from.

The Fields is a local dirt track where every kid or adult in town with a fast car or a dirt bike comes to race. Friday night races have been a staple in the community for as long as I can remember. Ryder grew up racing here. So did Knox, Parker, Pax, and me. So many good memories are tied up in this place.

It takes me several minutes to find a space to park my truck. When I hop out, I can feel the charge in the evening air. The excitement from the gathered crowd surrounding the illuminated track. The rev of engines rumbles and shakes the ground beneath my feet, adding another layer to the anticipation of the races to come.

“Yo, Tate!”

I turn my head at hearing my name called and lift a hand when I see Knox. He hasn't been around the garage much lately, and this is the first I've seen him in two weeks. He's been training non-stop and will head out to Pala, California, next week to compete at Fox Raceway for the first leg of the Lucas Oil Pro Motocross Championship.

“Hey, man,” I say when I reach him where he's standing next to the long trailer that his KTM bike is strapped to.

We do our usual back-slap hug in greeting.

“Ry mentioned you’d be coming. Glad you’re here, brother.”

“Glad I came,” I reply, meaning it.

After clocking out at work, I went to see Parker. His dad must have visited before I arrived because there were fresh, if wilted, flowers set in front of his gravestone. Dr. Marley and I are usually passing ships in the night because of our busy schedules. I try to drop by at least once a month to check on him and help with anything that needs done around the house.

“Since you’re here, mind giving me a hand?” Knox asks, jumping up onto the bed of the trailer, causing it to groan and bounce under the added weight.

Lifting myself up, I hold one side of the bike, so it doesn’t tip over, while Knox unhooks the tie-down straps from the handlebars.

“Ry not here yet?”

“He’s around. Saw him talking with the *new employee*.”

I quirk an eyebrow at his smirking tone, not able to figure out what it means.

Once he’s done, he hops to the ground and attaches the ramp for me to guide his bike down.

“I didn’t know he was hiring. For the garage or for the team?”

He wipes his hands off on the jersey of his race kit. “The team. I can’t wait for you to *meet her*.”

Again with the weird tone of voice.

“The king has arrived!” Trevaughn loudly announces behind me, and I want to roll my eyes. I’ve had to live with that stupid nickname since junior high. It’s a curse of having the last name Kingston.

Knox and Trevaughn are both transplants from New York City. They met while living in the same family shelter. Trevaughn recently moved back to town after being gone for a while.

Trevaughn and I tap fists, then he helps me remove the ramp and slide it onto the bed of the trailer.

“Have you seen the new girl with Ry? *Holy shit.*”

“She is very pretty,” Knox replies, taking a quick glance my way, and I give him a scowl in return. What is up with him tonight?

Trevaughn and I follow as Knox walks his bike toward the track.

“I’m definitely going to hit her up for her numb—”

Trevaughn gets interrupted by a gaggle of girls wanting Knox’s autograph and to take selfies. We step out of the way, not bothered by it. Price of being a hometown celebrity.

Interested in who this new woman is, I turn to scan the growing crowd for anyone I don’t recognize.

“What does she look like?” I ask.

“Tall blonde with the most gorgeous green...”

Trevaughn’s voice fades into the ether when my eyes lock on the last person I would expect to see here. Searing pain claws inside my chest as my heart electroshocks itself back to life when gorgeous soft green eyes stare back at me from a distance. Peyton Marley was always the most beautiful girl I had ever seen, but the person watching me from across the field isn’t a girl anymore.

Having her this close is like looking directly at the sun. Intense and blinding. I knew the day would come when I’d see her again. I thought I’d be better prepared for it. Clearly, I’m not, as evidenced by my shaking hands, the beads of sweat that pop along my forehead, and the breath that gets knocked out of my lungs in a violent whoosh.

Go to her. Grab her in your arms and never let go. Tell her you fucked up. That you didn’t mean what you said.

But my feet stay planted.

Four years ago, I didn’t only lose my best friend. I lost the girl I loved, too. I had no choice. She was going to give up her

dream of college to stay. For me. I couldn't let her continue to be stuck in this small town and tied to a guy who literally had permanent grease stains under his fingernails. Peyton deserved better. And as much as it killed me, when she said she loved me, I lied and said I didn't love her back. I pushed her away, and those last words I spoke in desperation to save her from a life that Parker and I never wanted for her have haunted me every damn day since.

Statue-still and gaping like an idiot, I can't tear my gaze from her. She looks phenomenal. Her wheat-blonde hair, that always reminded me of autumn sunrises, is longer, falling in waves past her shoulders. Tight denim hugs every delicious curve, as does the fitted Randy's Custom Auto team jersey she's wearing.

I saw her as a speck from where I sat in the stadium last week at her commencement. She didn't know I was there, but there was no way in hell I would miss seeing her toss her cap up in the air. Pride swelled my chest to bursting until it felt like an overinflated helium balloon as I watched her. When the ceremony was over, her effulgent smile struck like an arrow aimed true to my heart. All I could think was, *Parker, look at our girl. She did it, man.*

A hand waves in front of my face. "Where'd you go?" Trevaughn asks, then follows my line of sight. "That's her... and she's walking toward us. Shit. How do I look?"

He runs a hand over his tight curls, then cups it over his mouth and exhales. "Dude, give me some gum."

The girls surrounding Knox finally disperse, and he turns his attention to Trevaughn. "What?"

"My breath reeks. Give me some damn gum."

I swear, it feels like my heart is about to crack through my ribcage from how hard it's pounding as she walks toward me. So goddamn beautiful. I curl my hands at my sides into tight fists, so I don't do anything stupid; the need to touch her suddenly overwhelming.

I watch her hips sway with every step she takes, a determined look set on her gorgeous face.

Ten feet. Five feet. One.

And then the sweetest sound caresses my ears when her Cupid's bow mouth opens, and she says, "Tate."

FIVE

PEYTON

“...to get started on the new campaign next week.”

Realizing Ryder is speaking to me, I glance up at him, a distracted smile plastered in place. We'd been discussing the new social media campaign, with Knox as the focus, that I would start working on come Monday.

“Sounds good.”

Ryder looks over and sees who I'm blatantly staring at. He knows the entire history between Tate and me. Hell, everyone in Fallen Brook does. It's the curse of living in a small town. Everyone knows everything about everybody else's business.

“I haven't told him yet that I hired you,” Ryder says, giving my arm a supportive squeeze.

I felt Tate as soon as he arrived, the awareness of his presence palpable. The air electrified around me, causing my pulse to pick up, my breaths to become shallow, and an explosion of goose bumps to skitter along my skin in a flurry of tingles. Tate had always had that effect on me.

I'd stalked him enough on social media over the years but seeing him on a small phone or laptop screen was nothing compared to seeing him again in person.

When those Caribbean-blue eyes settle on me from afar, a whole-body shudder quakes me to my core. He's so much... *larger*... than I remember. Lean, muscled arms that used to hold me so tenderly are now bulging and straining against the short sleeves of his cotton T-shirt. My eyes soak in every new detail of him. From the top of his artfully shaggy dark hair I

want to sink my fingers into to the toes of his dark-brown Timberlakes. Broad chest, tapered waist, and long legs that fill out his jeans to mouthwatering perfection. But it's the face of the boy I used to love that has every synapse firing with renewed desire. Tate was always gorgeous, but the man he has grown into is absolutely devastating.

Ryder gently places his hand on my lower back and gives me an encouraging push. "We can talk later. Go to him."

Ryder is not only my boss but a good friend, mentor, and someone who I consider an honorary big brother. Parker and Tate practically grew up at his garage, which means I did, too, since I was forever tagging along wherever my brother and his best friend went. Ryder and everyone else who worked at Randy's Custom Auto became my adoptive family, in a way. Something I'm incredibly grateful for, especially after losing Parker so suddenly.

Not having to be told twice, I give Ryder a quick side hug and force my wobbly legs to move. With every footfall that crunches the tiny gravel under my feet and takes me closer to Tate, my heart cries out and reaches for him.

I've missed you so much.

I love you.

As much as it shredded me into a thousand jagged pieces, I know why Tate pushed me away. Once the hurt and the anger subsided, it left behind a clarity of understanding. Tate loved me enough to give me up. He loved me so much that he was willing to do what was best for me and let me go, even if I wasn't willing to acknowledge it at the time. I had just lost Parker, and I didn't want to lose anyone else I loved. I was willing to give up everything, every dream, because of my fears. Tate knew it, and he did the only thing he could to make sure that didn't happen.

Knowing that truth is what has sustained me without him these past several years.

But there's one dream I've always had since I was nine years old. A dream that I'm willing to fight with my life for.

And that dream is standing right in front of me, looking at me with need, and hunger, and longing.

“Tate.”

Those hauntingly beautiful blue eyes heat when I say his name, and his chest expands with a deep inhalation.

“Trouble.”

A smile blooms across my face at the nickname he used to call me, just as a rush of arousal dampens my panties at hearing the deep timbre of his voice. It’s a bizarre and confusing mix of happiness and lust. I don’t know whether to hug and kiss the hell out of him or climb him and demand he take me somewhere more private and screw my brains out.

A hand thrusts in front of me, breaking the smoldering stare-off between Tate and me.

“Hey. I’m Trevaughn.”

“Hi, Trevaughn, I’m Peyton,” I reply with a bemused chuckle when I take his proffered hand.

He brings my hand to his lips and kisses it like a Victorian gentleman.

I catch Knox’s eye roll before he says to Trevaughn, “You’re an idiot,” then, “See you after the races. I’m going to get set up.”

“Bye, Knox.”

I’m looking forward to working closely with him. Knox has been steadily working his way up the rankings over the last two years, and everyone says that this is his year to make it to the top three in the standings.

Even though the crowd here tonight is loud and rowdy, the silence that descends the patch of dirt where Tate, Trevaughn, and I are standing is deafening.

Tate shuffles his work boots awkwardly and runs a hand through his mop of hair. I bite my bottom lip and fidget my restless hands.

Trevaughn seems to catch on and backs away, saying, “I’ll go help Knox get ready. Nice to meet you, Peyton.”

I give a finger wave goodbye, but my sole focus is on Tate.

“Walk with me?” I ask him.

His eyes widen with brief shock, and he hesitates for what feels like an excruciatingly long time before he nods.

Strolling side by side, I have to crick my neck to look up at him. I’d forgotten how tall Tate was. I’m five foot seven, and he towers over me like a sequoia would a rose bush. The breeze teases my hair and carries with it the subtle cologne clinging to his skin. Sandalwood and citrus. The football jersey I stole from him the last night we were together lost his scent a long time ago. I still wear it to sleep in. It’s silly and sentimental, but having something of his so close to my skin helped with the heartache of missing him.

After a few minutes, we find ourselves standing next to his black Chevy Silverado. A rush of memories comes tumbling forward, of long drives with the windows rolled down and hot-as-hell make-out sessions while parked under the stars.

I walk around to the back and pull the handle to let the tailgate down, then hop up and dangle my legs off the end. Tate slowly comes around to stand in front of me, and the urge to wrap my legs around his waist and pull him to me is almost irresistible.

He rubs a hand over the back of his neck and looks off to the side. It used to be something he’d do when nervous, and for some reason, seeing him do it bolsters my mood.

“You’re Ryder’s new hire, aren’t you?”

“I am.”

Not able to hold back any longer, I hook my finger in the hem of his shirt and twist until he takes a step closer. His hot blue gaze returns to me, and my belly swoops when I see the swirling tumult of emotion etched on his handsome face.

“Peyton, what the hell? Why would you come back?”

Steeling my courage, I take a shaky breath and reply, “I came back because this is where I want to be. Here. With you.”

He opens his mouth, but I don’t let him spew the bullshit I know is coming. Screw Parker and screw him. I did what they asked. I worked my ass off at CU and graduated with honors. But that’s as far as I’m willing to let them control my life. I refuse to exist in a world where I’m merely content. With myself, with my life partner, with my job. I don’t want a boring, *content* life. I want one filled with happiness and love and a man who both infuriates me and sets my soul on fire.

I touch his chest. So solid and warm. Familiar. His heart drums a fast staccato under my palm, and I count the beats because my heart plays the same rhythm.

“I love you, Tate. I never stopped.”

I expect him to argue or curse or lie again and say he doesn’t want me. What I’m not prepared for is for him to take my face in his large, calloused hands and kiss the ever-living hell out of me.

SIX

TATE

Two minutes.

I lasted two whole freaking minutes before I couldn't stop myself from kissing her.

Peyton Marley will always be my kryptonite.

And she said she still loves me.

After all this time. After what I said and how I treated her to make sure she left Fallen Brook for CU—good intentions and promises made to Parker beside the point. It was still cruel.

But she loves me regardless.

The first taste of her sweetness when my tongue dips inside her mouth is pure heaven. A surge of electricity ripples through me, and my heart thunders as her lips press against mine, unleashing a flood of sensation that courses through my body with every reciprocating stroke of her tongue. Four long, lonely years of pent-up emotion are channeled into our kiss, and my cock strains against the zipper of my jeans, wanting inside her. Now.

“Tate,” Peyton whimpers against my mouth, fisting my shirt in her hands. “Take me home.”

I don't overanalyze how I know she's talking about my place and not her father's. Without a second thought, I wrap her legs around me and lift her up. I don't even bother putting the tailgate back up.

The years and distance between us feel like an ocean of unresolved emotions, a chasm of space and time saturated with words that need to be spoken. Peyton and I have so much we need to talk about, so many things that should have been said. The most important being that I love her, too. I also owe her a shit-ton of apologies and some major groveling that she most absolutely deserves. But all that can wait until tomorrow.

“Did you drive here?”

I walk with her in my arms when her wicked mouth does even more wicked things to my neck. If I don't get us inside the truck, I have a feeling we're going to go at each other like animals, not caring that there are hundreds of eyes watching.

“We can get it later,” she pants at my ear. “I've missed you so much. I can't wait. Please, Tate.”

This is insane. We haven't seen each other in four years, but it's like that absence never existed. We should go somewhere private to talk, not immediately jump straight into sex. That's the rational thing to do, but neither Peyton nor I listen.

Her teeth graze the sensitive skin behind my ear she knows all too well, and I grunt with the effort it's taking not to strip her jeans off and fuck her against the side of my truck.

“You sure about this?”

She nods emphatically as I one-hand the passenger side door open and gently set her down in the seat.

“I'm sure that if you don't stop talking and start driving, I'm going to strangle you.”

My smile flashes wild and free at her sass.

“Yes, ma'am.”

With our kiss out of control and my hands full of her soft curves, I stumble Peyton inside my house with her locked tightly around me.

She breaks our kiss to look around, but with the lights off, it's too dark to see much.

“Do I get a tour?”

My place isn't big. I bought the two-bedroom, two-thousand-square-foot Craftsman a couple of years ago. It sits on a large plot of land, which was its best-selling feature. Plenty of room to build a three-car garage out back or add on additions to the main structure. I spent the first year gutting it and remodeling it. All new wiring and HVAC, new kitchen and appliances, new wood flooring, new paint in the interior and exterior. I'm curious to know what Peyton thinks of it.

“Later.”

Kicking the front door closed with my foot, I push her up against the wall.

“Here's good.” She goes for the zipper of my jeans. “Tate,” she complains when I begin walking again, heading toward my bedroom down the hall.

“I'm not fucking you against the wall the first time.” No matter how badly I want to.

We'll have plenty of time for fucking later. Right now, I need to make love to my woman. I've been without her for far too long. Years to make up for. So many orgasms I owe her.

She laughs as we tumble to the mattress, the soft memory foam cushioning our fall. Her laughter suddenly fades as our eyes meet, the air crackling around us, thick and pulsating like a physical thing as if it were alive.

She lifts her hand to my face and presses the pad of her thumb to my bottom lip as if imprinting her touch on me. When she sucks her thumb into her mouth like she's savoring our last kiss, my cock throbs painfully, wanting to feel her lips wrapped around it and not her thumb.

I sit back on my knees when she gently pushes on my chest. Her intense gaze scorches my skin as her eyes travel over me.

“What?”

She scrapes her bottom lip between her teeth and peers up at me with moss-green eyes. “It looks... *bigger* than I remember.”

A huge smile spreads across my face, and I tackle her back onto the bed and kiss her stupid.

We shed the rest of our clothes in a haste to feel skin on skin. I reacquaint myself with every single one of her curves as I lick and nibble a path down her neck, her chest, her breasts, her stomach. When I get to her wet heat, I bury my face between her thighs, and feast.

Her back arches off the bed, and she cries out when I go straight for her clit. Adding one finger, then another, I slide them along her inner wall, remembering all her pleasure points and locating her G-spot by memory. It doesn't take long before her delirious moans turn into screams of my name as her orgasm sends her flying. And I watch every second of it. The way her back gracefully arches, head thrown back in total surrender, eyes shut tight, her blonde hair spilling like a waterfall over the bedspread. She's absolutely breathtaking.

Her fingers twist my hair, pulling me up until our faces are only inches apart. My lips touch hers, and she moans again when she tastes herself in our kiss.

“Stop torturing me. I need you. In me. Now.”

Her hands firmly grip my shoulders just as her legs tightly wrap around me, pulling me closer to her heat, her body begging me to fill her. But I'm a greedy man and want more.

“Patience, baby.”

With brushstrokes of my lips along the length of her neck, I savor her jasmine-scented skin before traveling down to her breasts. I pause to tease her nipples with my fingertips, delighting in how they harden into stiff peaks, then spend long minutes kissing and caressing each breast until she's writhing under me.

“Tate, *please*.”

I take a nipple into my mouth and lightly bite down, enjoying how her body shudders underneath me.

“Please what?”

She knows what I want to hear. The dirty words I crave.

“Please fuck me.” She reaches between us and circles her hand around my cock, pumping slowly, until I’m the one panting.

“Has there been anyone else?”

Her question may sound casual, but it’s laden with insecurity. She wants to know if I’ve been with another woman. I tried to date. I tried to move on, thinking I would never see her again. But something always stopped me from taking it further with the women I went out with. Four years is a very long time with only my fist to help relieve me.

“No, baby. Only you.”

I hadn’t noticed how tense she’d been while waiting for my reply.

“Me neither.”

Good to know. It wouldn’t have mattered.

Moving carefully at first, I inch inside her slick, tight warmth. She hooks her ankles behind me, and with a sudden thrust forward, I’m seated fully inside her. The sounds coming from Peyton are pornographic. I’m making it my mission to hear those sounds again and again for the rest of our lives.

Our lips melt into one another, our tongues exploring with a slow rhythm that echoes the sensuous pace of our lovemaking. My fingers weave through her hair before drifting down to grab her waist. When I feel her inner walls begin to flutter around my shaft, I pull back and slide her left leg up to rest against my chest, exposing her more fully. I carefully mold my palm around her hip bone to hold her in place and press my weight into her, pushing deeper.

Peyton buries her face in my neck as I pound into her, taking her higher and higher. Telling her with my body how much I love her. That she’s mine. But words are nice, too.

“I love you.”

“I love you, too,” she gasps, then cries out in pleasure as she climaxes.

I nuzzle my face between her breasts as the force of her orgasm obliterates every nerve ending in my body, and I fall off the cliff into bliss right along with her.

Peyton goes boneless in my arms as I kiss her through the aftershocks. We’re slicked with sweat and utterly spent, but her eyes are bright, and her smile is radiant. I’m sure my face wears a matching expression.

Touching a finger to the curve of her mouth, I ask, “Happy?”

“More than happy.”

She loops a piece of my hair behind my ear while I wrap a strand of her wavy hair around my index finger, enjoying how it glides over my knuckle as it unwinds.

“I need a haircut.”

She purses her lips in contemplation. “I like it longer.” She caresses her fingertips over my short beard. “I like this, too. It felt phenomenal when you were... *you know.*”

Her blush is so damn cute.

The curtains are still open, the almost full moon luminous in the night sky, its light casting an ethereal glow on Peyton’s sun-kissed skin.

Still intimately connected and not wanting to move anytime soon, I prop on my elbows and bracket her face with my hands.

“I love you, Peyton.”

Once the words came out of my mouth, I can’t seem to stop telling her.

There’s so much that still needs to be said, and I’m so damn grateful that I have the rest of my life to say them.

“You and Parker wanted me to live my dreams, but you, Tate Kingston,” she whispers, lifting up and kissing me ever so tenderly. “*Are my dream come true.*”

As I gaze into the heart-stopping green eyes of the only woman I will ever love, I know for a fact that she is not only *my dream come true*, she's my *everything*.

EPILOGUE: TWO YEARS LATER

PEYTON

Pulling up to the open garage bay at Randy's Custom Auto, I let the engine idle as I enjoy the scene of my husband bent over the front of a Jeep Grand Cherokee. A hefty dose of lust shoots straight through my core as I stare at his gorgeously tight ass.

I'd spent the last three days in California with Knox and the team and just got back to town a few hours ago. I had a very important stop to make before I came here to surprise Tate. He wasn't expecting me back until later this afternoon.

Tate and I didn't wait long to get married and start building that perfect dream of sharing our lives together. Within two months of me coming home, he put his ring on my finger. Three months after that, I walked down the aisle and married the man I loved.

"Did you want to ride with us?" I ask Dad over the hands-free Bluetooth of the car connected to my cell phone.

We were going together as a family to visit Parker's gravesite later. And I couldn't wait to share the wonderful news with him and Mom. I reach over and touch the thin, long box I wrapped in gold foil paper.

The sound of chair legs scraping over linoleum filters over the line. He must be in his office.

"I should be able to get out of here by five. I'll meet you there."

"Sounds good. Love you."

“Love you, too, peanut.”

Pressing the button on my steering wheel to hang up, I turn off the engine. Butterflies explode inside my stomach, which has nothing to do with the morning sickness I started having.

I splay a hand over my still-flat abdomen, and I ask our child growing inside there, “Ready to tell your daddy?”

I’d had suspicions that I was pregnant over the last week, but it wasn’t until yesterday morning in the hotel room when I was ‘praying to the porcelain gods,’ as they say, that it really hit home. Three over-the-counter pregnancy tests later—because I’m neurotic and wanted to make sure that I wasn’t imagining the positive results—confirmed what I already knew in my heart.

Like he can feel me, Tate’s head lifts and turns my way, and I swear, the smile that stretches across his face gives me a mini orgasm. Pregnancy hormones are the best—okay, not the throwing up parts of it.

He wipes his hands off on a towel and jogs over to where I’m parked, wrenching my car door open and lifting me out of my seat as soon as I unclip the seat belt.

Hungry lips meet mine, and our kiss explodes with fiery need. Three days is way too long to be away from him.

“God, I’ve missed the hell out of you,” he says gruffly, holding me tight.

With me still lifted in his arms, I snuggle into his embrace and breathe him in. Grease and oil mix with the sandalwood and citrus of his skin.

“I missed you more.”

He carries me around to the hood of the car and deposits me on it, then walks between my legs until my thighs grip either side of his waist. The heat from the engine warms my butt, but the way Tate looks at me sets me on fire.

“Get a room!” Charlie shouts, and I giggle when Tate lifts his middle finger over his shoulder.

“When did you get back?”

I toy with the collar of his work shirt, needing to touch him. There's a grease stain I'll need to pre-treat before putting it in the wash.

"A little while ago. I wanted to surprise you."

"Best surprise," he says and tips my face up to meet his kiss, this one slower, deeper. Perfect.

Not able to wait any longer because my heart feels like it's about to explode, I say, "I brought you something. It's in the front seat."

His handsome face tilts and those blue eyes seem bluer as they reflect the cloudless sky above.

"You brought me a gift?"

I nod.

He goes to the passenger side and leans in through the open window to retrieve the wrapped box, then comes back to me.

Giving it a small shake, he asks, "A watch?"

I bite my lip and shake my head no.

His brow furrows with curiosity as he once again gently rattles the contents inside the box, trying to figure out what I got him, and I can't stand it anymore. He does this at Christmas, too. He likes to take his time unwrapping every present, while I love to dive right in, rip the paper to shreds, and get to the good stuff.

"Oh my god. You're killing me. Just open it."

He laughs as he slips a finger under the tape on one side, then the other side, and removes the thick metallic foil from around the box.

"You bought me jewelry?"

The only jewelry Tate wears is his wedding ring and the new watch I gave him last Christmas. There's a men's leather cord bracelet I've been eyeing for his next birthday that I think he'd like.

“Nope.”

When he carefully lifts the top of the box off and sees the white plastic stick inside, his wide eyes lift to my tear-glossed ones. He knows what that stick represents.

A tidal wave of love radiates off him and slams into me with the force of a wrecking ball.

“You serious?”

I nod my head, too choked up to utter the word yes.

“Holy shit! *Holy shit!* I’m gonna be a daddy!”

He drops to his knees on the tarmac and peppers kisses all over my stomach, mumbling words of love to our unborn child, the sweetness of it causing the gathered tears to finally fall and stream down my cheeks.

I yelp when he suddenly stands and hooks his hands under my arms, lifting me high in the air. I brace on his shoulders, and we cry our happiness together. Tate and I have been trying for over a year to start a family, and it’s finally happening.

He lowers me until I can bind my legs around his waist and curl my arms around his neck.

“I love you, Mrs. Peyton Kingston.”

“Not as much as I love you.”

ABOUT JENNILYNN

Jennilynn Wyer is a multi-award-winning romance author (Rudy Award winner for Romantic Suspense, HOLT Medallion Award winner, four-time Contemporary Romance Writers Stiletto Finalist, three-time HOLT Medallion Award Finalist, Carolyn Reader's Choice Award Finalist) and an international Amazon best-selling author of romantic fiction. She writes steamy, New Adult romances as well as dark reverse harem romances. She also pens YA romance under the pen name JL Wyer.

Jennilynn is a sassy Southern belle who lives a real-life friends-to-lovers trope with her blue-eyed British husband. When not writing, she's nestled in her favorite reading spot, e-reader in one hand and a cup of coffee in the other, enjoying the latest romance novel.

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UNEXPECTED: IVY
JACKSON

ONE

GEORGIA

Oh, that was hard to watch.

My poor best friend was dancing with the pretty new girl in town, teaching her how to do all the steps and turns. It seemed like she was enjoying herself, too, laughing and chatting away. Not that it's hard to enjoy your time with Gray. He's a good guy and is funny as hell.

People tend to take advantage of that. He's been through more heartache than anyone should have to experience in his lifetime. Too many women are attracted to his good looks and strong body that he's honed over the years from working on his family's farm. Then they get tired of how nice he is, wanting someone that is going to fight with them over stupid shit and get involved with their drama.

But that's just not Gray. He's stable, loving, and empathetic. He's there when you need him, and he's handy as hell. He's always fixing stuff around the house for me and my daughter. Speaking of, the bathroom faucet in her room has been dripping incessantly lately. I'm going to need him to fix that...

Rhett Black, one of the grumpiest motherfuckers I've ever met in my life, finally ends the conversation and tugs the new girl away from Gray, yanking her outside like she's his property or something. Never seen that before. But that girl looks ecstatic, so I guess we're gonna let whatever is happening there happen.

I move my eyes back to where Gray is standing off to the side of the dance floor, looking a little annoyed but mostly resigned. He isn't the biggest fan of Rhett. Hell, none of us are. We know he's a good guy deep down, but like I said, he's grumpy as hell and communicates mostly in grunts.

Not the best way to win people over.

"Ouch," I say as Gray walks back to the bar and takes his seat next to me. "Guess he's pissed all over that one. Best keep your hands to yourself."

"You're annoying. Anyone ever told you that?"

I snort.

"You. Every day." I spin around on my barstool and squeeze his bicep. "I'm sorry," I tell him, trying to be more serious. "I know you thought she was cute."

He shrugs and lifts his hand to get the bartender's attention.

"It's fine." He leans over and bumps my shoulder. "I've got you."

"Exactly. And I'm the best dancer there is."

He laughs out loud, throwing his head back as his whole face transforms. The sides of his eyes crinkle, and his dimples pop. Lord, how he hasn't been snapped up yet is a damn crime.

"You dance worse than Elaine does," he says as he finally comes back to earth. He's referring to Elaine from an old 90's show called *Seinfeld*, who dances like she's having a seizure instead of a good time. And for the record, I do not dance *that* badly. I'm just a little uncoordinated.

"Another beer?" River asks, walking down to our side of the bar. She's had a busy night, and she looks like she's about to fall over. I wonder if Bill needs to hire some more help for the weekends.

"And two shots of tequila." I wag my eyebrows at her, making her laugh.

“I am not doing a shot.” Gray looks very serious when he says this, but he never turns down tequila once it’s in front of him. “It makes me loopy.”

This is true. Gray practically turns into a sorority girl once it hits his system, making him endlessly more fun and giving me a great night. And since I only get so many nights without my kid, I make sure I have the best time I can each time. Which is why when River puts the shots down in front of us, I thank her and nudge one toward him.

“Please?” I use my best puppy dog eyes. And I know I have good ones because they’re the only feature I like about myself. Where my hair is just plain old brown, and my body is most certainly a mom bod now, my eyes are a vibrant mixture of green and gold.

“You are so lucky I love you,” he says, rolling his eyes and biting back a smile. “To your one night out this month.”

I hold my own shot out and clink it against his before throwing it back and trying not to breathe fire after. That shit burns on the way down. His eyes squint, and his face contorts as he sticks his tongue out.

“Alright.” He downs the beer and clinks it loudly on the bar top. “Fuck it. Let’s dance.”

“Excuse me?” I laugh in his face. “You cannot be serious. You never want to dance with me. You’re always worried I’m going to trip and hurt myself.”

“Or hurt me.” He gives me a look. “Pretty sure you almost broke my toe last time. But that doesn’t matter. I’ll just learn to move a bit more quickly out of the way. Dance with me.”

This is the charm. The way Gray can turn it on so quickly is unsettling sometimes. He knows just how to look at you to make your stomach flutter and your panties melt. At least, if I wasn’t just his best friend, that would happen. I’ll admit in my weaker moments, I’ve *maybe* entertained the idea. But this friendship we have is too important to me.

“Fine. But only if you stop puttin’ on the charm so goddamn heavy.”

“What charm?” His smile is small and ornery.

“One dance,” I tell him, giving him a warning look.

“Just one,” he says, holding two fingers up. “Scout’s honor.”

“You weren’t even in the Scouts.”

“I was in the FFA. That’s gotta count for something.”

I laugh and smack his chest before hopping down from the barstool. I have my heeled ankle boots on tonight, but I’m still short as hell. And when he stands to his full height, he towers a whole foot above me.

“No swing dancing, though!” I shout over the noise of the music as he tugs me to the dance floor.

“You don’t want to be thrown around a little?” He looks back over his shoulder and winks.

Two can play that game, you little shit.

“Only in bed.”

His smile drops, and red blooms across his cheeks. And then the best thing ever happens. He trips and falls flat on his face. I narrowly avoid going down with him by pulling my hand from his and stepping to the side. I collide with another guy, who holds me up. But I’m laughing so hard at Gray that I can barely breathe, let alone thank this man for catching my flailing self.

“No more tequila for you,” I tell Gray as I pull away from the other guy and stoop down to help him up.

He mumbles something, but I can’t quite hear him over how loud the music and all the people around us are.

“What?”

“I said I don’t need to know what you like in bed!”

I swear it’s like a record scratch in a movie. He’s laughing, clearly messing with me, but he shouts it loud enough for everyone around us to hear. And I can feel my face turn bright red as I pull him up off the floor.

“Thanks for that.”

“Didn’t realize you were so shy.”

“Didn’t realize you were so *loud*.”

He laughs.

“Come on, Georgia Grace. Let’s dance.”

TWO

GRAY

After a few more beers and a lot of horrendous dancing, we're heading out. Georgia's momma will be dropping her daughter off pretty early in the morning, and no one wants to watch that little hellion with a hangover *and* no sleep. She lives about a twenty-minute walk away from the bar, so I just decide to walk her home. The fresh air will do me some good sobering up the rest of the way so I can drive.

I've got my arm around her shoulders, and she's laughing at something stupid I said while her fingers play with the top button of my shirt. We've been in this position so many times before, me walking her home and our bodies pressed together in a friendly embrace. So I don't know why tonight feels different. My stomach is doing this weird thing where it's tangled up in knots as I look down at her smiling face.

Every time her fingers slip past my shirt and brush against my chest, I can feel my pulse speed up. And then her other hand is reaching up to grab hold of my own that hangs over her shoulder. Our fingers tangle together, and her head lies in the dip below my shoulder. Fuck, she smells good. Under the smell of the bar, that sweet scent of her perfume permeates the air. Like a fucking cupcake.

"You know..." Her head rolls back, and she looks up at me. "I'm starting to think there's not gonna be anyone for me after Henry."

Henry is her husband. He died right after Olivia was born. I remember the morning Georgia called me, crying and panicking. He just went to sleep and never woke up. Doctors

said it was an aneurism that happened in the middle of the night, so quickly that he wouldn't have felt a thing. I'm pretty sure I stayed at her house, taking shifts with her parents to help with Olivia and Georgia's grief.

"Why in the world would you say that?" Georgia is beautiful. Green eyes, rich brown hair, and freckles all over her body. And don't get me started on her body. Christ, this woman has more peaks and valleys than the Rockies.

"No one ever wants to be with a single mom." She shrugs. "Single dads are a hot commodity. Women love watching a man take care of his kids. It's like catnip. But when it comes to us single moms? Not so much. Most of the time, we're unshowered and wearing leggings with a T-shirt from the night before that still has a spaghetti stain on it."

"I tend to like you unshowered with spaghetti stains." She laughs as I squeeze her shoulder.

"That's very nice of you," she teases. "But it's been a year since I've had sex with anyone, and I'm afraid I'm going to start drying up down there."

I choke on my own spit.

"Sorry." She laughs and pulls away and starts digging for her keys as we approach her house. "I just really, really miss sex."

My still slightly inebriated brain is going into overdrive. It's not that we've ever shied away from talking about sex. Hell, we've gone into detail with each other about partners and their skills or lack thereof. We are *best friends*. So we talk about everything with each other.

But tonight, looking at her in those jeans that hug her curves and the shirt that dips so low her bra keeps peeking out... I can't think worth a damn. My dick is twitching, and my heart is pounding. Why have I never thought of her like this before? Why have I never even considered...?

"Do you just wanna stay over tonight?" she asks, completely oblivious to my train of thought. She grabs her keys and looks up at me. "Hello? Earth to Gray?"

I realize I'm staring at her.

"Uh, what?"

"Do you just want to stay here tonight?" Her eyebrow raises. "Just crash on the couch and get your truck tomorrow. You can have breakfast with me and Liv."

"Georgia." I walk toward her slowly. She looks confused and backs up to her front door as I close in. I didn't realize how much I wanted this, but she looks good enough to eat, and I very much intend to get my fill. "Maybe you could let me help."

"With breakfast?" She's confused, but her voice is breathy, and her eyes can't decide where to land. They look me up and down until she licks her lips and decides to be bold, looking me straight in the eyes.

"No, sunshine."

Slowly so I don't startle her away, I bring my hands to her face, cupping her cheeks gently. I can feel her damn heartbeat pounding against the side of her throat as she swallows. Leaning in, I watch for any signs that she doesn't want this, that she doesn't want me to kiss her right now on her little front porch in the middle of the night.

But she doesn't give me one. Her eyes dip to my mouth, and her fingers hook through my belt loops. Fuck. Yes.

I close the distance between us, stepping closer to her body as our lips touch. It's gentle at first, testing and tasting each other for the first time. My hand slips into her hair while the other holds tight to her jaw as she opens up for me. Our tongues tangle together, and the sweetest sigh escapes her.

"I don't know if this is a good idea." She pulls away just enough to get her words out.

"Why wouldn't it be?" I'm just as breathless as she is, but my whole body and mind are in this. My best friend. My Georgia Grace. My sunshine. "Just let me take care of you. Maybe be selfish for a night?"

"And you? What about you?"

“You don’t think I’m being selfish, sunshine?” I smirk and kiss the tip of her nose.

“One night,” she tells me, resting a flat palm against my chest to keep me from diving in again.

“Maybe.” I shrug and give her a grin.

“Gray,” she warns. “One night. We help each other out. And we go back to being best friends in the morning.”

“How about we just focus on tonight.” Because I don’t want to think about what happens in the morning. This feels too right, too good, to let go of.

She laughs and untangles herself from me. I watch her turn around and fumble to get the key in the lock. My hands can’t stay off her body, running through her hair and then down the swell of her hips before grabbing two very nice handfuls of ass.

Christ, I can’t wait to see that bouncing on me.

“Gray.” She groans as my fingers dig into her flesh.

“Shh.” I push her hair to the side and kiss her neck. “Just get your ass inside, Georgia.”

THREE

GEORGIA

This man is looking at me like he wants to taste every single inch of my body. I'm not too proud to admit that I've spent one too many nights with this little scene going through my head as I have a little alone time. But I never dreamed we would make it here or that I would actually want to.

I'm still apprehensive, a little too scared to let myself enjoy this. I'm in my head, wondering what tomorrow morning is going to be like. Will we be able to get back into our comfortable routine of just being best friends? Will this ruin what we have? And I'm definitely too proud to wonder if he might want more than just friends. I don't think my ego can take that hit if I were to ask that out loud.

"Stop getting in your head." He picks me up and kicks the front door shut. I wrap my legs around his waist as he turns the lock. "Just be in the moment, Georgia."

He should know how hard that is for me. I've always dealt with anxiety, and this is like skyrocketing it. While my lady bits definitely want this to happen, my brain is still worried over whether or not this is *actually* a good idea.

"I just don't want to ruin our friendship."

"Maybe I do."

He kisses me, and I'm too stunned by his words to even react. So I tell my brain to shut up and just let me have this tonight. I can worry about tomorrow when tomorrow comes.

"If I remember correctly," he says as he carries me up the stairs, "you said you like to be thrown around in the

bedroom?”

I can feel my entire face heat. It was one thing to joke with a friend about that, but now it's a little embarrassing. Letting my forehead drop to his shoulder, I let out a soft laugh, hoping he'll just let that drop.

“I'm not letting it drop, sunshine.” *Sunshine*. I like that far too much. “Just asking, because if you do like to be thrown around, I can definitely oblige.”

I pull back and grab his jaw. His very strong, very sharp jaw. I take a deep breath. Fortune favors the bold, right?

“Yes. I like it.”

“Atta girl.”

His answering grin is enough to soak my panties. I bite the inside of my mouth to make sure I don't blurt out anything embarrassing, like just how handsome he is and how long I've kept that thought to myself.

He tosses me down on the bed, my body doing a couple of bounces before he starts taking off my boots and unbuttoning my jeans. Anxiety about my body plants little seeds in my stomach that grow into full-on weeds by the time my jeans are off.

He's seen me in one-piece bathing suits when I take Olivia over to his farm to swim, but he's never seen my stomach. He doesn't know about the angry-looking C-section scar or the white stretch marks that run vertically from hip to hip. He doesn't know about how my PCOS causes me to be a little hairier than most women, with a bit of a happy trail from my belly button to...

I haven't shaved. Oh my fucking god. I haven't shaved.

“Fuck.” He whispers it like a prayer as he sinks to his knees between my legs. “Do you know how fucking gorgeous you are, Georgia?”

His palms run up my thighs and over my hips, pushing my shirt up higher and higher until it's tucked above my breasts.

My eyes are squeezed shut, and I hope that my plain black bra and panties are giving me some sort of shape to look at.

“Look at you,” he says with wonder in his tone. It’s slowly chipping away at all my insecurities. “You are perfect.”

His lips make contact with the smooth scar, making me gasp and grab onto his shoulders. I sit up a bit and look down at him. His mouth stays hovering over my skin as his eyes make contact with my own.

“Please don’t tell me to stop.”

“I’m not. I just— The scar.”

“You think I care about this scar?” He kisses it again, and then the tip of his tongue runs along a small part of it. “This is just proof that you brought that amazing little girl into this world.” He kisses it again.

“I also haven’t...ugh.” I groan and fall back onto the bed. This is Gray, my best friend. I know him. I love him. I should know that none of this will make any difference to him. But I can’t help the thoughts that keep popping up without my permission. “I haven’t shaved.”

To be honest, I never shave anymore. It’s uncomfortable, gives me razor bumps, and just takes so much time. I also started hating the fact that with the extra weight I’ve gained, it was a struggle to even be able to get in all the nooks and crannies. So... *au naturale* it is.

“You think I give a shit about some hair, sunshine?” His hands grab onto the fabric of my panties. “I’m a grown-ass man, and you’re a grown-ass woman. I’d expect you to have some hair. In fact,” he says, winking up at me, “I like it. Now, let me taste you.”

He rips my panties off me in one fell swoop, leaving me completely bare to him. I can feel every inch of my body heat with excitement. And when he dives between my legs, licking and sucking with pinpoint precision? Fuck. I’m a goner.

He works me over with his mouth and his fingers until my legs are shaking and my body is sweating. My stomach muscles are contracting and releasing as he pushes me closer

and closer to the edge. I run my hands through his hair, tugging tightly on the soft strands to urge him on while my thighs squeeze the sides of his head.

“Yes,” I say on an exhale, letting my body relax into it. “Gray!”

My muscles flood with heat as I come, saying his name over and over again. And he sees me through the entire thing. He doesn't stop too early or push me too far. His fingers slowly slip free, and his tongue licks me in slow, measured movements until I can breathe normally again.

“I know we said this is a onetime thing, but I don't think once is enough now that I've had a taste,” he tells me as he pulls away to stand and start stripping off his own clothes. God, this man is carved from stone. Long hours of work on his family's farm have toned every muscle in his body. His skin is tanned, and his chest is hairy.

I sit up on my elbows and watch as he gets completely naked for me. He is impressive *everywhere*. From his arms to his tree trunk thighs to his cock standing at full attention. Everything is perfect. I want to lick it all.

“Keep looking at me like that, sunshine, and I won't ever let you out of this bed.” He grabs a condom out of his jeans pocket and tosses them back to the floor. I watch as he tears it open with his teeth and slowly slips it on. God, he's thick.

“That seems impractical.” I grin up at him.

He shrugs and walks slowly toward where I'm lying on the edge of the bed. Without any effort at all, he picks me up by the waist and tosses me farther back on the bed. I fall into the pillows and bite my lip. I *really* like how easily he can throw me around.

“Impractical, maybe. But a challenge I'm willing to accept nonetheless.” He crawls back onto the bed and helps me get out of the rest of my clothes. “Ready for the main event?”

He wags his eyebrows, and I can't help but laugh, all of the anxious tension from earlier gone. It feels good now, like

we're back to being our comfortable selves. Just...naked and in bed instead of fully clothed and watching Sunday football.

Capturing my laugh with his mouth, he kisses me hard and deep, his tongue tangling with my own while my hands roam over his body. His hips move between my thighs, and I feel the thick head of him at my entrance.

“This still okay?” he asks, his voice breathy.

“Yes.”

I kiss him again, and he sinks slowly inside of me.

FOUR

GRAY

I wake up in the morning to Georgia trying to sneak out of bed. I catch her mid-roll over and tug her back to me.

“Where do you think you’re going?” I kiss along her shoulder and up to the crook in her neck, where she still smells like a freshly baked cupcake. Her hair is a mess when she turns around to face me. *Freshly fucked* comes to mind, and I can’t help but smile wide at her.

“I was going to get dressed and start breakfast for Liv. She’ll be here soon.” Georgia smiles and leans over to kiss me but stops herself, probably remembering it’s now the morning and we were only supposed to have fun for a night.

I decided that wasn’t happening the second her taste was on my tongue. So I grab ahold of the back of her neck and tug her down to me, kissing her until she relaxes again.

“I’ll start breakfast,” I tell her in between kisses. “You rest.”

“I can’t ask you to do that, Gray.” She pulls away, and a little concerned line has formed between her eyebrows.

“I’ve made you both breakfast *countless* times. Don’t get weird on me now, sunshine.” I kiss her cheek and then give her a light shove back into the mattress. “Let me cook you guys breakfast, and then I’ll fix that hole in the drywall I saw last night.”

“Oh yeah. That.” She laughs. “I was trying to move Liv’s toy chest on my own. It fell. Big hole.”

I roll my eyes. “I’ve told you just to ask me and I will help you.”

“I’m a strong, independent woman who—”

“Will blow her back out one day.” I raise an eyebrow in her direction.

“Thought that’s what you did last night.”

My jaw drops for a second at her crass comment before I belly laugh out loud. This fucking woman.

“It is indeed. Now, let me make some pancakes.”

“And coffee, maybe?”

“Two sugars and heavy on the milk, coming right up.”

Not long after I finish breakfast, Georgia’s mom knocks on the door. I start to go get it, but Georgia’s feet come running down the stairs. I get a glimpse of her in some spandex shorts that set my blood on fire before she swings the door open. Olivia jumps into her arms and gives her a hug, but when her eyes land on me in the kitchen, she squeals and fights to get out of Georgia’s arms.

“Gray is here!”

I open my arms wide, and she runs right into them, hugging me with all her might like only kids can do. I’ve loved this kid since I first met her as a newborn four years ago. And I was here a lot after Henry died, helping change diapers and clean the house while Georgia slept and tried to deal with her grief.

“Hey, best friend.” I pinch her nose and then set her down at the table. “I have blueberry pancakes, a ton of bacon, *and* I made you chocolate milk.”

She digs in immediately after I set the breakfast in front of her, a mumbled “thank you” barely making it past a mouthful.

I watch her with a smile on my face as I lean against the wall, waiting for Georgia to finish chatting with her mom.

“And you know I’d be remiss if I didn’t mention how early Gray is here,” her mom’s voice floats down the hall quietly.

“Mother.” Georgia sighs, but I can hear the smile behind it. I feel my own cheeks aching with holding a smile back. “Don’t start.”

“I’m just sayin’. I think you both keep missin’ each other for some reason. And if you finally came together last night, well, I think that’s pretty amazing.”

“He’s my friend.”

“Friend’s make the best lovers.” I hear Georgia groan at her mom. “Was Henry not your friend?”

“Of course, but—”

“That man in there looks at you like you hung the moon. And you look right back the same way. I don’t know how y’all have been dancin’ around it for so long. But I’m glad you finally got there.”

“Okay, yes. Thank you, Mother.” I can imagine Georgia shooing her mom out the door, and when I peek around the corner, that’s exactly what she’s doing.

“Goodbye, Gray!” her mom calls out, waving at me from where I’m not so subtly hidden.

“Goodbye, Mrs. Schumacher!”

“Don’t say a word,” Georgia grumbles as she walks toward me down the hall. “Not a peep.”

“Wasn’t gonna say a thing, sunshine.”

“Hey, baby,” she says, kissing Olivia on the top of the head before looking back to me with shyness. “You heading out now?”

I don’t want to leave. Not only did I promise her to fix up the little things around the house, but I feel like the second I walk out that door, we go back to our normal little friendship. And I don’t want that. I wasn’t kidding last night when I told

her I wanted to ruin the friendship. Her mom was right—we've been dancing around this for too long, and I'm not sure why neither of us saw it.

“Nope. Just need to get some stuff to patch that hole.”

“My sink is drippin’,” Olivia adds between bites.

“I'll fix that, too, then.” I wink at her. “Also noticed the fridge is a bit wobbly. I'll get a little piece of wood from my truck and fix that.”

Georgia follows me to the front door and hovers as I start to put on my boots.

“You don't have to do all of this,” she whispers. “If this is awkward and you're ready to go...I can sort it out myself.”

“Okay, one,” I say, standing back to my full height. “This is not awkward. This is the best I've felt in years. This feels right. And two, I'm not ready to go. Hell, I never want to leave. Being here with you and Olivia on a Sunday morning, eating breakfast and watching cartoons? Heaven.”

Her face turns pink, and her eyes start to water. I knew she was always concerned about Olivia when it came to dating, worried that she wouldn't find anyone that would want to take on that responsibility. But I didn't realize it was weighing *this* heavily on her. I should've known.

“And lastly, you definitely can't do this shit yourself,” I tease to lighten the mood. “You thought the front porch light wasn't working when really, it just needed a new light bulb.”

“Unfair!” she says, laughing. “I had just moved in, and I thought it wasn't wired right!”

“Why you jumped to that conclusion instead of the light bulb being burned out, I will never know.” Her giggles die as I pull her into my chest and kiss the top of her head. “Just let me help you, Georgia. Everything else we can figure out later.”

She looks back at me and nods.

“I'll be right back, Olivia!” I shout toward the kitchen. “Just getting stuff to fix your sink.”

“Thank you!” Her little voice drifts to my ears, and the sweetness makes my heart squeeze.

“Hurry back.” Georgia lifts up on her tiptoes and gives me a peck on the lips. Her eyes go wide like she can’t believe she did it. I don’t let her dwell on it too long, though. I grab her face and pull her back, tasting the sweet coffee on her lips.

“In a jiffy.” I wink and then slip out the front door.

FIVE

GEORGIA

While Gray walked back to his truck and then went on a supply run, I hung out with Liv on the couch. We watched her favorite cartoons while she slipped in and out of sleep. Every time my mom and dad watch her, she comes back exhausted. Not that I mind. It's good for her to have these moments with them, and I don't mind if her sleep schedule is messed up for a day.

But it's given me a lot of time to think about what's going on in my head and my heart. I think I never let my mind stray toward Gray because I never thought it could actually be a possibility. But now that it is, I can't *stop* thinking about it. He's over-the-top amazing with Liv, always has been. And he's never not shown up for me when I needed him. He never complains about it either, always ready to help with a smile on his face.

And now, as he walks around the house, fixing the drywall and tightening whatever needs tightening in her bathroom sink, I realize how well he fits in here. He keeps finding little odds and ends to do, like changing the batteries in the smoke detectors and spraying some WD-40 on the back door, which has been screeching for months now. Every time I look up, he's got a new tool in his hand.

Damn, does he look fine doing it, too. He's got just a T-shirt on. Must be one he grabbed from his truck because he wasn't wearing it last night, and it looks a little small, clinging to all the right places. Between his five-o'clock shadow and unkempt hair, I'm really struggling to stay in control.

Working on the farm his entire life has honed his body into strong, sinewy muscle that makes my thighs clench. His sleeves roll up slightly, too tight on his round biceps, and show off that farmer's tan. He reaches up, and it's like his abs are playing the world's sexiest game of hide-and-seek with my eyes. I can't help but follow that little path of hair that leads into his jeans, where that very impressive length is hiding.

"I think I want to go outside and play." Liv's sleepy voice brings me back from my thoughts.

"Okay, baby. How about you go work up an appetite, and I'll make us all some lunch?"

She nods, her dark brown curls bouncing as she climbs off the couch and runs outside. I follow her, smiling when she laughs at something Gray told her as she squeezes past him. He's working on the hinges of the screen door, doing what, I don't know.

"Hey," I say, leaning my hip against the counter. "Are you just trying to find things to do so you don't have to leave?"

He lets the screen door close quietly and turns to face me. His arms are crossed, and his cheeks have a tinge of pink to them. I choose to believe it's from working hard and not because he's a little embarrassed by my question. Because that would just be too fucking cute.

"Maybe." He shrugs. "I like being here."

"We like you here."

"Yeah?" Gray smiles and closes the distance between us. He doesn't touch me, just leans his own hip against the counter and looks down at me. "Think you'd like me to stay?"

"For lunch?"

His laugh does all sorts of things to my body. He closes a little more of the gap, leaning into my space as he cages me in with his arms.

"Or longer," he says.

"Dinner, then?" I barely get the words out I'm so tongue-tied from the heat of his body next to mine.

“I heard what your mom said this morning,” he says, his lips leaving a scorching mark on my cheek. “And I think she’s right.”

“Eavesdropper!” I chide him.

“I think about you, Georgia.” His voice is low and skates over my skin. Goose bumps rise. “I don’t know how I never realized just how much you mean to me. You *and* Olivia. I like taking care of things around the house and making her breakfast. And I really, really like taking care of you, sunshine.”

“Gray.” My voice wobbles. “What about the friendship? I can’t lose you?” My throat is closing up with anxiety. He’s been my best friend since school, and to think we could ruin that all because we are compatible — very compatible — in bed terrifies me.

“I promise you that no matter how this ends, whether it be with us staying together or us deciding in the end it doesn’t work, I will be your friend. I will never look at you differently or treat you any less. I will hold nothing against you, and I will never stop being here for both of you.” He leans in and kisses me softly, stealing my breath. “I will never leave you.”

“So, we’re going to try this?” I hate how hopeful I sound, so desperate in that little question.

“I want to. Do you, Georgia Grace? Do you want to try this?”

His dark eyes are pulling me in, making me feel more comfortable than I have since Henry died. Maybe it’s finally time I really try for my own happiness again. And maybe it’s perfect that the person I’m ready to get back in the saddle with is my best friend. I already know I can trust him with Liv, and I can trust him as a friend. He’s loving, reliable, and kind.

So trusting him with my heart seems like the logical next step...right?

“Okay.” I take a deep breath. “Okay, yeah, let’s give it a go.”

His smile takes over his face, lighting up his eyes and crinkling the corners. Grabbing hold of my face, he tugs me in for a long, sweet kiss that makes my toes curl and my pulse kick.

“But we promise this will not ruin the friendship,” I say when he finally lets me break free. “And we have to keep Olivia’s feelings in mind. We have to be careful.”

“I’ll treat her heart just as gently as I intend to treat yours, sunshine. No one is going to hurt my girls, let alone me. I’ve got you both.”

I nod because words won’t come. I’m feeling too much.

“Trust me?” he asks, smiling wide.

I nod and smile back.

“Trust you.”

ABOUT IVY JACKSON

Ivy Jackson is a lover of quiet small towns, nights where you can see all the stars, and the smell of hay being cut (even though it sends her allergies into overdrive). She grew up in a small town along the Ohio River where there was nothing better to do than ride four-wheelers, go cow tippin', and get into far too much trouble at Friday night football games.

[Website](#)

WATCH US BURN: A.D.
MCCAMMON

ONE

BIRDIE

His presence looms over me like a dark cloud, and dread sits heavy on my chest as my gaze lands on him. My ex, however, is oblivious, his attention fixed on the blonde bombshell on his arm.

His *fiancée*.

The corpse of our relationship was barely even cold when Jacob asked her to marry him. The news spread like a wildfire through our small town. I spent weeks inundated with condolences and pity-filled stares. And I've done everything I can to avoid the *happy couple* since.

But it looks like my luck just ran out.

The air in my lungs stills as his eyes lift, his stare locking on mine. My teeth grind as he throws that infamous, boyish smile my way, as if he's happy to see me. That smile used to melt me into a puddle, now I'd like nothing more than to punch him in his stupid face. It's all for show, all to keep up his nice guy reputation. He wouldn't want anyone finding out what an asshole he really is.

I twirl on my heel as Jacob continues to move toward me, my feet carrying me in the opposite direction as fast as they can. There's no way I can face him, face *them*, right now. Picking up single serve dinners at the market on a Friday night is embarrassing enough without the guy who broke your heart and the woman he replaced you with witnessing it.

My footsteps slow as I dip into an aisle a few rows down, trying to appear as if I'm just causally shopping instead of

running from my ex like a crazy person. This isn't the first time I've dodged Jacob out in public, it's just the first time he's seen me. Now that I've had a moment to catch my breath, I realize that probably wasn't the best way to handle things. At this point, I would just like to escape this situation with my last shred of dignity intact.

“Are you alright?”

My stare slides over to the man standing next to me, embarrassment flooding my veins. I was so terrified that Jacob and little miss perfect were going to walk by at any moment that I hadn't even noticed him standing there.

“Yes.” I nod then shake my head. “No. I'm not sure.”

He chuckles, the deep musical sound relaxing my tense muscles. “I've been there.”

A smile spreads across my face as I turn to face him, and my stomach does a little flip when my gaze collides with a pair of bright blue eyes. My stare roams down his body, my cheeks growing warm as I take him all in.

Holy crap. The man is gorgeous. Tall, broad frame. Thick, dark hair. There's a salt and pepper beard lining his chiseled jaw and faint crinkles around his gorgeous eyes. He's older than me. I'm guessing mid to late forties. But the whole distinguished vibe only works in his favor.

I've never seen him around here before. He must either be visiting or just moved here. Either way, it isn't likely that Jacob knows him either. Which means, he could be the answer to my problem.

“Actually, I might have officially lost my mind because I'm about to ask you to do something that's completely insane.”

His brow lifts, his gorgeous eyes twinkling with amused curiosity. “Yeah? What's that?”

“I need you to pretend that you're *with* me.”

“With you?”

Before I have a chance to explain, Jacob calls out my name.

The guy looks at Jacob then back at me, a playful smile tugging at his full lips as the pieces of the puzzle come together. I give him one more pleading look before turning around, silently begging him to play along.

“Hi, Jacob.”

My chest tightens as I allow myself to really look at him for the first time since we broke up, and memories we shared together flash through my mind like a picture book. He still looks like the man I fell in love with all those years ago—same dirty blond hair, pretty hazel eyes, and charming smile. Only now when I look at him, all I feel is hatred.

His fiancée shifts uncomfortably at his side as my gaze flickers to her, and the two of us exchange an awkward, tight-lipped smile. It’s the best I can offer. I know she’s not the reason my relationship ended, though I’m almost certain he cheated on me with her. But my heart was broken. I’m allowed to be a little petty and immature.

“I haven’t seen you in a while,” he says, a mischievous grin curling his lips. “It’s starting to feel like you’re avoiding me.”

My back stiffens as my accomplice snakes his arm around my waist, pulling me into his side. “I’m afraid that’s my doing. I’ve been keeping her pretty busy lately.”

My mouth drops open when he grabs a box of magnums off the shelf and tosses it into my empty basket, my face heating as he winks at me. Maybe asking a complete stranger to pretend to be my boyfriend wasn’t the brightest idea I’ve ever had.

Jacob’s mask slips as he eyes the guy, his features briefly twisting with anger before it slides back into place. “Aren’t you going to introduce us to your new friend, Bee?”

“Oh, umm...this is...uh...”

“Roman Pierce,” he answers for me.

“Nice to meet you, Roman,” Jacob says, not an ounce of sincerity in his tone. “I’m Jacob Elroy,” he pauses, searching Roman’s face for recognition he won’t find, “and this is my fiancée, Sara.”

“Nice to meet you,” she chimes in.

One thing’s for sure, she’ll fit nicely into the role of dutiful wife. I was never going to be who Jacob wanted me to be.

“I wasn’t aware Bee was *seeing* anyone new.” Jacob’s voice is full of suspicion as his hard glare studies us. “And it’s hard to keep something like that a secret in this town.”

Shit.

He’s right. If I was seeing someone new, there’s no way he wouldn’t have heard about it by now. The people in this town are far too invested in other people’s lives.

“Well...we don’t exactly get out much, if you know what I mean.” Butterflies take flight in my stomach as he leans in and nuzzles his nose into my neck, his lips placing delicate kisses on the sensitive flesh. Warmth spreads through my body, but he pulls away, leaving me lightheaded. “I tend to be a little greedy when it comes to her.”

I bite back a smile when Jacob’s eyes narrow, a sense of triumph washing over me as his jaw begins to twitch.

Maybe this plan wasn’t so bad after all.

“Oh my gosh,” Sara coos. “That is so sweet.”

Jacob forces a smile on his face. “Yes, well...we’ll let you get back to your night.”

TWO

ROMAN

She pulls out of my embrace the second that douchebag is out of sight, and I fight the urge to pull her right back to my side. Color tints her cheeks as her gaze meets mine, her feet nervously shifting.

Damn, she's gorgeous. Dark, wavy hair hangs untamed around her shoulders, her tan skin sprinkled with freckles. She has the cutest little button nose and full, pink lips that are meant to be kissed.

"God...I'm a little mortified." She giggles, the musical sound bringing a smile to my face.

"Don't be, I was happy to help. That guy seems like a real asshole."

This was a first for me, I've never pretended to be someone's boyfriend before. But she was obviously upset when she stepped up next to me, her vacant eyes scanning the shelf as she mumbled to herself. It didn't take long for me to piece together what was happening once that arrogant prick walked down the aisle with a woman on his arm.

She sighs, her head nodding. "Yeah...I just couldn't...I didn't want to deal with..."

"I get it," I reassure her.

I've had my heart broken before, found my ex fucking my best friend. It was the worst kind of betrayal, and they both tried to blame it on me. They said it never would have happened if I'd been more emotionally available, that I put so much of myself into my job there wasn't anything left.

“Well, I really appreciate it. Your performance was very... believable.”

The color on her cheeks deepens as her stare falls, and I know exactly what she’s referring to. It was impossible to miss the way her body reacted when I kissed her neck, her breath hitching as she melted into me. Truth be told, there wasn’t a whole lot of acting going on in that moment. It was more like giving into temptation. I wanted to inhale her floral scent—needed to taste her sweet skin.

I chuckle. “Your ex certainly seemed convinced.”

A smile lights up her face as her eyes find mine again. “That felt so good. He was so mad. I seriously don’t know how to thank you for that.”

“You could buy me a drink.”

She chews on her bottom lip as she considers my proposal, her eyes roaming over me once more before she answers. “How about I grab us a bottle of whiskey then you take me back to your place?”

Well, damn.

This trip just took an unexpected, pleasant turn. I only came out here as a favor to a friend. When Michael called me last month to tell me he was retiring and said he would like me to consider being his successor, I immediately declined. As flattering as it was that he would think of me, it didn’t feel like the right fit. I thrive on the constant chaos of the city. Small towns like this are boring, sleepy. He eventually wore me down, though. Even got the chief’s seal of approval. So, I agreed to come out here for the weekend to check the place out before making my final decision.

Today went well enough. Michael showed me around the station then took me on a tour of the town, but my mind was still pretty made up.

That is, until about ten minutes ago.

I’m starting to think this town may have more to offer than I originally thought.

“Sounds perfect.” A shy smile tugs at her lips when I wink at her, taking her hand in mine. “Lead the way.”

When we walk out of the market five minutes later with a bottle of Woodford Reserve, condoms, and the toothpaste I came in for, Jake the snake and his fiancée are right behind us.

“God, I can feel his eyes on me,” she groans out, keeping her voice low.

I drape my arm around her and kiss the side of her head before eyeing him over my shoulder. Sure enough, his hard glare is fixed on us, his lip curled with disdain. This fucker has some nerve, acting as if he still has a claim on her while another woman stands at this side with a fat diamond on her finger.

I whisper in her ear as she stops next to an old Ford pickup, “What do you say we give him something to look at?”

She unlocks the truck and tosses the bag inside before turning to face me, her dark eyes gleaming with mischief as she nods ever so slightly.

I grab her hips and pull her body into mine, my hands sliding to her ass as my mouth crashes into hers. She parts her lips for me without hesitation, her tongue melding with mine. The kiss is needy yet unhurried, both of us reveling in the moment.

It’s been so long since I’ve kissed a woman—even longer since it felt this good. This right. The feeling is both terrifying and electrifying at the same time.

She breathes a soft moan into my mouth as her arms wrap around my waist. That stupid prick is the furthest thing from her mind now, and I can’t help feeling a sense of pride. I plan to spend the rest of the night trying to completely wipe him from her memory.

By the time I force myself to break the kiss, her lips are swollen, her skin flushed. She slowly opens her eyes, her lashes fluttering as her stare finds mine again.

“Fuck,” she breathes.

I chuckle. “You ready to get out of here, honeybee?”

She bobs her head eagerly. “So ready.”

THREE

BIRDIE

Nervous energy courses through my veins as Roman hands me a plastic cup filled with whiskey. The ride to his hotel was quiet, the awkward silence following us all the way into his room. I've never done anything like this before. Never had the chance. Jacob and I started dating in high school. He's the only man I've ever slept with.

I'm not sure what came over me when I suggested we come back to his room. Maybe it was the high I got from seeing Jacob jealous. Or maybe it was the rush I felt when Roman touched me. Either way, I didn't want it to end. But going to the bar with him wasn't an option. Tricking Jacob was one thing. I don't need the entire town talking about my new *friend*.

After we checked out at the market, I started having second thoughts. But Jacob was right behind us. I couldn't let him know it was all a lie. Then Roman kissed me, and all thoughts of Jacob melted away.

I finally understand what they mean by a toe-curling kiss. When his tongue tangled with mine, I felt it everywhere. My whole body came to life under his touch, creating a need like I've never experienced before. By the time his mouth left mine, all I knew was that I wanted more.

Roman takes a seat on the couch, his stare heating my skin. "So...Bee, is that short for something?"

Oh, god. I'm in a hotel room with a man who doesn't even know my name. And I know absolutely nothing about him

either, except for his name. Being here with him feels reckless, but maybe a reckless night with a complete stranger is exactly what I need.

“Yep...”

He chuckles, quirking an eyebrow. “You going to tell me for what?”

I take a big swig of my drink and shake my head. “Nope.”

There’s a reason why everyone calls me Bee. I hate my name. My mother named me after my great grandmother, Bernadette. Everyone called her Birdie for short, which is how I got stuck with it.

Roman is a great name, though. Strong, commanding, sexy. Just like him.

He grins, his head tilting as he studies me. “All right. Honeybee it is then.”

I roll my eyes, taking another sip to hide my blushing cheeks. “How long are you going to be in town?”

“I’m leaving Sunday morning.”

“And what brought you to town in the first place? This isn’t exactly a tourist destination.”

Our little town has really grown over the past ten years or so as people continue moving in from the larger, bustling cities around us. With nearly ten thousand residents, it might not even seem that small to some. But there isn’t a whole lot going on around here. A night out on the town consists of dinner at The Grind and grabbing drinks at Dot’s.

“I was offered a job. Came out here to check things out.”

My heart skips, the idea of him staying here making this all seem a lot more dangerous. I can handle a night of hot sex with a handsome stranger. But if he moves here, things could get a lot more complicated. And I’m not ready for more *or* complicated. “And are you going to take it?”

“I wasn’t planning to, but...” He pauses, his eyes trailing down my body and back up again before he continues. “The

idea of living here just got a whole lot more appealing.”

Butterflies flutter in my stomach as he winks at me. “Easy, Romeo. I’m already in your hotel room.”

His deep, hearty laugh vibrates on my skin, and a smile spreads across my face. “You going to tell me what the story is with that Jacob prick?”

I take a deep breath as unease settles in my gut. Jacob is the last person I want to think or talk about right now. “He wanted me to quit my job, to give up my career for him. And that was never going to happen. So, he ended things with me and found himself a Stepford wife.” I shrug a shoulder and throw back the rest of my drink, acting as if my heart hadn’t been completely shattered. “But I don’t want to talk about that.”

His eyes track my movements as I drop my empty cup in the trash, my feet slowly inching me closer to him. “What do you want to talk about?”

I grab the whiskey from his hand, polishing it off as well before tossing it in with mine. “I don’t want to talk at all.”

“No?” His brow lifts as I climb onto his lap, his eyes searching mine, almost as if asking permission, before his hands grip my hips. “What do you want to do?”

I brush my fingers through his soft hair, leaning in until my lips are nearly touching his. “I want to be reckless.”

FOUR

ROMAN

Two weeks later

Michael tosses the last of his personal items in a box, his eyes scanning the office one more time before landing on me. “You ready to meet your new team, Captain Pierce?”

“That depends. Do you think they’re ready?”

It isn’t always easy to transition into a new station. Especially one that’s as close and tight knit as this one. Michael has been their captain since they were all just starting out. He helped shape and mold them into the firefighters they are today. They trust him with their lives. But I’m nothing more than an outsider to them right now.

It’s another big reason why I was leery about taking the position. But I ignored my instincts and took a huge risk. All for a woman who didn’t even give me her last name. This may be the most impulsively and potentially idiotic thing I’ve ever done.

“Don’t worry, they’ll warm up to you.”

“That isn’t very reassuring.”

He chuckles. “All you really need to do is win over Lieutenant Travers. If she likes you, the rest will follow.”

That’s all? Sure. No big deal.

Michael told me all about Lieutenant Travers. She moved up faster than any of her peers and became the youngest lieutenant in the state. Sounds a lot like me, actually. Which means this station is her life. She takes her job very seriously

—including ensuring the safety of her crew. I’ve butted heads with plenty of my captains over the years for that exact reason. Always thought I knew what was best. And that wasn’t always the case.

“Great,” I deadpan, scratching at my beard. “Anything you can tell me that might help me win her over?”

“Don’t underestimate her. She’s young but dedicated.” He pats me on the shoulder on his way out the door. “I’m going to put this in my car. Shift change starts in a few minutes, that will be a great time for you to meet everyone.”

I sit at my new desk and take a deep breath. The last few weeks have been a bit of a whirlwind. I’ve barely had time to process everything. The morning after I met Bee, I called Michael and accepted the position. By the time I left that Sunday, I had an apartment lined up for my return. I moved everything in just yesterday, there are still boxes all over the place.

There’s a knock at the door, and my gaze lifts; my brain is uncertain if what I’m seeing is real.

“Hey, Captain Martin, I—” She freezes when she finally looks up from the piece of paper in her hands, her features bunching with confusion before spreading with shock. “Roman?”

My name passes through her full pink lips with a shallow breath, and a smile spreads across my face. “Hey there, honeybee.”

Bee watches me, her eyes unblinking as I stand and make my way over to her. This moment, seeing her again, is all I’ve thought about for the past few weeks. The possibility of her, of us, is what kept me pushing forward with this move. All the worries and doubts couldn’t compete with my drive to see her again. Every part of me is dying to touch her, to hold her, to taste her.

She shakes her head with disbelief, her lashes fluttering as I come to a stop in front of her. “What are you doing here?”

“Well, I decided to take that job offer after all.”

By the time I woke up the next morning with Bee in my arms, my mind was made up. I felt more alive in those twelve hours we were together than I'd felt in a very long time. There was no way in hell I was simply going to walk away from that—walk away from *her*.

“I—what? No. No, no. What are you doing *here*?”

“Like I said...” I give into the temptation to touch her, my fingertips skating down her arm. “I took the job. I’m the new Fire Captain at this station.”

“Oh, god...This can’t be real. This can’t be happening right now.”

Ouch. That’s a blow to the ole ego.

I’m sure she’s scared, and for good reason, too. I saw the aftermath of her last relationship. And I know firsthand what that kind of destruction does to a person. That’s why I didn’t try to stop her when she ran out on me the next day. But there’s something here. Something that’s worth exploring for more than one night.

“Look...we don’t have to—”

“No, you don’t understand. I’m—” She stops short as Michael walks back into the room, quickly putting more space between us.

“Oh...good, you’re here,” he says, smiling at Bee. “Did you meet Captain Pierce?”

Her eyes flicker to me then back to him as she shakes her head. “Not officially, sir.”

“Well...let me do the honors. Captain Pierce, this is Lieutenant Travers. Lieutenant Travers, this is the man who will be taking my place. He has some big shoes to fill, but if anyone can do it, it’s him.”

My head spins as I absorb this new information. Bee is my lieutenant. My fucking lieutenant. Shit just got a lot more complicated. This explains why she seemed so freaked out. Probably should’ve been able to put this together before now. But she’s not in her uniform. And I was so wrapped up in

seeing her again that it didn't even dawn on me to question why she was at the station in the first place.

I force a smile on my face, extending my hand to her. "It's a pleasure to meet you, Lieutenant Travers."

I'm not exactly sure what the rules are here. But it's probably best if we keep this situation from Michael for now. At least until we figure out what exactly is going on between us.

Pink tints her cheeks as she timidly takes my hand. "Looking forward to working with you, Captain Pierce."

Her hand lingers in mine, her stare reflecting the thoughts running through her mind. She's thinking about the night we spent together. About all the places she'd rather my hand be right now. I know because I'm thinking the same.

Working with her isn't going to be easy. Keeping my hands to myself is going to be damn near impossible. This could get very messy. And I'm not usually the kind of guy who does messy. But, for her, I'd make an exception.

FIVE

BIRDIE

“Holy shit,” Dana says, fanning herself. “Captain Peirce is fine with a capital F.”

My face heats, my head shaking as I let out a nervous chuckle. “He’s your superior.”

It’s the same thing I’ve been repeating to myself since this morning. But, god bless, I’d almost forgotten how freaking gorgeous that man is. When I saw him standing there, it didn’t even feel real. Then he called me honeybee, and all I wanted to do was run into his arms.

For the past two weeks, I’ve been regretting walking out on him without so much as exchanging numbers. I was so adamant about not sharing too many details about our lives, wouldn’t even tell him my name. It seemed like the right thing to do at the time. I told myself it was best to keep it simple, that I wasn’t ready to get *involved* with someone again. I didn’t realize how wrong I was until it was too late.

He’s all I’ve been thinking about for weeks. And now he’s here. But he’s my fucking captain.

Why didn’t I ask him about his job offer that night? Something, anything, about himself.

God. How can this be happening? I was never supposed to see him again. He said he wasn’t going to take the job.

The idea of living here just got a whole lot more appealing.

A thrill shoots through me as his words echo in my mind, the idea of him moving here for me giving me butterflies.

No. This can't happen. *We* can't happen. It's crazy. Stupid. Reckless.

"Hello, Earth to Bee." Dana snaps in front of my face, her brow lifted. "What's going on with you? You've been acting funny all day."

"Nothing," I answer, the high pitch of my voice giving me away.

"You've always been a bad liar." She snickers, shaking her head. "Talk to me. What's going on?"

Dana and I met during training and quickly became best friends. We tell each other everything. The good, bad, and ugly. So, naturally, I told her all about my night with Roman. She was beyond thrilled that I finally "got laid" and especially ecstatic about how he handled the whole Jacob situation. I'm pretty sure she was even more upset than me that we hadn't exchanged information. She begged me to give her his name, determined to use her supersleuth skills to find him. And I was tempted to let her. Maybe if I had, we wouldn't be here now.

"Fine..." I sigh. "Do you remember that guy I hooked up with a couple of weeks ago?"

"You mean the beekeeper?"

Dana joked about Roman being *beekeeping age* when I told her he's in his forties. Which became even funnier to her once she learned that he called me honeybee. From that point on, he was officially known as the beekeeper.

I laugh, rolling my eyes. "Yes...the beekeeper is back in town. For good."

"What?" She screeches with excitement. "Then why the hell do you look like someone just told you your dog is dying? Isn't this a good thing? You did say the man rocked your world. Multiple times."

I jump as someone clears their throat, embarrassment flooding my veins when my gaze lands on Roman.

"Sorry to interrupt." There's humor in his tone and a smile tugging at his full lips. "Lieutenant Travers, will you come see

me in my office? There's something I would like to discuss with you."

My racing heart causes a warmth to spread through me, and I clear my throat. "Yes, sir. I'll be right there."

Dana watches as he leaves the room, her wide eyes turning to me as soon as he's gone. "Oh my fucking god," she whispers. "Is Captain Pierce the beekeeper?"

I shush her, my eyes scanning the room to make sure we're still alone. "Yes, but I swear I didn't know until this morning. And I don't want anyone else to know. For obvious reasons."

"Your secret is safe with me. Always." She zips her mouth, her eyes beaming with delight. "What did you say when you found out?"

"Nothing yet. We haven't exactly had a chance to talk."

"Well, go..." she says, shoving me toward the door. "And I want to know all the dirty details later."

Roman greets me with a bright smile when I step into his office, his eyes drinking me in. He doesn't say a word while he moves toward me, invading my space as he closes the door behind me. My head swims when his stare locks on mine, his fingertips shooting electricity through my body as they trail up my arms.

"Hi," he says, his left dimple peeking out.

"Hi," I breathe. "I can't believe you're here. That is... crazy."

He lifts a brow, his head tilting. "Good crazy or bad crazy?"

"I'm not sure yet," I answer honestly. "What are we doing? I mean...you're my captain."

"I'll admit, that's not ideal. But I really like you, honeybee. And I think it would be stupid not to explore this spark between us."

Butterflies take flight in my chest as he closes the remaining gap between us, his hands landing on my hips. I

want this so badly. I want him. But there's a lot at risk here. This station is my home, if things end poorly...

I lick my dry lips. "And what if that spark turns into a flame?"

"Oh, I'm counting on it." He leans down, bringing his mouth dangerously close to mine. "With any luck that flame starts a fire that can never be contained."

I let out a soft moan when his lips connect with mine, all my worries fading away as I melt into him. The kiss is passionate and sensual, giving me that same toe-curling sensation as our first kiss. Every nerve in my body is buzzing with need by the time he pulls away, desperate for more.

"What do you say? Want to see where this thing goes?"

"I don't know, sounds dangerous," I tease.

He chuckles, leaning in to whisper in my ear, "I can't wait to watch us burn."

ABOUT A.D. MCCAMMON

Amber Danielle decided to take her passion for writing to the self-publishing world in 2017. When she isn't writing, you'll find her reading, spending money she doesn't have in Target, or hanging with her hubby and two kiddos.

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WHISKEY STOLEN
MOMENTS: M LEIGH
MORHAIME

PROLOGUE – SIX MONTHS AGO

With a bottle of whiskey in one hand, and a Marlboro cigarette in the other, I contemplate where the hell everything went wrong.

Two days ago, everything was on track. Everything was going well—for once in my life.

I guess I should have known better.

I thought when I finally came out and allowed myself to fall in love with my first girlfriend that my love life would get easier. I mean, women understand women better, right?

Wrong.

At least the women I've dated. And you never really get over your first.

I tried. I tried hard. Through several men and women.

And then I met Stacey. And she fixed me. She made it easy to love her. She made it fun. She made our relationship everything I'd wanted and needed.

Only problem? She refused to come out of the closet. But that's Kentucky for you. I'd told her my story and unfortunately, it scared her. My parents were more than okay. My friends were too. My classmates? Not so much.

Who knew bullying continued into college?

But I tried everything I could to get Stacey to come out and be herself. I didn't want to push her but also, I was getting

tired of hiding our relationship. I wanted to shout it from the rooftops. Hell, I wanted to throw a damn party!

I never got my party.

I got a box of clothes thrown at me with the vilest words ever hurled at me. All because she thought I'd spilled the beans. It didn't matter how much I told her I didn't. It didn't matter that her friend was just perceptive.

Nope. She freaked the fuck out and kicked me out of her life.

So, what did I do?

I reached out to that first love. I'd blame the whiskey, but I knew what I was doing.

Getting invited to her wedding though? That was a different story. Not expected and I think after the words left Lyla's mouth, she felt the shock too.

I asked her countless times over the last two days if she really wanted me to come. She assured me by buying me a dress and sending me gas money.

So here I was, sitting on the hood of my car, drowning a bottle of Jack Daniel's finest and smoking my first cigarette—ever. I was hacking up a lung, sure, but it was also helping. It didn't make any sense to me, but I'd heard enough of my co-workers talk about just the act of smoking was enough to relax them.

“Hey, are you Della?”

“Who's asking?”

I didn't even look in the direction of the voice. I was still trying to stomach seeing Lyla for the first time in nearly five years.

“Um, Callie sent me.”

“Who?”

“Lyla's fiancée.”

“Oh. And who are you?” I knew I was being rude. But it was my defense mechanism these days.

“I’m Nico, Callies’s brother.”

“Okay.” What else was I supposed to say? “Why did they send you out here?” I finally asked.

He stood there with his hands in his pockets, rocking back and forth on his heels. Pour guy; he looked so uncomfortable.

“They—uh—wanted to make sure you were here.”

“Do they need me for something?” I raised my eyebrow almost to comical heights. I wasn’t exactly a part of the wedding or anyone helping with anything. And I sure as shit wasn’t about to walk into a dressing room with Lyla more than likely in one of two very dangerous situations, half naked or already in her dress. Either one had my heart racing and cheeks turning red. The image of Lyla naked was forever burned into my mind. The way her waist curved perfectly to draw my eyes to her hips, then her perfect peach of an ass. The way her thighs felt when I gripped them with my hands, making sure she knew that I worshipped her. And the way her breasts were so damn soft and plump and the perfect pillow.

I knew it was a mistake to come here.

“Ah, no. They—uh—” He sighed, obviously still feeling awkward as fuck.

“They didn’t think I’d show up, did they?”

He pushed his lips together and nodded his head. “Yeah, I think some of them are holding bets on it.”

“Can’t blame them.”

“How come?” He finally relaxed some, his curiosity outweighing everything else.

“You don’t know?”

“No, I don’t really know anything. Except that both my sister and Lyla are acting weird.”

“I knew I shouldn’t have come.” I huffed and realized my cigarette was completely gone. I tossed it down and then

immediately regretted it.

As I leaned forward to pick it up, Nico beat me to it.

“Shit, thank you.”

He shrugged then gestured to the open space on the hood of my car. “Can I? They haven’t really let me sit much all day.”

“Sure.” I tried to scoot over to give him more space but there was only so much space on the hood of this Corolla.

That meant that his leg was pressed right against mine. It wasn’t cold out by any means but the warmth from his leg flooded through me.

What the hell is going on with me? I thought to myself.

“So, do tell. What’s the story?”

“Lyla is my ex.” I blurted.

“Shit, that explains it.”

“Explains what?”

“All of it. Each of them freaking out about if you’d be here or not.”

“Does your sister not want me here?”

He adamantly shook his head. “No, no. She’s perfectly fine with it. She just...” He trailed off.

“What is it? Is she scared of me?” I joked, bumping into his shoulder.

“Oh, no. She’s more worried that you won’t like her.”

“What does my opinion of her matter?”

“Because she knows how much Lyla loves you. Her words, not mine.”

“She doesn’t. Not anymore.” I dropped my tone, looking off into the distance.

“She does. But not in the way you’re thinking. That’s why I had no idea who you were to her. Lyla only talks about you

as if you were best friends who hadn't seen each other in a while."

"I mean, she's not wrong." I shrugged. "Wait, does your sister know I'm Lyla's ex?" I nearly squealed asking the question.

"That's a question for Lyla. But I think so. They don't seem like the type to keep things from each other."

I inhaled, exhaled, and then sighed. This was too much. This was a mistake.

I shouldn't have come here. I told myself yet again, frustration growing each time.

"I should go." I started to push off the hood when I felt his hand cover my knee.

"No, I think you should stay."

"How come?"

"Because all in all, they're excited for you to be here. Plus, without you, I don't really have anyone to talk to at the reception."

"Really?"

"Yeah. Other than our parents, I don't really know any of the guests."

"And you don't want to get stuck talking to your parents all night, right?"

"Exactly."

I relaxed. He was right. At least we could talk to each other—the two odd ones out. "Alright, I'll stay. But you're not allowed to abandon me tonight." It wasn't like me to cling to anyone, especially a stranger, but nothing about tonight was normal.

"Hell, I should be saying the same to you."

We both let out a laugh and somehow, everything felt easier. I may have known him less than thirty minutes but just

knowing I wasn't completely alone here was helping more than the shitty cigarettes and strong bourbon.

"Can I get a sip of that?" As if on cue, he nodded towards the bottle.

I handed it off to him without a second thought. I'd drank about a quarter of the bottle, despite being sure I'd had so much more. But I was at a very smooth buzz and needed to maintain that in order to not make a fool of myself.

Nico leaned his head back, drowning what had to be at least a double shot worth of alcohol.

"Damn!" I said, as if in awe of what he'd accomplished.

He rubbed his mouth with his free hand and said, "What? It's been a long ass day." His voice was rougher, as if the burning of the alcohol had adjusted his tone. He raised his eyebrows and smirked before tossing back another shot's worth.

"Alright, don't drain it all. Some of us have to go watch the woman they thought they'd marry get married to someone else." The words fell out of my mouth before I could stop them. "I just mean... It's just a saying." I tried to cover up but from the smile on Nico's face, he knew better.

"Yeah, I think we might need more liquor. Good news is, I know where it's all being stashed."

"Shit, seriously? Do you think we could break into that? And maybe some food? I'm fucking starving."

He bellowed a laugh as he jumped off the hood of the car before extending his hand to me. I took it, more than willingly, and let him lead us around the backside of the oversized house that was used more for weddings than anything else.

He let us in through the back door and into a dark room.

"Where's the light switch?" I asked.

Before I could look for it, I felt Nico press against me. "Shh, we're not supposed to be in here."

"Why not?"

“Because my sister knows I’d demolish some of the food and alcohol before the wedding even starts.”

“How are we supposed to find anything though?” I whispered back. “It’s pitch black.”

“I helped my parents put everything in here, so I know where most of it is.”

“Okay, first things first, where’s the whiskey?”

“This way.” He pressed further into me as he shimmied around me and led the way to the far corner.

My eyes adjusted to the dark well enough to see several stacks of liquor boxes. “Are those all liquor?” I asked.

“Yup.” He turned to me, grinning before digging quietly through some boxes. Finally, I heard him say, “Ah-ha!”

“Did you find it?” I inched closer to where he’d found what we needed. There wasn’t much space to keep from constantly bumping into each other. It was just large enough for one person. Yet, here I was, pressing into the brother of my ex-girlfriend’s fiancée—or should I say wife at this point?

He turned around with the bottle in his hands. In both of our maneuvers, we were now pressed against each other, front to front.

And I swear to any and all gods that I felt something twitch in his pants.

“Want to move somewhere there’s more space?” His voice was low but deeper this time.

I shook my head and then realized he probably couldn’t see it. “No, I’m good right here.”

“Oh, really?” I could hear the teasing in his voice.

And I don’t know what took over me but suddenly, I became this flirty tease. I reached for the bottle of whiskey and leaned my head back, letting the brown liquor burn down my throat. Once I’d had more than I could drink, I pulled it away, muttering, “Fuck.”

“Damn.” He nearly groaned.

“Want some?” I offered the bottle but stared straight at him.

He didn’t take his eyes off me as he responded, “Hell yeah I do.”

“Then get some.” I teased back.

He reached out and for a moment, I thought he was just going to take the bottle, leaving me here with soaked panties and a racing heart.

But as he reached, he leaned in, and I definitely felt his swelling dick.

“Shit.” I breathed. And before I could stop myself, I pushed up onto the balls of my feet and wrapped my free hand around his neck, pulling him down until his lips finally met mine.

For a brief second, I freaked out—in my head. I just pushed myself against this stranger and then made him kiss me.

But when I started to pull back, he pulled me back into the kiss. He took the bottle from my hand and pushed it onto the table behind me before wrapping his hands around my waist. As his hands slid down to my thighs, we deepened the kiss. He cupped just beneath my ass and lifted me until I was sitting on the table.

Just the move alone had me more than excited. Never before had anyone even thought about trying to lift me. I wasn’t exactly the skinny girl.

But Nico did it so effortlessly.

I pulled my lips from his, trailing down his jawbone and to his neck as I began unbuttoning his dress shirt. He wasted no time sliding his hands up the front of my thighs, pushing my flowy dress out of his way.

“Fuck.” He groaned when his fingers found the hem of my panties. I pushed his dress shirt off and then pulled his white tank top over his head.

I'd never been one to get too wrapped up in people's looks. At least when it came to whether or not a guy had bulked out muscles.

But everything about Nico's chest had me taking in every inch of him.

He was firm but not only muscle. He had a thin tuft of chest hair spanning the width of his upper chest. And in the top right corner, there was a tattoo wrapping from his collar bone, down to his pecks. I ran my fingers over it, wishing I could see the details of it.

Maybe later. I thought to myself.

Before I could dwell on that unexpected thought, Nico was pulling my panties off before reaching up to let the zipper of the dress come undone. I shrugged it off, not even the slightest bit worried that I couldn't wear a bra with it.

"Jesus Christ." He moaned before diving in and taking one breast in his mouth and the other with his hand.

I'd been down this road before. The one where the guy palms a boob while just sort of sucking on the other.

But this was... My eyes rolled into the back of my head, and I arched back, silently begging for him to keep going. Maybe it was that or maybe it was my hands gripping into his hair that had him taking one hand to begin unbuckling his belt.

"Let me." I whispered as I reached forward, taking over for him.

I made quick work of his pants, aching for more—and faster. The moment he sprung free from his pants and boxers, I had my hand on his shaft, working my way up and down. He'd moved on to trailing kisses on my chest, neck, and jaw and now, after a deep moan, his mouth was back on mine, pulling and biting at my lip.

He wrapped his hands around my bare back and pulled me closer to the edge. I let go of his dick and wrapped my legs around his waist.

"Protection?" I whispered.

“Wallet.” He pulled back to retrieve it and I moaned, desperate for him to come back.

He made quick work to roll it on before turning his attention back to me. He lifted my dress off, leaving me completely naked. He bit his bottom lip as he took me in. And even though it might be the cliché move, I was lapping up every moment.

He pressed closer and I thought he was about to enter me but instead, he dipped his hand in, rubbing around until he found my clit. He kept his movements precise, changing tempos and intensity. Every move brought me closer to an orgasm and when I started to cry out, he slipped in. “Fuck! Shit!” I yelled out, forgetting we weren’t even supposed to be here.

He let out a deep chuckle, letting me know that he appreciated my reaction. Just like he had with his hand, he kept his moves precise. He started out with the slow and strong pumps before he sped up. He was gripping my ass and I had my legs and arms now wrapped so tightly around him, nails digging into my back.

With his ferocity, I had to dig in, but the more I dug in, the harder he pounded. It didn’t take long for me to find that climax, having one of the best orgasms in my life. The sounds of my orgasm and the way my nerves pulsated around his dick had him groaning out his release too. If I hadn’t literally just cum, the sound of him would have made me.

He didn’t pull out; not right away at least. Instead, he pressed flat against me, holding me in his arms. Neither of us even spoke until he pulled out and stepped back.

“Fuck, Della. That was...” He trailed off but I knew what he meant.

“For you too?”

“Hell yeah.”

“Good.” I’d hopped off the counter and walked straight up to him as he was trying to secure his pants. I pressed my bare

breasts right against his chest and trailed a finger all the way up to his chin. "I'd be up for round two later if you are."

"Shit, I'd go for it right now if I could." His gruff words slipped from his mouth to mine as he pulled me in for another breathtaking kiss. This one, if possible, held even more intensity than the others.

I'd had one-night stands with others before. And the sex was good with most of them. But no man had ever stayed in me for even ten seconds before pulling away and getting dressed. And none of them even compared to the intensity and ferocity of this kiss. Hell, none of them even had a kiss like this before the sex, much less after.

"Fuck, you're good, Nico." I didn't even bother trying to not boost his ego too much. Sex like that demanded to be given all the credit.

He started to say something when we heard the interior door crack open and several voices, one saying clearly, "I don't know where he went."

"Her car is here but she isn't there, so I assume he found her?"

Lyla.

I knew her voice anywhere.

And I froze in place.

"Hey, hey." He whispered, "You okay?" He reached with his index finger to pull my head up to face him.

I managed a tight nod.

"You sure?"

"Yeah," I finally managed. "We just need to get out of here."

"Come here." He crouched down, pulling me with him so we were hiding from the sight of the doorway. Without much space, I was still pressed into Nico.

After a few moments, the door shut again, and the voices disappeared. "We should probably get dressed and go out

there.” I whispered, terrified, they were still there.

“But out there sounds so boring when I have all of this right here.” He smirked, gesturing to the fact that I was still naked and practically sitting in his lap.

“This sounds so much better on so many levels.” I pulled him in for a kiss when suddenly *both* of our phones started vibrating.

“Fuck.” He groaned, this time in irritation.

We each pulled out our phones to see that Lyla was calling me and his sister was calling him.

“Hello?” I answered first and he followed suit.

“Hey, I saw your car but not you. Where are you?”

I glanced up at Nico. “Um, I went for a walk.” I offered as I bent over to grab my clothes.

As I did so, I heard him offer his sister the same excuse. All the while, grabbing my ass with his free hand and nearly causing me to yelp.

“Well, are you close? We’re almost ready to start the ceremony.”

I pulled my phone from my ear. Surely enough, it was ten minutes to five. “Yeah, I can be back in time.”

“Okay, good.” Lyla started to end the call, but I could hear her breathing on the other side, as if she wanted to say something but couldn’t get the words out.

“I’ll be there.” I assured her again, hoping that would satiate her.

It seemed to as she sighed and hung up the phone.

When I turned around, I saw that Nico was already dressed and off the phone.

“Here, let me help you with that.” He stepped towards me, but I saw the devilish grin on his face just before I slipped the dress over my head, letting it fall to just above my ankles. Sliding his hands around me, he effortlessly zipped the dress

up and laid a soft kiss on my lips in the meantime. As he pulled back, he took my panties from me, slipping them into his pocket.

My mouth dropped open, but I slowly pulled it shut and smiled. “Souvenir?” I joked.

“Yep. Plus, if you want them back, you’ll have to come for them after the ceremony.”

“Meet you back here?”

“The room should be empty by then. They’ll have set everything up by then.”

“Good. Now, let’s go watch my ex and your sister get married.”

“That’s not a sentence you hear every day.”

“That’s not a sentence I ever thought I would say.” I joked back as he led his way out of the building, around the front, and into the room where the ceremony was being held. “Are you up front?”

“Yeah, supposed to be, but I can sit back here with you, if you’d like.”

“Would your family be okay with that?”

“If they aren’t, they’ll just have to deal with it.” He let me slip into a chair first before taking the one beside me.

They were the types of chairs that I swear only twigs and children could find comfortable and spacious enough. My ass was neither of the above. Naturally, this meant that we were pressed against each other—again.

The only thing I remember from the wedding reception is Lyla. Her dress was flawless and clung to her in all the right ways. The neckline plunged, showing her perfect cleavage. And her ass? Better than I had even imagined.

But that was it. The rest was a blur. I could only focus on Nico's hand on my leg, thumb rubbing circles as he mindlessly made sure I was okay.

I was ready for the wedding to be over with. Not just because I didn't want to be sitting here, watching my ex-girlfriend vow to another woman. And not just because I was aching to be immersed with Nico again, climbing to the next best orgasm of my life. But also, because, despite having just met him, my life didn't feel like such chaos around him. I didn't feel like I had when I was on my way here, wondering where the hell everything went wrong. Because in this moment, everything felt right.

ONE

It might be ironic that I'm a bartender and all I really like to drink is whiskey. Or it might be the most kismet thing ever. And while I go to Jack Daniels most of the time, I actually prefer the higher end shit. But I can't afford the higher end shit most of the time.

Especially when I'm unemployed and living in a new city.

After Lyla's wedding and the fact that everywhere I looked, I found happy couples—including Stacey in a new and open relationship—I needed a new scene. It just took me a few months to come to terms with it.

So, I finally packed up my shit in my shitty Corolla and drove north.

And now, I'm standing here at the bar of The Bellhouse Pub waiting for someone I could ask about a job. Normally, I'm cool, calm, and collected.

Right now, I was sweating, shaking, and scattered.

I needed this job. I didn't know much about this town beyond the fact that it seemed like no place was hiring. I wanted more than anything to work at the high-end bar down the street, but they weren't hiring. As soon as I arrived in this small-ass town, that was the first place I saw. They were packed. And I could just tell it was the place to earn a shit load of money.

But when they told me they weren't hiring, I found myself wandering down the streets until I ended up at a little bakery called 12th Street. And I gorged myself on a variety of pastries.

That's where I heard about this place. The girl behind the counter said she worked there on and off, if they didn't have anyone else, and knew they needed someone. So, I picked my ass up, wiped the crumbs off my face, and brought my resume down there.

After standing for only a few minutes, I was lucky enough to hand it directly to Anthony, the general manager, who asked if I had time to sit down and talk.

Of course, I did. I didn't have anything else to do. I'd already "unpacked" in my new studio apartment.

"So, Della." Anthony held his palm out, gesturing for me to sit at one of the high tops near the bar. He let me sit first before taking his own seat.

"Yes." I put on my brightest customer service smile I could muster.

"Kentucky?" His question might have only been one word, but I knew all the other questions underlying.

"I needed somewhere new. I'd outgrown that small town."

"So, you came to another small town?" He teased.

I held my hands up in defense and chuckled. "Trust me, there is nothing like a southern small town. This is practically a different world here."

"Tell me about it."

"Sounds like you've been there, ran from it yourself."

Anthony raised his eyebrows in agreement and huffed.

From there, the conversation went from us bonding over "running away" from southern small towns to our favorite liquors and memories associated with them.

Hell, we barely even talked about my experience, and I think the only time he looked at my resume was when he was double checking my name at the beginning. By the end, I realized almost forty-five minutes had passed.

"Well, Della. Have you ever heard the expression that being a bartender is more about communicating and being a

sort of therapist for the people than it is to make drinks?”

I nodded, “Yeah, I’ve heard similar things.”

“You are one of the best conversationalists I’ve met.”

His unexpected compliment shocked me. “Uh—thank you.”

He clasped his hands together and rested his chin on his knuckles, slightly leaning forward and narrowing his eyes. “So, when can you start?”

My eyes went so wide that I could feel the air conditioning rushing in. I had to blink my eyes three times before I could respond. “Today.” I joked.

He smiled. “Well, my trainer bartender is off tonight but he works tomorrow morning. How about that?”

“That’s—that’s perfect.” My smile was making my cheeks ache at this point. “What time?”

“Let’s say 9:30. We’ll have to get some paperwork done and get you all set up. Bartenders usually come in at 10am to get the bar set up. Tomorrow, it’ll just be you and running the dining room too until three, when our night shift comes in. It’s a slower day so you should be fine.” He looked down at my resume, finally skimming through it. “Yeah, you’ll be more than fine.” He holds up my resume. “I honestly don’t need these to ever know if someone is right for the job or not, but it does help to see that this isn’t your first rodeo.”

“Well, I really appreciate you taking a chance on me.”

“A chance? We’re born from the same cloth. You’d have to be really good at faking it and lying to deceive me. Someone else running away from the backwoods south? There’s always a connection.”

“I’m with you on that one. It’s hard enough just wanting to be independent but being different than the others? That’s just too much of a sin.”

Anthony chuckled like he knew all too well what I was referring to. “Yeah. And I was one of their biggest sinners in my town.”

I let out a laugh. “How did you manage that?”

He raised his eyebrows and did that slow nod, like he was thinking back to how rough it was. “I’m gay.”

This time, I let out a roar of laughter. I clamped my mouth shut to try to stifle it. “I’m so sorry. I’m not laughing at you.” I held my hand out. “I’m bi.”

“You need say no more.” Anthony stood from the barstool, so I followed suit. “Like I said, from the same cloth.”

I expected Anthony to hold out his hand for a shake but instead, he opened his arms and stepped forward. “Can I give you a hug? I feel like we’re already past handshakes. Plus, handshakes are antiquated and used to express dominance.”

“Of course.” I leaned into his hug and felt the warmth you get from a best friend.

“I’ll see you tomorrow morning, Della.”

“You too.” I smiled and made my way out of the pub. “Holy shit.” I let out as soon as I heard the door close behind me. “I just got a job.” I squealed and ran to my car.

As soon as I had my seat belt buckled and had the car on, I pulled out my phone and opened my messages. I scrolled through until I found the person I wanted to tell more than anything. My thumb hovered over her name, and I had to fight it. Lyla wasn’t mine anymore. I didn’t get to share my life with her anymore.

I tossed my phone to the passenger seat and dropped my head back to the head rest. “Fuck.”

After a few minutes, I pulled myself together and made my way out of the parking lot, heading straight for the bakery. Earlier, I was trying to fill a void with those cupcakes. Now, I wanted one to celebrate.

TWO

I hadn't brought anything more than what I could fit into my sedan but thankfully, I thought to bring my black slacks and a trusty black button-down shirt. My slacks were nothing special, but this shirt got me through a lot of rough nights. It had more beer spilled on it than anything else. It was perfectly worn in too. Any others I got over the years were too stiff, too tight, too short, too broad, too downright ugly.

This one had softened and was permanently morphed into the perfect shape. And in this business, that kind of shirt was crucial. The buttons were placed expertly to where I could show off some cleavage without too much. Standing straight, I was concealed enough to serve a birthday party for six-year-olds. Slightly leaning over a bar top or leaning to get ice from the well gave me just the advantage I needed to pair with my fake flirting to get the bigger tips.

Sure, maybe I was gaming the system, but I had to. I wasn't some stick thin girl that looked good in any shirt. No, I had to be strategic about how my pants fit and making sure they didn't get too tight or too baggy. This shirt helped distract from those bad pant days. My boobs were my key asset against the countless blonde twigs I'd worked with over the years. And in a new town, I wasn't about to forfeit it.

So, I smoothed out the front one last time, adjusted my boobs to make sure they weren't pulling the whole "slipping under my bra just enough to look like they were sagging" bullshit, and double checked the buttons then made my way to

the front door. I took a deep breath and tried to open the door, but it was still locked.

“Shit.” I forgot to ask Anthony about who would be here and if I needed to call someone first.

I’d just turned and started biting my thumbnail when I heard the door open.

“Della!” Anthony’s familiar voice broke out and my anxiety melted away.

“Anthony!”

He ushered me in and gave me a quick tour before grabbing the necessary paperwork. I sat in the back corner to fill it out, double checking everything.

He’d just gotten me fully set up when the clock hit ten.

“Alright, just familiarize yourself with the bar and I’m sure he’ll be here soon.” With that, Anthony was off, and I was by myself.

I looked around, finding a cutting board, knife, and some limes. I started cutting, hoping that this bar prepped their fruits the same as I’d always done before. Lime and lemon wedges with a small slit in the middle so they’d fit perfectly on the rim of a glass. Orange slices—not wedges—with a similar slit. The shallow dishes with lime juice, salt, and sugar each in their own. And not to mention the cherries. Ah, the cherries. You either love them or hate them. I happen to love them. I filled the small container, grabbing one for myself.

I’d just popped it in my mouth when I heard someone come up behind me. “Shit.” I muttered. Sure, it was only a cherry, but I hadn’t thought this through. First day and I’m already stealing garnishes?

“You must be the new girl.” The assumed bartender here to train me had a voice so deep that it caught me off guard.

Spinning slowly, I gulped the cherry down and stuck the stem on the side of my mouth, hoping my teeth would keep it hidden.

Except, I wasn't anticipating my mouth dropping open. I almost didn't notice it falling out of my mouth because I was too distracted by the man standing in front of me.

His one-sided smile, bright eyes, and overall attractive demeanor—plus the fact that I knew him were the culprits to my gawking.

“N—Nico?” I stammered.

“No way. Della?”

Fuck, he remembered me too. And my name. How long had it been? More than six months. I didn't know if I was impressed or horrified.

“Um, yeah.”

He let out a laugh and shook his head in disbelief. “There's no fucking way that you are standing in front of me. Here. In this small-ass town, what, thousands of miles away from Kentucky? And as my new trainee.”

I was in just as much shock as he was. “What a small world.” I let out a nervous chuckle, pinching my thumb between my other fingers—age old nervous tick.

He shook his head again and crossed his arms before immediately uncrossing them and stepping forward before abruptly stopping. I was frozen in place, and he had no idea what to do.

“How about we just pretend we don't know each other and focus on the training and pouring drinks part of all of this.” I blurted. It wasn't the first thought on my mind, but this was not the time or place to be having those thoughts—memories, really.

He slowly nodded like that wasn't what he was thinking either. His eyes told me that much with the way he was staring at me.

Fuck, this was going to be difficult.

“You sure? Because I wouldn't mind picking up where we left off with.” His eyes narrowed with the cliché desire people talk about.

That's when it all came flooding back to me. It wasn't like I'd forgotten that night. I never would for so many reasons. But this brought me back to that moment. And how much I'd wanted him then. I thought it was the whiskey and the emotions of that day that made me kiss him.

Turns out, it was him. Because right now, all I wanted to do was close this distance, wrap my hand around his neck, and repeat what we did half a year ago.

I knew I shouldn't. I knew I needed to back away and be firm in what I'd just said.

But I didn't want to.

I hadn't had sex since that night. It's not for a lack of trying. I went on dates. I met up with Tinder dates. But none of them could get me in the mood. So, I'd been relinquished to take care of myself with only the memories of Lyla or Nico to get me by.

It wasn't a good time for my libido so naturally, it made sense that I'd have these thoughts.

But I was stronger than this. Wasn't I? If I could resist the urge to message Lyla, I could resist Nico.

He wasn't making it easy on me though. He stepped towards me, gently sliding his hand on my hip and leaning in. He brought his lips close to my ear. "I can see how much you want to but won't let yourself. And I get it. We can both try to be good, but I don't know how long I can hold back."

Shivers ran down my spine. I pressed my hands against his stomach, feeling just how warm and firm his torso was. Squeezing my eyes shut and taking a deep breath, I forced myself backwards.

"Damn straight we're going to be good." I mustered every ounce of conviction I had.

He pulled back and didn't say anything at first, creating an awkward silence. Finally, he broke the silence. "So, I see you've got our garnishes done for the day. You look optimistic for how many people are getting cocktails today. People get drunk on Tuesday mornings back in Kentucky?"

His shift in conversation caught me off guard but helped get my thoughts back in line.

“You’d be surprised. Some of them are nursing a hangover with more alcohol.” I shrugged and turned to clean up the cutting board.

From there, Nico walked me through the rest of the opening steps. They were all pretty standard. Fill the well with ice. Turn on all the TVs to either sports or news. Make sure everything is stocked and the taps were good to go. Check the glassware for smudges or lipstick marks. And then wait.

Thankfully, there were just enough people to keep us both busy. Nico took lead on all the tables, letting me absorb the menu and processes but behind the bar, he let me make most of the drinks. It was mostly beer but there were a few Manhattans and some glasses of wine.

Finally, I saw three o’clock roll around along with the night shift. Nico made quick introductions, we cleared out, and he steered me to a booth at the back of the restaurant. “I just want to go over a few things today. See if you have any questions. Also, I need you to this out.” He handed me a sheet of paper with various questions. A lot of it was on the legal end. Like what to do and when to cut someone off. How to properly ID people, and all that jazz. Shit that every bartender needed to know from day one.

Which meant this was a breeze for me. I started scribbling in the answers, knowing his eyes were on me the whole time.

“Stop looking at me like that.” I glared at him over the papers.

“Like what?”

“Like you’re purposely trying to distract me.”

“I wasn’t doing it on purpose.”

I put the pen down and covered one hand with the other, covering part of the paper. “Bullshit.”

“What on earth could be my motive?”

“Quit the shit, Nico.”

His face got serious. “I—I’m sorry.”

I dropped my shoulders, realizing I was sounding like a bitch. “Look, this isn’t exactly easy for me.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, really.”

I expected him to come back at me with some smart-ass response but instead, he sighed, agreeing with me. “It isn’t for me either. Seriously, the moment I saw you here, I knew I had to be hallucinating. I mean, there was no way in hell that you could be here. But the closer I got to you, the more it was apparent. And it took me right back to that night. Which, I admit, hasn’t exactly left my mind. And I know, it’s been six months. But there was something about it. That sex...” He trailed off.

My heart was racing, and my cheeks were burning. “It hasn’t really left my mind either.”

“So, it feels kismet that you’re here. And not just in the same town, but working at the same restaurant, behind the same bar. Shit like that doesn’t happen.”

“No, but it doesn’t mean there’s automatically a relationship here.”

Nico’s face went stiff. “Um, no, no. It definitely does not.”

“Fuck, I’m sorry. You have a girlfriend, I imagine.”

“Nope. Not even a date in the near future.”

“Oh.” *He’s wide open, Della.* I cleared my thought, pushing the thought away. “Well, right now, I just need to focus on not fucking up my new job so that I don’t have to go crawling back to Kentucky.”

“First, you’re not going to fuck up your job. And you sure as shit never have to go back there. There are a million different places you could go. And you can just stay here, too.” His voice softened, suggesting he wanted me to stay. “But you’re right. There doesn’t—and shouldn’t—be anything here except two coworkers.”

“Right.” I took a deep breath. “Well, thank you. I should get going.”

“Me too.”

We both abruptly stood from the booth, awkwardly nearly colliding.

“Alright, I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“At three p.m.”

“Yep.” I handed the papers to him and darted around him, headed straight for the door.

THREE

By the time three o'clock had rolled around, I wasn't doing much better. In fact, I was more overwhelmed with the memories and thoughts than when I'd left the restaurant just twenty-four hours ago.

But somehow, Nico and I made it through the night with only a few accidental bumps and minor purposeful touches veiled as innocent. Despite the night being a bit slow, time ran by. Partly due to me getting caught up talking to the head chef, Beckette. She initially ran me through the menu, teaching me about the different options and other things I should know when it came to the food side. By the time we finished, we'd ventured off into her giving me tips and information on where to go—and not to go—in this town.

Nico and I even made it through closing the bar without incident. We just kept our eyes off each other and a safe distance apart.

Hell, the next couple of days went similar. I was so busy with making sure I remembered everything—maybe I used it as an excuse to avoid Nico. But it was working.

Was.

Suddenly, it was Friday night. It had been an exhausting shift that was non-stop drinks. The paper in the well printer had to be changed mid-shift because the server orders would not stop coming in. We silently seemed to agree that I was making the server drinks and he was taking care of the people at the bar, keeping a safe distance.

It wasn't just that though. It seemed like Nico was actively avoiding me. He wouldn't even look at me when he asked me for something. And if he did, his eyes would dart away from mine.

There was one time that he slipped his hand along my lower back, gently at first. And then it was gone, and he'd already retreated back to the patrons.

And it was frustrating the hell out of me. Just days ago, we were both on the same page about how, sure, there seemed to be a connection but that we had to focus on work instead.

And now, he was avoiding me so much that I was beginning to think it was all a joke to him. That he was just trying to either get in my pants again or that he'd been lying before and trapped me into being vulnerable.

I tried not to dwell on it too much. I couldn't handle my insecurities interrupting me trying to do my job. I just had to barrel through the rest of the night, close the bar, and get some sleep. And then, I would talk to Anthony about being on different shifts. Why? I'd figure out a good excuse later.

Finally, the restaurant began to die down, giving me my first chance to escape. I took the opportunity to take out the trash and maybe a few minutes to clear my mind.

When I made my way back in, there was only one table left in the restaurant, leaving the bar itself empty.

I maneuvered around Nico, who had been texting someone on his phone, still ignoring me.

Or I thought he still was. Finally, he acknowledged my presence and came towards me, obviously wanting to say something.

“You know it's not nice to tease, right?”

“What?” I narrowed my eyes at him.

“Your shirt. I've had to force myself to look anywhere else when you even slightly bend over.”

“I'm not wearing this for you. I'm wearing it because it's my best work shirt.”

“Well, I can see why. It helps with the tips. But there’s no one else here but me so, getting hard to believe it’s not for me.” His eyes darted up and down.

I followed his gaze down one time, realizing that one of the buttons had popped open and not just my cleavage was showing.

“Shit!” I spun away, fastening the button as quickly as I could. It must’ve popped open when I was cleaning.

“You don’t have to do that on my account.” Nico’s voice was low, skating through my hair.

“Well, these aren’t for you.” I retorted.

“Okay.” Nico pulled back, walking away from the bar, and leaving me in utter confusion.

What the fuck was he pulling? Was he trying to torture me?

Frustrated, I grabbed the last full dishpan and brought it into the dishwasher. “Thanks, Della.” He commented as I set it down.

“Fucking crazy night, huh?”

He shrugged. “Normal Friday night. Thanks for not waiting until the last minute on these.” He nodded towards the dishes and pulled them towards him.

“Sure.” I turned, making my way back to the bar. Nico still wasn’t there, and I was half worried he’d bailed on me, leaving me to close by myself now. This was anything but a normal Friday night for me.

FOUR

My frustrations weren't going anywhere. Nico had been gone for nearly ten minutes and I was almost done with cleaning. The restaurant was finally closed, and I was ready to get out of there as fast as I could. All the other servers had left, and I just needed Nico to say I could go.

I waited a few more minutes, double checking everything before pulling out my phone, scrolling mindlessly through Instagram.

"It looks great, Della." Nico's voice startled me.

I shoved my phone in my back pocket, double checked my shirt, and turned to him.

As if he couldn't resist, his eyes darted to my chest and when I caught his eye, he looked disappointed. And suddenly, he wasn't ignoring me anymore. I watched as he hesitated, like he was fighting some battle I couldn't see.

I waited for him to say anything. He was the one who had to break this silence. Not me.

And he finally did, with a sigh. "Why can't anything be easy anymore?"

It felt like a rhetorical question, so I didn't even bother responding.

He shook his head and switched gears. "How was tonight? It got really intense there for a bit."

"It was fine." I'd crossed my arms, trying to stay firm, but my voice betrayed me.

“You did great.”

“Thanks.”

How could he know? He’d ignored me all night.

“For a minute there, I didn’t think you’d talk to me all night.”

“You weren’t exactly keeping conversation with me.”

“Well, we were busy.”

“Yeah, and?”

“Was my comment earlier crossing a line? Because I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to make you uncomfortable. I was trying to joke but...” He trailed off.

“No, it was fine.” I blurted but didn’t want to elaborate. In fact, I wanted this conversation to end. I was damn near sick to my stomach in trying to figure out what the hell was going on while needing to get away from him—and that smile of his. And his eyes. And those hands...

He cleared his throat. “Let’s see how we did.” He began entering all of the tips into the system while I counted down the drawer. Once we calculated everything, Nico held out a wad of cash, causing my eyes to go wide.

“How much is this?” I started to take it but paused.

“Over six-hundred dollars.” He grinned.

“You can’t be serious. This is to split, right?”

“Nope.” He shook his head and rubbed his thumb over mine so gently that it didn’t even register until he pulled away. “We each got that.”

“Holy fuck!” I screamed, letting my excitement take over. “I’ve never made this much in one night.”

“Welcome to anywhere but the south, Babe.”

I knew it was just a part of the phrasing and not meant to be romantic, but the rest of my body didn’t seem to get the memo.

“I—I feel like I need to celebrate.” I started counting the money, still not believing it. Once I was done counting—six hundred and twenty-nine dollars to be exact—I looked up to see Nico holding out a shot to me. “What are you doing?”

“Celebrating.”

“Oh no, we can’t do that, we’re on the job.”

“We’re allowed two shift drinks.”

“But we’re still working.”

Nico looked around, “Looks like you finished everything already.”

“Well…” I trailed off realizing he was right and took the shot.

We clinked them together and then I downed mine, letting the whiskey-burn fill my mouth and throat. “Fuck.” I muttered.

“That sounds familiar.” Nico finally took his shot and I realized that he’d watched me take mine.

I let out a laugh and rolled my eyes. “You’re not the only one I’ve said that around when I’ve taken a shot.”

“Maybe.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

Nico shrugged before leaning forward to put his glass on the bar just behind me. “We’re being good, remember?”

My head fell back, and I groaned.

“And right now, everything you do makes it harder and harder for me to resist the temptation.”

“I’m not doing anything.” I quipped but I knew exactly what he meant. “If anyone is, it’s you.”

“Oh? How so?” He retorted.

“By giving me a shot of whiskey. And standing this close. And looking at me.”

“Looking at you?”

“You know what I mean.”

“Maybe I don’t. Maybe I need you to elaborate.” He teased stepping towards me just a bit more.

“I’m not doing that.”

“Why? Because you’re thinking what I’m thinking but don’t want to admit it?”

“And what would that be?”

“That maybe we should have a repeat of that one night.”

I scoffed, not even trying to hold it back.

“What, you can’t tell me that you aren’t thinking it too. I know you enjoyed it. You already practically admitted it.”

Suddenly, his cockiness was pouring out of him, making me laugh even harder and pull away, putting the wall back up. I wasn’t falling into this trap.

I held up my hands defensively, determined to be strong. I didn’t know what had come over me but suddenly, I blurted words I wasn’t even aware I’d been thinking. “Look I don’t need any more pity sex from you.”

He was obviously taken aback, as I kind of was. “What— What do you mean pity sex? I don’t remember anything even remotely like pity sex.”

I’d spent so much of the night trying to steer clear of him and keep any and all thoughts about him at bay, that I must have pushed myself to the complete opposite without even realizing it. “You know, I was the ex-girlfriend at the bride’s wedding. Of course, it was just for pity.”

“Pretty sure I remember it very differently.” Nico’s expression looked like one of hurt.

“Oh, and how did you picture it?” It seemed I was doubling down, and I knew I shouldn’t. I was boxing him in with everyone else. I was convincing myself that there was no way in hell he actually wanted to have sex with me—more than once.

“That there was a very gorgeous girl that I couldn’t keep my eyes off of and then couldn’t keep my hands off.”

I felt a heat creep into my cheeks as I saw his smile widen. I couldn’t tell if he was just trying to sweet-talk me or not.

“I’m not kidding, Della.” he said as if he could read my mind.

So, I reacted the only way I knew how to. I tried to scoff again, and it came out more like a stuttering mess of a person.

“What—What?” I stuttered. “What are you talking about?”

Nico pressed against me, slipping his hand around my waist.

“Nico, why are you doing this? Why are you so close to me? And why are your hands around my waist?” I spun around, trying to get his hands to break away from me but instead, he kept ahold of me, this time, his hands were on my stomach.

“Seriously, Nico. This isn’t cool.” I gulped, thankful I wasn’t facing him.

His hand flew off me like he’d just stuck it in the fryer. “Shit, Della, I’m so sorry. I didn’t mean to go this far. I know you don’t want to be with me. I just I just got caught up in my head.”

I was overcome with guilt. I wasn’t trying to make him feel like he did anything wrong. He hadn’t really. I was just confused. Just the way his hands felt on my stomach took me right back to that wedding. And all the ways—and places—he touched me and how I felt. How euphoric all of it was.

I couldn’t think about it anymore. I had to stop. I had to get away from him. It was the only way I was getting out of this unscathed.

“I forgot something of my car.” I blurted. “I’ll be right back.”

I’m push past him as fast as I could trying to make an escape before I get him before I caved.

“Della? Where are—”

He dropped his question, realizing exactly what I was doing.

There was too much guilt in my head, though. To turn around and go back to him. Guilt for how I made him feel like he did something wrong. And now, guilty from running away instead of talking to him or anything.

Knowing what I had to do, I spun around, making my way back to him at the bar.

“I’m sorry.”

“For what?”

“For running out just now. For making you feel like you did something wrong.” I dropped my voice. “And for accusing you of only having sex with me out of pity.”

He stepped closer to me. Closing the already tight enough distance between us. And I could feel my heart racing.

“Look,” his voice was really low at first. “I tried. I tried to do what we both agreed we had to do. But I haven’t stopped thinking about you. Just being here every day with you has been pure agony. Hell, I can’t get you off my mind when I’m home. And that’s the most dangerous time, to tell you the truth. I don’t have assholes snapping their fingers to distract me. And it’s fucking killing me, Della. I haven’t ever gone through this before. And I’m beginning to think that keeping distance and fighting all of this,” He gestured between us. “Is a mistake. So, I don’t care if that sounds cheesy, corny or any sort of ridiculous or not. I have to tell you this. Because I know you feel the same way, even though you’re suddenly putting up this defensive shit.”

“Look, I didn’t move thousands of miles away just to fall into another bad habit.”

“I’m a bad habit?”

“Yeah.”

“What does that even mean?”

“It means that I need to be responsible. I need to focus on myself. I need to get the past out of my head.”

He sighed. “And I’m part of that past, aren’t I?”

“Yeah.” It was painful to admit. “At least you were supposed to be.”

“And now?”

“Coincidence? I—I don’t know. I just know that this isn’t...” I trailed off. This wasn’t what?

Nico took a step towards me. “I’m not asking you to define anything or put labels on this.”

“No, you’re just asking for sex.”

“And what is so wrong with that? There’s a connection here and you and I both know there’s no use in acting like that was the most incredible sex.”

“That’s no reason to hop in bed and fuck again.”

Nico’s eyebrows shifted up at the word *fuck*.

“Alright. Deny this.” Nico pressed against me, and I felt his cock hardening. “But you and I both know that this will happen. Maybe not tonight but you and I aren’t done. We haven’t even gotten started yet.”

“And what has you convinced that I’m just suddenly going to come up to you, just begging for you to fuck me. Beg you for that huge c—”

“How’s it going?” Anthony’s voice came from across the dining room, startling us both.

Nico jumped back and cleared his throat but initially, he kept his eyes on me. “Good, we were just finishing up.”

“Good.”

I finally composed myself and turned around to see Anthony shifting his gaze between us.

“Nico, you want to bring me your drawer?”

“Um, yeah. I’ll meet you back there.”

We were all in a stalemate before Anthony finally caved. “Alright.”

The moment his back turned, Nico was pressed against my back, lowering his voice to my ear.

“You want to finish what you were just about to say?”

I fought the way his warm breath made my breath catch and how my knees buckled from how deep his tone was.

“What?” I asked, barely regaining my composure, and turning around to face him—which was a mistake. Now, our faces were mere inches apart.

“What you were saying about my,” He paused, looking down.

I rolled my eyes. “I was not—”

“Oh, you were. You were about to call my dick huge.”

“You are crass.”

“You started it. Besides, it’s not like I can ignore a compliment like that, even if you were being sarcastic.”

I attempted to roll my eyes again but stopped midway. “Fine. I admit it. I was incredibly impressed.”

Nico smirked, pulled away to grab the money drawer. He slipped past me only looking back once before he disappeared into the kitchen.

I took the moment to regain my composure and get a glass of water.

“Fuck.” I muttered.

I was fucked. He was right. I was one touch from him away from begging for him.

And waiting for him to come back was agony. The responsible side of me was begging me to leave him a note and get the hell out of here.

But the rest of me? It was begging for some fun. To just let go. We’d done it once before.

What harm could another round do?

“A lot.” I muttered to myself.

I was just beginning to drown in the endless sea of all the disastrous ways this could go when I finally saw the two of them coming out of the kitchen.

“I’m headed out. I trust that you’ll lock up?” Anthony’s eyes were drilling into Nico, making me concerned about what the hell happened back there.

“Yes, Anthony. You don’t need to worry. Go home.” Nico made his way back over to the bar, standing right behind me.

Anthony seemed to hesitate but still left. Now it was just Nico and me.

“What did he say?”

“He told me not to fuck this up.”

“Wait, he knows?” my voice hit a pitch I didn’t know I had.

“No. He just thinks I’m flirting with you because you’re cute and doesn’t want me to do something to make you quit.”

“Oh.”

“Yeah.”

“Wait was that his words or yours?”

“What?”

“Cute.”

Nico stepped forward and cupped his hand under my chin. “His. I have different words for you.”

“Like what?”

“Gorgeous. Sexy. Feisty. Smart. Delicious. Impossible to resist.” He met my lips with his before I could respond.

I met his urgency, his need. Both of us desperate for each other’s lips, touch, everything.

Nico tugged at my shirt, pulling it from under my pants, and slowly started unbuttoning it from the bottom. His

knuckles dragged against my skin as he went, setting my skin on fire as my entire body ached for more.

When he got to the top button, he paused, reminding me of how it was accidentally unbuttoned not too long ago.

He pushed it from my shoulders and tossed it on top of the tap handles. He tugged his own shirt from his pants and damn near ripped it off. The moment it hit the taps, his hands were on my waist, lifting me on the bar, shockingly easily.

And there I was, face to face with Nico's bare chest.

"One time, Nico. One time." Even as the words left my mouth, I knew it wasn't.

"I'll take whatever you want to give me."

And then his lips crashed against mine again.

ABOUT M LEIGH MORHAIME

M Leigh Morhaime is an East Coast Native transplanted to the Pacific Northwest with her husband, sweet pup named Myah, and two cats, Hannibal and Watson. She can always be found with a pair of sunglasses somewhere on her head as she wasn't meant for the sun. With a childhood dream to be an author, she published her first novel in November of 2020. While she is chaos, her stories revolve around the fierce heroines healing, thriving, and finding love.

Creating Fierce & Witty Heroines with Lingering Love Stories.

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THE WINTER OF
WISTERIAS: LILA GREY

ONE

MADILYN

The sun rises over the mountains as I sip on my morning tea. This is my third week in my little cabin here in the mountain town of Hollyhill Valley.

It's a gorgeous town full of so many interesting people. After a bad break up in the city just south of here, I came here to find peace. Lucky for me, I landed a job at Mad Motors. It's a local restoration and mechanic shop. The woman who runs the front office was looking to retire, and offered to rent me this cabin as well.

I finish my tea and head into the shower to get ready for my first day. I haven't met the owner yet, but Doris assured me that everything would be fine.

Hopping out of the shower, I grab a pair of jeans and a shirt to throw on. I want to impress, but I also know this is a garage and I may get dirty. Doris mentioned sometimes she has to carry boxes or bring parts back that customers drop off... and they aren't always clean.

Drying my hair, I throw it up in a ponytail to keep my hair out of my face for the day. I look outside to see a light flurry, so I grab a sweatshirt to layer on top.

My truck thankfully has a remote start so I turn that on as I pack a small bag of things along with my purse. Sneakers in case I'm inside all day, snow pants in case I get stuck, mittens, and a hat. I put my snow boots on, throw my winter coat on, and head out the door.

I drive down my little mountain pass and head right to the little coffee shop in town. There's no way I can start my day without a cup of coffee.

Heading inside, I get to the counter and the young girl comes over to take my order.

“Hi! What can I get you this morning?”

“Peppermint latte with almond milk, please.”

She smiles. “Of course! Up early today, huh?”

“First day of my new job! I'm a little nervous, so I wanna get there early. Impress the new boss.”

“Oh, awesome! Where are ya working?”

She hands me my coffee as I hand her my cash. “Mad Motors. Miss Doris is retiring, so I'm taking over.”

The girl scrunches her nose. “Oh. Good luck. Your boss, Beckett? Huge jerk.”

Frowning, I take my coffee and head back to the truck.

My new boss can't be that bad... right? Surely Doris would have said something to me...

Shaking my head, I head toward the outskirts of town where the garbage is located. I pull down the dirt driveway and park the trucks next to Doris's little yellow bug. She comes outside and grins when she sees me.

“Oh good! I was gettin' worried you got lost!”

I walk inside with her as we head over to her little office.

“Just stopped for some coffee. Oh, and...” I pull out a travel mug from my bag. “Lavender spearmint tea for you.”

“You're a doll! Now come on over and I'll show you around.”

Doris shows me all the files, cabinets, lists, all of it. Then we head out onto the floor. She shows me all the storage, the bays, and around the entire garage.

She points up the steps to an open office. “That's Beckett's office. He's pretty particular, so unless he asks, just don't go

in.”

I look up and see a guy step out of the office and glare down at us. But even through his glare, the man is gorgeous. Dark hair, piercing blue eyes, covered in tattoos. He’s not a giant of a man, but he’s certainly tall and in shape.

Leaning over, I whisper to Doris. “Who is that?”

She laughs. “That’s Beckett Greyland. Your boss.”

“Not who I expected. At all.”

He stalks down the stairs over toward us. “Who is this, Doris?”

“She’s my replacement, ya grouch. Be nice to the young girl.”

He looks over at me, those steely blue eyes shooting right through to my soul. “You ever worked in a shop before?”

I nod. “Yes, sir. I ran my dad’s garage throughout high school and as I studied in college.”

“Fuck. How old are you?”

“Twenty-three.”

“Hmm. We’ll see.”

And with that, my new hot, yet so very grouchy boss storms away.

Doris chuckles to herself as she takes my arm. “This way, dear. Beckett is a good man. I think this will all work out. You just gotta show him you’re a tough broad and it will be fine.”

“I dunno. He seems more grouchy than the old guys back at my dad’s shop. How old is he?”

” Thirty-two. Acts like he’s ninety through. Come along, I’ll get you started before the other guys come in.”

I glance back to see Beckett bent over the hood of an old Mustang. His shirt lifts a bit and I can see even more tattoos.

Doris laughs to herself as she pats my back. “Lord, help the two of you.”

“Ya didn’t say he looked like he just walked off every women’s book boyfriend’s wet dream, Doris.”

Another guy comes walking over, throwing his arm around my shoulder. I gently push him off and step toward Doris.

“Connor is the name. Who are you, sweetheart?”

Beckett comes walking over, almost growling. “New girl. Get back to work.”

Connor puts his hands in the air and chuckles. “Just tryin’ to play nice, boss man.”

Doris shakes her head and pulls me along. “That one is a troublemaker. Stay away from him. Connor and Beckett have been like this since they were little babes.. Always fighting over everything, trying to one up each other.”

“I’m just here to work.”

She smiles at me as we walk into the office. “We’ll see about that.”

TWO

BECKETT

Groaning, I roll out of bed and head into my kitchen. I get my coffee machine rolling as I pop a breakfast bowl into the microwave. I can feel in my bones that today is going to be a shit show at work. Running your own business sounds good, but it's a ton of work and frustration.

Then there's the new girl...

Madilyn.

Doris seems to think she's going to be the best fit, but I have my doubts. She seems young, naïve, and too cocky.

But damn, she's pretty. *Real pretty. And I already have this weird pull to her...*

Shaking my head, I grab my coffee and head out the door. There's a new layer of snow on the ground already, and I groan. Winter here can get really nasty. Big snowstorms, high winds; it's miserable. But when you go out the next day, that sun shining, snow sparkling as you drive... it makes it all worth it.

I pull into the lot and head right into my office. Lights on, heat on, things get moving before the rest of my crew even gets here. When you're the boss, all things land on you. But unlike office bosses, I get my hands dirty with my guys. I'll never have them do something I won't do.

The door opens and I figure the guys are here already. Instead, I'm met with Madilyn in my office door.

"Can I help you?"

“Yes, you can.”

She walks into my office and sits in the chair across from me. Her eyes narrow toward me and I just know she’s itching for a fight.

“Did you read my resume?”

“Doris did.”

Madilyn huffs. “Exactly what I thought.”

“Come on. Lay it on me. Scream, yell. Do all that emotional shit you ladies do.”

She laughs and I’m caught off guard. Madilyn smiles as she stands, leaning across the desk.

“Nah, I don’t do that shit. Which is why I’m the best candidate and you know it. Crying gets you nowhere in a man’s world. But you know what does? Standing your ground.” She slams a folder on my desk. “Here’s my resume. I suggest you read it over.”

A slight grin spreads across my face.

This girl has got some fire in her... I like it.

“And if I don’t?”

She shrugs. “Guess you’ll be without an office manager.”

“I could get Doris back.”

“She left for a cruise. One entire month. That’s a long time with no help.”

I groan, knowing she’s right. “Fine. What do you want me to see?”

Madilyn sits back down and takes the paper from me. “Here. Look at my experience. Give me a real shot. Just like every other person who works here. I deserve a real chance.”

Leaning back in my chair, I cross my arms and look up at Madilyn. “How about-”

A knock interrupts our conversation, and one of my guys pops his head in my office.

“Yo, Becks. We got an issue down here. Can you come look? Hey Madilyn! Looking nice today.”

I nod as I stand up, walking past Madilyn, who looks at me, then back to Connor.

Heading down the steps, I walk over to the lift where we have a classic sixty-six Chevelle that’s being worked on.

“What’s the problem, Connor?”

He whistles low. “Missing the original super sport front bumper emblem.”

“Where the fuck did it go?”

Connor shrugs. “Dunno. And I can’t seem to find one in the area.”

“Did ya look online?”

“Uh...”

I sigh, but then spot Madilyn out of the corner of my eye. She wants to prove herself? Then this is the perfect project for her.

“No worries. Head over to the new girl and hand it off to her.”

“Madilyn?”

I nod. “Yup. She wants to prove she belongs here, so this is how she can do it.”

Connor shrugs. “Okay... if you say so. Gives me a good excuse to talk to her.”

I lean back as I watch him walk over to the little glass office and hand a paper over to Madilyn. She gives him a big smile, nodding as she slowly entrances him with her stupid charm.

This girl is trouble, but it’s a good thing I can handle trouble like her...

THREE

MADILYN

It's been a few weeks at Mad Motors and Beckett still has yet to give me a real chance. He gives me mundane tasks like running to get lunch or watering the flowers in my office.

But what I have in my hand is going to knock his socks off. When Connor came to me a few weeks ago and told me about this part, they couldn't find for the Chevelle. I knew this was my time to shine.

I spent sleepless nights searching for it online to be shipped at a decent price. Then, my luck turned around, and I met this old gear head at a festival last weekend. He has an enormous lot full of all classic cars. *And what would you know*, he just happened to have the missing original super sport front bumper emblem!

Rushing into the garage, I stumble into their little morning meeting. Beckett looks up at me with that annoyingly hot, brooding face.

"We're busy, Madilyn."

I nod as I take a seat in an empty chair. Beckett looks over at me.

"What do you want?"

Standing up, I walk over and hand him the paper. "I found it."

"Found what?"

"The emblem."

The other guys whistle, whispering to themselves as Beckett stands up.

“Where.”

“A few towns over. This guy has a huge collection and-”

Beckett shakes his head. “I know all the collectors around here. How did you find him? What’s his name?”

“Internet. I went out and met with him. His name is Mickey.”

“You met with him?”

Beckett’s voice is getting louder...

“Yes, sir. I brought him some homemade muffins, and he offered it to me for half the price he told you...”

The guys giggle like little schoolgirls in the back, and Beckett turns bright red.

“How did he know about me, Madilyn?”

“I told him who I worked for, of course. So you want the emblem or not?”

He shakes his head and sighs. “Fine. Yes. Now just... go to your desk. Or whatever.”

I stand there, unsure of what to make of this entire interaction.

I did my job... right? Is he upset that I actually got the part? Isn't that why they gave this task to me?

Beckett looks over at me and frowns. “Why are you still standing here?”

“Did I do something wrong?”

“What? No?”

I shrug. “So, why are you so upset with me?”

Beckett sighs, walking over to grab my arm and pull me inside my office.

“I’m... I’m not upset. I just don’t understand how Mickey just sold that to you.”

“I was nice.”

He scowls at me. “Are you saying I’m not nice?”

I laugh as I sit down at my desk and turn my computer on. “I’m just saying you catch more flies with honey rather than vinegar.”

“I guess you’re right.”

Smiling, I look up at Beckett. “I’m here to work for you. So use me. Use my sweet demeanor to get deals for parts and cars. But I will not stay if you continue to get this.. jealous rage when I’ve done my job.”

He huffs, but there’s a slight smile on his face. “Deal. Now get back to work.”

Laughing, he walks out of the room, and I check emails, voicemails, and messages.

A few minutes later, the other guys from the shop come into my office. The one guy, Connor, sits down in the chair across from me.

“Don’t worry, Mads. Beckett is just a big old grouch. Don’t let him get to you.”

The other guys nod in agreement.

“We talked it out. It’s all good now.”

“Good! So come out with us on Friday night.”

“Where?”

Connor grins. “The Fat Lamb! Best bar around.”

One of the other guys, Joey, chuckles. “The only bar around.”

I look at all of them stuffed into my tiny office and smile. “You know what? I’ll go. I haven’t been out in a bit and it sounds like a good time.”

They all stand and smile. “Awesome!” “See ya Friday!” “Woohoo!”

Connor hangs back as the other guys leave.

“Something I can help you with, Connor?”

“Just want to get to know you.”

I look around, almost hoping grumpy Beckett will show up to save me.

“Why did you move here? Got a boyfriend?”

I turn and glare at Connor. “It’s really none of your business, and those are very inappropriate questions.”

“So I have a chance?”

“No. I have feelings for somebody else, *despite him not seeing me...* but you need to leave, please. I told you this is extremely inappropriate. We are co-workers, not friends.”

He stands up with a huff. “I was trying to be nice. Just a warning. You don’t stand a chance with Beckett.”

“Excuse me?”

“Beckett. You have no chance with him. He’s a closed up, cold asshole. Just figured I would warn you now before you fell for him. Save you the heartbreak.”

Shaking my head, I put my hands on my hip, really upset at this point. “Beckett is my boss. That is it. I think it’s time for you to leave.”

He storms out just as Beckett comes walking into my office.

“Everything okay?”

“Uh, yeah. Just talking with Connor. They all asked me to come out on Friday night.”

Beckett frowns. “Oh.”

“Yup.”

He runs his hand through his hair. “Uh, if Connor is bothering you, just, uh, let me know.”

I smile up at him. “Will do, thanks.”

Beckett grins as he nods and walks out.

I think there’s more to Beckett than meets the eye...

FOUR

BECKETT

I'm working on a customer car when I look around, seeing nobody else is working. I walk around and hear faint laughter coming from up front.

Madilyn.

I storm over and clear my throat. My guy's turn and scramble out of the room. Madilyn stands up as they all leave.

"This isn't a social club. Stop distracting my guys. You *all* have work to do."

"What is your problem?"

I cross my arms and stare at her. "My problem?"

"Yeah. Your problem. Ever since I walked in here, you've had it out for me. Why let Doris hire me if you didn't want me here?"

I shake my head and huff. "I...I don't."

Madilyn rolls her eyes. "Wow. Convincing."

A slight smile spreads across my face at her sarcastic reply. "I'm hard on everybody when they first start."

"Why?"

I sit down in the chair across from her and let a sigh out. "I only hire people I see real potential in. And when they are lazy and don't live up to that potential, it pisses me off."

"So we're all supposed to know what you expect of us and what you see in us?"

“I guess that’s a little unrealistic, huh?”

She nods. “You seem like a decent guy. But you gotta chill. Especially with me. Or I will quit.”

Shaking my head, I stand up and put my hands on her desk, leaning over. “But see, this makes me fucking upset. I’m the boss and you are walking in here and trying to take charge.”

“Not trying to take charge. Just setting my boundaries. I know what I’m worth, Beckett. And I won’t settle for less.”

“Jobs are scarce around here. You take what you get.”

Madilyn shrugs and leans back in her chair. “I’m not afraid to pack up and leave. I won’t settle for less than whether that is a job, home, or relationship. I know my worth.”

“Just... just do your damn job and do it quietly.”

She barks out a laugh. “Back to the Hyde, huh?”

“And back to the sarcastic bitch, huh?”

Turning around, I storm back out of her office and over to my bay. I run my hand over the car and sigh.

Madilyn is perfect for this job. She knows her shit and the guys love and respect her already. *So why am I so hard on her?* She’s fulfilling her potential, so I have no reason to be such an ass to her.

I look at the car in front of me and smile. I’m comfortable with cars. I can turn rust into beauty with my own two hands. I’m in my own world when working on these cars. Nobody to bother me. Nobody to mess with me. Nobody to distract me...

Distract me like Madilyn does.

I shake my head as I look up and watch her smile while on the phone. For some unknown reason, she makes me feel things. And feelings always lead to disappointment and heartbreak, something I never want to deal with again.

The one and only time I let a girl get close to me, she ripped my heart out. I built her a home. Built a life that would provide for her. Bought her the ring she wanted. All for her to

throw it in my face and leave town with every last dime... and on another man's arm.

So here I am, ten years later. Alone and living life how I want it. Until Madilyn showed up. She's young, but knows what she wants. Pretty, but doesn't throw it around like my ex. She's everything I should stay away from. Yet, there's this pull to her. And maybe that's why I've been an asshole to her. To push her away, protect my heart.

Somebody clears their throat, making me almost jump out of my skin. I turn around and curse to myself.

"Jesus, Doris. You scared the shit out of me. Aren't you supposed to be on a cruise?"

The old woman laughs. "Delayed for two days. And maybe you shouldn't be daydreaming about Miss Madilyn over there, huh?"

"Dunno what you're talking about."

"Mmm hmmm. So when you gonna ask her out?"

I shake my head. "Never. Not doin' that again."

Doris sighs. "You went after a girl that half the town had been through. Whether you wanted to believe it. That girl played you like a fiddle throughout high school."

"It's not like that."

"The hell it is, Beckett. She was no good. But Madilyn... she's one of a kind. Try gettin' to know her instead of building up those walls. I think you may be in for quite the surprise."

She laughs and gives me a hug before walking out of the garage.

Maybe Doris is right. Maybe it's high time to pull my head out of my ass and live again.

FIVE

MADILYN

It's Friday night, and I am so excited to go out tonight. I've got my change of clothes and makeup in my bag to change before leaving. The guys are all finishing up their last jobs of the day when Beckett comes walking into my office.

"Can I help you?"

"Yup. Got some things I need you to do."

I make some space on my desk and motion for him to sit down.

"Okay. Lay it on me."

Beckett looks up. "I have some invoices you need to do. Gonna be a late night."

"I have plans."

He frowns as he stands up. "Then plan to not have a job? You were told that there would be late nights."

"Which I understood. But not on a notice like this."

Beckett just shrugs. "Go through and mark each one as paid, partial, or overdue. Then Monday you need to go through and call the ones who still owe us money."

He throws a giant box onto my desk, and I gasp as I flip through it.

"Beckett! This is like three months of invoices!"

"Yeah, and?"

I shuffle through some papers. “Why weren’t these done before?”

“That’s why you’re here now, huh?”

“To clean up other people’s messes?”

He nods. “Yeah, mine. I would get to work now if you wanna leave before midnight.”

“Wow. So generous of you.”

Beckett just shrugs as he walks out of my office. Not wanting to waste a second, I get to work going through the invoices. I set three boxes up on the floor. One for each category.

Taking a small stack, I go through them and place them in the appropriate spot. This will make it easier instead of having to mark each one. I can file away the paid ones, the partials and overdue can be called starting Monday.

A few hours go by when the guys come into my office. They all pause and look around.

Connor shakes his head. “What’s going on? You ready to go?”

“Unfortunately, I gotta work late. Beckett dropped this on me last minute.”

“To avoid you going out, huh?”

I shrug. “Nah. It’s my job. You guys get outta here so I can focus. I’m gonna speed through this so I can come out tonight. I’ll just be a little late!”

”You sure? We can help.”

I smile up at the guys. “I’ve already got my system down. You guys go, really.”

They all begrudgingly shuffle out of my office, and I get back to work.

Beckett comes in and looks at me. “Uh, can you just lock up before you leave?”

“Yup.”

“Look, I’m not doing this to be a jerk.”

I shrug as I move through the paperwork. “Ok.”

“Mads...”

“Have a good night, Beckett. I have work to do.”

He sighs, opens his mouth like he’s going to say something, but then closes it. He sighs and shakes his head, heading back out of my office.

Beckett, the forever mystery man. My grouchy boss that I most definitely have developed a crush on.

Chugging the rest of my energy drink, I get back to work to finish this work as fast as I can.

Time flies by and I finally finish around nine at night.

Still pretty good timing, if you ask me.

Grabbing my bag, I quickly change into a cute little outfit; cute pair of black ripped jeans, a lace corset tank top thing, a leather jacket, and black cowboy boots.

I flip my hair upside down and run a large brush through it, giving it some volume, then flip back over. Quick little Smokey eye for makeup in the mirror on my desk, and boom! I’m ready to rock and roll.

Heading outside, I brush the light dusting of snow off my car and start it while I run back to lock up the garage. I make sure the security system is on and head back to my car, rushing to get in from the cold.

I plug the address in to my GPS and head out of the driveway, excited go out and loosen up.

And maybe see a different side of Beckett...

SIX

BECKETT

I'm sipping on my beer, enjoying the night, when Connor comes and sits next to me.

"So what's your deal with Mads?"

I turn and frown. "Who?"

"Madilyn."

He has a nickname for her? Are they... together?

I shake my head and sip on my beer. "Nothing. She's my employee."

"Yeah, but you're a jerk to her."

"I ride her hard because I know she can take it. She's worked in a shop before, so she knows her shit. Not every guy who walks into that office is going to be nice to her. Not every parts owner is going to treat her with respect."

He shakes his head. "So that's why you should be kinder to her, man."

"I am. You don't see everything."

"That's why you made her work late? To be kind? Or to keep her away from us?"

I turn to face Connor. "Is there something you need to tell me, Connor?"

He runs his hand down his face. "No."

"What's going on between the two of you?"

I wait for his answer, this strange jealousy coming over as he glares at me.

She's not mine. She's my employee. I need to focus, get my head back in the game. If she wants Connor, then...

“No, nothing, boss. I want something to happen, but she turned me down, said there was somebody else.”

“I didn't know she had a boyfriend...”

He shrugs. “She doesn't. But told me she has feelings for another guy even though he doesn't even see her. I dunno, man. Women are fuckin' complicated.”

The door to the bar opens, and through the cigarette smoke, walks Madilyn.

Holy shit... she's... gorgeous. All done up, clothes that fit her to a t. Goddamn...

Connor grins and walks over to her, giving her a big hug. “So pumped you made it, Mads!”

The other guys rush over and she saunters her way to the bar, taking a seat next to me.

The bartender comes over and grins at her. “What can I get you?”

“What do you have for Baltic porters?”

”I've got a new one today; War horse.”

She smiles and we're all under her spell. “I'll take it.”

I clear my throat as she looks over at me. “Get all that work done?”

“I did. And I could fit in an extra month. So you are all caught up. I'll start making calls Monday morning.”

“Good girl.”

Madilyn nearly chokes on her beer, her face turning a bright red. “I, uh. Okay. Thanks.”

Madilyn picks up her beer and walks over to the pool table.

Interesting. Looks like Madilyn has a dirty side to her.

I shake my head and turn to see the guys looking at me. Connor has a scowl on his face.

“So you’re the guy, huh?”

“She’s my employee. Nothing would ever happen.”

Connor huffs and sits down next to me. “How long has this been going on?”

“Connor. I had no idea, man.”

“Yeah. Sure.”

The other guys try to cheer him up. “Come on, dude. He didn’t know.” “Yeah, bro. It’s not like he’s bangin’ her in the garage or shit.” “You’re too good for her anyway, bud.”

I stand up in front of the guys. “Alright, that’s enough. A woman can say no without being dragged like that. Nobody is too good for anybody.”

Connor snorts. “Easy for you to say. You’re the one she wants.”

“Look. I had no idea. I’m a jerk to her. You said it yourself.”

“Guess good guys always come in last.”

I grab his beer and push it away. “We’re done here. That’s bullshit and you know it.”

Connor stands up and shoves me. “So you want her now? What? Just to shove it in my face?”

The other guys stand on either side of us.

“Connor, time to go home.” I turn to Joey. “Take him home, now.”

“Got it, boss.”

Connor turns to me. “I hope she fuckin’ breaks your heart like your whore of an ex.”

“Go home.”

Shaking my head, I sit back down and order another beer. Madilyn comes over and takes a seat.

“Connor okay?”

“He’s just had a little too much to drink, that’s all.”

She nods, peeling the label off her beer bottle. “Thank you.”

“For what?”

“I briefly heard parts of your conversation. Connor just... isn’t my type.”

I mumble. “Yeah. No problem.”

Madilyn sighs, getting up from the bar and walking over to the dance floor. Joey takes her seat and shakes his head.

“Man, that was your opportunity. She was layin’ it up perfect for you.”

“She’s my employee.”

He pats my back and laughs. “Live a little, boss man. Take a walk on Madilyn’s wild side.”

He walks away laughing as I turn to watch her dancing with some other guy.

Maybe he’s right. Maybe I should take a chance...

SEVEN

MADILYN

I can feel Beckett's eyes on me as I move around the dance floor. The way he looks at me, the way he *speaks* to me... he's confusing as all hell.

Does he want me? Is this all a game to him? What does he want?

The guy I'm dancing with places his hands on my hips, turning me to face him.

"So Beck your man or...?"

I laugh as we move together to the song. "Nah, just my boss."

"I dunno what's worse."

I laugh as he spins me around, grabbing my hand to go to the bar. The bartender comes over and I grin.

"Two shots of tequila, please."

He nods and brings them back in just a few minutes. I push one toward my new dance partner with an arched brow.

"Drink up."

I giggle as his face puckers, then grab his hand and head back to the dance floor. The tequila warms my body, making my mind feel free. The man runs his hands down my body as we gyrate together.

Looking over at the bar, Beckett's face is less than happy. But somehow, it still looks so goddamn good on him. The song changes and a new set of hands reaches out for me.

I go with the flow, having a good time dancing and letting myself to be a little more free than normal. But then... Beckett happens.

He comes storming over, that broody look all over his face. Those steely blue eyes burning right through my soul.

“Time to go, Madilyn.”

“Nah, I’m having a good time with my new friend here.”

He glares. “And what’s your new friend’s name?”

I shrug. “Dunno. Don’t care. Bye.”

I turn and throw my arms around the guy, swaying to the music. My attempt to ignore Beckett doesn’t work, and I turn to see him still glaring at me.

Beckett grabs my hand, and a shock goes through my body. I try to pull away, but Beckett isn’t letting that happen.

“It’s time to go, Madilyn. Now.” He drags me out to the parking lot and to his truck before opening the passenger door for me. “Let’s go, I’ll drive you home.”

I get in and glare down at him. “I’m not drunk.”

“Didn’t say you were.”

He slams the door and walks around, getting into the driver’s seat. Without another word, he turns the truck on and heads out of the parking lot.

The drive is silent as he heads toward my little mountain cabin. When we get there, he comes around the side of the truck and helps me out. I storm up to my door, trying to get inside before he can get closer to me. But I’m not quick enough. Beckett puts his foot in the door, preventing me from closing it.

He pushes in and slams the door behind him. I turn and glare as I kick my boots off and toss my jacket on a spare chair.

“What is your problem?”

“You, Madilyn.”

I roll my eyes as I lean on the counter in my kitchen.

“I was having a perfectly good time before you came along. I’ve done my work, I keep my head down. So how am I your big ole problem?”

Beckett stalks toward me, this hungry look in his eyes.

“Don’t play coy, *Mads*.”

I shiver as he cages me in, his tattooed covered arms on either side of me.

“I’m... I’m not.”

I gulp as he leans down, his lips gently brushing against my ear.

“I think we both know there’s no denying the attraction anymore. I saw those big doe eyes when you first laid eyes on me. So tell me how you truly feel.”

I gaze up and nod, giving Beckett the green light.

Beckett crushes his mouth to mine, groaning as his arms slide down my body. I instinctually wrap my arms around his neck as we move through the small cabin.

He kisses me fiercely, our tongues swirling together until I’m breathless. Beckett pulls away from my lips then drops to his knees in front of me.

The back of my knees hit the bed, and he gently pushes me up toward the pillows. Beckett slowly peels away my pants, leaving me bare for him.

He kneels down on the bed, his breath on my bare pussy. Slowly, his tongue touches me. I gasp, my body slowly trembling as his tongue drags slowly and flatly across me. I moan, gazing down at Beckett. He holds my gaze as he repeats the motion.

Slowly dragging his tongue from the base to my clit. He curls his tongue around my little clit, rolling it gently against his lips.

Beckett growls into me, moving faster and with more pressure. He swirls his tongue around my clit before he thrusts

it deep into me. I moan wildly as he fucks me with his tongue. He plunges it in and out, his hands sliding around to my ass, gripping it tight as he pulls me against his mouth. Beckett pushes me closer and closer to the edge with his tongue. My hips move on their own and he thrust his tongue into me before dragging it to my clit. He sucks my bud between his lips, sucking as he swirls. Beckett's fingers tease at my lips, sliding in and out. He moves faster, tonguing harder and growling.

“Be a good girl, Mads. Come for me, baby.”

My body trembles until... I shatter. I cry out, bucking hard and shamelessly against his mouth. Beckett slows, letting his licks turn light, almost teasing, before he slowly pulls away from me.

I lean up on my elbows as Beckett wipes his mouth with a grin.

“Holy shit, Beckett. I... wow.”

He takes his clothes off, crawling toward me as he slowly removes my tank top.

“I'm not even *close* to being done with you, Madilyn.”

EIGHT

BECKETT

Madilyn moans as I spread her legs, moving between them. My hands skim up her thighs, feeling every inch of her soft skin. Wrapping one hand around my cock, I stroke it. I move closer to Madilyn, my hand slipping under her to cup her tight ass. She raises her hips, gasping as I pull her into me, legs wrapping around my waist.

I stroke my cock, letting it tease against her pussy before I nudge the swollen head slowly into her. But I just leave the head in as my hand skims over her hip, my thumb finding her clit. Madilyn mewls, crying out as I roll the little nub, my cock grazing up and down her slit. When her hips buck, I just move faster.

“Let me make you come again, Mads,” I groan, stroking my big cock against her pussy. “Let me make you come for me so good.”

She cries out, gasping, her hips eagerly grind against my hand as she nods up and down. My fingers roll over her clit harder until suddenly, with a choked cry, Madilyn shatters for me again. She moans out her release, hips bucking as her sweet juices make a mess of her bed and my cock.

Madilyn has barely come down from her orgasm when I ease my cock into her. Her cheeks are flush, nipples rock hard.

So fucking ready for me.

Leaning down over her, keeping my cock head inside of her, my lips find hers. Our mouths crash together, my hips push forward, and Madilyn cries out into my mouth. I hiss in

pleasure as I slowly sink my cock into her pussy. Madilyn's soft moans of pleasure are like music to my ears, urging me on as she wraps her legs around my waist. I bury the last few inches inside of her....

And now she's mine...

I kiss her fiercely as I slide out, then thrust back into her, burying my cock in her sweet little pussy. Madilyn cries out, her ankles locked at my back, pulling me deeper into her.

“Beckett...”

“Fuck, you're perfect, Mads.”

I drop my lips to her neck. Softly kissing her neck as she mewls beneath me. We move faster, my cock easing in and out of her pussy. I groan as my mouth drops to her breast, sucking at her pert nipples. Madilyn cries out as I pick up my pace. I thrust in and out of her, the sounds of her moaning filling the room. I sit up, one hand gripping her waist, the other wrapping around her throat. She wraps her legs around my waist. My thumb drifts from her hip down to roll her clit. She cries out, bucks against me, her face full of pleasure as I fuck her. We move faster and faster, our bodies moving as one.

“Oh God, Beckett!”

“Madilyn...” I groan, losing myself in her.

“I, of fuck, I'm gonna...”

Madilyn cries out, her arms move to her side, fingers clawing at the bedsheets as I fuck her wildly, until suddenly... she explodes.

“Beck!!”

She screams my name, her whole body shakes and trembles. The last of my control finally crumbles and I thrust deep into her, burying my cock to the hilt. We both crash over the edge together.

My lips crash to hers, swallowing her moans as I slow my thrust. Madilyn moans into my mouth, her hands finding my cheeks, cupping it in such an intimate, kissing me slow and deep.

”Holy fuck, Beck.”

I nod as I drag out of her. “Yeah, babe. Whew.”

She giggles as I stumble out of bed and grab a towel. Madilyn grabs the towel from me, then takes my hand.

“Come on, we’ll shower.”

Madilyn leads me to a little bathroom, turning the shower on, then steps in. I follow right behind her, the warm water washing away our mess.

I gaze down at her and grin. “You... you are something special, Madilyn.”

“Mmm. Is that why you’re so grumpy around me and this whole town?”

I chuckle as I lean down to kiss her. “I’ve been hurting. And I took that out on everybody around me instead of the guilty party.”

“And who would that be?”

“My ex. We dated throughout high school. I was too stupid to see her plan, but looking back now? I can see it clear as day.”

Madilyn gently places her hand on my chest. “People suck.”

“Yeah. She used me to fund her lifestyle. There was no love there. Despite everything I built for her, for the family she wanted, it was all a lie. Took the money and ran off with her lover of the week.”

“I’m so sorry, Beckett.”

I smile and gently kiss her nose. “I’m not. It was a lesson I needed to learn. And while I may have shut down for a bit, I just needed the right pain in the ass to come along and push me out of that comfort zone.”

“I’m not a pain in the ass!”

Madilyn giggles as I kiss down her neck. “You are, but you’re the best pain in the ass to come my way in a long time.

And the prettiest pain in the ass.”

“Wow. And they say romance is dead.”

Gazing down at this beauty before me, I know I’ve found the one I was always supposed to be with.

Madilyn frowns. “What about... what about my job?”

I turn the water off and help her into a towel. “Nothing will change, I promise.”

She leans up on her toes and softly kisses me. “Thank you, Beckett.”

NINE

MADILYN

I pace my cabin back and forth, biting at my nails. It's Monday morning and I have work in an hour. Beckett and I spent the weekend together and despite him telling me nothing is going to change, I still can't help but worry.

What will the others think? Do we hide this? What if he changed his mind?

Shaking my head, I head out to the car to clean the dust off. But when I get outside, my car is already cleared. I start it and head back inside to grab my stuff, then head out to work.

Pulling into the garage lot, I park and slowly head inside. I drag my feet through the snow, watching the small little trail I make to the door. With my hand on the doorknob, I take a deep breath and go in.

Beckett and the guys are all standing in a circle. They all turn and look up at me, staring as I head toward my office.

He clears his throat. "Alright, guys. Good meeting. Let's get started. Mads? Can I see you in my office?"

I nod and follow him into my office, taking a seat across from him.

"I don't have much to pack. Just give me an hour and I'll be out of here."

Beckett tilts his head. "What?"

I stand up and take a deep breath, then look right into his eyes. "There's no need to play games, Beckett. I understand

we crossed a line and it will be difficult to work together. Thank you for this opportunity, and I'll be out of here soon."

"Madilyn. Sit your pretty little ass down. Now."

I turn and arch my eyebrow. "What?"

He chuckles and stands up, walking over to wrap his arms around me.

"Listen to me. You are not going anywhere. Ever."

"But... the meeting. Everybody stared at me. I thought..."

Beckett shakes his head. "I was telling them about us and how our relationship is not to change anything about this shop."

"Oh."

He playfully kisses me on the forehead. "You're my missing piece, Mads. Did you really think I was gonna spend the entire weekend with you just to drop you come Monday? Not to mention you are the best shop manager we've ever seen here."

"So I'm not being fired?"

He chuckles. "Of course not, Mads."

I sit down in my chair and grin. "Not gonna lie. I was nervous there for a minute. I hadn't heard from you since last night and..."

"So who do you think cleared your car off, silly?"

"That's true..."

Beckett takes my hand and helps me up. "And I got you coffee this morning. Not to mention..." He leads me out of the office to one of the garage bays. "I was picking up this smoking deal."

I rush over to the car, running my hands down the side. "Is this really a fifty-seven Ford Fairlane?"

"That it is, pretty girl. Found it online late last night and knew I needed it."

“I’ve always wanted one of these, but in pink and white. Like my own fifties Barbie car.”

Beckett smiles and shakes his head. “Pink? Come on. Maybe one day I’ll let you mod a car here. But this baby is gonna be classic red and white.”

“Boring. Spice it up, Beck.”

“I have enough spice in my life with you.”

I laugh as he pins me against the car. “Oh, yeah?”

He nuzzles his face into the crook of my neck. “Mmmm, very much so.”

Somebody clears their throat and we both jump, turning around. Connor is standing there with his arms crossed, glaring at the two of us.

“I quit.”

Beckett shrugs as I gasp.

“Okay.”

“Why?!”

Connor looks at the two of us. “I’m quitting because I don’t want to be around this. I don’t want to be around her, or you, anymore.”

Beckett just shrugs again. “Great. Let me know when your toolbox will be picked up.”

I look between the two men and I’m just dumbfounded. “You’re going to let him just walk right out of here? No conversation at all?”

“Nope. he wants to act like a child because I’m finally happy, then so be it. Why don’t you tell her why you’re throwing a hissy fit, Connor?”

I turn to Connor, and he shuffles his feet. “I... it’s just...”

”He’s upset because you chose me over him. Because Connor isn’t getting his way for once in his life. Because for once, a woman has said no to him. Connor has been like this

since we were kids. Cries when things don't go his way. Throws a fit when I have anything good happen in my life."

"Connor... is this all true?"

He slowly nods. "I just, I really like you, Madilyn."

"But I don't. Maybe it is best that you leave."

Joey suddenly appears, waving a piece of paper in his hands. "He's been stealing!"

Beckett rushes over. "Stealing? Stealing what?"

"Parts! Since Mads has been here, she's been making inventory lists. And look here, shit has gone missing. So I did some sleuthing and caught Connor stealing the parts. And sniffing Mads sweater... shit is weird around here."

I look at Connor and shake my head. "Why? Why would you do that?"

"Why not? Figured I could get you fired, blame it on you, then be your shoulder to cry on."

Beckett steps in front of me. "We're done here. See yourself out and don't come back."

Joey takes Connor by the arm and pulls him out of the shop. I turn into Beckett's arms and shiver.

"He's... not who I thought he was."

"No. No, he's not. But now we can start fresh. No more nonsense in my shop or in our life. Come on, Mads."

He gently takes my hand and we gather the other guys to let them know what happened. Beckett stands tall in the middle of the circle.

"I have let Connor go. He was caught stealing and conspiring to get Madilyn fired. He also was upset that Madilyn had turned him down, and I'm sure had more sinister plans for that. If anybody else has a problem with Mads and I dating, or how I run this shop, can leave now."

Not once single person moves. Beckett nods his head.

“Good. Let’s close up early. I think we all deserve the day off. Paid, of course.”

I smile up at Beckett, happy with where life has led me. Here, in Hollyhill Valley, with a wonderful man by my side.

TEN

BECKETT

It's been a year and things have been going great. Madilyn and I are happily in love, running the shop together. Because of Madilyn, we have become unstoppable. I'm able to focus and really get back to working with my hands on these beautiful cars. She has hired somebody for our social media, gotten us more custom builds, and really brought our name to the top. We now have people from all over coming here for their cars.

I look over to see Madilyn talking with a new customer and smile. This woman supports me, loves me unconditionally, accepts me for who I am. I'm still in shock that this is my life now.

Madilyn comes over with a clipboard in her hand, gently lifting on her toes to give me a kiss. "Got another one! This is a really cool project, too."

"Yeah, babe? Whatcha got?"

"Sixty-seven Chevy Nova! They've got some cool ideas for it. Check out the sketch."

I look it over and nod. "We can do this. Set up it!"

Madilyn does a cute little dance and rushes away toward the customer. Joey comes over and pats me on the back.

"Life is good, huh, man?"

"That it is."

"You ready for tonight?"

I nod as I smile at my beautiful woman across my shop. “Absolutely. Let’s get ready.”

While the other guys keep Madilyn busy up front, Joey and I get to work clearing out the back bay. Doris shows up with a smile on her face as she hugs me.

“Guess I was right, huh?”

“That you were.”

She laughs and plops four giant bags on the table. “Let’s get decorating!”

Doris hangs birthday banners and decorations up, goes back out to her car with even more bags full of food and drinks. Joey and I help where we can until she kicks us out to go get the big surprise.

I head out back to the overflow garage and open the door, smiling at the creation before me.

The fifty-seven Ford Fairlane that Mads fell in love with sits before me, painted a beautiful shade of light pink and stark white.

Just like she wanted it...

Joey made all custom rose gold emblems and accessories to go with the car, along with white leather seats. The car is absolutely gorgeous, just like my woman.

We got it done just in time for her birthday and I can’t wait to surprise her with it.

Opening the door, I place my small little gift bag on the passenger seat and start it up.

I bring it into the back bay and Doris slaps a huge white bow on it.

“She’s gonna love it.”

Doris claps her hands and points to Joey. “Go get our girl!”

He rushes up front as the rest of the guys come back, as well as some of our favorite customers. I stand in front of the

car, nervously waiting. Joey comes back with a huge smile on his face, Mads behind him with a blindfold on.

“Okay! Take it off!”

Madilyn rips the blindfold off and gasps, tears prickling her eyes. I walk over and take her hands in mine.

“Happy birthday, beautiful. This baby is all yours.”

She looks at me, then back at the car. “Mine? For real?”

Doris laughs. “Yes! Now get in it!”

Madilyn looks at me and I nod, opening the door for her. She slides in and looks all around until she finds the bag on the passenger seat. Mads leans over and takes out the little box.

As she opens it, I get down on my knee and wait for her to turn around. Inside, sits a two carat Emerald and round cut white diamond halo style engagement ring in rose gold.

Madilyn whips her head to look at me and the tears roll down her cheek.

“What do you say, Mads? Wanna get married?”

She chokes out a half laugh, half cry as she nods her head, leaping into my arms. I place the ring on her finger, leaning down to kiss her as we stand up. “Beck... this is all, wow. The best birthday I’ve ever had.”

“Good, pretty girl. I love you until the moon stops shining.”

She grins and kisses me again. “I love you until the sun stops shining.”

The End

ABOUT LILA GREY

Lila Grey currently resides in the beautiful town of Peterborough, New Hampshire with her two children, husband, and three rescue cats. When not writing, she can be found snowmobiling in the winter, spending time with her family, and of course, reading. She wrote her debut romance novel in 2019 and has plans for many more.

All her links can be found [here](#).

WORKING INTEREST:
SUTTON BISHOP

DEAR READER

There's a good chance I am a new author to you. I enjoy underpinning my stories and novels in real-life settings and environments, particularly when transporting you to countries and cultures outside of the US.

To aid readers, I employ glossaries and translations when necessary. An example of this is my Ancient Passages series—spicy global and multicultural action and adventure.

Working Interest is set in Oklahoma, and the story is *short*. So, instead of bogging it down with terminology and legalese, I've provided it below, in a bulleted list for your reference.

During the Depression, many Sooners sold off their oil and gas rights to keep their family farms, leaving them with surface rights only. Oklahomans are aware of this, and oil wells are *everywhere*. Dotting the landscape and on public and private properties. Oil and gas rule.

Nix Ogden is a landman (correct terminology), which means she is the middle person between Jude Carpenter, a farmer, and Ogden-Keller Oil, her family's decades-old company. During the 1930s, Jude's family sold mineral rights to keep the family farm. Tension anyone?

- Sooner: The term evolved from the land claim races, i.e., Land Runs, after the Oklahoma Territory opened for settlement in 1889. Each race began with a pistol shot. Those who entered the plots illegally—jumped the start—were called “sooners.” The moniker was

embraced by many pioneers and their descendants and came to mean “can-do.”

- **Landman**: The person who determines mineral rights and how to approach various land transactions. Responsibilities include researching court records and legal documents to identify proper ownership (to include titles and deeds to the surface and sub-surface land, as well as the rights to the parcel (s) to be contracted). In addition, a landman negotiates and develops leases for the purpose of exploring and producing (if discovered) oil, gas, and / or minerals within specified tracts and other oil and gas agreements.
- **Surface Rights**: Rights attached to the land’s surface. The owner has full access to their property in accordance to permitting and laws. Examples: building businesses, homes, and other buildings on the property, farming the property, and hunting and fishing.
- **Sub-surface Rights**: Often referred to as mineral rights, what lies below ground.
- **Unified Estate**: When the owner (s) holds both the surface and sub-surface rights.
- **Joint Tenancy (JTWROS)**: Co-ownership of real property by two or more people, each with equal rights and responsibilities and rights of survivorship.

I hope you enjoy *Working Interest!*

Sutton

ONE

Friday ...

Nix changed out of her gym shoes for the Jimmy Choos and slid the messenger bag over her shoulder. She pushed down on the pitted chrome door handle of her grandfather's '67 International truck and threw her shoulder into the door with all her might. Then again. Once more. It yielded. The door protested; creaking and groaning loudly as it gave way.

The momentum of her efforts propelled her out of the cab and into the weeds poking through the gravel. She was just able to get her hands out in time to brace and avoid a face plant. The messenger bag landed several feet away, and her favorite heels scattered elsewhere. A quick glance confirmed the shoes were scuffed.

Rough stone bit into her palms and knees and toes. She grimaced and pushed herself upright to her knees, wincing as she dusted off her stinging palms. Blood seeped from where the skin had opened. Her knees were in a similar state.

Dammit to hell. Why didn't she just get the doors fixed? Maybe because their history of sticking, even when the truck was Granddad's, made it seem as if he was still living.

Sucking in a deep breath, she tucked her shirt back into the skirt and smoothed her flyaway hair, trying not to stain either with blood. Praying that the man she was here to meet had not witnessed her less-than-elegant arrival.

Why had she worn a skirt and her favorite pumps to wild, rural Oklahoma? And why had she driven the beloved ancient

beast of a truck instead of her late model Mercedes coupe full of creature comforts?

You know why. To distract Jude Carpenter and get the lease signed.

Mortified and eyes closed, it took nothing to imagine what her hurling out of the truck might have looked like. A woman in her late twenties wearing a sleeveless silk blouse, pencil skirt, feet bare, on her hands and knees in a weed-infested gravel drive. Said driveway and farm were owned by a rumored alpha male, serial womanizer, and an ass of epic proportion.

Crunching gravel under heavy footsteps announced a human. More than likely male. A silhouette stretched over her, holding her shoes in one hand, giving Nix a reprieve from the mid-afternoon early summer sun. Shit. She stared at the ground and swallowed, searching for composure.

“That was quite the arrival. My laugh for the day. You fuckin’ sailed out of the cab. Didn’t quite nail the landing, though.”

His soft, deep chuckle rumbled through her, igniting a spark low in her belly. “Rarely is a woman on her hands and knees before we even talk.”

That last comment had her temper rising, dousing the desire. *I have met the ass.*

She groaned inwardly. Jude Carpenter. It had to be. Nix reminded herself she was here to negotiate the lease and gulped down her snide retort.

“Hurt yourself?” He sounded concerned.

With the sun at his back, the deep shadow from the ball cap concealed his expression. Nix glared up anyway, to the approximation of where his face was, and mumbled. “I’m fine.”

“You don’t seem fine.”

She wasn’t about to give away what she was feeling or thinking and relaxed her shoulders. “I am.”

“You don’t talk much, do you?”

“That’s because your mouth is running.” She sniped, then bit down on her bottom lip. Dammit.

He barked a laugh. “You’re a firecracker, I’ll give you that. Here.” He thrust an outstretched hand in her direction. His voice was gruff and full of the marbled dialect of long-time Oklahomans. “You can get on your merry way to wherever you’re headed.”

Electricity sparked in her skin as they made contact. His touch was gentle as he helped Nix to her feet and handed her the marred pumps.

“These are useless out here. Have a fancy afternoon date?”

Upright and closer, she still could not discern his features—other than his height. He towered over her barefoot five-foot-six.

“No date. A meeting,” she disclosed with confidence. “Here.”

He released her hand as if it burned. “I don’t think so.”

“I *know* so—” Tottering while slipping into the heels, almost crumbling to the ground again. Adding another four inches in height. “I have an appointment with Jude Carpenter.”

“You’re Nick? I expected a man. Not some woman who looks like a model and wears fuck-me shoes.”

She clenched her jaw hard and ground out clarification. “Nix. N-I-X. Ogden. O-G-D-E-N.”

“Hmm. My niece told me I was meeting with Nick Oden about selling land. Dammit. No wonder I couldn’t find you.”

“You looked me up? I said leasing, not selling.”

“Leasing ... Selling ... Whatever. The consequences are roughly the same,” Jude said heatedly. “Of course I looked you up. Apparently, my niece didn’t catch the details. She’s fourteen.” He half shrugged, as if her age explained the confusion.

“Oh. She sounded older.”

Raking a hand through his hair, he grumbled and muttered under his breath. “Ogden ... You’re related to Jamison and Patrick? Mule Ogden?”

“I am. Jamison is my father. Patrick was my grandfather and Mule was my great-grandfather.”

“Then you know the history. Was it Jamison’s idea to send a woman out to sweeten the bitterness?” He growled.

“No.” It was hers. Because she wanted to prove herself to her father. She was counting on leveraging Jude’s rumored appreciation of women to move him toward signing the lease as soon as possible. The other landmen—Clive and Walter—sent out to approach the recalcitrant man failed, each chased off by a shotgun. Despite the inauspicious start, Nix was determined. She continued to stare up at his shadowed face and not flinch a muscle.

“You’re a bona fide landman?”

“I am.”

“So, you’re planning on taking one for Jamison.”

What the hell does that mean? “What motivates me is none of your concern.”

“You’re right. There will be no discussion about a lease.” He turned his head to the left and cocked it toward a barn. “But I’m not an all-out prick. Use the bathroom in there to clean up. You’re bleeding. First aid kit is in there, too. Then get the fuck off my property.”

Pissed off, Nix marched around him as best she could in four-inch stilettos in gravel. She stopped and faced him.

He had pivoted. The cap was off and crushed in his hand. The sun lit him up—thick dark hair and brows, light blue eyes, a strong jawline, a straight nose, and full lips. About six-foot-four if she had to guess. All of it, from the work boots to the dusty jeans and black vintage ZZ Top tee, only enhanced a physique of packed lean, hard muscle.

Holy fuck. She caught most of the gasp before it escaped, but was sure he had sensed all of it, and how her face

expressed what she felt. Raw desire. It was all she could do not to quake in his presence. Jude Carpenter was breathtaking. A man who could make her look multiple times and bring her to her knees, anywhere. Any time.

However, she lifted her chin and fixed him with the assertive stare that worked well on her father and every man she knew. “Can we just talk, since I’m here?”

She saw the glint in his eye and how the corner of his full lips hitched up into a sexy smirk. Alarms went off inside her, but she held her ground.

“Fuck no. Thought I was clear.” His eyes meandered leisurely over her before he spoke again, deceptively soft. “If you decide you wish to have another type of conversation, let me know. I’d be up for that. Appears you might be too.” The smirk vanished, and he nodded at her. “Have a safe trip home, Nix Ogden.”

“Nix!” Remi squealed, drawing Nix into a bear hug, and pecking her cheek. “I’m so excited you’re spending the weekend. It’s so good to see you.”

“Girl, you saw me a few months ago.” Nix laughed, squeezing Remi back, and kissing her cheek.

“I know, but I always visit you or we settle on a destination.” Remi moved out of the shared hug and cleared her throat, fixing Nix with an impish smile that carried right into her eyes. “Well, you’re *here*, even though it’s work that brought you and not your bestie. I forgive you. By the way, we have a destination. Tomorrow at a wonderful new spa in the next town over. A full day of pampering.”

“Sounds perfect.” It was, just what Nix needed. She could have her pedicure redone. Enjoy a massage to soothe her bruised body and ego and keep her mind from thinking about the hottest man she had ever set eyes on.

Remi frowned at her friend's appearance, noticing the blood and dirt on her clothes and the scraped knees. "Miss Put-Together looks like she bit the dust." Her eyes landed on the scuffed pumps. "Oh, no. What happened to your Jimmy Choos? They're your favorite. Are you okay?"

"I'm fine. Humiliated, but whole. Wearing them out to a farm was a bad idea. I had a bit of a tumble getting out of Granddad's truck." Nix wasn't sharing all the details with her Remi right now.

Because Jude Carpenter had gone alphahole on her.

Because mentioning him might unleash the unsatisfied carnal hunger and simmering frustration she battled.

Because she sensed something important was brewing with Remi.

"You drove it? I love that creaky old truck, Nix. So many memories of us in it during college. Can we take it tomorrow?"

"Sure."

"By the way, I made plans right after we disconnected. We're going out."

"Oh. I thought we'd be staying in, watching horror flicks in our pjs. Eating buckets of buttered parmesan popcorn and drinking too much. Remi, you whine about living in Ulen. Say how bored you are. That you need a change of fresh scenery. Blah, blah, blah ... But lately ... You haven't complained. And now that I think of it, you've been kind of quiet. Mysterious-like. What gives?"

"Voilà! I've been saving to tell you until I saw you in-person. I've met someone. Chet's incredible, but then you'll meet him tonight." Remi clapped her hands and beamed. "I think he might be 'it,' Nix." She exhaled a dreamy sigh. "You're going to love him and his friends."

"I'm so happy for you!" This was huge news. Back in college, she and Remi made a pact. They would be each other's maid or matron of honor. After breaking up with

Johnny a year ago, Nix remained on dating hiatus. “Going out sounds fine to me.”

“Great. Chet and his friends will be at Beugy’s tonight. A guys’ night out, but I mentioned we’d be eating there. The restaurant is across the square.”

“I passed it when I drove in. Looks like a hole-in-the-wall.”

“Beugy’s is the oldest eatery in Ulen. And the best.”

Horning in on a guys’ night out wasn’t appealing to Nix. But she had to think that Remi knew her man and his friends and that they wouldn’t mind. “What time are we heading out?”

“Sevenish.” Remi dropped her chin and gave Nix a pointed look. “Why don’t you grab a shower? I’ll get some appetizers started.”

“I’m good.”

“Uh-uh. Clean up. Help yourself to whatever. The first aid kit is under the sink. Coffee?”

“Can you make an iced latte?”

“Does a duck swim?”

Belly laughter burst out of Nix. How she missed her zany friend.

“An iced latte coming right up. Think I’ll have one. Or maybe two. Chet may come back here afterward, but don’t worry. Sound doesn’t carry.” Remi’s eyes moved from the master, across the great room, to the guest room on the other side. “That goes for you, too. Chet has attractive unattached friends. You might want to hook up with one of the—”

“Remi ...” Nix warned, half joking.

Remi raised her brows and shrugged. “Just saying.”

A blush stole over Nix’s neck and face when the cloaked-in-shadow farmer flashed in her mind. And her breath hitched as she remembered the gorgeous face and body revealed in the sunlight.

Could she be with someone who ignited her temper so easily? What would sex with him be like? Wild and edgy, she imagined. Her blood surged. What a harebrained thought. Enough of that. Come hell or high-water, she somehow needed to get him to sit down with her soon and negotiate a lease. But it was Friday, the first evening of a weekend with Remi. With that, she banished Jude Carpenter from the real estate in her head.

Nix padded to the ensuite bathroom. “I’m riding single tonight.”

TWO

Jude stood in the corner of the poolroom, hidden in the shadows nursing a beer, and making progress with his roast beef sandwich. He contemplated Nix Ogden, surprised to see her making quick work of a fried whole chicken, pickles, and sweet onions. Where in that slim, curvy body did she put it? She was with Remi Shay—his best friend’s girl. Chet was serious about the perky blonde.

Nix lounged in her chair; long legs extended under the table. She had changed out of the clothes she wore at the farm, an outfit that any hot-blooded man could appreciate, and now wore something even more alluring. A messy updo secured her long chestnut hair. Sandals had replaced the ridiculous heels. Denim cut-offs and a clingy top displayed plenty of sun-kissed skin, stirring his imagination and his cock.

Nix and Remi grew more animated as the level in the pitcher dropped—talking and laughing nonstop. Apparently, the women knew each other well.

Did Nix know that Remi’s boyfriend was his best friend? Did it even matter? No.

It could prove an interesting night. He wanted her and, if he had read the signs right, she was interested too. Wide, blinking hazel eyes. The pink tongue licking that bottom full lip before she bit down on it. Her gasp. *That* had gone right to his groin. He’d be willing to bet her nipples had tightened into hard points, and that thought made his mouth water.

How was he going to smooth over getting off on the wrong foot with her?

Chet, Hank, Brady, and a host of other guys were running both tables, cheered on by a swelling crowd.

“Jude! You’re up.” Chet called over the voices and country music pumping out of the jukebox.

Jude finished the rest of the sandwich and wiped his hands on a napkin, then stepped up. He chalked the cue stick and analyzed the balls scattered on the burgundy felt.

Chet sidled closer. “Solids, in case you forgot. You seemed to be more interested in the other room.” A goofy grin spread over his face. “Watching my girl?” He teased, stretching around Jude to ogle Remi.

“Nope. The brunette she’s with. You know her?”

“Remi’s college roommate. Haven’t met her yet. Remi has always visited Nix in OKC, where she lives. Or they meet up at some spa destination.”

“Hmm.” Jude pointed the stick and leaned forward to line up and take the shot. “Five ball. Side pocket.” *Crack!* The orange ball ripped into the pocket. The cue ball spun like a top in place. He moved, searching for the spot from which to take his next shot, pointing at the far corner pocket to his right. “Corner. One ball.” The cue ball struck the side of the solid yellow ball, bouncing it off the cushions and cleanly into the pocket. “Chet, do you know when the girls made plans?”

“Seems like Remi mentioned it a few weeks back, preparing me to share her all weekend. They have a spa day at that new fancy place in Eagle Creek tomorrow. Why? You interested?”

What motivates me is none of your concern, Nix had stated at the farm. The fuck. Something to prove to her dear old dad? Jude rolled his lips in thought, weighing whether to give her a second chance, just for fun and to see what she was made of. Did she possess the Ogden grit and iron will? Did she play dirty like Jamison, Patrick, and Mule? Or was she ethical? Was it fair that he held the enticing brunette accountable for the

ugly history between their families—what transpired between their great-grandfathers?

He avoided answering Chet's questions by asking a few of his own. "Does your girlfriend know you're here? That it's guys' night out?"

"Yup. She'll venture over here and make introductions before leaving." Chet stepped to the table to take his turn.

Jude returned to studying the visitor from Oklahoma City, wondering how to smooth over the earlier debacle at the farm. "Where are they headed after here?"

"You *are* interested."

"Can't I simply be conversational?"

"*Simply* conversational—" Chet assessed Jude through narrowed eyes. "Yeah, right ... Remi mentioned they might stay for trivia and then end the night at her place in pjs, with a movie and popcorn. I'll never understand women and their love of pajama parties. You'd think it was over and done with years ago." He shook his head, raised the longneck, and took a long pull. "You're up again. You keep looking at Remi's friend like that and you're going to light her on fire. Want to meet her?"

"Already have."

Chet's brows shot up. "When?"

"This afternoon. She's an *Ogden*." Jude sank the last of the solid balls, winning the game.

"Ogden ... As in Ogden-Keller Oil?"

He placed the cue stick in the rack, finished his beer, and set it on the narrow ledge on the wall. "Yeah. One and the same."

Chet placed his stick next to Jude's. Awe filled his low whistle. "I didn't know there were female Ogdens. An Ogden-Keller secret weapon?"

"The thought crossed my mind. She showed up in an old truck, dressed like she had a hot date."

He didn't want to share more with Chet. However, the image of Nix Ogden flying out of the vehicle had given him the belly laugh of the year, which was subdued by a sudden and fierce arousal induced by her tight skirt, long shapely legs, and exposed tummy. A fuckin' Oklahoma smokeshow. It was not something he would forget for some time. That, and her blasted furnace of a temper; it about matched his.

“Why did she show up at the farm?”

“Claimed she had an appointment with me. Kind of true. Skye got the information wrong.”

Chet's words took on a protective tone. “Give your niece some grace; she's fourteen. She's been through a lot. You didn't get up in her shit, did you?”

“What do you think?”

Chet stared at him.

“Of course, I didn't. I can't be mad at Skye.” His niece was the only child of Nell, his recently passed sister, and her husband Lane. She was now his ward.

Six months after the accident, he and Skye were still establishing themselves as immediate family. Loving her was easy. Disciplining her was a challenge. Jude needed to address the oil and gas history with Skye because the farm was her home now, and she had joint ownership with him and his brother Lee.

“You can be a real fucker when you're mad, Jude.”

“The meeting didn't happen. I ran Nix off as soon as I realized what she was up to.”

“Which was what?”

“To discuss a lease, or better yet, sign one.”

“Aha! A landman? You have no recourse, only some room in the contract details.”

A snarl escaped Jude. “Thanks for pointing out the obvious, asshole.”

“Dressed to negotiate. Definitely a secret weapon.” Chet guffawed, seeming to enjoy irking him. He signaled with two fingers to the passing waitress for another round of beers for him and Jude. “She must have heard what a dog you are. Did you bite?”

“Nope, but now that she’s visiting your girlfriend through the weekend, I just might.”

Catching Remi’s attention in the other room, Chet flashed a smile and waved at her and Nix. “Nix is a tall drink of water, Jude. And ballsy to show up on your property like that. Maybe let whatever is in your craw slide tonight.”

“Nothing in my craw.”

“Bullshit. I hear it. I see it in your face. You have a conflict. You’re as attracted as hell to her, but she holds the power of oil and gas over you. Ouch.”

Chet summed it up perfectly. Jude had been unable to think of much else after their encounter. He could not remember experiencing such an immediate reaction. But he was also fiercely protective of the Carpenter land, which brought out the best and the worst in him. Nix had gotten a taste of the worst. The idea of having to cave to a descendent of the man who had fucked over his great-grandfather pissed him off to no end. His entire body tightened in response. What a quandary. Did she know?

“Don’t worry about that,” Jude said with a smug grin. “I’ll lay on the charm.”

“You can be a real jerk sometimes.” Chet pulled his phone from a hip pocket and glanced at it. “It’s trivia night in the bar. Remi is planning on snagging a table. Let’s go check in with them. Maybe join.” He poked Jude in the chest and squinted, his lips drawn into a hard line. “Don’t fuck me over with Remi. Got it?”

“Got it.”

THREE

Remi dragged Nix toward the bar. It was filling up. The women claimed a high-top table with two stools in the back of the room.

Nix hitched her hip onto a stool and rested her elbows on the rustic wood surface, noting the ornate hand-carved bar that filled most of the back wall. Her eyes flipped to Remi. “How long does trivia last?”

“A few hours. It can get competitive and rowdy, which will help me not think of Chet playing pool in the other room with his friends.”

“Oh, girl. You’ve got it bad.”

“Yup. I told you; I think he’s the one.”

“I’m up for rowdy.”

Remi elbowed Nix good-naturedly. “And maybe more?”

“Possibly. You picked up dinner, so the rest of the night is on me. I’ll be back with beer.” Nix edged off the stool as a graying older man stepped onto the low riser in the corner, to the side of the bar.

“Good evening!” The mic carried his voice over the crowd. “For those of you who haven’t been here before, and those who have, welcome. I’m Wade Chisholm, one of the owners of Beugy’s Bar & Grill. This evening is trivia night. Some housekeeping before we begin. If you’re hungry, the last orders for the kitchen are nine o’clock. That’s a firm deadline. Our cooks work hard and need time off. Teams are limited to

four. You might play with people you never met. To quote Yeats—” He directed patrons to the large lettering on the wall to his right. “‘There are no strangers here; only friends you haven’t yet met.’ So, get yourselves acquainted, situated, and be prepared to have fun. We’ll begin in fifteen minutes.”

Nix returned with four long necks in a bucket of ice. “Thought I’d get backups. Okay, I want to meet your Chet.”

“I texted him when you went for beer. He’s popping in. They just finished their game. Not sure if any of his—”

“Remi.”

Grinning from ear-to-ear, her college roommate raised her head, appearing like she was swooning as the good-looking man placed himself in between the women and delivered a wallop of a smooch.

Oh yeah. Remi was a goner. They should just cut to the chase and find a room. Or a dark corner. Nix rolled her eyes and twisted away, connecting with a frowning Jude Carpenter. *What the actual hell?* Scowling, she whipped back to look at her friend.

Remi and who she assumed was Chet, finished their scorching kiss. Wet-lipped, she giggled through introductions. “Nix, this is Chet. Chet, Nix, my best friend.”

“Nice to meet you Nix.” The sandy-brown haired man grinned and lifted his chin, acknowledging his wingman. “And I believe you’ve met *my* best friend, Jude.”

“You met Jude? When?”

Remi’s questions irritated Nix. Chet’s best friend was the gorgeous mercurial farmer? What were the chances? Shit. What a mess.

“This is a pleasant surprise.” Jude’s voice rumbled through her, unleashing a havoc of butterflies in her stomach, and elevating her pulse. That same glint she noticed at the farm appeared in his eyes and a knowing grin broadened over his face, exposing straight white teeth.

A pleasant surprise, my ass.

“Baby, will you stay? You and Jude can complete our foursome,” Remi said excitedly. “It’ll be fun, and you can get to know Nix.”

“Sure, we’ll stay.” Jude drawled, leaning in, and helping himself to a beer from the bucket.

His breath caressed Nix’s cheek, temple, and ear. Goosebumps chased over her skin. Her hand tightened around the bottle she held, and her sex clenched.

“Knowing you better ... I’d like that.” He smiled wickedly. There was no mistaking the heat in his eyes, which were focused on her as he sealed his lips over the mouth of the bottle and drank.

Her breath stuttered. Mesmerized by the movement of his Adam’s apple, she could not look away. Totally turned on, willing to disappear with him should he ask. Pissed off by her body’s reaction to his hypnotic, sexy energy.

Nix drained her beer, trying to wash away the erotic thoughts accumulating in her mind at lightning speed.

Jude capturing her mouth, roughly at first, and then turning tender.

Him tasting her skin as he slid her shorts off, impatiently tearing her panties and thrusting in, groaning in her ear as he eased the pace. “Fuck, you feel like heaven.”

Her hands flailing about, unsure what part of him she wanted to explore first, then giving up and raking her nails over his back, encouraging him to take her harder and faster. Deeper.

Epic fail. Heat spread like wildfire over her chest, neck, and face. Rattled, Nix slammed the bottle on the table. “I’m stepping outside, Remi,” she said, and flashed Jude her death stare out of the corner of her eye—the best ‘fuck you’ look she could muster.

“Good idea. It’s getting hot in here.” He chided, a wink accompanying the smile tugging at his lips.

A watercolor of yellow and orange streaked the sky as daylight receded into night. The evening was comfortable, but it did nothing to cool the soupy mixture of emotions simmering in Nix. Normally, she would have stopped what she was doing to enjoy the beautiful tapestry of color. But not tonight.

Nix's feet pounded the sidewalk as she considered her predicament. Heady, all-consuming desire. Increasing frustration. The unfortunate and contentious history between her family and Jude's, which dated back to the Depression.

Yes, she knew all about it.

Jude had to know, too. His great-grandfather William needed money to keep his farm. Nix's great-grandfather Mule negotiated a purchase of the mineral rights, except for the hundred and sixty acres surrounding the homestead, barns, and other outbuildings, keeping them as a unified estate. Through research and oral history, she knew the Jude, his brother Lee, who lived in Piñon Ridge, Colorado, and their niece Skye held joint tenancy of the unified estate and the surface rights of the remaining nine hundred and ninety acres. Upon her death, their sister Nell's ownership had transferred to her only child.

The decision had been the right one. William kept the farm, but selling the rights to what lay under his vast acreage bothered him to no end. When financially able to do so, William approached Mule to buy back what he had sold. Mule refused all offers. The boom had already started. The profits made him wealthier than he ever imagined, ensuring that future generations of Ogdens would be set for life.

Both Nix and Jude had working interests in the future exploration and drilling operation she was presenting to him. What was the best way to navigate it all?

She walked to the small park close to Remi's and dropped into one of the metal benches framing an area with a softly lit water feature made of large boulders. The soft burbling and

splattering calmed her mind. Nix closed her eyes. Just for a moment.

Gentle shaking roused her. “Hey sleepyhead, wake up.”

“Guess I conked off.” Nix murmured, looking into Remi’s brown eyes.

“Mm-hmm. Seems so. It’s after ten. I checked your location after you left. Pretty sure you had dozed off and were safe. Why didn’t you just go back to my place? You know where the key is.”

“I planned on coming back to Beugy’s, but the sound of the water drew me here.”

“You went on a walk. Why?”

“My day had caught up with me, and I needed to walk off the beer.”

Remi’s lips turned up in a soft smile. “You are skilled at so many things. Lying is not one of them. Not to me, anyway. You ditched us. You needed to walk off what you were feeling about Jude.”

“No.”

“Yes. You are totally into him. I get it. He’s hot. Single. And if rumors are true ... And there are grains of truth in rumors, right? Gifted in the intimacy department.”

“Jesus, Remi,” Nix said with more force than intended. She sat up and stretched. “I’m not into him.”

“Then having dinner at my place tomorrow won’t be a problem. You’ll be all relaxed from our day at the spa.”

“You mean ...?”

“Yes. Chet, you, me, and Jude.”

Nix rubbed her forehead, inwardly groaning. “Whose idea was this?”

“Chet’s, and mine. Jude said he’d come too if you were there. He’s attracted to you.”

Oh, fuck me. “Remi.” Nix whined, drawing out her friend’s name.

“Where’s my curious and fearless friend?”

“Your curious and fearless friend is as frustrated as hell. There’s the larger issue. My great-grandfather bought most of the Carpenter mineral rights from Jude’s great-grandfather. Bad blood exists between our families.”

“Aha,” Remi said, nodding. “After you left trivia, Jude mentioned you showed up at the farm. Admitted he acted a little protective of his property.”

“That’s what he called it?” *Get the fuck off my property.* Right. “Unbelievable.”

“The Carpenter farm is one of the few remaining large farming operations in Oklahoma and is very profitable.”

“I know that Remi. I also know that drilling and exploration have been going on there for decades.”

“I’d bet he’s worried about future projects and how they impact the land.”

“I presume he is. We can address all of that in the lease. And if there are still sticking points, the Corporation Commission will mediate them.”

“It seems you and Jude got off on the wrong foot. You two need to talk. Resolve your contentious relationship.”

Nix countered. “Professionally, it could look bad.”

“Seriously? I disagree. You and Jude ... The interest you have in each other deserves to be explored. It’s palpable, Nix. I mean, how long has it been since you and Johnny split?”

“A year.”

“What happened was during the Depression, almost a century ago. Time to bury that, don’t you think? C’mon. Let’s head to my place. Are you rested enough for our pajama party?”

“Yes.”

Saturday Night ...

Jude brought her flowers. Cymbidium orchids, roses, viburnum, and hydrangeas emitting a fresh honey-vanilla scent.

“Thank you. These are beautiful.” Glancing up from the bouquet in shades of green, pink, and lavender, she couldn’t help but smile. Every time her eyes connected with his, Nix experienced something different. Happiness. Shyness. Intense desire. And for now, her frustration remained checked. “I’ll put these in water.” She floated into the open kitchen, her heart dancing, and looked over her shoulder.

Remi was lip-locked with Chet. The ivory roses he gave her were on the counter, along with a bottle of Chardonnay and the Merlot Jude brought.

“Remi, I’ll take care of your roses.” She called.

No response from her friend. Nix pushed up onto her toes, reaching toward the vases in the high cabinet with open shelves. *Dammit.*

“Let me help,” Jude said from behind.

One hand grazed her lower back as he grabbed two vases with the other, generating a riot of delicious tingling throughout her system and yearning in her core. He placed the vases on the counter.

Am I even going to make it to dinner? What would it be like to disappear with him into the guest room, shed her clothes, and tangle in the cool clean sheets? To languidly shower with him afterward? Her eyes darted to Jude.

He lounged against the edge of the counter, watching her, wearing a thoughtful expression and that damned sexy smirk.

Her face heated to bright red. She concentrated on filling each of the vases with water, adding the flowers, and restoring

her composure. She turned to him. “Red or white?”

“The Merlot, thank you. How was spa day?”

“It was perfect,” Nix said opening the bottle and filling the two red wine glasses one-third full. “Just what I needed.” She handed Jude one, inhaling sharply when their fingers touched.

He nodded his head at the kissing couple. “They’ll be like this for a while, as in most of the night. It’s the reason I don’t usually hang with Chet when he’s with Remi. Let’s talk.”

The frustration about their shared history roared to the surface. “No, let’s not. I appreciate the flowers, but—”

“Nix, we need to talk.” Jude’s tone was uncompromising.

Annoyed by his insistence, she responded in-kind. “Dammit—”

“Oh, this won’t do.” Remi appeared out of nowhere, flushed and winded. “What will it take for you two to play nice?” She took the wine glasses from Nix and Jude, placing them back on the counter, then put their hands together. “Come on ... Look each other in the eye and say something —” She tapped on her chin. “Complementary. Yes.” She giggled and arched a brow. “Then find a private place, preferably away from us. Dinner is in an hour. Should give you two plenty of time to work out what ails you.” She hip-checked Nix.

Nix shot Remi a sharp look. “I don’t think so.” Deciding to handle this her way, she headed toward the front door. “We’ll be back in plenty of time for dinner. Are you coming, Jude?”

ABOUT SUTTON BISHOP

Sutton Bishop has always believed in happily ever after. Despite beginning her writing career while penning nonfiction essays and articles for magazines, Sutton's heart belonged to romance long before she wrote her first book. After marrying her teenage heartthrob and starting her own family, she finally plunged into romance writing and is still yet to come up for air. Sutton's deeply layered and flawed characters are forced to contend with challenging plot twists that reveal their hidden motives and passions, in settings that range from America's heartland to the heat of Guatemala, Morocco, Italy, and Spain.

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WRENCH IN MY PLANS:
LILIAN LUXE

ONE

EMERSON

The rumble of my exhaust is loud as I pull into the full parking lot, finding a single vacant spot near the back corner of the lot. I glance around and turn my truck off. There's an array of cars filling the spaces, older styles to new, simple issues to completely wrecked. The building has four garage bays, two tall doors and two regular, that are double stacked with another four doors running along the back. *Gramps' Auto Body and Repair* adorns the top of the brick building in bright white letters.

A flutter of nerves race through my body, causing me to question if this is the right decision. I take a deep breath and get out of my truck. If there's anything I've learned over the past few months, it's that there's no better time than the present to put on your big girl panties and move forward with confidence along the path life is taking you.

There's an old service bell attached to the top of the doorframe that rings out when I push through the front door. Other than two elderly gentlemen sitting in the far corner of the waiting room, sipping on coffee and chatting with each other about the current news, there's not a single soul in sight. I head over to the empty service counter, wondering if I've come in during a lunch break when the door to the shop bursts open, a giggling little girl in a sparkly pink princess dress with smudges of grease all over comes running through it and straight to me.

“Hiya! I'm Cora Jean and this is my grampy's repair shop. Do you have something that's broken?” the little girl says to

me, her blonde curls bouncing with every word and dimples popping out when she smiles up at me.

I smile back at her, kneeling down to her level, not missing how she said this is *her* grampy's shop. "Hi, Cora Jean. It's nice to meet you. I'm Rem—"

A male voice cuts off my words, the raspy baritone sending shivers up my spine. "Cora Jean Callahan. What did I tell you about running through the shop?"

Cora Jean leans in close to me and whispers, "Uh-oh, Daddy used my full name. He means biscuits."

A snort-laugh escapes me at her hushed, dramatic tone and her use of the word biscuits instead of business, but I quickly cover it up with the clearing of my throat.

A tall, muscular figure towers over us, and my stomach drops in response to the striking man before me. The top of his coverall is hanging off around his waist, his tight-fitting t-shirt showing off every defined muscle as he kneels to be at the same level as us. He has light brown hair that is short on the sides, with a wild mop of curls on top, and his jawline is sharp as stone. But it's when his smokey gray eyes connect with mine that my breath catches in my throat. He's just as handsome as he is intimidating.

The worried frown that was etched onto his face subtly shifts into a faint smirk before he moves his focus back to his daughter, giving her a soft, but stern, expression. I stand up, taking a couple steps back to give them a little privacy as he places his hands on her shoulders, reminding her of how dangerous it is for her to run around the bays. His voice is surprisingly gentle for someone who looks like he would prefer to be scowling all day.

"I'm sorry, Daddy. It won't happen again," Cora Jean says, brushing her tiny hand along the short stubble on his jaw absentmindedly, soothing both of them at the same time.

He leans in, kissing her on the temple and then stands, those beautiful gray eyes now focused on me. "Sorry 'bout that. Knox Callahan, at your service."

He offers his hand and when I grip it within mine, the introduction I was about to make becomes lodged in my throat. An electric jolt shoots up my arm, sparking a tingling sensation that radiates through my entire body. Knox notices too, his grip tightening briefly before releasing mine completely. I'm transfixed on his hand as it falls to his side, balling into a fist and then opening fully a few times.

He clears his throat, bringing me back to the moment. I look up but don't quite meet his eyes. "I, uh... I'm looking for ___"

"Grampy!" Cora Jean yells, cutting off my words and running past me.

I squeeze my eyes shut, breathing deeply through my nose, trying to prepare myself for the inevitable. When I open them, I'm met with Knox's pinched expression, annoyance and curiosity all mixed within.

Knox

I watch her as she takes a deep breath, her eyes squeezed shut, a dark lock of hair falling into her face. I fight the urge to reach out and push it back behind her ear, my fingers twitching at the thought, but I don't know if I can handle touching her again.

She finally opens her eyes and looks up at me. Her expression is unreadable, but sorrow and regret fills those pretty golden eyes.

"I'm sorry, I didn't catch your name," I say, desperately wanting to know.

She hesitates, fidgeting where she stands and then glances over her shoulder to where Cora Jean has Gramps by the hand, talking his ear off. I can't take my gaze away from her as I wait for her to answer. Her lips part, words forming in her mouth, but then she shakes her head and turns away, looking like she's going to leave.

She takes one step, which catches Gramps' attention. His thick brows bunch together before his whole face lights up with recognition.

“Remy? Is that you girl, my Remy-pie?” Gramps moves toward her, arms stretched wide, and she embraces him with everything she has.

Remy-pie? I’ve known Gramps since I was fourteen. In those twelve years, he’s only mentioned someone named Remy a handful of times. A granddaughter that his only son moved away with and never let him see.

A picture of a young girl in coveralls and pigtails flashes in my mind. The old, tattered picture sitting on Gramp’s desk has kept her frozen in time. Only she’s not a little girl anymore. She’s closer to my age than I ever realized and she’s here in my town—my shop.

Now I just have to figure out why.

TWO

EMERSON

The sound of a torque wrench echoes through the shop as I rummage through my toolbox to find a non-broken screwdriver. Today marks exactly one month since I moved back to the only place I ever thought of as home. It doesn't matter that we moved away from here when I was only six, being enveloped in my gramp's arms brought all the memories back at once.

This is the only place I ever felt truly safe. My father tried to mimic that for me, but his dealings were always on the shadier side, and he could never quite pull it off. I don't blame him for the life he lived and ultimately died from, or the way he brought me up, teaching me everything I know about cars and mechanics. But I hold a bit of resentment in my heart for him keeping me from the only living family we had.

Everyone here has taken to me with open arms, some around my age that I would've grown up with. Others reminisced about the few memories they had of me when I was little and running around the shop as Cora Jean likes to do now.

She has even taken a liking to me, shadowing me when I'm working and asking a million cute little questions that remind me of how I was at her age. She's fascinated with the fact that I'm a "real life girl mechanic", and "wants to be just like me when she grows up".

Her father, on the other hand, stays a good twenty feet away from me at all costs. Knox closed himself off the

moment he found out who I am, and I don't have the slightest clue why.

I try not to let it bother me, focusing instead on the task at hand. I'm in the middle of repairing a '68 Mustang. The owner is a buddy of Gramps, but I'm realizing that just about everyone in town is a buddy of Gramps. The car is in good condition overall, but the transmission needed some work.

As I tighten the last screw, I notice Knox standing by the shop's back door, staring off into the distance. Cora Jean is at a summer program today, so I wonder what has Knox's attention.

I take a deep breath, deciding to confront him and walk over to him. Standing beside him, I follow his gaze, but there's nothing out there except for dead cars and empty fields as far as the eye can see.

"Everything okay?" I ask, trying to break the awkward silence.

His muscles tense as if he hadn't realized I was here, and when he turns his head to look at me, his infamous scowl is fixated on his face.

"Why are you here, Emerson?" His words are forced through gritted teeth, my name sounding like a curse. It sends shivers down my spine, an odd feeling fluttering through me. The only time anyone used my full name was when I was in trouble. Which is exactly how I feel every time Knox speaks to me.

I'm taken aback by his question, not sure what he's getting at. My brows bunch together, and I frown at him. "I don't know what you mean." My response is slightly defensive, but I can't help it.

He shakes his head, his arms crossed over his chest. The sharp angle of his jaw moves with his clenching.

"You know exactly what I mean. Why did you come back here? After all these years?" His tone is accusatory, as if I've done something wrong by returning to my roots.

I scoff, unable to believe the audacity of this man.

“I came back to be with the only family I have left. The family that my father kept me away from for so long,” I say pointedly, emphasizing the last part.

Knox’s eyes narrow at my response, and I can see that he’s not entirely convinced. For a moment, I think he’s going to say something else, something cutting, but he just turns on his heels and stalks away.

I watch him go, a mix of frustration and confusion swirling inside me. I don’t understand why he’s so hostile towards me. We’ve never even met before, at least not that I can remember.

As I turn around to head back to the mustang, I spot Gramps standing just outside his office, watching. I briefly wonder if he saw the interaction that just happened, but decide I don’t care if he did. Maybe he can help pull the stick out of Knox’s ass.

Knox

I take a deep breath as I stride out of the shop, my heart hammering so hard I’m afraid it might burst out of my chest.

This girl has gotten under my skin, taking up space in my head. No matter how hard I try to keep my distance from her, she’s always there. In my town, in my shop, in my mind.

I don’t know what it is about her, but she makes me feel... things. Maybe it’s the way she looks at me, like she sees something in me beyond the rough exterior.

Whatever it is, I know I need to keep my distance. I can’t let myself get too close to her, can’t let her see the real me, the one that a lifetime of mistakes has scarred.

But as I pace back and forth outside the shop, I realize it might be too late for that. She’s already seen through me, seen my hostility towards her for what it really is—fear.

Fear that now she’s here, everything I’ve worked so hard for, spent days and countless hours working toward, will slip right through my grasp.

THREE

EMERSON

Slipping the key into the ignition, I crank the engine on the '70 Chevy I've been working on this past week, but it won't turn over.

I press my forehead against the steering wheel and curse under my breath. The shop is closed, and everyone else has gone home, but I stayed to get this truck finished.

Only, things haven't been going in my favor today. Ever since the conversation I had with Gramps last night, I've been off my game.

I'm leaving Knox the shop when it's my time to go. Actually, it'll be before then, 'cause this old kook is 'bout ready to retire.

It didn't take me by surprise when he told me this. Knox is this shop, more so than Gramps. I realized that within the first few days of being here. But his next words definitely took me by surprise.

I think he's threatened by you being here. Afraid I'll change my mind, want to keep this place in the family.

It explained why Knox has been so hostile toward me, but he shouldn't feel threatened at all. I didn't come here looking for a handout or expecting anything from anyone. I came here to recoup the time I missed with Gramps and to get away from the path my father went down.

Footsteps echo through the shop as I get out of the truck and make my way over to take another look under the hood.

I turn around to see Knox walking toward me, his arms crossed over his chest and his shoulders tense. My stomach drops at the sight of him, unsure of what to expect from this encounter.

“Need some help?” he asks gruffly, stopping a few feet away from me.

I raise an eyebrow, surprised he’s actually offering assistance. There’s a snide comment on the tip of my tongue, but I can’t afford to turn down his help.

“Yeah, actually. The engine won’t start, and I can’t figure out why,” I say, gesturing at the truck.

Knox nods, his expression focused as he leans over the engine to take a look. I can’t help but watch him, noticing the way his muscles tense and release as he works, the way the sunlight catches on the small beads of sweat on his forehead.

It’s like I’m seeing him in a new light, not just as the hostile man who’s been giving me a hard time, but as someone who’s overcome so much.

Cora Jean’s mother, if you can even call her that, left without a trace as soon as they released her from the hospital.

Gramps’ words replay in my mind as I continue to watch Knox. How can anyone leave this man, let alone his beautiful, sweet-spirited little girl?

After a few minutes of poking and prodding, Knox finally stands up straight, wiping his hands on a rag. “I think I found the issue. It looks like a loose connection,” he says, pointing to a wire that’s come undone.

I nod, grateful for his expertise. “Thank you. My head’s been all over the place today. Not sure I would’ve caught that so quickly.”

Knox shrugs, looking slightly uncomfortable. “No problem. Just don’t expect me to be helpful all the time.”

I laugh, causing the tension between us to dissipate slightly. “I won’t hold my breath.”

We stand here in comfortable silence, taking each other in, the only sound the faint hum of the shop's lights. As I look at Knox, I can't help but notice the intensity in his gaze. It's like he's seeing me in a new light too. The air between us is charged, and my pulse quickens in response.

Knox takes a step closer to me, his hand reaching up to tuck a loose strand of hair behind my ear. My heart skips a beat as his fingers brush against my skin.

Goosebumps rise along my arms as Knox leans in, his lips hovering just inches from mine. His faint scent of motor oil and sweat mixed with his cologne is oddly intoxicating. For a moment, I forget all the reasons why Knox and I shouldn't be doing this, why it's a bad idea to mix business with pleasure. But right here, right now, all I know is that I want him.

Without another thought, I close the gap between us, pressing my lips against his. It's like a burst of fireworks go off in my head as our tongues dance together, exploring each other's mouths. Knox's hands are on my waist, pulling me closer to him as he deepens the kiss. There's a bulge in his jeans pressing against my thigh, and it only adds fuel to the fire that's burning between us.

I moan softly as I break away for air, my eyes locking with his. There is so much emotion swirling around us, I can't even bring myself to speak.

Knox takes a step back, breaking the intense gaze we shared. He looks away with a small smile, his cheeks a light shade of pink.

"I should probably go," he says softly, his voice hoarse.

I nod, not trusting myself to speak. Knox turns and walks away, leaving me standing in the shop, my heart pounding. I take a deep breath, trying to steady my racing pulse. I have no idea what just happened, but I do know that I wouldn't hate it if it happened again.

FOUR

KNOX

The air around me shifts, giving me a reprieve from the summer temperatures. This week has been sweltering, but there's some much-needed rain moving in that's bringing in a pleasant breeze.

Cora Jean bounces on her toes next to me as I lock up the shop. It's Friday and today is the start of the annual town festival, so everyone had the day off, but I came in for a few hours to finish up some paperwork.

As I slide the lock in place and remove my keys from the door, Cora Jean squeals with excitement before taking off in a sprint from my side.

I turn to take off after her, her name at the tip of my tongue when I freeze in place at the sight before me.

"Remy-pie!" Cora Jean yells with giddiness, jumping up for Emerson to catch her. She adopted Gramps' nickname for Emerson.

She giggles as Emerson spins her around, their eyes locked together. My throat tightens as I gaze at the two of them, my heart picking up its pace.

Even though I'm around Emerson at the shop most days, this is the first time I'm really seeing her out of her element.

Her usual dirty coveralls and grease-stained t-shirt are replaced with a jean skirt, cowboy boots, and a halter-top that shows off her perfect breasts. Her dark wavy hair is mostly loose, a stylish braid pulling back one side and she has what looks to be gold sparkles framing her eyes.

She's absolutely stunning, and standing here watching her with my little girl makes my chest ache.

I'm drawn from my thoughts as Emerson looks up and sees me watching them. She gives me a shy smile, her cheeks tinted pink.

"Hi, Knox," she greets, her voice soft as she sets Cora Jean down on her feet. I've been avoiding her these last few days, ever since our kiss.

As much as I want to blame it on needing time to clear my head, deep down I know it's because I don't know what to do now, what to say to her. Ever since the day my ex left, my sole focus has been on raising Cora Jean.

But the kiss Emerson and I shared was something I've never experienced before, with anyone. Except, pursuing something with her could very well make things complicated.

"Daddy, I invited Remy-pie to come to the fair with us," Cora Jean says, pulling Emerson closer to me by her hand.

Emerson shoots me an apologetic smile, picking up on the fact that I'm just now being clued into this invitation.

"Oh yeah, is that right?" I ask Cora Jean, squatting down to her level.

"Mm-hmm." She bobs her head and leans in closely as if her next words are a secret to be shared. "I just know she's going to love it as much as I do."

A wide smile lights up my face at my precious girl. "Then I guess we better get going so we can show her how to have the best time."

Cora Jean giggles some more when I grab her up in my arms, throwing her over my shoulder while I stand. I catch Emerson's eye and give her a wink before I turn and guide us to my truck.

A thick fog of tension hangs between us as we pile in, weighing us down. But Cora Jean babbles on about all the games and rides she wants to try, slowly clearing the air.

Emerson seems to relax as Cora Jean chatters away, a small smile playing at her lips. It's like she's in her element with my daughter, and it warms my heart to see them together.

When we pull up to the fairgrounds, the excitement in the air is palpable. The sound of laughter and music greets us, the smell of funnel cakes and fried dough wafts around us.

Cora Jean practically bounces out of the truck, dragging Emerson by the hand toward the ticket booth. I follow behind, my heart racing as I watch the two of them together and wonder if I've done my daughter a disservice by not having a female role model in her life.

Emerson

As we make our way through the fair, I can't help but feel a childlike sense of wonder wash over me. The bright lights and colorful displays are a stark contrast to my usual greasy surroundings at the garage.

Cora Jean leads us to the first ride she wants to try, a spinning teacup that looks like it's straight out of Alice in Wonderland. She pulls me into a cup with her, her face lit up with excitement as the ride starts to spin.

Knox has been dodging me at every turn, trying to ignore my existence since we kissed. But tonight, it's like he can't keep his eyes off me. I try to push the thought away and focus on the moment.

After we're done with the ride, Cora Jean pulls us over to a game she wants to try, a balloon popping game that promises a prize if you can pop three balloons with darts.

Knox steps up to the booth, taking aim at the balloons with a steady hand. I watch in amusement as he only pops one, and by accident at that. Laughter bubbles out of me at how terrible he is.

He turns to me with a mock pout, his eyes crinkling with amusement. "Are you... laughing at me?" he asks incredulously.

I nod, continuing to giggle. "It's nice to know you're not good at *everything*." Knox is annoyingly perfect. He's a great

dad, a skilled mechanic, and an incredible kisser. My lips tingle at the memory of his soft lips on mine, thoughts of his powerful hands gripping my waist causing a warmth to spread through me.

He smirks at me, an all-knowing glint in his eyes, as I step closer, taking the next three darts from his grip. I slide in front of him, our bodies so close the heat from his envelopes me.

“Let the master show you how this works,” I say with a cocksure attitude.

The first dart slides from my fingers with ease, popping a balloon, surprising everyone and even myself. Despite my air of confidence, I honestly have no idea what I’m doing.

I’m not so lucky with the second dart, though. Somehow it turns sideways midair, bouncing off of the balloon, causing laughter to escape us all. When I position myself to aim the third dart, Knox moves forward, pressing his body against my back. One large hand slips onto my hip while his other comes around me to cradle mine.

His hot breath brushes over the shell of my ear as he whispers, “Hold it like this.” He guides my hand to the right position, giving it a gentle squeeze before gliding his hand down my arm and settling on my other hip.

It’s hard for me to breathe with him holding me like this. I squeeze my eyes shut and throw the dart. Not the brightest idea I’ve ever had, but Cora Jean’s squeals of excitement let me know I’ve hit my mark.

I slowly turn to face Knox as he steps back, my lips spreading into a goofy grin. He returns my smile, his face lighting up, and my heart swells in my chest. It’s so good to see him like this, lighthearted and carefree.

It’s like a breath of fresh air, and I can’t seem to stop myself from craving more and more.

FIVE

KNOX

I pick up a sleeping Cora Jean from her booster seat, the giant stuffed elephant held tightly in her arms. Emerson gets out of the passenger side of my truck, following along behind us to my front door.

Cora Jean had a tiny meltdown when we were leaving the festival, wanting Emerson to come home with us to help her get ready for bed, even though I knew she'd be out before we left the parking lot.

I carefully make my way through the house and into Cora Jean's bedroom, laying her down gently and covering her with a blanket.

Looking over my shoulder, I find Emerson standing in the doorway, watching us. A soft smile graces her face as she takes in Cora Jean's pink princess bedroom with matchbox cars, toy wrenches, and engine parts lining her shelves.

"She's so precious," she murmurs, her voice barely above a whisper.

We make our way down the hall and into the living room, Emerson taking in the home I've created for Cora Jean and myself along the way.

She stops in the middle of the room and turns to face me.

"Thank you," we both say in unison, causing a chuckle to escape me. Emerson's cheeks flush as she laughs along with me, and my heart pounds harder in my chest. She's so beautiful when she smiles like that and having that smile aimed at me sets my skin on fire.

“I just wanted to say thank you for letting me spend the day with Cora Jean...” Her words trail off as her gaze connects with mine. “And you. It really meant a lot to me.”

I take a step closer to her. “Thank you for coming with us tonight. For being there for my little girl.” My voice comes out rough with emotion.

Her eyes widen slightly at the intensity of my words. She swallows hard and nods, her gaze dropping to the floor. I reach out and gently lift her chin, tilting her face up toward me.

“Emerson, I know things have been...” I swallow, trying to find the right words. “Complicated between us. But I can’t deny the fact that I’m drawn to you. No matter how much I try to tell myself not to mix business with pleasure, I don’t want to ignore what’s building between us anymore.”

Her eyes dart to my lips before meeting my gaze again. We stand there for a moment, neither of us moving or saying anything, until the tension between us becomes too much to bear.

There’s a war raging inside me, between my brain telling me to be responsible and my heart yearning for her touch.

My heart wins out, and I close the distance between us, my hand coming up to cup her cheek. Emerson’s eyes flutter closed, and I lean in, taking her lips in a soft, tentative kiss. It feels like a bolt of lightning shoots through my body, singeing me to my core.

Her lips are soft, warm, and pliant, like they were made to fit perfectly with mine. My tongue slips out, tracing the seam of her lips, and she opens for me. Our tongues tangle together, exploring each other’s mouths with a heady passion.

She tastes like candy, sweet and addictive. Her hands find my chest, wandering up to my neck, pulling me closer. Every one of her perfect curves fit seamlessly against my body.

When we finally break apart, gasping for breath, I press my forehead to hers, my hand still cradling her cheek.

“Knox,” she whispers, her voice trembling. “I... I didn’t expect this.”

Pulling back slightly, I look into her eyes, my own filled with a mix of desire and uncertainty. “Neither did I, but you threw a wrench in my plans, and I can’t fight it anymore,” I say, my voice low and husky. “I want you, Emerson. I want all of you.”

She bites her lip, a small smile playing at the corners of her mouth. “What about Cora Jean?”

Her question makes my heart swell, knowing that her first thought was about my daughter. I take a deep breath, running a hand through my hair. “She’s my top priority, always,” I say firmly. “But that doesn’t mean we can’t explore whatever is between us. We can take it slow, see where it goes.”

Emerson nods, her eyes shining with emotion. “I want that too.” She reaches her hand up to stroke my cheek. “I want to see where this goes.”

We fall into each other’s arms again, our mouths meeting in a frenzy of need and desire. I move us to the couch, our bodies grinding against each other, each movement igniting a fire within us that we can’t seem to quell.

And as I cling to her with everything in me, I know that this is just the beginning of our story. Whatever happens next, I’m ready for it.

AUTHOR'S NOTE:

Thank you for taking the time to read my short story. I'm Lilian Luxe, a newbie author who lives in the Midwest with my husband and two boys. I wanted to collaborate in this anthology piece because nothing keeps this world turning more than our blue-collared workers, who are often overworked and underpaid.

I hope you enjoyed Knox and Emerson's story. If you'd like to see what else I'm working on, head over to [Kindle Vella on Amazon](#) and check out my other works there.

You can also find me on [Instagram](#).

Much love,

Lilian <3