



dark

*obsession*

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

HOPE FORD

# **DARK OBSESSION**

HOPE FORD

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Editor: Kasi Alexander

Proofreader: Nicole Graf

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# CHAPTER 1

# JASON

I'M COMPLETELY ON EDGE, and I hate this feeling. I was once the most confident man in the room, but I hate what I've become. My hands are fisting at my sides. I clench, feeling my nails digging into the skin of my palm and enjoying the pain of it for just a brief second, and then I unclench. I do it over and over until I have to force myself to stop. I never know if someone is looking at me, but it feels like I'm always under a microscope. That's why every step I make is slow and calculated. I'm never spontaneous anymore, no sudden movements, and now every time I go out, it is planned and thought out before I even walk out my door.

"Relax, it's a haircut," Davis says. It's probably the tenth time he's tried to calm me since he and his fiancée, Abby, picked me up at my apartment. "It's past time. Nobody would believe by looking at us that we were once part of Walker's elite mercenary team."

I run my hand through my hair, and it does feel longer than I ever remember it being. I know from hearing the guys at the compound talk that Davis needs a haircut too. I think after the guys gave him crap this week, he gave in and decided it was time to trim his hair. I wouldn't mind keeping mine. I can give two shits what names the guys call me, but I really don't have to worry about it. You're a real asshole if you make fun of the blind guy, so they don't give me too much shit.

I suck in a breath. Blind. It's been two years, and I swear I've almost forgotten what the sunrise looks like. My mind plays tricks with me, and when I dream, I dream of everything—the

good, the bad, and the things that I would give anything to forget. But as soon as I wake up, I realize that my life is worse than the nightmare I had the night before because once where there was light, all there is now is darkness.

“Shit... I mean shoot. I got it. It’s just a haircut.”

I feel Abby’s soft elbow hit me in the side before she threads her arm in mine. I know she’s doing it to help me avoid knocking into something. If it was one of the guys, I’d probably run my mouth, but there’s no way I’d risk hurting her feelings, so I zip my lips.

Abby giggles. “You’re lucky Alexis isn’t here today. She’d have you putting money in her swear jar.”

Davis chuckles. “I swear the girl is going to be able to buy that new bike she wants by the end of the month if she keeps it up.”

“You mean if you keep it up. You’re the one with the potty mouth who can’t stop swearing,” Abby admonishes him.

I walk down the sidewalk listening to Davis and Abby go back and forth. I have my mobility cane in one hand and Abby with her arm threaded through my other. I don’t have to see Davis’ face to know he doesn’t like it. He’s protective of Abby, and I can’t say I blame him. I don’t have to see her to know she’s something special.

“This is ridiculous,” I mutter, expressing my opinion again.

Abby lets me go, and Davis grips my elbow. “Come on, dude. We are past time to get our hair cut. Walker told us both that we needed to tighten this up.”

Abby’s voice sounds in front of me. “I’m not going to lie. I’m going to miss the long hair.”

Davis responds huskily, “I can leave it if you prefer.”

I stop in my tracks. I’m not the only one having second thoughts here. Maybe I can talk them out of this nonsense. “Yeah, let’s skip it. Come on, let’s go to Red’s Diner. My treat. I’ll buy you each a piece of the apple cinnamon Blaze cake that everyone keeps going on about.”



Abby threads her arm through mine again and practically forces me another few steps. “Jason, my friend Olivia is the best in town. We can’t cancel now. Plus, Davis has already promised us dinner at Red’s, his treat.”

I grumble, but I follow right along beside her. There’s no arguing with Abby.

When we get inside, the noise of women talking and laughing automatically comes to a halt. Even though I can’t see it, I can feel all eyes on me. There’s a rush of heat that travels through my body, and I have to take a deep breath and let it out slowly. It’s either that or I’m going to run out of here, and with my luck lately, probably right into an oncoming car on the busy downtown street.

A voice I’ve never heard before rings out in the room and moves closer to us. “There she is. It’s been forever since I saw you. Heck, when was the last time? Oh yeah, the sex club.”

My head jerks. *Did she just say sex club?*

Abby gasps, and I feel her swaying beside me. “Seriously, Olivia? Why don’t you buy a billboard and put it up there that we went to a sex club, geez.”

I don’t hear the woman respond, but she must do something because Abby is giggling. I would love to know what’s going on, but instead I stand here like a clueless fool. “Anyway, you know Davis, my fiancé,” Abby singsongs, and then she pulls me closer to her side. “And this is our friend, Jason.”

The woman is silent, and I’m about to hold my hand out when I feel her grip my elbow while she holds on to my arm. With her hand on me, she asks, “Hey Jason, you want to go first?”

My tongue feels as if it’s swollen to twice its size in my mouth. Feeling her body pressed to my arm has me wanting to pull her in closer but at the same time run out the door. The reaction is instant, and when you haven’t felt anything in a very long time, it’s almost alarming. “Yea. Sure. Might as well get it over with,” I tell her more gruffly than I should.

She laughs and then threads her arm through mine. “Okay, so sexy and grumpy. My kind of man.” She walks me through the

room, and finally the talking of the women around us continues.

Olivia guides me to the chair and then wraps her hand around mine that is holding on to the cane. “You mind if I take this? I promise to give it back.”

When I don’t let go right away, she giggles and leans in until her breasts are pressed against my arm once again. Her voice is low and like a whisper in my ear. “You can trust me. You don’t look happy to be here, and I don’t want you hitting me with that thing.”

Instantly I release my hold on the cane. “I would never hit a woman.”

As soon as I say it, I realize she meant it as a joke. She takes the cane from my hand but is back almost right away. “Okay, so you’re sexy and grumpy but no sense of humor.”

I clear my throat. Is she flirting with me? That’s twice she said I was sexy. Before the accident, I didn’t have any doubts. I could practically have my pick of women, but since then, I’m not so sure. Maybe it’s a pity flirt, but regardless, already I feel the need to apologize. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean...”

When my voice trails off, she squeezes her hand around my wrist. “It’s okay, really. I’m just playing with you.” She lets go of me, and I’m just missing her touch when her hands go to my head. I flinch with a jerk, and we’re both silent.

I let out a puff of air. “Shit. I’m sorry. I should go.”

I’m about to get up when both her hands go to my shoulders, holding me in place. “Stay. It’s fine. We’re just learning each other, that’s all.”

I grit my teeth. “Right.... Learning each other.”

She giggles like she knows I’m being obtuse. “Yes, learning each other. So we just met, but I already know to never joke about hitting a woman and that you don’t like to be touched —”

Oh shit. In the two minutes since I’ve been in here, I’ve found that Olivia likes to touch, and I don’t want her to stop. “No!” I

say a little too loudly and then soften my voice. “It’s not that... it’s just sudden movements that catch me off guard. You can touch me all you want.” Fuck. Did I just say that? “I mean... you touching me doesn’t bother me.”

Heat flushes through my body. What the hell is wrong with me? The groan escapes before I can stop it. “Okay, so let’s start over. Olivia, I’m Jason, and I’ve been told I need a haircut. I’d appreciate it if you fix me up. Whatever you think would look good will be fine. I promise to sit here and keep my mouth shut.”

She’s back to touching me, and I hold my hand perfectly still so she doesn’t move away. “I don’t want you to keep your mouth shut. I actually like hearing your voice. It’s soothing.”

I sit up a little straighter, and when she starts to talk again, her voice is low and she’s right next to my ear. “I’m going to touch you now.”

It’s like a little kick to my chest when she says it. And even though she warned me, I’m not ready when she puts her hands through my hair and drags her nails along my scalp. I groan and then suck in a breath to stop myself. Fuck, that feels good.

“You have beautiful, thick hair. Can I wash it?”

“Yeah,” I murmur. Hell, at this point, she can ask for anything and I’d give it to her.

She starts talking, giving me a play-by-play of everything she’s doing. She puts a cape over me. “I’m going to spin you around. My wash bowl is right here so you can stay in your seat. I’m going to wash you up, give you a good condition, and then start with the cut.”

I feel the chair spin and the sound of water turning on. The back of my seat starts to descend and I don’t fight it; I lie back and let it take me until I’m lying flat on my back. Olivia is right beside me, and I feel the warmth of her body as she leans over me.

I completely clear my mind and focus on the feel of her hands on my head. She ignites something inside me, and my body

readily reacts. When my manhood twitches in my jeans, my body jerks.

She puts a hand on my chest. “You okay?”

I nod my head because I don’t trust my voice. I move my arms from the armrest and let them slide down my body and grip my hands together, hoping to hide my ever-growing erection under the cape.

That’s all I need is to come off as some kind of pervert or something. Fuck, how is this my life? For two years, I thought that part of me was broken and now, here in the middle of town, surrounded by a roomful of women, I discover my cock still works. Fuck.

I’m not going to make it through this. She keeps talking as she washes my hair, and I can’t concentrate on anything except trying to keep my mind off how she’s making me feel.

I’m about to tell her I’m done when she turns the water off, thank fuck.

She towel-dries my hair and sits me up, and I feel the chair spin. She talks to me, telling me step by step what she’s doing. When I’m upright, I start to breathe a little easier.

“So, Jason, tell me about you.”

“I’m blind,” I tell her.

I swear she swats at me with the comb in her hand. “Right. I got that, but I want to know about you.”

I let out a shaky breath. “There’s not much to tell.”

She chuckles, and I don’t know if it’s just me, but her voice drops sexily. “I don’t believe that. I bet you have an exciting life.”

When I don’t answer her, she continues, “What do you like to do in your spare time?”

I don’t answer her because I feel like all my time is spent in therapy or doctor’s appointments, and I’m definitely not going to get into that.

“Ookay,” she draws out. “Well, it’s obvious you like to work out.” She squeezes my arm, and I flex automatically. She laughs, and I can hear the smile in her voice. “Okay, fine. You didn’t ask, but I’ll tell you. I like to cook, love to eat and learn new hairstyles, and people tell me that I talk too much.”

“You don’t.” I shake my head. “I mean, you don’t talk too much. I like hearing you talk.”

“Well....” she says as she massages her fingers into my head again.

I lean into it, and she pauses for a minute and then starts rubbing again. I feel like a damn cat as I nuzzle into her hand.

My cock is betraying me again, twitching in my pants, and I sit up, holding my body stiffly. Fuck, I’m like a freak or something.

The energy is buzzing all around me, and I can barely sit still, but I don’t dare move. I can hear the sound of the scissors against the side of my head as Olivia continues to cut my hair.

When she falls into a silence, I do the same. One thing since I’ve lost my vision that has been hard to deal with are my thoughts. I mean, yeah, not being able to see is the worst, but the thoughts in my head are somehow even easier to get lost in now. I can go from being fine one minute to feeling as if I’m about to lose my mind the next.

In the span of twenty minutes, the time it takes her to cut my hair, I’ve managed to work myself up until there’s no talking myself down.

*She’s flirting with me because she wants a tip.*

*She’s not really interested in me.*

*My dick starts to work again and half the town is here to witness it.*

*Olivia is quiet now; I’ve offended her somehow.*

*Fuck, I’d give anything to see her face.*

All of it whirls around in my head, and I can’t make sense of any of it. A pressure builds on my chest, and I know I need to

get out of here. She announces we're done and undoes the Velcro from around my neck. When the gown lifts off me, I reach into my pocket for my wallet. I have no idea how much money I take out, but I get up and drop bills on the seat I just vacated and hold my hand out. "Cane?"

"Uh..." she stutters before I feel the metal in my hand. "Here you go."

"Thanks," I grunt and then walk away, trying to recall the direction of the door.

"Want to sit outside?"

"Yeah," I tell Davis, who has popped up beside me.

He gets me outside and directs me to a bench. "We'll be out when I'm done." He's not happy with me, and I can't blame him. I was an asshole to his fiancée's friend, and she didn't deserve it.

"Yeah," I repeat, already kicking myself for my rude departure.

# CHAPTER 2

# OLIVIA

*DO NOT FOLLOW him out that door, Olivia.*

I repeat it to myself again, but it doesn't stop me from looking at him longingly out the big front windows. I'm drawn to assholes. That's sort of my thing, but I also know how to handle them. And even though Jason was rude to me, I don't think he's an asshole. At least not the typical one.

He came in here trying to keep his face void of all emotion, but I could tell he wasn't comfortable. I saw how he felt when I touched him. I affected him, and damn if he didn't affect me too. I watch him out the window. Davis is talking to him as he sits on the bench outside.

"What happened?" Abby asks me, and it's then I realize she's been standing in front of me, snapping her fingers in front of my face.

I shake my head, trying to figure out my thoughts, but I can't even begin to think straight. He's a man who is lost. That much is obvious. And I should forget about him, but already I know I can't.

"Tell me about Jason."

Abby scrunches up her face, and I figure she's going to tell me her lips are sealed, but she leans forward. "He was there with Davis when he got hurt. He was one of the mercenaries. That's when he lost his sight." She holds her hands up. "That's all I know, really. Well, except that Walker brought him and the others here."

"For rehab?" I ask, wondering how long Jason will be around.



Abby nods. “Rehab... but Davis said Jason will have a job here too, if he wants it.”

I suck in a breath and bite my lip. So he may be staying in Whiskey Run... for a while at least. Before I can ask anything else, Davis is standing in front of us. “Sorry about that. You ready for me?”

I blink up at him. Shoot. “Uh, yeah, sorry about that. Let me clean up real quick and I’ll be ready.”

I grab the broom and make quick work of cleaning up my station. After wiping things down, I gesture to the chair. “Have a seat.”

He gets in, and Abby and I both laugh. I hit the knob that lowers it. “You really are a big guy, huh?”

Abby just smiles, and Davis looks at himself grimly in the mirror. After wrapping the cape around him, I ask, “All right. How would you like it cut?”

He scrunches up his nose. “Short.”

I nod. “Like one guard short, or four guard short?”

Abby holds her hand up. “Four guard, definitely.”

Davis just smiles. “You heard the lady. She knows what she likes.”

I want to roll my eyes, but I don’t. If anyone deserves happiness, it’s Abby, and even though I may be a little jealous that she’s found a man like Davis, I won’t begrudge it to her.

Abby is talking to a woman in the chair next to us, and I’m silent as I wash Davis’ hair and then sit him up. I don’t do any small talk or anything, I’m straight down to business, lost in thought.

“I’m sorry if he upset you.”

I find Davis looking at me in the mirror. There’s no doubt he’s caught me looking outside where Jason is sitting by himself. I pause for just a second, but I shrug my shoulders and continue trimming his hair. “It’s okay. He didn’t really do anything.”

“He’s having a hard time with things.” I open my mouth, but he holds his hand up to stop me. “I know that doesn’t excuse him for being a jerk, but I just don’t want you to take it personal, that’s all.”

I swallow and nod, looking outside again. Jason has his head turned to the side, and his eyes are closed. He’s deep in thought about something, and I can’t help but wonder if he’s thinking about me at all. I shouldn’t ask, but I can’t stop myself. “Is he okay?”

Davis’ eyebrows lift. “What do you mean, okay?”

Abby has found her way back to us and is leaning against the wall listening. She nods at me, and I clear my throat. “I mean, I know he’s not okay, but I mean, I dunno, he seems really sad, that’s all.”

Davis looks outside at his friend, and his face is grim before a small smile forms. “Jason is something else. He has trouble going out, especially to new places. He’s probably the most independent person I know, and he has trouble having to depend on people, even his brothers, but we sort of just make him let us do stuff. I don’t know, he’s a great guy. I know you might not believe me, but he is. But he’ll probably never let you see it. Since.... since the accident, he hasn’t been himself.”

I swallow. It all seems so heavy, and even though I literally met the man not even an hour ago, my heart aches for him. Jason might as well have said the same thing earlier when he couldn’t tell me what his hobbies were. I can’t even begin to imagine everything he’s been through.

I’m putting the finishing touches on Davis’ haircut when Abby brings me out of the trance I’m in. “What about Rick? You still seeing him?”

I look outside at Jason again and then back to Abby. “Yeah, I’ve been out with him one time, but we have plans to go on another date.”

She “oooohs,” and I roll my eyes at her. “It was one date. It’s not a big deal.”

She nods real big. “I know... but you agreed to a second date, and that is a big deal.”

I just nod grimly at her. Abby knows me well, and she’s telling the truth. I don’t usually go out with the same guy more than once. I never want to let things get serious. I’ve been there, done that, and it was not all it’s cracked up to be. Especially after I caught my husband of three years with another woman. Nope, I’ve gotten used to the single life, and it serves me just fine. “Trust me, it’s not a big deal. You know I’m not interested in settling down.”

She just laughs. “Famous last words.”

I move the chair a little and point to the mirror. “Okay, sorry it took so long, but you had a lot more hair than Jason. What do you think? I can go shorter if you want me to.”

Abby squeals as Davis pulls her to his side. “She likes it. It’s perfect. Thanks, Olivia. For fitting Jason and me both in today.”

I nod, and Davis reaches into his pocket to pay but I hold my hand up to stop him. “No, Jason paid enough for his haircut, your haircut, and a big hefty tip.”

Davis nods his head.

“When’s your next appointment?”

I look at Abby and see the curiosity there. I look at my watch and then back to my friend. “I have about forty-five minutes.”

She reaches for me. “Go to dinner with us. We’re going to Red’s.”

Before she even gets it all out, I’m shaking my head. There’s no way I can sit next to Jason right now. He makes me think things I shouldn’t be thinking about. “I’d better not. She’s usually early, and I need to clean up anyway.”

“Walk us out then?” she asks.

I reluctantly nod my head. Not one time has Abby ever asked me to walk her out, but I’m not going to deny her. The truth is I do want to talk to Jason again, even if he’s probably going to be rude to me. Fuck, I’m a glutton for punishment.

“Okay, yeah, sure.”

Abby and I head out with Davis trailing behind us. He reaches around Abby to open the door, and when we walk out, it’s obvious when Jason realizes it’s his friends. “Hey, Jason, sorry it took so long.”

“No, it’s fine. I need to talk to Olivia,” he says, pushing to his feet.

Abby nudges me with her elbow and jabs me in the ribs. “She’s right here.”

She pushes me in front of her, and I almost fall into Jason before I catch and balance myself. “Hey,” I say breathily.

Why does he have to be so handsome? Just looking at him causes a hitch in my breath.

Davis grabs on to Abby’s hand. “We’ll be right down here.”

“But—” Abby starts, trying to hold her ground.

Davis just laughs and picks her off her feet, carrying her down the sidewalk.

When they walk away, all I can do is look at Jason and wait. “I’m here,” I tell him.

# CHAPTER 3

# JASON

I PRACTICED what I was going to say the whole time I sat on this wood bench. I was going to apologize for being an asshole and for being gruff and withdrawn. I was going to try and explain my behavior, but everything I thought I was going to say is gone.

Now all I can think about is the sound of her breathing, the smell of vanilla and lavender that from now on is always going to make me think of her, and of course the memories. Of her pressing against my arm, of her fingers in my hair. Hell, even now, my body reacts to it all.

I clear my throat, realizing that she's standing in front of me, staring, probably impatiently waiting for me to say whatever I have to say so she can get back to work.

"I'm sorry."

She's quiet, and finally she asks, "Okay, what exactly are you sorry for?"

I run my hand across my face. "This is why I don't go out much."

Her comeback is quick. "Why? Because you're an asshole?"

I laugh—how can I not? I was an asshole, and I'm glad she's calling me out on it. A lot of people have been tiptoeing around me, and it drives me crazy. "You're right. I deserved that. I was an asshole."

I can hear the smile in her voice. "Well, it's a good thing that I'm used to assholes, so no need to apologize."

My forehead creases. “Who’s being an asshole to you? I mean, besides me?”

She laughs and puts her hand on my forearm. “Forget it. It’s a bad joke. And you’re not an asshole. It’s fine, really.”

When I hear the pity in her voice, or what I think is pity, I scrunch my nose up. “I like it better when you call me out for being an asshole instead of pitying me.”

She squeezes my wrist and then releases me. “Oh, I’m not pitying you. We may have just met, but I can tell that you’re a man that wouldn’t appreciate pity at all.”

I tilt my head to the side, and for the thousandth time today, I wish I could see. “Anyway, I need to apologize for my behavior earlier. I was rude, and I shouldn’t have treated you like I did. I’m sorry.”

“Why?” she asks. “I mean why were you? And you can tell me if I’m wrong, but you don’t seem the type to be rude, so what did I do that rubbed you the wrong way?”

“Nothing,” I tell her instantly, hoping that’s enough to make her drop it.

She laughs. “No, seriously, tell me. I’d like to know so I don’t do it again.”

I run my hand across my chin. “You didn’t do anything wrong.”

“Jason...” She admonishes me, and hearing my name on her lips is my undoing.

I hold my hands up. “Where are you at?”

She reaches for my hands and brings them to her shoulders. “I’m right here.”

I clench them and then force myself to loosen my grip. Fuck, this is a bad idea.

I move my hands across her collarbones up her neck and hold her there. At this point, I’m practically panting. We’re in the middle of downtown, right outside her work, and I’m sure the ladies inside are watching us. Hell, I’m sure Davis and Abby

are. I can't do any of the things I want to do to her. I move closer to her until I can feel her chest rise with each breath she takes. "I was an asshole because for the first time in two years, I felt something."

I can feel the muscles of her neck move as she tilts her head to the side. "You felt something? What does that mean?"

"Since... since my accident, I didn't think... I haven't felt attraction for a woman..."

I let my voice trail off. I have no idea what she's thinking right now, but I don't want to freak her out.

I feel one of her hands go to my chest, and she lets it slide to my belly. My muscles contract under her touch. "Wait... so you're saying you're attracted to me?"

My fingers tighten around her neck instinctively, and I nod my head. "Yeah..."

"And you didn't know if ... you haven't been attracted to a woman since your accident."

I nod once. "That's right."

She sounds unsure. "And you're saying it's me... that you're attracted to me?"

"That's right," I repeat, not understanding why she sounds so surprised. I hear the doubt in her voice. Never have I imagined I could be attracted to someone without seeing them, but there's no doubt I feel a pull toward Olivia like I've never felt before.

I loosen my hold when she shakes her head side to side. "But why would you be an asshole about that?" She pauses and then gasps. "Oh, because you don't want to be attracted to me."

I let my hands slide down to her shoulders, down her arms, and then I reluctantly let her go. I take a step back, putting some distance between us. "Two reasons, really. One, I don't need half the town talking about me having an erection as you cut my hair."

She gulps. "An erection?"



Oh damn, I really told her that I had a boner while she cut my hair. I have no game at all.

But she doesn't seem fazed. She asks, "And the second reason?"

I take another step back, and the words don't even taste right when I say them. "Because nothing will come of us, that's why."

I don't give her time to respond. I hold my hand out to her, hoping she'll take it. "Anyway, it was nice to meet you, Olivia. Thank you for the haircut and for excusing my bad behavior."

She puts her hand in mine, and I squeeze it gently as I shake it.

"But..." she starts.

"I better go. Davis is a bear when he's hungry. Thanks again."

I barely get turned around and I feel her hand on my shoulder. "Wait. Do you want to schedule your next appointment?"

Fuck, she's making this hard on me. If it was my choice, I'd come in here every day just to hear her voice and smell her sweetness. "It's been over a year since my last haircut, so I think I'm good for awhile. It's probably best if I don't come again. There's no sense embarrassing myself... or you, for that matter."

Then before I can think twice about it, I walk away. I have no idea where I'm going, but I have to put some distance between Olivia and me. It's either that or I'm going to do the one thing I've been thinking about since I first heard her sweet laugh. But kissing her on Main Street is probably not something she wants... at least with me.

# CHAPTER 4

# OLIVIA

ALL I CAN DO IS STAND HERE and gawk as Jason walks away. Did that really just happen? Did he really just admit to me that he had an erection while I was cutting his hair? I mean, I sort of had to force it out of him, but he admitted it... and then he walked away.

Abby waving at me draws me out of my trance, and I wave back. I barely get through the shop doors and the whistles and hooting and hollering starts. I should have known that everyone in here would be watching us.

“Girl, who was that?”

“If you don’t want him, I’ll take him!”

“If I was just twenty years younger, he’d be mine. There’s no way I’d let a man like that walk away from me.”

All eyes go to Brenda. She’s in her eighties but as spry as any woman in here. The woman next to her is nodding her head in agreement. “You know that’s right.”

I hold my hands up. “Okay, okay... enough of that. Now you know we wouldn’t want some guys talking about us that way, so maybe we should lay off—”

Brenda speaks up. “Speak for yourself. I wouldn’t mind at all if he talked about me. He can talk all he wants.”

She is wiggling her white eyebrows and has everyone laughing again.

I just laugh with them and make my way to my station. Maybe if I get to work, they’ll move on to something else.

Normally, I'm happy to share and jump in, but with Jason, it all just seems too personal. I ignore the laughter around me and get to work cleaning up my station.

I barely have time before my next appointment comes in the door. I know I need to focus, and I push all thoughts of Jason to the back of my mind. "Hey girl! What are we doing?" I ask Missy as she sits down and I wrap the cape around her.

She fluffs her hair. "The usual or whatever you think I need. I trust you."

I laugh and nod my head. "Oh, if all my clients were as easy as you."

I get to work mixing up color when Missy leans forward. "All right, talk. Give me the scoop."

After measuring the right amount of dye and developer, I stir it in the bowl as I stare at her dumbly. "What scoop?"

She rolls her eyes. "Don't give me that. The scoop! I already heard you were making out with some guy right in front of the shop. Is that the new guy you were going to go on a date with? Rick, right?"

I look around the room in awe. Is she for real right now? I know I live in a small town, but I still am amazed by what all that entails. Who would have thought that she would have already heard about Jason... and I definitely wouldn't call it making out. Heck, we didn't even kiss.

"First of all, where did you hear that?"

"At the co-op. One of the ladies that just left here was telling Millie, and I overheard it all. So tell me everything, and don't leave any of it out. It has to be serious if you're making out with him right on the street downtown."

I grip on to the chair and turn her around so she's facing the mirror. It's times like these that I'm glad my section is a little private. "We were not making out. He didn't even kiss me."

She scrunches her nose up. "Wait. Haven't you all been dating? And he didn't kiss you?"

I part her hair into sections and start applying the dye. “Okay, so it wasn’t the guy I’ve been seeing... it wasn’t Rick.”

She blinks at me in the mirror, trying to keep the judgment off her face, but she’s not doing a very good job of it. “So there are two guys, and the one you were not making out with was not Rick?”

Obviously, I need to clear this up. “No, I wasn’t making out with anyone. Listen, so I’ve only been on one date with Rick, but we are going out again. The guy I was TALKING to in the street is a new client. It was nothing.”

She shakes her head. “Oh no, uh-uh, don’t tell me that. From what I hear, it was hot. Capital H-O-T hot. You’re telling me there was no touching?”

I move to the side so I can look her straight in the face instead of in the mirror. “He’s blind, Missy. He was touching my shoulders just so he knew where I was at, that’s all. It was nothing.”

I say it, but there’s obviously more to it. The way I tripped over the words and the way the tone of my voice changed, Missy knows I’m not telling her the whole truth. But what can I say? We didn’t make out. He touched me but not the way she heard it. We definitely didn’t make out. But why do I feel like we did? Why is my heart racing just from thinking about it?

She’s squinting her eyes at me. “You’re not telling me something.”

I shrug and get back to lathering on the dye. “Yeah, well, that’s exactly what happened.”

Her lips turn down, and she’s obviously disappointed. She was hoping to get an inside scoop on the new hot guy that has moved to Whiskey Run, but I’m not going to be the one to give it to her.

When I think she’s about to give up, her eyes light up. “So what about Rick? Second date, huh? That’s pretty big. For you, I mean.”

“What do you mean? I’ve been on second dates before.”

She purses her lips. “Oh yeah? When? Name it.”

I look up at the ceiling, trying to think of the last time I went on two dates with someone.

I guess I take too long because Missy throws a hand up in the air. “See? You can’t even think of anyone.”

Geez, I had no idea that I had such a name for myself. “Okay, okay, fine. I went out with that one guy—the lawyer—what was his name? Dennis... I mean, Donnie.”

She bursts out with a laugh. “You mean the one where you had to leave in the middle of the first date because you were sick and so you went out with him again?”

I nod. “Yeah... on a second date.”

She’s laughing again, and I jerk her chair around a little roughly, which makes her laugh harder. “It doesn’t count if you didn’t make it all the way through the first date. Just admit it. Rick is the first guy you’ve said yes to for a second date, which makes him special.”

I don’t like where this is going. And I already have regrets planning the second date with Rick. I didn’t think it was that big of a deal, but now, something feels off about it.

*You know exactly why it feels off, I tell myself.*

How can meeting one man throw everything into a loop? How can I be thinking about changing my plans just because of one encounter? And it wasn’t even a big encounter or anything. I cut his hair... and he was rude to me. I rub my arm along my brow. Yeah, but he explained why he was rude to me, and just thinking about it causes a pull in my lower belly.

*Fuck, quit thinking about it, Olivia.*

“Listen here, Missy. Enough about me. Let’s talk about you. Is your son staying out of trouble?”

And that does the trick. Missy goes off on a tangent talking about the latest where she had to go to the school’s office again because her son got in trouble. I listen to her, offering some reassurance when she pauses, but the whole time I’m thinking about a certain ex-mercenary and the way his hands

felt when he was touching me. I know I should be thinking about Rick, but no matter how hard I try, I can't get my mind off Jason.

# CHAPTER 5



# JASON

I BAILED on Abby and Davis. I skipped out on dinner, caught an Uber, and now I find myself in the gym at the rehab center, throwing around more weight than I have in a while. Frustration fills me, and I need to let off steam. I don't trust myself with a handgun yet, so going to the shooting range is not an option. I used to run, that was sort of my thing, but I can't really do that now. Not freely. So I've turned to lifting weights.

I lift the bar over my head and feel the muscles straining in every part of my body as I fight to hold it. When I have nothing else to give, I lower it, letting it slam into the floor with a frustrated grunt.

“What happened?”

I freeze for two seconds when I hear Kanan's question, and I want to tell him—hell, I need to talk to someone—but instead, I shrug my shoulders as I stretch my arms out over my head. “Nothing.”

He laughs, and if anything, it makes me angrier. I find a bench and sit down on it, and as I do, a towel hits me in the face, letting me know that Kanan is still here. I use the towel to wipe off. “What's going on with you?”

He chugs his drink and lets out a satisfied sigh. “I had a meeting with Walker.”

I tense for all of one minute before I realize Kanan is waiting for a response. “That's good, man. What did he say?”

“He asked me to be over grounds maintenance.”

“Fuck, dude, that’s awesome. That’s right up your alley. You like that kind of shit.”

He grunts. “Yeah, it really is, but it’s all sort of crazy too. You think Walker’s finally lost his shit or something?”

I think I know where he’s going with this, but I still ask him, “What do you mean?”

“He brought us all here, and let’s face it, we’re not the healthiest bunch, but he brought us here, is making us do the therapy and then giving us jobs. He could do all this—get the employees he needs—a lot cheaper if he just advertised for the positions.”

Kanan is just voicing what all of us have been thinking. Don’t think I haven’t thought about it until finally it started to make sense to me. “I understand what you mean, but you know as well as I do that this is who Walker is. We were his mercenaries, and he’s always treated us like family. He gave us two years to get our shit together after the accident, and we were all still flailing. He knew what he was doing when he brought us here. Look what it’s done for Davis and you already. I mean, can’t you tell the difference in yourself since you got here?”

Instead of answering me, he asks his own question. “When’s your appointment with Walker?”

I laugh because it’s either that or I punch something. “I haven’t made one.”

“Why not?” he asks.

I’m gripping the towel between my fingers, and I force my hands to loosen their hold. Since I’ve gone blind, I really work on keeping my emotions intact. “Because it’s a waste of time, Kanan. He’s not going to offer me a job. He knows I’m not of any use here.”

“Bullshit!” he says angrily. “That’s bullshit and you know it. How long have you known Walker?”

I shrug and refuse to answer.

There's a loud thud and it takes me a minute but I figure out that Kanan threw his water bottle away and stomps toward me before sitting heavily on the bench. "We've known Walker for at least ten years, Hawk."

I know he's mad when he calls me by my last name. "And in those ten years, the man doesn't miss. He just doesn't. He knew what he was doing bringing us here. Just like he knows what he's going to have you do here. But you have to get your head out of your ass before you can do it."

"Fuck you, man. You don't know... you don't have any idea what it's like."

He grunts. "I know I don't know what you're going through, Hawk. I know that. Trust me, I have guilt knowing that Davis lost a leg, you're blind, Elias is all fucked up with scars, Colter has a brain injury, and I just have a little pain in my arm. Trust me, I know I don't know what you're going through."

Dammit. "Kanan, shit, I didn't mean it like that. Look, I know I'm being stupid," I tell him, and it's the truth. He doesn't deserve this, and the truth is, I know it's not a little bit of pain he has in his arm. There's a lot more shit he's going through, but he's not the type to go on and on about it. I count to ten and try to calm myself down. "Look, I'm sorry."

Kanan inhales deeply and then lets it out with a loud sigh. "What the fuck is going on with you, man? And don't tell me nothing. It's obvious you have something going on."

I open my mouth and then close it again. I don't even know where to start.

After I don't answer him, Kanan's voice gets deeper. "Does this have anything to do with Olivia?"

I hear the material of the towel in my hands start to rip. "How do you know Olivia?" Jealousy rages inside me, and I know it shouldn't. I don't have any claim on her.

"I don't know her."

I sit up a little straighter, making myself bigger. "Don't lie to me. Not about her. How do you know Olivia?" I demand.

He chuckles. “Davis called and told me what happened. What do you think I’m here for? I wanted to make sure you were okay.”

I lean over and rest my head on my hand. “Fuck, what did he tell you?”

If he told Kanan I had a boner while I was getting my hair cut, I’ll never live this shit down. Never. I already feel guilty. I know I owe Olivia another apology, but I’m sure she’ll be better off if I just leave her alone at this point.

“He didn’t say much, just you and her had a thing and you were not happy when you skipped out on dinner. Abby was all upset and worried about you. What were you thinking upsetting her? You know how Davis is about Abby.”

“I know, I know. I just wanted to get out of there.” I stand up from the bench. “Let’s do a set. I feel like we’re worse than the old men that sit outside the post office and talk shit right now.”

He stands up and assists me in moving weights off the bar. “You go first.”

I find my way to the bench and lie down. He helps me get into position, and then I go to work, lifting the bar straight up and then lowering it to my chest. Over and over, up and down until I’ve completed ten reps, and then he helps me bracket it.

I’m huffing and puffing as I sit up.

When I change places with Kanan, he proceeds to bench, and I hold on to the bar lightly so I know what movement he’s making. I start to talk, and when I do, I can’t stop. “I fucked up. God, I fucked up, Kanan. Olivia... she’s something else. She has the sweetest laugh I’ve ever heard, and she smells... I don’t even know how to explain it, but it made me feel all cozy inside.” I shake my head. I just met the woman and I’m waxing poetic about her.

When I stop talking, he brackets the bar and huffs. “So what? Did you ask her out?”

Stunned, I shake my head. “No, of course not.”

He stands up, shoves me from the bar with a push to my shoulder so he can take his turn, and I take my position back on the bench. “If you like her, why didn’t you ask her out? That doesn’t even make sense.”

I shrug and listen to him count as I do ten reps. When I set the bar on the bracket, I sit up, huffing. “It actually makes perfect sense. I’m sure I’m not her type.” I don’t get into all the reasons why I’m probably not her type. Kanan doesn’t want to hear that shit, and honestly, I’m tired of thinking about it.

He moves from the bar and comes to stand beside me. His hand grips my shoulder. “Yeah, well, the bad thing about it is you’ll never know. If you don’t put yourself out there, how are you going to know if you’re her type or not?”

I suck in a deep breath, knowing he’s right. I know that the chemistry between Olivia and me was like nothing I’ve ever felt before, and I’d give anything to pursue it. But I also know that my life right now is too fucked up. With therapy, doctor’s appointments, and no real job at this point, let’s face it, I’m not really a catch. Nope. I’m doing the right thing. Olivia’s better off without me.

# CHAPTER 6

# OLIVIA

IT'S BEEN THREE WEEKS, and he's obviously forgotten about me. I don't know what I expected, but complete silence, not even a text or phone call, surprised me. There's no way I'm the only one that felt the connection that day in my salon.

Since then, it's all I've thought about, and I'm now to the point where I'm wondering if I just made it all up. Maybe I've exaggerated it in my mind or something. You know how you eat something and you think it's the best thing you've ever eaten. Then you go back, order the same thing, and it's not as good as you remember. I'm thinking that's what's happened with Jason.

I've worked it up in my head, and when I see him again, the instant attraction will be gone. My toes won't curl, my nipples won't harden, and I won't feel that tug in my lower belly. I'm so convinced that this is the case that I'm ready to test my theory.

That's why I'm standing outside the front doors of the rehab center, staring up at the big glass windows.

There are a few people inside staring out at me, and instantly I feel out of place. I'm not one to get ruffled, though, so I pull my shoulders back, lift my chin up, open the door, and step in before I can talk myself out of it.

A few people stop what they're doing and look my way. I smile at them and look around the room.

There's an information desk with four people in line. I'm about to get in the back of that line when I freeze.

This is crazy.

I don't chase men. That's not what I do or who I am. And if Jason wanted to see me, he could have tracked me down easily. He could have gotten a message to me through Davis and Abby or even gotten my number by calling the shop. But he didn't do any of those things. And what am I doing? Showing up at his door like I'm some kind of stalker. My God, why didn't I just take the hint?

I pull my bag farther up my shoulder and turn on my heel, ready to go out the door I just came in.

"Hey, Olivia."

I wince before I even turn around. Davis Jones. I throw a hand up and look at him with a nod. "Hey, Davis. How's it going?"

He's in full uniform, navy blue head to toe with a patch that says security on top of his heart. "Good. How you doing?"

I keep moving toward the exit. "I was just leaving... it's good to see you."

I'm backing out the door when Davis laughs. "My fiancée was right. I'll never hear the end of it."

Damn. Davis is the big silent type, but of course now, when I'm trying to get the heck outta Dodge, he decides he wants to have a conversation. "Oh yeah, right about what?"

He crosses his arms over his barrel of a chest. "She said you were coming today, but she also said you would chicken out."

My mouth drops. Abby is supposed to be one of my very best friends. I broke down at the book club meeting the other night and told them about what I was thinking of doing today. Of course, they encouraged me. Even Abby, who is usually the voice of reason, said I should do this. Of all my friends, she's the last one I'd expect to call me out. I'm going to be sure to talk to her about this. "I'm not chickening out... I came to my senses, that's all."

He just nods his head. "Yeah, she said you usually talk yourself out of things that are good for you."



I blow a puff of air, and my bangs go flying as I mutter, “Good for me... I’m not so sure about that.”

He gestures his head toward a hallway. “Follow me.”

He starts to walk, but I’m not budging. My legs feel like lead, and I can’t even manage putting one in front of the other. “Follow you where, exactly?”

He stops and looks at me over his shoulder. “Jason’s over at the apartments.”

I still don’t move. “Yeah, uh, I don’t want to bother him at his house. I’ll just go.”

I turn around and get through the door before I hear Davis lumbering behind me. “Olivia, stop.”

I turn and put my hand on my hip. “Bossy, much?”

He just laughs. “Abby said you were a spitfire. Look, I hate this shit. This is not who I am, but you’re here, and even though Jason’s got his head up his ass, I know he’d want to see you.”

I cross my arms over my chest. I’m not easily swayed, but I am curious. “Oh yeah? Why do you think he wants to see me? He sure hasn’t reached out to me in the last three weeks, so you can’t blame me for not wanting to just run and track him down.”

He stares at me with a frown. If it was any other man, I’d probably be intimidated by that look but not on Davis. I’ve seen this guy turn to mush any time Abby or her daughter are around, so I know he’s harmless. He grits his teeth, obviously having some kind of inner debate. When I don’t think he’s going to answer, I am about to go, but he stops me. “He hasn’t been the same since he saw you. Look, you’re one of my fiancée’s best friends. You think I’m going to fuck with you and do something to upset you? No, because I will never do anything to hurt Abby. So can you just do this? You won’t regret it.”

I tilt my head to the side and look at him. There’s a big part of me that wants to leave, but I don’t. Only because I know if I leave now, I’m going to regret it. I’m always going to wonder

what would have happened. Plus, I have to do something to get Jason out of my head, and if I see him and there's no fireworks or anything, I can forget about him. I can move on. "Okay."

His eyebrows lift. "Okay?"

I nod, and he waves for me to go with him. He walks fast, almost like he's afraid I'm going to change my mind or something. I practically have to run to keep up with him, but he doesn't seem to notice.

We get down the long hallway and step outside. He takes me along a path, and when we get to a clearing, there are apartment buildings to one side and small cabins on the other. In the middle is a huge pond and dock. The Whiskey Run Mountains serve as the backdrop, and it's breathtaking. I stop and look around with my mouth wide open. "What? How? Where did this come from?"

Davis comes to a stumbling halt and laughs. "It's something, right? You can't see any of this from the main road. Come on, it's right over here."

He takes us to the first apartment building, and as we walk in the front door, my stomach starts to flutter. I'm not someone that usually gets nervous, but right now, I am. I try to shake it off, but I can't seem to.

Davis stops in front of a door and knocks.

I'm holding my breath the whole time, not ready. I shouldn't have come. I don't know what I was thinking, but I should not be here. Oh my God, what if he has another woman in there? I'm going to look like a fool. Is it too late to run?

I'm about to do just that when the door swings open, and then there's no way I can move. I'm completely rooted to my spot because Jason is standing in front of me, still wet from the shower, with only a towel wrapped around his waist. I bite my lower lip to hold in my groan. I knew he had tattoos on his arms, and all I can do is stare at the ones across his chest.

There's a droplet of water that I watch fall from his collar bone down his chest and finally pool at his lower belly. I rub my

thighs together, but the friction doesn't give me any relief.

Jason doesn't even have to say a word and I have my answer. It wasn't a fluke or a one-time reaction. I am one hundred percent attracted to Jason Hawk. There's no denying it. My mouth has run dry. My body is tingling, and my nipples are already pebbled. I try to take a breath, but there's a hitch in my chest, and no matter what I do, it's like I can't catch up and have to exhale and inhale again real fast. Yep, I want Jason... I want him bad.

I tighten my hold on my bag and stand there with my eyes wide open.

"Jason," Davis says.

Jason's lips break into a smile when he recognizes his friend's voice. "What's up, Davis?"

Davis just smiles. "Oh not much. You usually answer the door with just a towel?"

Jason shrugs. "What? I'm decent. Everything's covered. Right?"

As he asks, he pats the towel, pressing it to his thighs, and I get a good look at his thick manhood outlined behind the towel. *Have mercy.*

Davis grunts. "Yeah, it's covered, but there's a lady present."

Jason doesn't seem fazed. "Oh yeah, what's wrong? You afraid Abby's going to realize she picked the wrong guy?"

I can't help it. I giggle. I have to because Davis seems to get at least three inches taller next to me, and his face transforms from a nice guy to a lethal killing machine in a split second.

And as soon as the laugh escapes me, Jason's mouth drops, and he grips his towel.

# CHAPTER 7

# JASON

“OLIVIA... IS THAT YOU?”

She makes a noise that sounds almost like a whimper. “Yeah, it’s me.”

“But what are you doing here... what—” I let my voice drop off and try my best to void any emotion on my face. Fuck, I’ve thought about her every day for three weeks, and I can hardly believe she’s standing right here in front of me at the door to my apartment. “Come in.”

“I’m outta here.”

I wave Davis away. “Yeah, thanks for bringing her here, man.”

The sound of Davis walking away is all I hear. Olivia is so quiet, I’m not sure what she’s thinking. “Liv...”

“Yeah?” she says softly.

I smile, still unable to believe she’s right here. I hold an arm out in the direction of her voice. “Where are you?”

She wraps her hand in mine, and I lace our fingers together and pull her to me gently. “Will you come in?”

“Y-yeah,” she stutters.

I pull her in the door and shut it behind us. “Can I get you something to drink?”

“No, I’m fine.”

I hold her hand tighter. She seems nervous, and I don’t want that. “Have a seat.”

I gesture toward the direction of the couch, and she starts to move, pulling me with her. She helps me find where I'm going, and we both sit down. I turn in my seat until my bare knee presses against her bare knee, and I gulp. "Shit." I grab the towel and shoot to my feet. "Shit, let me get dressed. I'm sorry, I forgot."

She giggles, and I stop, loving the sound from her lips. "I just flashed my junk at you, didn't I?"

She laughs. "It's okay."

I shake my head and put some distance between us. "I'm sorry, Olivia. Geez, you're all I've thought about in three weeks, and the first thing I do when you come around is flash you. Fuck, you have to think I'm some kind of pervert at this point."

"I don't," she says.

I open my mouth to say more but then slam it shut. I've made a horrible impression on her twice now, and I don't know if I can come back from it. Hell, I don't even know if I should try because I don't even know what dumb thing I'll do next.

She reaches for me and squeezes my arm. "Why don't you go get dressed? I want to talk about something with you."

I nod and take two steps away before stopping. "Wait. That doesn't sound good."

She laughs, and I swear my heart does a flip-flop.

"It's fine, Jason. Go put clothes on."

I nod and then worry my lip the whole way into the bedroom. I grab my clothes and get dressed really fast before making my way back into the living room. I'm probably being foolish, but I don't want her to leave.

"Where's your cane?"

My steps falter, but I make my way back to the couch. "It should be in the corner by the door. I sort of have everything memorized here and don't need it much. I always try to have it when I go out."

I sit heavily on the couch next to her, and the mood has shifted. It's not her fault that she's curious, but it's like a sudden reminder of my handicap. "So what are you doing here?"

I wince when I realize how blunt that sounds. "I mean, I'm glad you came," I say, but even to me, it's like an afterthought.

She's quiet and starts to talk softly. "I came to cut your hair."

"Cut my hair?" Of all the things I thought she'd say—or hoped she'd say—I wasn't expecting that. "You just cut my hair three weeks ago."

"Yeah, I know, but I figured..."

Her voice trails off, and I lean forward. "You figured what? Just say it."

"This is a bad idea. Forget it. I'm going to go."

The cushions on the couch shift, and I know she's on the move. I stand up and reach out for her. When my hands wrap around her waist, I pull her back and set her down on the cushion next to me. She's close, so close I can feel her thighs pressed against mine, and one of her legs is over mine. "Don't go," I tell her gruffly.

"Why should I stay? You're obviously not happy I'm here."

I guess it's good I put clothes on because in the towel, she would be able to tell how excited I am that she's here. "Yes, I am. If you want to cut my hair, cut it. Do whatever you want to do. But I want you to stay."

She blows out a breath. "Jason, I feel like I keep saying the wrong thing, and I'm sorry. I came because I know you weren't comfortable at the shop. Plus, it's been three weeks. I have some clients that come and get their hair cut every week. And..." Her voice trails off, and I hear her take a deep breath and let it out. "And I wanted to see you."

I reach for her and wrap my hand around her thigh. I don't have the right to touch her, but I'm yearning to have my hands on her. "That's really sweet of you. I would appreciate you cutting my hair."

I may not be able to see her, but I can feel a change. She's happy, and she jumps up from her seat. "I'm going to get set up and get a chair for you."

I stay in my seat as she works around the room. I hear her drag one of the kitchen chairs and what sounds like her setting things on the table. When she comes to me and grabs my hand, I go to her readily.

As I sit in the chair, I suck in a breath and try to prepare myself for what's about to come. She talks me through what she's doing. She brought her cape and wraps it around me. She puts her hand on my shoulder. "I'm getting the scissors out."

"Okay."

Snip, snip. I get lost in the sound of her tiny breaths and the clip of the scissors. "What did you want to talk to me about?"

"Maybe we should save that conversation for another time."

I sit rigidly in my seat. There's no way I'm going to let her walk out of here without talking about whatever she came here for. I'll go crazy. "Put me out of my misery, Liv. What did you want to talk about?"

Instead of answering me, she keeps cutting and randomly running her fingers through my hair. "I like that you call me Liv."

I grunt in response.

"Tell me about you," she says. It's more of a question, and I don't have the heart to tell her no.

"There's not a lot to tell, really. I know by now you've heard about how I lost my sight. It was two years ago, and doctors have said it's temporary—I should be getting my eyesight back—but they are not happy with my progress. Walker is bringing in a specialist."

I stop talking, and she massages my shoulder before attacking my hair again. "What about hobbies? Have any of those?"

"I used to do woodworking. My family owns a furniture store, and we made everything we sold. When I went into the Army and then... to work for Walker, I still spent any time I could



making things. But I haven't been in a workshop since... you know."

She pauses on my hair and then gasps. "Jason, did you make the furniture in here?"

I can't help but smile. "Yeah, the coffee table, entry table, kitchen table and chairs and my...bed. My dad brought it all here when I moved in."

"It's so beautiful. I've never seen anything so beautiful."

I feel my chest swell. "They're pieces I made years ago. They're probably weathered now."

Her voice is thick with emotion. "No, gosh, they're perfect. I can't believe you made those. They're beautiful. I want to see the bed before I leave." She giggles. "That sounds bad... I mean, you know, I want to see the bed you made."

Fuck me, just hearing her say it has my pulse racing. "Sure," I choke out. If I don't change the subject, I can't be responsible for what happens next. "So what about you?"

She combs my hair with her fingers. "I do hair, as you know. I'm in a book club with Abby and a few of our friends. I enjoy reading."

"What else?"

She puts her hands on my shoulders. "Looks good. I'm done."

I nod. "Uh-huh, you're not getting off that easy. Tell me about you."

She undoes the cape, and I sit here as she starts putting things away. "There's not a lot to tell. I'm divorced—"

"You were married?"

She blows out a breath. "Yeah, I was for around three years."

"What happened?" I ask her and then realize she probably doesn't want to talk about this. "I mean, if you'd rather not—"

She cuts me off. "No, it's fine. It's the past. He cheated on me."

I move to my feet. "He cheated on you?"

She keeps packing her things away. “Yeah, but it’s fine. I’ve moved on.”

“He sounds like a dumbass.” I could say a few other choice words, but I figure the less I say on the matter, the better.

“He is. I dodged a bullet, though. The last I heard, he’s remarried and his wife is pregnant, and he’s cheating on her too.”

I shake my head. Her ex-husband obviously isn’t a good man, not the kind of man she deserves.

# CHAPTER 8

# OLIVIA

HE GROWLS. He literally growls, and the sound echoes through the room. I can feel the anger vibrating off him as he grimaces in my direction. “He’s an asshole. I hope you know that.”

I laugh, shaking my head. “Oh, trust me, I learned my lesson on that one.”

Jason holds his hand out, and I don’t hesitate in putting mine in it. He pulls us back over to the couch, and when I sit next to him, I run my fingers through his hair. “You’re going to have to take another shower. You have hair on you.”

He tilts his head into my fingers, and I scratch at his nape. He grunts as he stops my hand and then brings it down, still holding it against his chest. He’s smiling, and I can’t help but smile too. “What are you smiling about?”

He shrugs, still smiling. “I like when you touch me.”

Dang, why do I like touching him so much? This is only the second time I’ve been around him, and I can’t seem to keep my hands to myself.

I open my mouth and then shut it. I should just let it go, but that’s not who I am. “Can I ask you something, Jason?”

He tenses, and I’m not surprised. It’s obvious he doesn’t like to talk about himself. “You can ask me anything.”

I nod. “Yeah, but does that mean you’re going to answer me? And are you going to tell me the truth?”

He blows out a breath. “I’ll answer you, and I’ll never lie to you. What do you want to know?”

I tap him with my shoulder. “Wow! Promises, promises. You’ll never lie to me, huh? I’m going to hold you to that.”

He’s still sitting rigidly next to me, but the soft way he’s holding my hand is surprising. “Relax, I’m not asking you for state secrets or anything.”

He sighs and nods his head, but he’s still tense.

I pry my hand from his but just so I can curl my fingers into his chest. “I’m wondering why you haven’t contacted me these last three weeks. I mean, I don’t get it.”

He doesn’t answer me, and I start to ramble. “I just thought we had a connection, but maybe I was wrong. Maybe I was the only one that felt anything, and here I am showing up at your door and you obviously don’t want me here. I should go.”

I’m about to get up when he grips my hand harder and puts his other hand on my knee. “You’re not leaving until we talk this out.”

I bite on to my lower lip. I’ve always hated it when people try to tell me what to do. When you’ve been on your own for as long as I have been, you get used to doing what you want when you want. But there’s something about the way Jason commands me. I suck in a breath and bite my lip. Even now, just sitting next to him, my heart is racing. “Look, I know I’ve put you in a weird position—”

He cuts me off. “I’m glad you are here.”

I like hearing it, but it’s not enough. “But...”

“There’s no buts... I do like having you here.”

I pull from his grip and lean away from him. “Okay, so you do want me here.”

“Yes.”

I don’t know if I’m just being difficult or what, but I need more. I’ve pretty much stalked him to his house, and I need something that tells me this is not all one-sided. I feel foolish, and I hate this feeling. “And?”

He reaches for me, but I dodge his grip. He frowns and holds his hands out to me. “Olivia.”

“What?”

“Fuck,” he says in frustration before running his hand roughly through his hair. “What do you want from me?”

I get up and stand with my arms crossed over my chest. “I want to know what you’re thinking.”

He moves to the end of the couch and lets his elbows rest on his knees. “Okay, here’s what I’m thinking. Of course, I felt something with you. I told you that I did. The reason I haven’t contacted you in the last three weeks is because I figured I’d freaked you out. I thought for sure you thought I was some kind of freak or something, and—”

“Why? Why would I think that?”

He smirks and shakes his head. “Uh, because...” He gestures to himself. “You know.”

I bite my lip to try and contain my smile. “What? You thought you admitting having an erection would offend me?”

He nods his head. “Well, yeah.”

I move closer to him. “No, I wasn’t offended. I was flattered actually. And you weren’t crude about it or anything. It didn’t make me feel weird or violated in any way. It made me feel... good.”

He blows out a breath. “So you’re telling me I have a chance.”

I can’t just give in. Yeah, I chased him down, and yeah, I’m practically throwing myself at him, but he’s going to have to show some interest. “Well, I mean, I came here, didn’t I?”

I move across the room and finish cleaning up and putting my things away, and Jason stands up. “What are you doing?”

Guilt floods me, but I’m not going to lie to him. I had promised Rick a second date, and I’m not going to go back on it. “I have to go.” With my voice softer, I tell him, “I have a date tonight.”

His voice drops, and he huskily replies, “A date? You have a date tonight?”

I grab my bag and sling it over my arm. “Yeah, I have a date.”

He stands up and comes toward me. I don’t try and dodge him. I wait until he’s close, and I put my hand on his shirt. The forlorn look on his face is almost my undoing. “So you’re seeing someone?”

I run my hand from his shirt to his shoulder and squeeze. “This is our second date.”

He grits his teeth. Anger is rolling off him. He’s a lot bigger than me, and maybe I should be scared of that anger, but I’m not. “What kind of game is this you’re playing, Olivia? You come here and tell me you felt a connection with me and then tell me you have to leave because you have a date with another man.”

“Jason,” I all but whisper.

“Yeah?” he answers gruffly.

I go to my tiptoes and press against him. My breasts are squished between us, and he has a harsh intake of breath. My whole body feels hot and feverish. “I’m going to kiss your cheek now.”

He stands rigidly, but when he doesn’t deny me, I press my lips to his cheek. I’m so close to his mouth, I could turn my head just a little and our lips would mesh together. I want to, but I hold myself back. His hands are at my waist, and his fingers dig into my hips. He’s holding me to him and I love the way he makes me feel protected in his arms. He says my name gruffly. “Olivia.”

I lean back and slide my hands up and down his chest. I can feel him vibrating under my palm. “I came here to tell you that I like you, Jason Hawk. I like you a lot. But...”

He tugs me by the waist until my lower body is pressed to him and I feel his impressive manhood against my belly. “But what?”

Shit, I know what I need to do, but feeling him pressed up against me makes it hard. I'm not thinking right. "If you want me, you're going to have to show me. I don't normally do the chasing." I slide my hand up his chest one more time, feeling his muscles flex before releasing him and stepping back out of his grasp. "I need to go... I'm going to be late. If you want to talk to me, ask me out or whatever, you know how to find me."

His mouth is hanging open, and I force myself to walk out of his apartment and not stop until I've walked across the compound, out to the parking lot and to my car. When I stop at my door, I let out a long breath. I definitely didn't think this all the way through. Instead of getting in my car, I put my back to it and lean against the door. With my face tilted to the sky, I count to ten and take a few deep breaths. I did my thing. I let Jason know I'm interested and the ball is in his court. There's a part of me that is worried because he let me walk out of his apartment. And he didn't come after me. What if he never does?



# CHAPTER 9

# JASON

SHE HAS A DATE.

I hear her walk out the door and the sound of the door shutting behind her, and I'm glued to the spot where I'm standing.

She has a date... with another man.

I start to pace, replaying everything since she walked into my apartment.

She kissed me. She admitted that she felt a connection and it wasn't just me... then she told me she had a fuckin' date, and I let her walk out the front door.

I'm an idiot.

If I'm doing this. I need to do it right. I can't just be some guy coasting in life. I need to get my shit together, and I'm going to start by talking to Walker.

Grabbing my cane, I walk out of my apartment and over to the compound. My apartment and the compound is where I feel most comfortable, and I make it to Walker's office without any problems.

"Hey, Jason, how you doing today?" Brooklyn asks.

I nod and answer her patiently even though I'm completely on edge thinking about the conversation I need to have with Walker. I know it's overdue and I've avoided it, but I can't put it off any longer. "I'm good. How you doing, Brook?"

She comes and reaches for my arm. "I'm good. You here to see Walker? He's in his office."

She's walking with me to his office, and I know the instant Walker sees us. He's protective of Brooklyn. He has been for a long time, and it only got worse after someone kidnapped her a few years ago. They got married right after that, and Walker is even more possessive since he put a ring on her finger.

His voice is gruffer than usual. "Jason... wife."

He must give her a look because she lets me go at the chair and laughs. "I'll be ready to go home when you are, husband."

"Jason is my last appointment for the day and then I'll be ready." His voice drops even more, and I can imagine the look he's giving her.

Brook excuses herself, and Walker tells me, "Sit down."

I reach for the seat and sit down on the edge of it. "I didn't have an appointment."

He chuckles. "I know. But you're the only one I haven't met with, so I knew it would be any time."

I nod. Walker is a smart man, and he knows why I'm here. I want to know what my future is here at the compound. "Are you serious about giving me a job here, Walker?"

He pauses, and I hear the creak of his chair as he sits down. "How is your therapy going?"

I tense and sit up a little taller. "I'm at every appointment. I haven't missed one."

He laughs, and I know that laugh. Walker knows all, and there's no getting anything by him. "Yeah, I know you've been at every therapy appointment, but I'm asking you how it's going. Are you participating?"

I shrug.

I hear the shuffling of papers, and Walker starts to talk again. "Mr. Hawk attends every session but he does not talk about the events that brought him here. When asked about his future, he is unable to articulate what his future holds. He is able to function with basic day-to-day life, but I have been unable to evaluate him in other situations."

I sit quietly, and he shuffles some more papers. “This is from your medical doctor. It is recommended to have further testing. There has not been any improvement with the patient’s vision.”

I lean back in the chair and cross my arms over my chest. “So basically, you’re not going to hire me if my sight doesn’t come back. Is that what you’re saying?”

“Fuck you, Hawk.”

I jerk in my seat and shake my head with a laugh. Walker has always been no-nonsense. He bangs his hand on the desk. When he comes around, the desk grinds as he sits on it. “I want to hire you.”

“To do what? What the fuck could I do here, Walker?”

He changes the subject. “I’ve heard the talk. Some of the guys think I brought you guys here because I feel guilty. What do you think?”

I shrug. I do know that Walker shouldn’t feel guilty, but I can’t seem to wrap my head around why he would bring me here.

“Do you think I feel guilty? You probably know me better than anyone. We’ve both been around the block.”

I shake my head. “Are you calling me old?”

He chuckles. “We’re in our mid-forties, and even though we don’t want to admit it, we’re getting older, Hawk. But no, I’m not calling you old. I’m asking you what you think.”

I blow out a breath. If he wants to know what I think, I’ll tell him. “No, I don’t think you feel guilty. You have no reason to feel guilty. You brought Davis here because even though he only has one damn leg, you couldn’t find someone better to head up your security. Kanan was raised doing landscaping, and he’s perfect for the position you put him in.”

“And Reyes and Colter?” he asks.

I shake my head. “What? You need your ego stroked, old man? I’ll do it. You’re right about them too. Colter, even with a fuckin’ brain injury, is the best hacker. We all know it. And Reyes is going to start going on missions again. He lives for

that shit. It all makes sense. They ALL make sense, but you know what doesn't make sense?" I pause. When he doesn't answer, I continue. "Me. I don't make sense."

He laughs. "I know you don't feel it. But you're the same guy that led men on over fifty missions for me. You are the same man that has saved hundreds of women and children, at least a dozen dignitaries, and countless others that would not be alive today if it wasn't for you. You are that same man, Hawk."

Fuck I wish I had the same conviction he does. "I want to be that man again."

"Okay, so now we're getting somewhere. At least you want it. Now you need to prove it."

"Prove it?" I repeat.

He's on the move again, walking around his office. "Yes, prove it. I need you to do more than just show up, Hawk. I need you to do what you do. Be a leader. I need you to take control of yourself. I need you to do better."

I hate the sound of defeat in my voice. "I can't control when my vision is going to come back, Walker. Trust me, I wish I could, but I can't."

"Fuck, I'm not asking you to see. I'm asking you to feel." He walks back over to me and pounds his hand against my chest. "I need you to heal, and the only way to do that is to be open to it. I need you to give it your all."

"And then I'll have a job... so I can stay in Whiskey Run."

He pauses, and I'm holding my breath waiting for his response. "Yeah, I have a job for you, but you're going to have to work for it. I'm not handing you anything."

I nod in understanding. "I will. I promise."

The desk groans under his weight again. "Okay, so I'm going to have you start a new therapy. Don't ask me what it is, just be here tomorrow at ten in the morning. Also, the specialist will be in town this week or early next week. He's just stopping in as a favor to me, and it may be last minute, but I need you available when he's here."

“Yeah, I got it. No problem.”

He claps his hands together. “All right, good. Anything else?”

I stand up and know I should go, but I have to ask. “And if I do it... if I take control of my therapy and put in the work, I’ll have a job?”

Walker clasps me on the shoulder. “Yes, and I hope you get your shit together, Hawk, because I have the perfect job for you.”

It’s on the tip of my tongue to ask, but I don’t. All that matters now is even though I’m still living in darkness, my future seems a little brighter. Things I want are within reach; I just have to make it happen. I nod my head, thank him for his time, and walk out of his office.

After saying bye to Brooklyn, I go to the main lobby and sit down. I have so much to do, but for the first time in a long time, I feel an urgency inside me. I want to get my life together.

I pull my phone from my pocket. “Hey, Siri, call Abby.”

I put it to my ear and wait for her to answer her phone. “Hey, Jason, you okay? Is Davis okay?”

“Yeah, everyone’s fine. I need a favor.”

She pauses. “Uh, okaaaay. What can I do for you?”

“I need Olivia’s phone number please?”

There’s another long pause, and I can’t blame her. That first day I met Olivia, I wasn’t nice to her. “Please, Abby. She came to see me today.”

“I know. I mean, I knew she was coming to see you.”

I run my hand over my face. I still can’t believe I’m sitting here while she’s out on a date with another man. “Yeah, well, she left before I could get her number.”

“Uh, Jason, you should probably know. I mean, she’s...”

When her voice trails off, I grit my teeth. “You mean she’s on a date right now? I know. She told me.”

“And you still want to talk to her?”

Fuck, is the douchebag she’s out with more important to her than I thought? “Yeah, I want to ask her out.” I need her number, and I’m not above begging. “Please, Abby. I promise I won’t hurt her. It kills me to think she’s out on a date with someone else, but I’m not going to cause any problems. I just want her to know I’m thinking of her and that I want to go out with her.”

She blows out a breath. “Okay, fine. But you better not make me regret this, Jason Hawk. Olivia is one of my very best friends, and even though she comes across as some badass, I don’t want her hurt.”

I nod, anticipation already fluttering in my chest. “I got it. I understand. You have my word.”

She rattles off the number, and I repeat it back to her. She tells me she’ll text it to me too, and only when I hang up the phone do the nerves set in. I’m doing this. I’m really doing this. I’m going to go after the woman I want because I can be the man that I once was. I have to be.

# CHAPTER 10



# OLIVIA

JASON HAWK IS A FOOL. Did I want him to stop me from going on this date? Yes, I did. But he didn't. I stood in that damn parking lot way longer than I should have. I kept watching for any sight of Jason, and I told myself if I saw him, I'd go to him, but he never came. At the ten-minute mark, I left.

Now here I sit.

The Steakhouse is probably the fanciest restaurant that Whiskey Run has to offer. It's known in town as the place you go for dates and special occasions. I'd much prefer to eat at Red's Diner, though.

"So I'm thinking after dinner, we can go back to my place. We can rent a movie... have a drink."

Rick is looking at me, and I feel as if I'm under a microscope. He wants to know what I think about his suggestion, but we haven't even been served our entree yet. I already know I'm going to tell him no, but instead I shrug my shoulders and take another sip of my wine.

"Here you go. Be careful, the plates are hot."

The server sets our plates down in front of us and turns to Rick. "Do you want to cut into your steak to make sure it was cooked the way you like it?"

I look down at my plate. I ordered steak too, but our waitress is not worried about mine. Distracted, I cut into my food and ignore the byplay between Rick and the waitress. He flirts openly with her, but it doesn't bother me. A part of me wonders if it's bad form to try and fix them up when I bail on

this date early. They talk and make eyes at each other, but I pretend not to notice. The more occupied he is with her, the longer I can sit here and think about how dumb Jason Hawk is. I literally stalked him to his house, and he just let me leave.

When the waitress walks away, Rick smiles at me. “How is it?”

“It’s good. How’s yours?”

He keeps smiling toward the waitress and then back at me to see if I’m watching him or not. I act like I don’t notice but I’m secretly pounding my fist in the air. I don’t feel bad now for when I tell him that it’s not going to work between the two of us. “Mine’s good,” he replies even though he hasn’t even taken a bite yet.

We eat in silence for a few minutes before Rick picks his phone up from the table. “Do you care if I step away and make a phone call? It’s work. I’ll be right back.”

I nod my head. “Sure, no problem.”

Instead of going outside, he disappears down the hall toward the bathrooms. I take a few more bites of my food and then lay my fork down. After taking a drink of my wine, I dig my phone out of my purse and grip it a little tighter when I see I have a text message from a number I don’t recognize.

“Hey Liv. It’s me, Jason. I got your number from Abby.”

I shouldn’t answer. I’m on a date, but when I look around, my date is nowhere to be found. I hit reply before I can talk myself out of it. “Hey.”

I hit send and hold my breath, wondering if he’s waiting for me to answer him or if he sent it and then completely forgot about me.

The text bubbles pop up, and my eyes are glued to my phone. “How was your date?”

I look around and still no Rick. “I’m still on it.”

His response is immediate. “He must be boring if you’re on your phone. Go out with me tomorrow night?”

Shoot, what does that even say about me that I'm making plans with one man while I'm on a date with another? "Can we talk about this later?"

"Go out with me tomorrow."

The text is almost immediate, and there is no question mark this time. It's more of a demand. My stomach does a little somersault and clenches. "Okay, tomorrow sounds good."

"Can you come here? 6pm?"

I open my calendar app and look at my schedule tomorrow. My last appointment is at four. I may be pushing it, but I can make it happen. "Yes. Tomorrow at 6. I'll be there."

"Liv?"

"Yeah?"

"Don't let him touch you tonight."

As soon as I read the text, I let out a breath with an oomph. I cross my legs because his text hits me right in my core. I don't know if he wants me to respond to that, but I don't have to wonder long.

"Liv."

And then another text. "You got me?"

I shouldn't agree. I should argue with him and tell him he doesn't have any right to tell me who can touch me. But the truth is I don't want any other man to touch me. When I think about it, the only one I want to have hands on me is the one I'm texting with. "Okay," I answer.

But those four letters are not enough for him. He texts me back. "I need to hear you say it. Tell me what I want to hear, Liv."

I don't realize I'm smiling until I look around the room and a woman at the next table smiles back at me. I nod and then stare back at my phone. "I don't like for people to tell me what to do, but I'm going to go along with this one. I won't let him touch me." There's only one man I want to have their hands on

me, but I don't include that part. No, I've put it pretty plainly to him that I want him. I don't need to tell him again.

I don't wait for his response. I type out another text. "I'm putting my phone away. I'll see you tomorrow night."

As soon as I hit send, I put my phone back in my purse. I look up just as Rick is coming down the hall, running his hand through his hair. When he sits down, I ignore the smeared lipstick on his face. I should be mad, but I'm not. Am I any better? I was just texting with another man and making plans to see him. No, Rick messing around with I'm assuming the waitress lessens my guilt a little bit, though. "I need to make it an early night tonight, Rick. You care if I head on home?"

He doesn't even try to hide his relief. "Yeah, sure, that's fine with me. You must be exhausted after being on your feet all day."

"Right. Well, I appreciate the date, but I think we can both agree that this is not going to work out."

His face turns red, and it's obvious he's wondering if I know what he's been up to, but I don't give anything away. Everything I say to him is with a smile. "I just don't feel like we have a connection, that's all. You understand, don't you?"

"But I thought we could go back to my house..." He starts, and I shake my head. Obviously, this man's ego doesn't like being turned down.

I lean over the table and pick up his napkin. "Hold still. You got some lipstick on your mouth. Let me get that for you."

I wipe the lipstick off, and his eyes meet mine. I'm telling him I know what he's been up to and it's best he let me just walk away. I let him know without even saying a word.

When I withdraw my hand, he's nodding his head.

I nod and stand up, grabbing my purse. I pull out my wallet and take out enough money to pay for my food and toss it on the table. "Thanks, Rick. Have a good night."

He stands up and stutters, "I can buy your meal and drive you home."

I shake my head. I really should have driven myself. “Nope, I only live a few blocks away, and I need a walk anyway.”

He puts a hand on my arm. “I can walk with you.”

I shake my head. “You haven’t even finished your meal yet. Stay. Enjoy. Thanks again, Rick.”

I walk out of the restaurant, and already my mind is on another man that’s across town.

I’m almost home when I pull my phone out just to see if Jason has texted me back. I read the four words and almost trip over my own feet. I stop moving—hell, the whole damn town seems to freeze up around me. I’m staring open-mouthed at my phone. My whole body flushes with heat, and every muscle seems to tense as I read the words again. “That’s my good girl.”

Fuck me. I never would have thought I’d be the type to seek the approval of a man, but that right there has me floored. This is going to be my undoing.

I start walking again, and the night is weighing heavily on me. I’m not looking for anything permanent. I’m more of a good time, no strings attached kind of woman. I date and have fun. There’s no talk of commitment, and I’m fine with it. I’m happy.

So why does being with Jason Hawk make me think I might just want more?

# CHAPTER 11

# JASON

IT'S ALMOST ten a.m. when I walk out of my apartment the next morning. I tossed and turned most of the night, wondering if Olivia made it home okay and how her date went, and I'm feeling it today.

When I walk out of my building, I hear someone call my name. "Jason Hawk."

I stop. "Yeah?"

A man comes closer. "I'm Chris Johnson. Walker arranged our therapy appointment this morning. I thought I'd meet you here and we'd walk over together."

"Sure." I laugh. "I know where the conference rooms and therapy offices are, though. Trust me, I'm there enough I have the steps memorized."

"Right. Well, we're going somewhere different for therapy this morning. You okay with that?"

I grit my teeth. One thing I hate since losing my sight is change. I hate when plans change, locations change, times change. I already have it all worked out in my head how long it will take to get somewhere, how many steps and everything else I could have planned ahead for. Spontaneity is not my friend, but I'm not going to tell him no. I need to do this. "Sure."

Chris talks me through where we're going, and it seems we're walking away from the center of the compound. He tells me as we pass the lake and the houses, and I know the direction is

off. I've never been back here. "So what kind of therapy we doing today?"

"You'll see, but I think you'll like it."

I nod grimly. "Please tell me this isn't some kind of horse therapy or something. I've heard about that, and I really don't want to be getting on a horse right now."

He laughs next to me. "No horses."

"Mountain hiking?"

"Nope."

"Music therapy?"

"Nope."

I'm about to guess something else when he touches my arm to let me know he's stopped. "We're here. Hang tight and let me get the doors unlocked and open."

I stand still and pay attention to the sounds. It's a lock on a chain, and I hear the clink as it rattles and he drops it to the ground. There's a loud thud and then the creak as what sounds like big doors opening and then banging against wood siding. Are we at a barn? I wonder.

And that's when it hits me. Memories flood me of growing up and time with my dad. The smell of wood and sawdust stirs all around me. For just a second, I let the memories sweep over me and I bask in them. They are some of the best times of my life.

Chris comes to stand next to me. "We're at the wood shop."

My mouth drops. "But what are we doing here?"

He puts his hand on my back. "Today, we're going over where everything is. I'm going to show you the layout and where everything is located. Depending on how much time you got, we may even try making something."

"Making something?" I ask him.

He leads me into the barn, and the smell is even heavier in here. "Yeah, make something. Everything is state of the art.



There's been additions to everything. Safety guards included. And braille instructions for every machine."

I stutter as I try to process what he's saying. "But... I can't... I mean, come on, I can't make anything."

His reply is instant. Almost like he was prepared with the fact I would fight him on this. "According to your file, you were a master craftsman."

"I was, but that was before...."

I let my voice trail off because I don't need to finish the sentence. We both know what I was going to say.

Chris starts to move around the room. "Look, it's up to you. You won't be the first blind guy to turn out furniture and wood projects. This is the therapy that Walker wanted you to do, but if you don't want to, I'm not going to make you."

"Therapy? This is my therapy?"

He laughs. "Yeah, this is your therapy. I'm a licensed therapist that also enjoys working with my hands. Now I don't think I'm as good as you, but I'm good."

I cross my arms over my chest. "Are you bullshitting me right now? This is my therapy?"

He walks toward me. "I'm not bullshitting you. This is your therapy. Look at it this way. We're going to talk and work through some things, but we're also going to make some cool stuff too." He pauses for just a second. "Now are you in or not?"

I would give anything to see the room right now. I want to see the machines, to inspect each piece of wood but I know that's not possible, and wishing for it is not going to make it happen. "I'm in... but you're going to have to show me everything. Take me back to the door and start from there."

Chris laughs and claps his hands together. "All right, let's do this."

We spend the next few hours just exploring the small barn. Chris is patient and shows me everything. He even tests me

out on where things are and how to get to them, turn them on and all the safety features.

It's midday before I realize that my cheeks are hurting from smiling so much. Walker got it right again; this is exactly what I needed.

"All right," Chris starts, interrupting my thoughts. "So what do you think? Let's make something and then call it a day."

"Make something?" I ask, freezing in my tracks.

He clasps me on the shoulder. "I'm right here, man. I'm going to walk you through it."

I suck in a nervous breath. "Okay."

"Yes!" he says, sounding more excited than me. "All right, so let's start simple. I'm talking grade school level project. What do you think?"

I nod my head. "Right. I have an idea."

He claps his hands together excitedly. "Let's do it."

I tell him what I'm doing as I do it. I walk around the room and grab two pieces of wood first, one 2 X 4 and one dowel rod.

I go over to the table saw and stand in front of it nervously.

I can hear Chris breathing over my shoulder, and when I hesitate, he says, "You can do this, Jason. I won't let you cut off a finger."

I nod and turn on the machine. I put on my safety glasses and measure the wood where I need it and lay it flat on the machine. After undoing the safety guard on the blade, I make sure my fingers are out of the way and then slowly cut the piece of wood into a square block. I measure and keep going, cutting each to the same size. I should probably feel embarrassed to be making such an easy project, but this may just be the biggest and most profound project of my life.

I cut the end of the dowel rod next.

When the pieces are cut, I grab the nail and hammer and connect the dowel to the square block.

When I'm done, I hold it up like I'm inspecting it. "How does it look?"

Chris pats my shoulder. "It looks good, man. How many of those did you make growing up?"

I laugh as the memories surface. When I was growing up, we always took furniture to the flea market in town. I wanted to make extra money, and I would always make these paper towel holders to sell. "I made thousands probably and sold them for a dollar apiece back then."

"Well, I think today went well. What about you?"

I shake my head. "We ain't done yet. I cut enough wood to make four, and I need to sandpaper it and stain it." I pause. "Unless you need to go."

He chuckles. "Nope, I'm good. I got all the time in the world."

We set up a spot to work, and Chris watches as I complete my project. "You got plans tonight?"

I nod because for the first time in a long time, I'm looking forward to something. "I do. I have a date."

And for the next thirty minutes, we work on the paper towel holders, and I tell him all about Olivia. I find that Chris is easy to talk to, and I just let it flow. I don't know if it's because I'm working while we talk or what, but I tell him all of it—leaving out the part about the boner at the salon. No one needs to hear that. But I do tell him about how I walked away and she came to see me. I tell him how I'm hoping to stay in Whiskey Run and to secure myself a job here. I just keep blabbing until I have nothing left to say and I feel as if I'm twenty pounds lighter.

When I finish cleaning up, Chris and I walk out together. He walks me through how to lock up, and as we're walking the path back to the apartments, I tell him, "Fuck, this feels good, man. I don't know how to thank you."

He wraps his hand around my shoulder. "Don't thank me. You did this, Jason. You. Did. This."

I couldn't stop the smile if I tried. "I did, didn't I?"

His laugh is loud and boisterous. “Fuck yeah, you did, man.”

As we continue walking, I tell him, “I’ll be honest with you, Chris. You’re my kind of therapist. None of the others say ‘fuck’.”

He laughs again and touches my arm to let me know we’re stopping. “We’re outside your apartment building. What do you say? Ten a.m. tomorrow morning? Meet you at the barn?”

I nod, and already there’s an excitement that fills me. “Yeah, sounds good, man. I’ll be there.”

He starts to walk away. “And good luck on your date tonight. She obviously likes you, Jason. Let her. Stop with the walls because I’m telling you, a woman like that is not going to do the chasing long.”

I throw my hand up, and when he’s gone, there’s a new excitement brewing inside me. I have a date with Olivia. For the first time in a long time, I’m ready to give something my all. I just hope my all is enough.

# CHAPTER 12

# OLIVIA

“I’M GOING to his apartment. I don’t need to wear a dress.”

I’m staring at two sets of eyes, and they’re all giving me knowing looks. Abby is the first one to speak up. “You want to feel good, Olivia, and you love wearing dresses. Wear the dress.”

Chloe is next. “Girl, do you know how many times you’ve dressed me in uncomfortable contraptions because we were going out. Well, it’s payback time. Wear the dress... and the heels.”

I hold my hands up and say, “I’ll wear the dress, but I draw the line at heels. I’m not doing it.”

Abby is sitting on the bed, fidgeting in her seat. Chloe is on the chair in the corner of the room, and they’re both looking at me. “You guys, I could have gotten ready on my own.”

Abby jumps up. “Oh, we know, trust me. You’re the one that always gets us ready for dates, so even though you may not need us, we still wanted to be here to show our support.”

I nod and turn in my seat to look in my mirror. I’m applying mascara when I meet Abby’s gaze in the mirror. She flushes almost guiltily. “So you’re not mad I gave Jason your number?”

I lift my shoulders in a shrug. “I probably would have been mad if you didn’t.”

Abby smiles ear to ear. “He was pretty convincing.”

I think about his blue eyes, that body, and those kissable lips. And wowzers, that voice. “Yeah, I can totally see that.”

Chloe chimes in. “So where are you guys going on this date?”

I shake my head. “I have no idea.” And Abby purses her lips. “Do you know something I don’t know?”

She holds her hand up and shakes her head. “I’m not telling. But I think you’ll like it. It’s low-key and your kind of thing.”

I stand up and smooth my dress down my legs. “Am I overdressed? You said low key. Maybe I should wear something else.”

“You look perfect, Olivia. Plus, you don’t have time to change. You’re going to be late if you don’t get going.”

I look at my watch, and sure enough, I have twenty minutes to get to Jason’s apartment. I walk out to my car with Abby and Chloe in tow. We all hug, and only when I’m in my car and alone do the nerves start to hit. Why am I nervous? I never get nervous, and now two days in a row, my stomach has felt like butterflies are swarming inside it.

I get to Jason’s a little early and take my time walking to the apartment buildings. When I knock on his door, I take a deep breath and wait, anticipation building.

“Hey,” he says when he opens the door.

I gulp. “Hey yourself.” I then roll my eyes because can I get any more awkward? But the fact is, even though I was prepared, I wasn’t. Seeing Jason causes a rush to surge through my head, and I’m not thinking clearly.

He holds out his hand, and I take it. He pulls me in but doesn’t step to the side to let me by; instead, he pulls me until we’re standing toe to toe, chest to chest, and he inhales deeply. “You smell beautiful.”

I can’t help it, I slide my hand up his chest and curl it around his neck. “You look very handsome, Jason.”

His body trembles, and he smiles at me. “I like the way you say my name.”

“Jason?” I ask him, not thinking I say it any different from anyone else.

He nods. “Yeah, trust me. It sounds good coming from your lips.”

He releases his hold on me but threads our hands together. “Come on in, I—”

I stop in my tracks. “What is that smell?”

He shakes his head. “Fuck, I hope you think it’s a good smell. Abby said it was your favorite.”

When I don’t answer him, worry creases his face, and he holds a hand up. “I’m sorry. We can go out if you want. I can turn the stove off and we can go.”

I shake my head, holding his hand a little tighter.

I put my free hand over my chest with my palm right over my heart. “You cooked for me? You made me chicken parmigiana?”

He nods, smiling now, and some of the worry leaves his face. “Yeah, with garlic knots and a side salad.”

“You cooked for me. I’ve never had a man cook for me.” It’s not a question this time but a statement.

He leans in. “Really. If you’d rather go out, we can—”

I cut him off. “Are you kidding me? This is perfect, Jason. I love this.”

He lets out a sigh of relief. “Good. I was thinking dinner and then we can talk.”

I lead him into the kitchen. “It sounds like a perfect night. Do you need a taste tester, because I volunteer as tribute.”

He laughs, and the sound is comforting and soothes me. Maybe too comfortable. How can I feel this way after such a short time? Why do I feel like we just mesh?

I stop in the kitchen, and he points to the table. “Have a seat.”

“I can help,” I insist, but he’s already gently guiding me to the other side of the room. “No way. Part of me cooking dinner for



you is serving you too.”

I open my mouth but close it real fast. I don't even know what to think or feel right now. No one—and I mean no one—has ever made me feel special like this. I watch him walk around the room. He grabs the salad bowl off the counter and brings it to the table, setting it perfectly in the middle. He brings over the basket of bread and puts it down. When he grabs the pan of chicken parmigiana from the oven, I'm holding my breath the whole time, but he does it without any problem at all.

“What can I get you to drink?” he asks when he sets the pan on the table.

“Uh, whatever you're having.”

He grabs a pitcher from the fridge and pours two tall glasses of what looks like sweet tea. When he brings it over, he sits down in the chair next to me, still smiling.

I shake my head. “You amaze me, Jason.”

He laughs. “Why? Because I didn't spill anything or make a mess?”

I reach over and grab his hand. He automatically flips it over and threads our fingers together. “Don't do that. Don't make it seem like it's nothing. I was married, remember. My ex couldn't even bother to get up and get his own drink, let alone bring me one. You just made me a whole meal and served it to me. It may seem small to you, but for me, it really means a lot.”

He nods his head, and his cheeks tinge pink as if I've embarrassed him. “This looks really good, Jason. Thank you,” I tell him and as an afterthought, I lean toward him. “I'm going to kiss you now.”

His eyes widen, and I move in the last few inches. Instead of his cheek this time, I press my lips to his, and on contact, my eyes close as a thrill shoots through my body. His hand comes up and cups the nape of my neck, holding me to him. He deepens the kiss, and when his tongue strokes along mine, a whimper of need escapes me.

When he pulls back, his eyes are glazed over, and he looks proud of himself. I'm not wearing lipstick, but I run my finger along the side of his mouth, just wanting to touch him.

He turns, pressing his lips to the tip of my finger before covering my hand with his. He holds it to his cheek and leans into it. "I'll cook for you every night if this is the thanks I get."

A laugh bursts out, and I'm shaking my head. "Let's see how the food tastes first."

He holds his chest. "Oh, wow, okay, you're testing me, right? It's all good. I'm confident in my abilities. I may not be able to do a lot, but I can cook."

I reach into the pan and put a serving on his plate before putting one on mine. Biting on to my lip, I don't even try to stop myself. "I don't know. I'm sure there's other things you're good at."

The fork he has in his hand drops and rattles against the table, and I smile. If nothing else, I have the man on his toes. I press my hands to my hot cheeks. I never knew flirting could feel this good.

# CHAPTER 13

# JASON

SHE'S FLIRTING WITH ME.

So far, I can't imagine the night getting any better. We eat, and we both take turns talking about our day. She tells me about her appointments and her eighty-year-old client who is a spitfire. I tell her about my new therapy.

"You made something today? With a saw?"

I don't have to see her face to know she sounds worried. I hold my hands up. "It's all good. See, I still have all my fingers. It was amazing, really."

"Well, what did you make? I want to see it."

My cheeks get hot. "It's not a big deal," I tell her, thinking about the little paper towel holder that most fourth graders could make on their own.

"Jason Hawk, you're kidding me right now. I want to see it. What is it?"

I grit my teeth. "It's a paper towel holder. Trust me, it's not a big deal."

She must look around the room for it because she says, "I don't see it. Where is it?"

"I sanded it and stained it today. It's drying at the shop."

"Next time, then. I want to see it next time."

I should still be embarrassed, but I'm not because all I can think about is the fact that she said there's going to be a next time.

When there's a lull in the conversation, I ask her, "Well, what do you think?"

She laughs. "It's so good. I feel like I'm shoveling it in because it's so good. Where did you learn to cook like this?"

I shrug my shoulders. "I never cooked until the last two years, and then I found it's easier to do that instead of going out all the time."

"Well, this has to be the best chicken parmigiana I've ever eaten."

I eat a few more bites, and even though I'm enjoying it, I enjoy talking to her even more. After dinner, we work side by side, packing the food up, putting the dishes in the dishwasher, and cleaning up.

We hold hands as we walk into the living room, and I'm happy when she sits on the couch right next to me. "Sooooo," she starts.

I've put off the question I've wanted to ask her since she walked in the front door, but I can't any longer. "How was your date last night?"

She's quiet, and I know I've done something wrong. "Liv..."

My thoughts are all over the place. Did he take her home with him? Did she let him touch her? Did she agree to another date? Did he kiss her? And the longer her silence is, the more I start to freak out.

"What are you thinking about right now, Jason?"

I open my mouth to answer, but she interrupts me. "You think I'm a slut, don't you?" She says it laughingly, but I can hear the pain in her voice.

"Why would you say that?"

Her voice gets softer, and I can feel her physically lean away from me. "I don't know. I was out with one man last night and then you tonight..."

I shake my head. "I don't think you're a slut."

“That was our second date,” she says, and I don’t know why she feels she needs to remind me because that thought has played over and over in my head since she told me.

I tilt my head to the side. “Yeah, but it’s not serious.”

I can hear the smile return to her voice. “How do you know that?”

I reach for her, but my hand lands in empty space. She doesn’t leave me hanging for long because she grabs my hand and holds it between the two of hers. “Because if you and he were serious, you wouldn’t be here with me.”

“You think you know me.”

I scoot closer to her. “I do know you.”

We’re so close, I can feel her breath on my neck. “What do you know?”

I slide my arm around her and pull her against my chest. My chin is resting on the top of her head. “I know you’re a good person.”

She shakes her head softly. “Dating two people in two nights does not make me a good person.”

I squeeze her tighter. “You’re a good person, Liv. Your best friend threatened me if I fucked with you. Her fiancé, one of my very best friends, threatened to bury me in the desert if I messed with you. You don’t have friends like that if you’re not a good person.”

She nods her head gently. “Davis is good for Abby. She’s turning into a little badass.”

I chuckle, and it feels good rumbling through my chest. I haven’t laughed this much in a long time. “Wait, there’s more. You’re good to people. And before you ask, I can tell by the way you talk about your clients how much they mean to you.”

She nods her head again, and now I don’t want to stop. She may think I’m a stalker, but I want her to know everything I’ve noticed about her. “Small things make you happy. Like cooking you dinner or helping you clean up afterwards. You pay attention to people, what they’re feeling and thinking, and

you try to make them feel comfortable. You go after what you want. You stand by your word.”

She leans back, and I’m assuming she’s looking up at me. “How would you know that?”

“Because you wouldn’t have gone on that date last night if you hadn’t already agreed to it.”

She murmurs, “You’re right about that. I didn’t want to go, but I felt like I should.”

I want to ask her about it, but I’m not done yet. “And you’re beautiful.”

Instantly, she shakes her head. “Don’t be fooled, Jason. I’m confident, but I’m not beautiful. I’m plain, well except when I put on makeup and wigs, then I stand out, but for the most part, I’m just a plain Jane.”

Fuck, I wish I could convince her. “Liv, I may not be able to see, but I know things. Trust me, I know you’re beautiful. The way you talk to me, the way you make me feel, the way you are with me. You’re beautiful.”

She sighs loudly and leans her head against my chest. She’s freed her one hand from me, and it’s drawing circles on my shirt. *Don’t ruin the moment.* That’s what I tell myself, but it’s out of my mouth before I can think twice about it. “Did you let him touch you last night?”

“No...”

The way her voice trails off, I know there’s more. “What are you not telling me?”

She shrugs. “We actually decided not to see each other again.”

I let out a breath. I was hoping that would be the case, but I was afraid to ask. When I don’t say anything, she turns again, lifting her head, and I can feel her gaze on me. “Don’t freak out or anything.”

I tilt my head down to her. “Why would that freak me out?”

“I just don’t want you to think I broke it off with him because I expect anything from you. Relationships are not my thing.”

“Oh...” I say, suddenly feeling defeated. That’s not exactly what I wanted to hear. I don’t know what I was expecting. This is only our third time seeing each other and our first official date. There’s no way I could expect her to commit to me or anything, but hearing her say that she doesn’t do relationships bothers me.

“You’re quiet,” she says.

I nod my head. “Yeah...”

She pulls out of my arms, and her voice gets louder. “Oh God, I did freak you out? I promise it’s not a big deal. Rick and I were not compatible. It had nothing to do with you or anything.”

Shit. Do I tell her or just let it slide? I understand why she doesn’t want a relationship with me. I mean, I hoped it could be different, but I get it. It’s a lot. Everything I’m dealing with... is a lot. I reach for her hands and hold both of them in mine. “I’m not freaked out about you breaking up with Rick. I’m happy about it. Relieved, actually.”

“But...”

“And I understand you don’t want a relationship with me. I get it...”

“It’s not you, Jason. That’s not what I’m saying.”

Shit. What else is she gonna say? “Yeah, I know. Some people just don’t want to settle down. I get it.”

A noise comes from her, but I’m not sure what it is. “But...” she starts, and I wait, but she doesn’t finish her thought.

“Liv, we should probably talk about something.”

She tenses, and her hands grip mine even tighter. “Okay. What do you want to talk about?”

“There’s a reason I told you not to let Rick touch you.”

“I figured there was,” she says and when I don’t say anything, she continues. “Are you going to tell me why?”



# CHAPTER 14

# OLIVIA

I WAIT for him to respond, but he doesn't. "Jason," I say after he's been quiet for too long. "Why do you care if I let him touch me?"

He looks alarmed for just a second and then he shakes his head as if he's coming to terms with something. "I know and understand you don't want a relationship with me, Liv, but I don't share. When you are with me—while you are with me, for however long that is—you're with me. I won't share you."

I should feel good with what he's saying. I mean, I do like him telling me that he doesn't want to share me, but I also want him to want more. I clench my eyes shut because I know I'm being ridiculous. I told him that I didn't do relationships. I should be thrilled with what he said. He's giving me what I said I wanted.

"I can't see your face, Olivia. Did I freak you out? What are you thinking?"

I blow out a breath. "What about you?"

He points at himself. "What about me?"

I reach over and put my hand on his thigh, and his muscles flex under my palm. "I mean when we're together, are you going to be going out with other women?"

His answer is instant. "No. Hell no."

"What if..." I start, but he doesn't let me finish.

He covers my hand that's on his leg. "Forget it. I'm not interested, Liv. When I'm with you, I'm with you."

I laugh, trying to make light of it, but on the inside I'm a bundle of nerves pulled tight. "You sound pretty sure."

"I'm one hundred percent sure. No doubts."

I reach up and run my fingers along his jaw. "I don't know if you know it or not, Jason, but you're pretty hot."

I love the way he tilts his head into my hand. It's like he loves having me touch him. "You think I'm hot?"

I burst out a laugh. "Yeah, me and the rest of the single women in Whiskey Run."

He lifts his shoulders up and lets them fall again. "There's only one woman I'm wanting to be with, Liv. That's you."

I'm speechless, which is saying a lot for me.

His voice is gruff when he asks me, "Can I ask you a question, Liv?"

I stop stroking his chin, and when I start to pull away, he grabs my hand. It's like I'm drawn to him and I lean even closer. "Yeah, you can ask me anything."

"Can I touch you?"

As soon as the words leave his mouth, his cheeks turn a bright red, and he shakes his head. "Shit, that didn't come out right. I want to see you but since I can't, I want to feel you."

When I don't answer him, he assures me, "Your face. No funny business."

My voice is breathy. "Yes."

He sits up a little taller and turns on the cushion to face me. I do the same, drawing my leg up on the couch between us. I grab his hands and put them on my shoulders.

His hands are warm on my bare skin. He runs a finger across the strap of my dress. "Do you have a dress on?"

I gulp. "Yes."

"What color is it?" he asks huskily.

"It's blue. Almost the same color of your eyes, and there are little daisies on it."

He keeps stroking along my strap. “Do you like daisies?”

I try to concentrate on what he’s asking me. “Yes, they’re my favorite.”

He nods and then rests his hands heavily on my shoulders again.

He keeps them there and already, my nipples have puckered. Geez, how am I going to survive this?

He doesn’t move. “What color is your hair?”

“Red.” He nods and then reaches around my neck and runs his fingers through it. He strokes it softly to measure the length and threads his fingers through it.

“What color are your eyes?”

I smile. “Green.”

He nods and moves his hand from my hair back to my neck. “Can I touch your face?”

I nod, and I know he can feel the rapid beat of my pulse under his fingers. He brings his hands to my cheeks and then softly strokes his fingers over my nose, my cheeks, my eyebrows and then down my nose again and to my lips. He traces them softly, and I feel that I can’t breathe. My body trembles, and his hands pause. “You okay?”

“Yeah,” I say with a strangled voice, and I try again. “Yeah, I’m okay.”

His hands are hooked around my neck, thumbs and forefingers on my face. “Jason,” I whisper.

He’s so close, all I would have to do is move a little to the front, and we would be able to kiss. “Are you going to kiss me?”

I expect him to dive in and press his lips to mine, but he just keeps stroking his fingers along my cheeks. “Do you want me to?”

I whimper and grab the front of his shirt, pulling him against me. “Yes.”

He moves in so slowly, the anticipation builds until I feel that I may combust. When his lips finally touch mine, I don't dare move.

His kisses are slow, testing me one minute and then all-consuming the next. It's like something has been unlocked inside him, and he ravages my mouth. With his hands, he tilts my face, letting him deepen the kiss. I can't think... all I can do is feel, and I need to be closer. I don't know if he pulls me or if it's me that pushes into him, but I move and straddle his lap.

I slide down until we're perfectly meshed together. His manhood is hard, pressed right to my core, and my hips have a mind of their own because I thrust into him, grinding myself on him.

His hands are on my lower back, holding me to him, and I wrap my hands around his neck. His kiss is everything, and when he pulls away, we're both breathless.

It's only when my mind starts to clear that I realize what I'm doing. If he hadn't stopped, I would have gone all the way with him. That's how gone I am.

I push against his chest, but he's not letting me go.

I swear his manhood is vibrating against my swollen clit, and it feels so good, I hate what I'm about to do.

"Let me up, Jason."

He lets me go instantly. I'm sure he knows something is wrong by the sound of my voice.

"Liv, what is it? What's wrong?"

I climb off his lap, and the first thing I notice is that my panties are a mess. My eyes are wide, and I'm looking around the apartment. I spot my purse and go to grab it. Jason is on his feet. "Liv. Stop."

He grabs on to my arm, and I know I'm freaking him out. His eyes are wide, and he's obviously worried. None of this is his fault. I try to calm my breaths. "Jason, I need to leave."

He pulls me to him. He's not angry but he's definitely frustrated. I completely get it because I'm feeling the same way. "You can't leave. Not like this. What happened? I'm sorry—"

He starts to apologize, and I put my hand to his chest. "No, don't you dare apologize, Jason Hawk. You didn't do anything wrong. This is just a lot. I need to leave."

He's quiet for so long, but I wait for him to release me. He never does.

"Fine. You want to leave. I'll walk you out."

"You don't have to—"

He holds his hand up. "No. I'll walk you to your car, Olivia. I'm sure I can at least do that right."

I grab my purse, and without talking, we walk out of his apartment. I've ruined a perfectly good night, and I feel like shit for it. We walk quietly out of the building and along the path toward the parking lot. Neither one of us says a word, and as we get closer to my car, I know I need to say something. "I'm sorry, Jason."

"If I hurt you... if I did something you didn't want me to do..."

I stop him next to my car and put a hand on his chest. "You didn't. And I know you'd never hurt me. It's not that, but I can't talk about it right now."

He shakes his head. I know he's the type that likes to take care of things, and it's killing him that he can't fix this. I pat him on the chest. "Jason, I promise, I'm okay."

He shoves a hand through his hair in frustration.

"Okay?" I ask him.

He blows out a breath. "I don't have much of a choice, do I? Fuck, Liv, I feel so helpless. Just talk to me. Tell me what's wrong, and I'll fix it."

I curl my hand around his neck. "I wish it was that easy. I'll text you when I get home."

I wait for him to argue with me some more, but he steps back. “Okay, I’m coming to see you tomorrow.”

I can’t deny him. Hopefully by tomorrow, I’ll have my shit together. “No, I’ll come here.”

He’s adamant. “No, I want to take you on a normal date.”

“I don’t get off until six tomorrow.”

He nods. “I’ll pick you up at your apartment.”

I’m about to rattle off my address. “I live—”

He stops me. “I know where you live.”

Fuck... this man. I’m trying to play it cool and keep it simple, but when he says things like that, how can I? “Okay, I’ll see you at my house tomorrow.”

“Okay,” he says gruffly.

I get into my car and drive away. It’s only when I get out of the parking lot that it hits me. I’m at a crossroads. I want Jason more than I’ve wanted anything in a long time, and I don’t know what to do about it. Can I trust him with my heart?

# CHAPTER 15



# JASON

I FUCKED UP. I'm not sure what I did to fuck up, but I did.

She texted me last night when she got home, but it was brief. She just let me know she made it okay and I wasn't sure what to say to her, so all I responded with was "Thanks for texting me. Let me know if you need anything. See you tomorrow."

She never responded.

I was up most of the night, tossing and turning. I was almost late for my therapy appointment. As I approach the barn, I can hear someone walking and twigs snapping. "Morning," I say to Chris.

I hear the chain rattle on the door and then the sound of the barn doors opening. I'm scrubbing my hand through my hair as I walk in.

"You look like shit," Chris says.

I nod. "I'm sure I do."

"How was the date?"

I grunt instead of answering him. "What are we working on today?"

Chris pauses for just a minute. "Walker needs forty tables."

"What kind of tables?"

"Coffee tables."

I point around the barn. "Is there enough wood for that?"

Chris laughs. “We’ve got enough for twenty. I’ve ordered more, and it will be here in the next few days.”

I’m nodding my head. I know when I’m in here, I need to stay focused, but my mind keeps going to Olivia. “You have design plans or you know what he’s looking for?”

When he talks again, he’s across the room. “I’m at the drafting table. We had plans made up.”

I walk over to the table and press my hand to the top of it. The papers are spread out, and I run my fingers across them, feeling the raised bumps of braille. The words come to me, and I learn the type of wood, dimensions, stain needed, and everything. “Wow. A lot went into this.”

Chris doesn’t comment.

I let out a breath. “All right, let’s get started.”

We work for an hour before Chris interrupts my thoughts. “So you going to tell me what happened?”

“What happened with what?”

Chris chuckles. He’s standing over my shoulder as I work, and each time I cut a piece of wood, I’m able to refrain from talking, which is nice. I’m not sure I’m ready to talk about my disastrous date last night. I mean, it was perfect... until it wasn’t.

When the blade turns off, I start stacking the cut wood against the wall. We planned to do one table, make any needed corrections, and then start on the rest.

As I’m coming back to the table, Chris asks again. “I mean, you might as well talk it out. You know it’s always a good thing to get a fresh perspective.”

Fuck! I blow out a breath. I keep my hands busy and start to talk. “I thought everything was perfect. It was going great. Then we kissed, and she freaked out and left.”

His silence is deafening, and so I continue. “I asked her if she was okay and she said yeah. I walked her to her car but it was obvious she was freaked out. I really don’t have a clue what

happened. I'm taking her out tonight. At least I think I am. She hasn't canceled yet."

And still he remains silent. I've had enough therapy to know that I'm waiting on him to ask me how it made me feel. When he doesn't, I start to ramble. "It's fucked up. I would have given anything to see her, to know what she was thinking."

"You think seeing her is the only way to know what she's thinking?"

I think about his question, and the truth is, Olivia's pretty open with everything. She uses touch to show me things, and she talked to me while she did things. She understands me in a way that no one else does. "I don't know. Maybe I just want to see her. If my eyesight would just come back..."

He inhales and lets it out, and I stop what I'm doing. "What? What is it?"

He's quick to reply. "Nothing. I know the specialist is coming in, and maybe then we'll have a better idea on your sight, but it's been two years, Jason."

My stomach turns. "You don't think I'm getting my sight back."

There's a screeching sound as if he's pulling up a chair and he must sit on the stool. "I'm not a medical doctor. But I can say that yes, we all hope you get your vision back, but until then, you need to make the best of today."

I throw my head back in frustration. "That's sort of hard to do when you don't know what's even happening tomorrow."

Chris' voice is level and without emotion. "Right. So let's worry about the things we can control. We can't control when or even if you get your sight back, but we can control how you respond to it. One of those ways is living your life. Making plans for the future. Doing things that will help you even if you don't want to."

"Yeah." I answer him without much conjecture.

"Back to the girl," he starts.

I cut him off. "Olivia."

“Right. Back to Olivia. Tell me more about the date.”

“I cooked her dinner, which really made her happy. She said she’s never had a man cook for her before. I guess her ex-husband was a real douche and cheated on her. Anyway, we ate and talked a lot. She made sure to tell me that she doesn’t want anything serious, which I understood.”

Chris makes a noise, but I keep going. “I didn’t fight it because I like her. I really like her. But if she doesn’t want a relationship, then I can’t force her into one.”

“Right. Then what happened?”

Man, I’ve never been the type to kiss and tell, but I open my mouth anyway. “We kissed. And it wasn’t just a kiss. It was the best damn kiss I’ve ever had in my life. That’s when she freaked.”

I start thinking about last night, replaying it all in my head, wondering if I missed something. I groan in frustration and then get back to work. We’re working together and nailing the boards together. He instructs me and helps me but then lets me do it on my own. All the pieces come together, and I can’t help but wonder what it looks like. Did I mismatch pieces? Is everything flush? “Well?” I ask him. “How does it look?”

“You tell me.”

I roll my eyes and run my hands along every crevice of the table. I’m squatting on my knees and working my way all around it. Everything is lined up and seems right. “I think it’s good.”

He laughs. “It’s perfect, man. I’m really impressed. Let’s sand and stain it. We’ll show Walker tomorrow and then start on the rest.”

I nod and go grab the sander. Before I start it up, Chris starts to talk. “So I know you’re going through some shit, Jason.”

I burst out a laugh. “That’s an understatement if I ever heard one.”

“Well, I’m just here to say that it sounds like Olivia has some shit going on too.”

My forehead creases, and I stop all activity, completely focused on what he's saying. "She told you she was divorced and her husband cheated on her."

"Yeah, but that was a few years ago."

"She told you that she doesn't want a relationship." Before I can interrupt him, he continues, "And then after you two kiss, which by your standards was pretty intense, she wanted to leave. 'She freaked out' is what you said."

"She did," I agree.

"Right, well, maybe, just maybe, she felt that intense connection too. Maybe that did freak her out."

"You think..." I start but I don't dare put voice to what I'm thinking. Fuck, could Olivia be freaked out because she may want more than just a fling? Did that scare her off? Or is she going to change her mind? Hope starts to build, and I do my best to tamp it down.

Chris is moving around the room again. "I'm going to grab the stain."

I nod my head, lost in thought. "So you think, maybe..."

Christ interrupts me. "I think you need to talk to her, that's all. Figure out what she's thinking."

I nod, and before I can stop myself, I grab my phone out of my pocket. I tell Siri to text Olivia. "Looking forward to tonight."

I can feel my cheeks heat in embarrassment. I don't usually talk like this with other men, but there's something freeing about working in a barn, elbow deep in wood and stain.

I'm caught off guard when my phone dings.

"You going to see what it says?" Chris asks.

What if she shoots me down? Fuck it, I have to know.

I press the button for the messaging app to read the text, and it says I have a message from Olivia. It then repeats the words from her message, and even though it's only two words, they tell me more than I was hoping for.

“Me too.”

She could have backed out and made up some kind of excuse, but she didn't. She said, ‘Me too.’

I pocket my phone, and Chris slaps me on the back. “Come on, let's finish up. It looks like you have plans tonight.”

# CHAPTER 16

# OLIVIA

I MOVED around my last appointment so I could get off early. I made it home in time to shower and get ready. I am just hanging up from ordering dinner when my doorbell rings. I open it and barely notice a truck driving away because all I can look at is Jason in his Wrangler jeans and his button-up black shirt. The top two buttons are undone, and I can see the shadows of his tattoos.

“Uh, Olivia...”

Darn it, I’m so busy drooling over him, I forgot to say hello. “Shoot, I’m sorry, Jason. Come in, come in.”

I reach for him, and he holds out a bouquet of daisies and a paper towel holder. I reach for the holder first. “Is this what you made?”

His cheeks are red. “Yes. I know—”

I don’t let him finish. “It’s perfect. I love it,” I tell him and then stop. “I mean, were you bringing it to me? I hope so because I want to keep it.”

He laughs. “Liv, are you more excited about the paper towel holder than the daisies?”

I grab the flowers too. “Actually I love and appreciate them both, but if I had to choose one, I’d choose the holder. Any time you want to bring me a project you made, I’ll always want that.”

He laughs as he follows me in the house. I hold the flowers and the paper towel holder in one hand and then loop my other



arm through Jason's. "Let's go to the kitchen and we can put the flowers and holder away."

He walks beside me, and I go slowly. I release my hold on him when we get to the counter and I talk to him as I put the flowers in a vase and then open a new roll of paper towel and put it on the holder.

"You smell good," he says.

I laugh. "You're probably smelling the daisies."

"Nope, it's you. It's like jasmine and vanilla. I've never smelled the two scents together, but you smell good."

I lean into him. "Thank you."

He puts a hand on my waist, and I cover it with my own hand. "So I thought we could go around the house and I'll show you where everything is. Want to start at the front door?"

He nods, and I take him back through the house. "Okay. Front door. As soon as you walk in the door, there is an entry table. On the right here is the front closet, and I usually put jackets and winter gear in there."

I take him through the rest of the house, explaining everything as we go. He asks a few questions, and I answer them patiently. When we make it back to the living room, I lead him to the couch. "Let's sit."

He clears his throat. "Where would you like to go for dinner?"

"I ordered dinner. It should be here soon."

His jaw tightens, and immediately I start to apologize. "I'm sorry. Is that okay? I probably should have asked you first, I just thought—"

He reaches over and puts his hand on my knee. At that exact moment, a calm comes over me as my heart starts to race. It doesn't make sense at all, but I'm learning my reaction to him is not normal. He squeezes my leg. "It's fine. I don't care what or where we eat, but you deserve a night out."

I shake my head. "Honestly, after working all day, having dinner delivered sounds about perfect. But if you'd rather go

do something, we can. I can try and cancel.”

He pulls his hand away, and I instantly miss his touch. “No, it’s fine. I just didn’t want you to feel like we can’t go out. It’s not always easy going out, but I would do it... for you.”

“I think you don’t enjoy going out because you haven’t had the right person going with you, that’s all. I’ll show you, the next time, we’ll go out, and you won’t even be thinking about the people around us. You’ll only be thinking of me.”

His voice gets a little deeper, sending a direct zing to my core. “I think you’re right, Olivia. I already think about you nonstop. What you’re saying makes sense.”

When I said it, I meant it as a joke, so to hear him agree with me makes me think all kinds of things I shouldn’t be thinking about. After that kiss last night and running out of there, I half expected Jason to cancel the date tonight. It took me forever to get my head on straight. This is a good time, that’s all this is. That’s all it can be.

The doorbell rings and I jump up, but Jason is right behind me. I get to the door, and he’s right with me. “I got it.”

He’s shaking his head, pulling his wallet out of his pocket. “No, you ordered, I’ll buy.”

I put my hand to his chest. “No way, this is my treat.”

“Olivia,” he says. “You’re not buying dinner. I’m sorry, that’s just not who I am.”

I blow out a breath. “Fine.”

I take his wallet and count out the bills. “I’m taking forty dollars out.”

“Okay.” He shrugs with complete trust.

I hand him his wallet back and open the door. I exchange the money for food and then we go to the dining room. I unpack everything, and Jason asks, “What are we eating?”

“Yesterday you mentioned liking pot roast. Well, Red’s Diner has the best pot roast in town. And for dessert, I ordered us each a slice of apple cinnamon Blaze cake.”

He starts to laugh. “I’ll finally get to try the cake I’ve heard so much about. It sounds perfect.”

We sit down to eat, and I’m too enamored by watching him enjoy his meal so I just pick at my food. “Mmmm, mmm, mmm, this is good.”

I bite my lip as I smile at him. “Yeah, this is good.”

We both talk about our day. He tells me about the coffee table he made, and I talk about the woman that came in with the hair she’d tried to bleach at home and wanted me to fix.

Everything is going smoothly and we’re about finished with our desserts when he asks the question I knew he’d be bringing up tonight. “So we going to talk about it?”

I try to stall. “I’m going to save the rest of my cake for later. Why don’t you go into the living room and I’ll clean up and be right in.”

He stands up and rolls up his sleeves. “You think you’re getting rid of me, but you’re not. A few dishes won’t hurt me, Liv.”

Already, I’ve learned not to argue with him. I decide to just keep my mouth closed and appreciate the fact that he wants to help. We work side by side washing and drying the two plates and silverware and then after wiping off the table, we go into the living room to sit down.

I’m quiet, and he notices. “What are you thinking about?”

“Uh, honestly, I’m thinking about how that first day you were so uptight and uncomfortable, and you seem to be a little more relaxed now. I like seeing it.”

He nods, leaning forward to rest his elbows on his knees. “Yeah, this new therapy has me thinking more about the future. It’s opening me up to things I didn’t think were possible. And yeah, even though being out in public makes me a little nervous, I’m feeling better about things.”

“That’s good, Jason. I’m happy—”

He interrupts me. “But it’s not just therapy, Liv. It’s you too. Meeting you has definitely been the highlight for me.”

He reaches for me, and when he finds my hand, he threads our fingers together. “We need to talk about last night, Liv. You know we do. If I did something wrong, you need to tell me. I can take it.”

I shake my head. “You didn’t do anything wrong.”

He speaks calmly. “Okay, then talk to me. Tell me what’s going on with you.”

My eyes are glued to him. He’s so handsome, understanding, kind, and funny, and he’s a complete alpha. He’s everything I want in a man, but there are so many what ifs. What if he gets his sight back and leaves Whiskey Run, going back to doing whatever he did before? What if he gets his sight back and takes one look at me and decides he’s not attracted to me? What if I let him in and he cheats or leaves me? I can already feel an attachment to him like nothing I’ve felt before.

“Olivia,” he says.

“Sorry. I’m sorry,” I tell him. “I don’t know what to tell you.”

He smiles softly at me. His gaze is right on me, and even though I know he isn’t, it feels as if he’s gazing directly into my soul. “Just talk to me, Liv. Tell me what you’re thinking.”

# CHAPTER 17

# JASON

“I’M NOT THINKING ABOUT ANYTHING,” she says.

I shake my head in frustration. “I would give anything to see your face, Liv. I feel like there’s so many things you’re not telling me or don’t want to talk about.”

She leans into me. “And what, you think if you could see me, you’d know?”

I groan in frustration. “I don’t know. I really don’t. But something has to give, Liv.”

She’s quiet for a few seconds, and then she pushes my hands away and climbs onto my lap and sits down. My cock twitches between my legs as she settles onto me.

“Is this okay?” she asks.

My voice sounds strained. “This is perfect.”

I put my hands to her waist and drag her closer. She leans against me with an oomph.

I slide my hands up and down her back. “I want to kiss you.”

Her voice softens. “I want that too.”

I’m about to pull her in and kiss her when I stop. “But first—”

She groans, letting me know she was anticipating our kiss too.

I move my hands to her face, cupping her cheeks. “But first,” I start again, “I want to know why you left last night.”

I can feel her face pull tight and pensive. Her smile disappears, and it’s obvious she doesn’t want to talk about this. “What is

it, Liv? Talk to me.”

She tilts her head to the side, and I slide my hands to her neck. Her pulse jumps under my fingers, and she mumbles softly. “I had to leave because it was pretty intense.”

“Fuck. I’m sorry, Liv. I didn’t mean to freak you out. I knew I was moving too fast, and I should have slowed down.”

I drop my hands from her neck, and she grabs them, putting them back in place. “I didn’t say it was too fast. I said it was too intense. I don’t think I’ve ever been kissed like that, Jason. At least, it’s never felt like that.”

All I can feel is shock. She liked it. She really did, but she wanted to run instead of staying with me and talking it out. I shouldn’t push her or try to sway her. I should take it slow from here on out and let her pick the pace. I realize my fingers are digging into her skin, and I loosen my hold on her and move my hands to her shoulders, down her arms and then hold her hands.

“I like it when you do that.”

Caught off guard, I ask her, “You like it when I do what?”

“I like that instead of releasing your hold on me, you trail your hand down my arms.”

I smile and tilt my head to the side. “I do that because I’m afraid I’ll touch something I shouldn’t be touching.”

She giggles, and fuck, I never realized how much I love the sound of a laugh until I heard hers. Everything inside me wants to flip her to her back, pull her dress up, and thrust into her telling her she’s mine with every thrust. The need to do it is overwhelming.

“What’s that look?” she asks me.

I soften the muscles in my face. “What look?”

She pushes her finger into my cheek. “You looked mad for a minute.”

I shake my head. “I’m not mad. I’m just trying to hold back.” I groan. “Liv, there are things I want to do to you that probably

will freak you out.”

She giggles again, and I smile as she leans her forehead to mine. “I want you to do those things, Jason.”

I take in a deep breath and try to count to ten, but I don’t make it. “I want to touch you.”

She slides her face next to mine until she’s whispering into my ear. “I want that too.”

I clench my eyes trying to get myself under control. I say her name, but it sounds more like a warning. “Liv.”

I feel her smile against my cheek. “Jason,” she says in the same tone I used on her. I’m not sure if she realizes it or not, but her hips are thrusting softly against mine.

I laugh and pull back. “Can I ask you a question?”

Her hands are sliding across my chest, and I’m doing my best to keep myself together. Her voice is a whisper. “Yes.”

With one arm hooked around her waist, I put a finger to her neck. “Can I touch you...”—I trail my finger down her chest, over her belly and don’t stop until I’m pressing against the part of her that is rocking against my hard cock—“here. Can I touch you here, Liv?”

She whimpers, pressing her pussy into my hand. “Yes. God, yes.”

I slide my hand down to the hem of her dress and run my palm over her soft bare skin. Wrapping a hand around her thigh, I squeeze, and she trembles.

“Cold?” I ask her.

“No, I’m burning up.”

“I’m going to lay you on the couch, Liv.”

She climbs off my lap and lays back on the couch, pulling me with her. We both laugh, and she wraps her arms and legs around me. I’m hovering over her, and I run my hand through her hair.



Reaching between us, I press my hand between her legs. Her panties are soaked, and I rub my palm across her. “You’re wet, Liv.”

She smacks me on the chest playfully. “Yeah, well, what do you expect? I’ve been like this since our kiss last night. All I gotta do is think about it, about you, and this is what happens.”

I rub her through the silky panties, and she lifts her hips to meet my hand.

I want to kiss her. I want it so badly, but I’m not risking her running away from me. Not now.

I start to slide down her body and she grabs onto my arms. “Where are you going?”

I smile and keep going. “Where do you think I’m going?”

“Jason, really, you don’t have to—”

“Have to? Fuck, Liv, I’m dying to taste you.”

She still doesn’t release me, and I know I need to do the right thing here. “It’s your call, baby.”

I feel and hear her suck in a deep breath, and when she lets it out, she gives me the go ahead. “Okay, yes. I mean, please.”

She doesn’t have to tell me twice. I slide down her body and push her dress up her thighs. My lower half is hanging off the side of the couch and I’m at the wrong angle, but there’s no way I’m going to complain. I dip my fingers into the band at her waist and bring her panties down her hips. She lifts her hips as I pull them down and then drop them to the floor.

I use my hands, guiding my way to where I’m dying to be. I slide one finger through her swollen wet slit, and she whimpers under my touch.

“Feel good?”

She grunts. “Yes.”

I smile as I move in to replace my finger with my mouth. I press a soft kiss to her core, and she lifts her hips to meet me.

Her hand tightens in my hair, letting me know she likes what I'm doing.

I suckle her clit in my mouth, circling it with my tongue. Over and over, she lifts her hips. Her taste is addicting, and I can't seem to get close enough. I put a finger at her entrance and pump in and out of her. She pulls at my hair, but the pain of it feels so good. "Yes," I breathe against her. I'm covered in her arousal and I lick at her until her moans are barely recognizable.

She puts her hand at the back of my head. "Jason, don't stop. Please don't stop. Right there."

She's crazy if she thinks I would stop now. I won't give up until she's completely come undone and there's no doubt she's satisfied.

She grunts, and then a guttural groan comes out of her as her legs lock around my head and her whole body flexes. Her hips start to writhe uncontrollably, but I still don't give up. I don't stop when the orgasm rolls through her body and she comes on my tongue. I don't stop when her body is pulled into one taut muscle and she clenches all around me. I don't stop when she starts to come down off her high and lies limp under me. I keep licking her, petting her with my tongue until she's letting out little satisfied whimpers.

Only then do I give her pussy one last kiss and then move up her body. "You okay?"

She sounds exhausted. "I don't think okay even begins to cover it."

"Good," I tell her, wishing I could kiss her but knowing I've already pressed my luck tonight.

She slides her hand down my body between us, and I'm about to stop her when my phone dings.

I groan, leaning my head to her chest. "I have to go."

She freezes. "Go? What do you mean go?"

I shrug. "I have to go. My ride's here."

I move to my knees on the floor and reach into the pocket of my jeans. I can barely get my hand in there because everything is fitting tighter right now. I pull my phone out and push the button to play my text message. It says, *You have a message from Kanan.* “I’m outside.”

I climb to my feet and I hear Olivia rustling around and then coming to stand next to me. I adjust my cock in my pants and grunt. It fuckin’ hurts, but it’s a good kind of hurt.

“You can’t leave now. I can take you home.”

“That’s okay. I need to go, and I know you work tomorrow.”

“But...”

“I’ll call you tomorrow, Liv. Have sweet dreams.”

“Okay,” she says.

I turn to walk away, and she stops me. “Jason.”

“Yeah, baby?”

She reaches for me. “Geez, this is embarrassing. You, uh, have me on you.” She reaches up and wipes at my mouth. When she’s done, she puts a hand around my neck and pulls me down, pressing her lips to mine. “Thanks for tonight.”

I kiss her back but then force myself to step back. “I’m pretty sure I should be the one doing the thanking. I’ll see you tomorrow, baby.”

I kiss her cheek, grab my cane, and then make my way outside. I get to the bottom step and Kanan is there to help me.

I can’t help but wonder if Olivia is watching me. “How was your night?” Kanan asks.

I nod, not even trying to hide my smile. “Really good.” Which is the understatement of the year, but tonight is not something I want to talk about. It feels too personal. I can see a future with Olivia, but just as quickly as the thought comes, I try and tamp it down. She’s not ready. And she may never be.

# CHAPTER 18

# OLIVIA

HE LEFT. After all that, he just left.

I understand his ride was here and he needed to go, but I wish we'd had more time together.

For thirty minutes, I try to pull myself together. I shower, turn off all the lights and climb into bed. I'm about to plug my phone in and turn my lamp off when I get fed up. I open the messaging app on my phone and start to type.

“Hey, did you make it home okay?”

I wait for the delivered notification to change to the read notification. When it doesn't, I tell myself I'm being foolish, and I put my phone on the nightstand. I turn off the lamp and then throw myself back into the bed with a huff.

As soon as I do, my phone dings. I dive for it, knocking it off the nightstand and then tumbling to the floor when I try to reach for it. Reaching around for it in the dark, I finally find it under the nightstand.

I huff out a breath as I climb back into bed. “Smooth, Olivia. Real smooth.”

When I lie back, I look at the phone and start to read. “I'm home. You in bed?”

I type back to him, “Yes. I wish you didn't have to go like that.”

His response is immediate. “Me too. But it's probably for the best.”

I read his text three times, and I'm trying to figure out what he means by that. Why was it for the best? I wish I could ask him, but I don't have the guts to do it. Or maybe I just don't want to know the answer.

I must have taken too long to respond because he texts again. "You still there?"

"Yeah, I'm still here."

"You okay with everything tonight?"

I groan and throw my head back. No, I'm not okay. I've never had a man make me come and then practically run out as if it's not a big deal. I know he was hard for me. I saw the bulge in his jeans when he was adjusting himself. But he left as if he didn't care that he was walking away from me.

I have to respond though. "Yeah, I'm fine. Why wouldn't I be?"

I roll my eyes and huff as I send it. Of course, I'm okay with everything, at least until the night ended. I didn't like that at all.

His text is immediate. "You're not telling me something."

I huff out a breath. I've never been one to put myself out there. Especially since everything with my ex-husband. Trust comes hard to me, and it sucks that Jason just left the way he did.

"I better go to bed. I need to get up early," I text him instead of telling him everything I'm thinking.

"Goodnight, Liv. Dream of me."

I roll my eyes again and groan into the empty room. This man is going to drive me crazy. Of course I'm going to be dreaming of him. Dreaming of the way he touches me, of the way he reaches for me anytime I'm close, of the loving things he says to me, of the way he makes me feel. Damn, that's all I'm going to be thinking and dreaming about.

"Goodnight, Jason."

I toss my phone onto the nightstand and then roll over to my stomach, bury my face in the pillow, and scream.

I'm sure I sound like a crazy person, but letting it out does make me feel better.

I toss and turn with my eyes closed, but no matter how long I lie here, I just can't sleep. I pick up my phone, type out a text to Abby, and then cringe when I hit the send button.

"You up?" I ask her.

She responds almost immediately. "Yep, you okay?"

"Can I call you?"

"Yes," she says.

I touch her name and choose the option to call her. When she answers, she doesn't even say hello. "What's wrong?"

I groan into the phone. "I can't believe I'm even telling you this."

I can hear the smile on her face. "Ooooh, it sounds good. Spill the tea, Olivia. You have to tell me now."

I blow out a breath. "Okay, but you're getting the short version. Jason and I had a date last night. He kissed me, and I ran. Literally, it was all too intense. Anyway, I invited him to dinner tonight. We ate—"

She cuts me off. "Whoa, whoa, whoa. What do you mean you ran?"

I scrunch my nose up. "I mean, I had literally just told him that I did not want anything serious and then he blew my socks off with that kiss. It was not just a kiss. It was an earth-shattering meeting of lips, and I'm pretty sure I saw fireworks." She gasps, and I'm nodding my head. "Yeah, it was that good."

"And you ran?" she asks in shock.

"Yes." I smack my hand to my forehead. "I freaked out. I had to get out of there before I begged him to take me—and I don't mean just take me. That man has a power over me that I can't even explain. I was convinced that I liked just going out and having a good time. Well, I can totally see it being more with Jason, and that freaks me the hell out."

Abby laughs. "Okay, so you saw him tonight."

I sit up in the bed and lean back against the headboard. “Abby, what I’m about to tell you—ugh, forget it. I’m not going to waste my breath, I know you’ll tell your fiancé, but so help me, Davis had better not say anything to Jason about this. Ugh, I’m dying. Forget it.”

I ramble all the words out in one long breath and start to talk myself out of it. “Olivia, what in the world? I’ve never seen you like this. You’re the cool one. You’re the one that’s sassy and smart-mouthed. No one gets the upper hand on you. You sound...”

She pauses, and I fill in the blank. “I sound like a mess. I know, because I am a mess. This guy’s got me all messed up.”

“So what happened tonight?”

“Uhhhhh... well, he came for dinner, we ate and then were talking. He uh, made me feel good... and then he left.”

“He left?” she repeats.

“Yep. He left, and it was all so weird. Like, he didn’t even kiss me tonight. I mean, I kissed him before he left, but it was quick and then he was gone. Which I understand he had to leave, his ride was here, but he just left. I mean, I didn’t ... you know... for him.”

She starts to laugh and doesn’t stop. “Abby Campbell, so help me.”

“Jones. Abby Jones,” Davis says.

My eyes widen in shock, and my mouth drops open. “Abby, please tell me that Davis did not hear everything I just said.”

“I told you I was in bed. Where did you think Davis was? It’s okay, he’s not going to say anything. You won’t say anything to Jason, will you, Davis?”

He laughs. “No, I won’t tell him that if he stayed he’d have gotten lucky.”

“Oh my God, I’m dying. Please just end me now,” I plead with Abby.



I'm not sure if she hears me because she's admonishing Davis. Which it doesn't sound as if she's getting onto him too hard because I hear her shriek and then giggle.

"Forget it, I'm going to go. I'm sorry to bother you."

"Don't you dare hang up, Olivia. Listen to me. It's obvious Jason likes you."

"Hmmpf." I grunt at her.

"He does," I hear Davis say and then the sound of a slap and Davis chuckling. My God, this just keeps getting worse.

I'm about to hang up when Abby comes back on the phone. "Okay, listen. I'm walking out to the living room so we can figure this out."

I wait until she starts talking again. "Okay, so I think what we need to do is talk about you running away, Olivia. Think about that."

"Trust me, I know I'm a mess."

She huffs her breath. "You're not a mess. You have trouble trusting people, that's all. It's going to take time, and if Jason's worth it, he'll give you all the time you need."

I put my phone on speaker and then lie back down on the bed, putting my arms under my head. "Yeah, I guess. But be honest with me, Abby. Isn't it weird he just left like he did?"

"Did you ask him why?"

"Well, yeah, but he said his ride was here. I told him I could take him home but he didn't even seem interested in staying. He left. Ugh, Maybe he realized that I'm a little chunkier than he thought. Maybe he's not attracted to curvy women."

"Olivia," she admonishes. "You're beautiful."

I roll my eyes. Abby is one of my best friends; what else is she going to say?

"All I'm saying is that if he wanted to stay... if he wanted me... he wouldn't have left."

Her response is immediate. “Maybe he wants you, but there’s a reason he thought he should take it slow. Oh, I don’t know, maybe you running out on him the night before after just a kiss has him skittish.”

I open my mouth and then close it. That actually makes sense. “Do you think that could be it? Do you think he left because I freaked out? Maybe he doesn’t want me.”

“Olivia, you’re being ridiculous. Was he attracted to you or not? I mean, you can tell...”

I remember him adjusting his bulge. I bury my head in my hand. I can’t believe I’m talking about this. “I mean yeah, I think so, but maybe I’m just a warm body.” I almost tell her that he hasn’t been with anyone in two years, but I don’t want to betray his trust that way. I already feel like I’m pushing it talking about all this with Abby.

It’s almost like I can hear her rolling her eyes. “Olivia, he’s attracted to you. Trust me, he likes you. I understand why you’re confused after him leaving like he did, but you know what you need to do.”

I wait for her to continue, and when she doesn’t, I ask her, “What do I need to do?”

She laughs. “Olivia, he really does have your panties in a wad. You need to talk to him. You need to tell him what you’re feeling, and you need to tell him all of it.”

I groan. I hate hearing it, but I know she’s right. I do need to ask him. “You’re right. I’ll go see him after work and ask him.”

“Okay.”

“Okay,” I repeat. “I’ll let you get back to bed. Thank you, Abby. I’m sorry for calling you so late.”

She laughs. “You know you can call me anytime. Love you, Olivia.”

“Love you too, Abbs. I’ll see you at the bachelorette party. I still don’t know how I can get you a stripper if you guys are doing a combined bachelor/bachelorette party.”

“No strippers,” Davis says in the background, letting me know Abby is back in bed.

“All right, big guy, no strippers. Talk to you tomorrow, Abby. Thanks again.”

“You’re welcome. It’s going to be okay, you know that, right?”

I let out a breath. I’m not sure right now of anything, but she’s at least given me some hope. “Right. I know. Bye, see you soon.”

I hang up and then lean over to plug my phone in. I know this is crazy, but I’ve already got a plan. Tomorrow, I’m going to talk to Jason and let him know everything I’m thinking. And I’m going to ask him why he was so determined to leave tonight.

When I roll over in bed, I’m thinking I’ll be able to sleep now, but after just a few more minutes, I’m already thinking of all the other scenarios in my head. I hope Abby is right, but there’s something that is holding me back from believing it. Maybe it’s all the crap I went through with my ex or maybe it’s just a feeling I have, but the only thing that lets me start to breathe easily is promising myself that tomorrow, I’m going to talk to him, and I’ll know one way or another what he feels and what he’s thinking.

# CHAPTER 19

# JASON

“HOW’D LAST NIGHT GO?”

I keep working, sanding another coffee table. Chris and I have been at it all day. We went and saw Walker first thing to show him the finished design, and he loved it. After a pat on the back, he sent us back out to the barn.

“It went good.”

I don’t know if it’s the smile that’s been on my face all day or what, but he doesn’t ask me any more about it.

“So how you doing?” he asks me.

And I don’t have to ask him what he means. I know what it’s about. Ever since Walker told me the specialist is arriving late tonight and my appointment with him is first thing in the morning, I’ve been thinking about it.

Of course, I want my eyesight back. For two years, I’ve been told that it will happen, and this whole time I’ve tried to convince myself that maybe the doctors are right. Plenty of times I have thought that things were getting less dark or that maybe I saw a shadow in the darkness. Over and over, until I’ve driven myself crazy with it.

For two years, I’ve put my life on hold. I never really tried to function as a blind man, doing the very least I can to get by. I learned braille because I had no other choice.

It’s different now. I changed when I met Olivia. I allowed myself to want more, and I know that’s in large part due to her.

“Jason, how you doing?” he asks again.

I decide to be honest with him. “I’m doing all right. I’m nervous about what the doctor is going to say. I’m nervous about how I’ll handle it.”

I feel like I already know what’s going to happen. I’ve never been a negative person, but this appointment just doesn’t feel good. If he tells me I’ll never see again, how am I going to handle it? And what does that mean for me and Olivia? I’ve told her my sight would be coming back.

I groan, and Chris is moving about the room. “I get it. You’re scared. But I wish you knew how far you’ve come just being able to admit that. It’s huge, Jason.”

I grit my teeth. “Yeah, but…”

Chris says, “No buts. You’re making progress, and whatever your diagnosis is tomorrow, you’ll make more progress.”

“Yeah, I want to know. I need to know.”

“So after your appointment, I’ll be here if you want to talk or work or whatever.”

I nod. From the ominous tone, it’s obvious Chris is a little worried about my appointment too. “Sounds good, man. Thanks for all this.”

I wave my arm around the barn. We get back to work, and it’s a little while later that I feel the shift in the atmosphere. I inhale, and I swear I smell vanilla and jasmine and I automatically think I’m going crazy. Now I’m imagining Olivia here when she isn’t.

I keep working, but I’m on high alert. The hairs on the back of my neck stand up and I know someone else is here besides just Chris and me. I stop sanding. “Olivia?”

She giggles. “I’m sorry. I was watching you work. I didn’t mean to interrupt you.”

I drop the sander. “What are you doing here? Is everything okay?”

She comes closer, and I hold my hands out. She grabs one of them and holds it. “Yeah, everything is fine. I was just hoping we could talk, that’s all. But I can come back later.”

“No,” I tell her. I turn toward Chris. “Chris, this is Olivia.”

He comes over to stand next to me. “Hey, Olivia, I’ve heard a lot about you.”

“Same,” she says. She pulls her hand from mine and walks away, but I trail after her. “These are beautiful, Jason. Did you do these?”

I nod my head, feeling the heat in my cheeks. “Yeah, Chris and I did.”

“Oh no, buddy. This is all you. I’m just here hanging out, talking a little,” Chris says.

For the thousandth time, I wish I could see her. But one thing I love about Olivia is she’s not going to keep me guessing. She’s talking to me as she moves around the room. “I’m walking around looking at all the tables, Jason. I can’t believe how amazing these are. They’re beautiful. Are you selling them?”

I shake my head. “No—well, I’m really not sure. Walker is doing something with them. I can make you one, if you really do like it.”

Chris interrupts me. “She likes them.”

I puff out my chest a little more. I don’t know why it means so much to me what Olivia thinks, but it does. “Chris, you okay with me cutting out a little early?”

Olivia comes back toward me. “Oh no, I don’t want to take you away from your work. I can come back later.”

I reach for her, and she threads her fingers through mine. “This isn’t really work. It’s therapy.”

Chris laughs. “Oh, it’s work, Jason. I mean, yeah, I’m here to do the therapy part, but once you finish with therapy, this is going to be your job.”

I suck in a breath. “Wait. This is my job? This is what Walker is going to have me do?”

He laughs. “Yeah, as soon as you complete therapy, this is your job.”

I reach for Chris, and he shakes my hand. “Take off, man. I’ll lock up. I’ll see you after your appointment tomorrow.”

I nod. “Sounds good.”

“Nice meeting you, Chris,” Olivia calls out to him, and Chris replies with the same.

We walk down the path toward the apartments. “I need to shower and then we can go somewhere if you want.”

“Okay,” she says.

We talk a little bit, and when we get to my apartment, I leave her in the living room while I go wash the sweat off me.

I hurry through the shower, get dressed, and I’m rubbing a towel through my hair when I walk back into the living room. “So where do you want to go? Are you hungry? We can eat. Or go for a walk. Whatever you want to do.”

“Can we talk?”

There’s something in her voice that has me stopping mid-motion. I set the towel on the back of the kitchen chair and then walk into the living room. I find my way to the couch and sit down next to her, our legs touching. “Yeah, we can talk. What’s going on?”

She jumps up and starts to pace back and forth. “This is so stupid. I should just let it go, but I could barely sleep last night for thinking about it, and Abby said I should just talk to you, but it’s ridiculous. I mean, we’ve known each other a few weeks—”

“Olivia,” I say to stop her rambling. I hold my hand out. “Come here and talk to me.”

She puts her hand in mine, and when she goes to sit down, I pull her by the waist so that she sits on my lap instead of the couch. She shrieks and then laughs. “What are you doing?”

“I’m listening to you, but I’m afraid you’re going to freak out again and run on me. This way—if you’re in my arms—you’re not going anywhere.”



She settles into my lap. “Okay, I don’t know how else to say it but just say it.”

I nod and nestle my nose into the crook of her neck. “Okay, say it.”

She trembles and then puts her arms around my neck. “I feel like this is a conversation we need to have without me sitting on your lap.”

I shake my head. “Tough. This is how we’re having it. So far, it doesn’t sound good, but whatever it is, we can figure it out because I’m not letting you run again, Liv.”

She sighs. “Okay. Why don’t you want me?”

“Excuse me?”

Her voice doesn’t sound anything like the Olivia I know. She leans away from me, but I don’t let her go. “I mean, I just don’t get it. Last night you left. If you wanted me, you would have stayed.”

I pull her snuggler against me. “You do know that I could literally say the same thing to you. You left me the night before.”

She gasps and puts her hand to my chest. “Jason, is that what that was? You get me all hot and bothered and then you leave for payback?”

She’s struggling in my lap, and I’m losing her. “Stop. Olivia, listen to me.”

She’s huffing and puffing in my lap, but I’m not letting her go. “Did you come last night?”

She’s snarky. “You know I did. It was all over your chin, you jackass.”

I lick my lips and laugh. Hell yeah it was. “Right, so don’t act like I didn’t deliver. I wouldn’t just leave you unsatisfied. And no, it wasn’t any kind of payback.”

She interrupts me with a huff. “Then why did you leave?”

“Sit on my lap.”

She huffs again. “I am on your lap.”

I shake my head. “No, sit the way I like you to sit. Put your pussy right here, Olivia.”

I cup my cock through my jeans. She’s done all kinds of thrashing, and I’m fully erect just from having her here.

She moves herself around until she’s straddling my lap. She’s not where I want her, though, and I grab onto her hips, dragging her up my thighs until the sweet juncture of her thighs is pressed against the bulge in my jeans.

I grunt on contact. “Yeah, right there.”

“Jason.” She moans my name, and I shake my head, forcing myself to get it together.

“Olivia, right, so you asked me why I don’t want you. Well, I think it’s obvious I do.” I lift my hips, pressing my manhood against her pussy to show her.

Her hands tighten on my shoulders. “Okay, so why did you leave then?”

“Because you don’t want anything serious.”

She leans against me. “Wait, what? You didn’t stay and have sex with me because I don’t want anything serious?”

I nod. “Yes, that’s right.”

She’s gripping my shoulders now, and her voice is tense. “But... I don’t understand.”

I lean forward until we’re cheek to cheek and I’m whispering in her ear. “Because I know if we make love, I’d want more, Liv. I wouldn’t want to let you go.”

“But...” She starts and stops, and I can feel her tense up in my arms.

I soothe my hands down her back. “Liv, I’m not asking you to marry me or anything permanent. I have too many unknowns in my life to burden you with all that. But I do know if we make love, I don’t just want one night with you. I want us to date and to see each other. No promises... we’re just seeing where it goes.”

I'm holding my breath, waiting for her response. "I can do that," she says.

"You sure? I don't want to rush you..."

She kisses my earlobe and then whispers in my ear, "Jason, I don't usually make it to the second date. This is our third."

I pull back roughly. "I haven't even taken you out on a real date."

She laughs. "I don't know, our first two were pretty epic, and this third one is shaping up pretty nicely too."

"Olivia," I admonish her because I know she's trying to change the subject.

# CHAPTER 20

# OLIVIA

I KNOW HE'S SERIOUS. I freaked all last night and today for nothing. He does want me... he just wants more.

I'm silent for too long, and he grips my waist. "Talk to me, Liv."

"I can do it."

He freezes and then rests his chin on my shoulder. "You can do what exactly?"

"I can date you and see where this goes."

He's not satisfied though. "And..."

"And... I won't run. No more running. If I freak out or get overwhelmed, I'll talk to you about it."

He lets out a sigh, and I swear I can feel his body react. He was seriously worried. "Okay," he says.

I laugh. "Okay? That's all you have to say?"

He laughs too. "I'm relieved. I thought for sure if you knew what I was thinking or how I was feeling, you'd freak out on me. I couldn't resist you last night."

"About last night—" I start.

His voice is gruff, and I know he's thinking about what we did. "What about it?"

"I liked it, but..."

He pulls back and cups my chin. "But what?"

I shrug my shoulders. "But you didn't kiss me, Jason."

He laughs. “Oh, I kissed you for sure.”

I playfully smack his shoulder. “Not there. I mean, you didn’t kiss me... on the lips.”

“I knew if I did, I wouldn’t leave.”

Emotion rolls through me. With anyone else, I’d say he was full of crap, but I know what he’s saying. That kiss was something else the other night. “Okay, so what about now? Will you kiss me now?”

“Fuck. I’d love to.”

He presses his lips to mine, and it’s all-consuming. There’s no working our way into it. It’s like the need and the desire has been there, and now we’re just stoking the fire. His hands are on each side of my face, tilting my head to give him better access and to deepen the kiss. My hands are everywhere, and when I reach for him this time, he doesn’t try and stop me. I’m pulling at the hem of his shirt, and when I get it up his chest, he raises his arms to help me take it off.

I sit back in awe to look at him.

“Olivia?” he says.

I shake my head. “Damn, Jason.”

He puts a hand to his chest and runs it across his abs. “What is it?”

I swallow roughly. “Uh, you are... wow... I don’t even know how to describe it.”

He puffs out his chest proudly. “Thanks. I’ve been working out a lot.”

I reach out a hand and touch him timidly. “I can tell.”

When my palm rests against his chest, he sucks in a breath. He fumbles around and reaches for my shirt. Gruffly, he asks, “Can I take this off?”

“Yeah,” I whisper to him but just as soon as he reaches for me, I grab his hand. “Listen, uh, I should probably tell you something. I mean, you may have already figured it out, but I’m bigger... you know?”

He scrunches up his nose. “And you think that’s going to bother me?”

I laugh. “Really? I’m not talking about my breasts, I’m just telling you that I know you’re probably used to smaller women, and I’m not small.” I look down where I’m straddling his lap. “I mean, I’m sitting on you so you probably already know this. Geez, Olivia, shut up.”

He starts to laugh. His hands go to my hips, and his fingers dig into me. “I like that you’re curvy, if that’s what you’re talking about. And if you’re worried about anything else, I think I’ve already proven to you that I am undoubtedly turned on by you. Your smell, your sound, your touch... anything YOU makes me hard, Olivia.”

I take a deep breath and let it out. I pull at the hem of my shirt and lift it over my head. I then undo the snap of my bra, pull the straps off my shoulders, and drop it to the floor. “I’ve taken my bra and shirt off, Jason.”

I barely get the words out and his hands are on me. He touches and teases me until I’m gyrating on his lap, wanting more. When he leans in to suckle me, it’s my undoing. I can’t take much of this.

I reach between us, scooting back so I can reach him. I grab at the button on his jeans, and he grunts.

He pulls off my nipple with a pop. “Can I take you to the bedroom?”

I’m off his lap and standing up in an instant. “Yes.”

He grabs my hand and leads me down the hall. I take in the muted room. There’s no pictures on the wall, no light at all.

When we get to the bed, he’s reaching for me. Kneeling at my feet, he’s undoing the button on my pants, and I help him get them over my hips and down my legs. I’m kicking them off as he stands back up.

He unzips his pants, and I put my hands at each side to help him take them off. His underwear comes down with them, and I about fall on my ass when I see his erect manhood standing straight up, looking at me almost angrily. It’s thick, and there’s

a drop of precum at his tip. I try to fight the urge, but there's no way. I reach out and kiss the head of his dick.

I should have warned him or given him some kind of heads up, but I didn't. "Fuck." He groans as his body stills in torment.

I smile as I wrap my lips around his girth and then take him down my throat. His fingers dig into my shoulders almost painfully. I move my hands to wrap around his thick thighs. There's no way I can wrap my hands around them, but I got a hold of him to bring him and push him back as I suck on him.

His moans fill the air around us, and with each satisfied sound, I work harder to please him.

I move one hand to wrap around him, stroking him because no matter how hard I try, I can't take him all.

"Fuck," he says again, and I take him a little deeper.

It happens so quick, there's no stopping it. He lifts me up and throws me onto the bed. I land on my back with a bounce. "Jason."

"No, fuck, Liv, I'm about to blow, and when I do, I want to be inside you. Tell me you're on the pill. I'm clean, and I don't want anything between us."

"I have an IUD," I tell him.

He leans over me. "Tell me, Liv. Tell me I can come in that sweet, tight pussy."

I grab on to the bed covers and clench them between my fingers. "Yes, yes." I'm not sure what happened to my sweet, quiet man, but I like this side of Jason too.

I wait for him to climb on top of me and enter me in one thrust. The anticipation is killing me, but when he doesn't, I sit up on my elbows. "Jason?"

He's breathing heavily, dragging in air. "Yeah, fuck, if I take you now... give me a second."

I lean up and hook my arms around his chest. His knees are on the bed, and I know I have him at an awkward angle, but I feel like if I hold him, he's not going to change his mind.



“Change my mind?” he says and it’s then I realize I said it out loud. “Fuck, Liv, a bomb could go off right outside these apartments and I’m not moving until I’ve impaled you on my cock. I just need a minute. I want this to last, and if I go in now, it won’t.”

I lean back and start tracing my finger around his nipple. Goosebumps rise on his arms, and so I trail a finger down his flat stomach and to his manhood. I run one finger from root to tip and his hips thrust. “Fuck me, you’re killing me.”

I laugh, and he pushes me back on the bed. I go easily, and instead of leaning over me, he goes straight to my pussy.

He’s relentless with his fingers and his tongue. Over and over, he brings me to the edge and then stops before I crest over.

I’m begging him to let me come, and finally he relents, and when I come, it feels as if my whole body is possessed. I ride the orgasm until I’m completely undone and lying lifeless on the bed. “Fuck,” I say softly.

# CHAPTER 21

# JASON

I CLIMB UP HER BODY, kissing along the way. We're both panting. My cock is hard, and I need relief, but I can wait until she's ready. When I reach her neck, she pulls me up until we're mouth to mouth. She kisses me, and I know the exact moment she tastes herself on me. She moans and deepens the kiss.

I'm positioning myself between her thighs. With her lips on mine, I wrap my hand around my dick and press it to her opening.

Her legs open wider, and her heels dig into my ass. I don't need more instruction than that. I guide myself into her, and she freezes underneath me. I pull my mouth off hers. "Breathe, Liv."

She lets out a gust of air. "Okay, I'm good. Don't stop."

I chuckle, but it's strained. "Oh baby, I'm not stopping. There's no stopping until your cum is coating my dick."

Her hands go to my back, and she pulls me into her. I slide into her honeyed depths, and she's so tight, it's like my cock is in a vise. I'm trying to go slow, but that's not what she wants. "Do it, Jason."

I push into her, and when I'm completely inside, I can feel her warmth all around me. If I could make this moment last a lifetime, I would.

She moans as I pull out and then push back inside her. The friction is intense, and with every thrust of my hips, I push her farther up the bed.

I just got in her and I'm about to come. "I need to come," I tell her.

She moans. "Do it."

I reach between us. As I push in and out of her, I press a finger to her swollen clit. "I need you to come again, Liv. Come with me."

Just a few more thrusts and circles around her clit and she's thrashing underneath me. There's a heat surrounding my cock, a flood of desire, and then I come as if my life depends on it. The orgasm shoots through me, rendering me useless. All I can do is grunt, groan, and try to keep moving even though she has me in a vise.

We're a mess. We both are, but I can't move, not yet.

She's breathing heavily, and her hands are roaming across my shoulders. "Are you okay?"

I laugh. "I think I'm supposed to be asking you that." I take a deep breath and let it out. "If I go get something to clean us up, are you going to run on me?"

She groans. "You'll be lucky if you get me out of this bed tonight, Jason Hawk."

I lean down and whisper in her ear, "Stay the night."

I hold my breath, waiting for her response. When she says, "Okay," I'm pretty sure my heart is going to explode. "Okay," I repeat to her.

She giggles, and I can't help but smile too. "You act like I want you to leave or something. I'd rather you stay."

Her voice goes all soft and unsure. "I didn't know. I don't want to overstay my welcome, that's all."

I lean down and tweak my nose against hers and kiss her thoroughly. When I pull back, my cock is hardening again. "That could never happen. I'll be right back."

I climb off the bed and take a few steps when she calls my name. "Jason."

"Yeah?" I say as I stop and turn toward her.

“I can think of one thing I’d get out of this bed for,” she says.

I hold my hands up. “Now wait a minute. I think I like the idea of keeping you in my bed a little longer.”

She’s on the move, and when she stops next to me, she slides her hand in mine. “I think you’ll like this too.”

I pull her against my body, and I swear it’s as if she’s made for me. We fit perfectly together. I hug her and then don’t let her go. “Okay, I’m open to listening.”

She kisses my chest. “I’d love to shower with you.”

It’s like a kick in the stomach. It’s like she’s in my head because taking a shower with Olivia is what dreams are made of. “Yes.”

She giggles. “Yes. What does that mean, yes?”

I walk with her to the bathroom. “It means that any time you want to take a shower with me, the answer is yes. I’ll never say no to that.”

I turn on the hot water without releasing her.

“That’s good to know,” she says as she wraps her arms around my middle.

When the water gets warm, I help her into the shower. I crowd into her, not wanting to let her go. I’m so worried she’s going to get overwhelmed or something. “You okay?” I ask her again.

She slides her hands up my belly and presses against my chest. “I’m okay, Jason. I’m not freaking out, I’m not going to run. The only thing I’m thinking about is when will we get to do that again?”

I let out a hearty chuckle. “How about a shower, food, and then we do it again?”

“Yes,” she says.

“Yes?” I repeat.

She laughs. “Yes, shower, food and then sex.”

I almost correct her. This isn't sex. There's no way what we experienced is just sex. But I know it's too soon for her to have me throwing the "L" word around. "Can I wash you?"

She pulls her hands from my chest but doesn't say anything. I'm about to reach for her when she says. "I'm standing here with my hands up, bare ass naked, legs spread apart. You can wash me, Jason. You can do whatever you want to with me."

I reach for her and pull her to me. Her wet, curvy body slides against mine in the best way. "You won't regret it," I tell her.

The mood shifts, and she's silent. I feel her rise to her tiptoes and press closer to my body. Her breath is a whisper against my ear. "Please don't hurt me, Jason. I know you don't owe me anything, but please don't break my heart."

"I won't," I tell her.

She rests her head on me. "Okay, I'll go first then."

Before I can figure out what she means, she drops to her knees in the shower. Her hand and then her mouth is wrapped around my hard cock, and she's taking me deeper than she was before. My hands thread into her hair, and I bunch it up in my fingers. She pushes me until I'm leaning against the shower wall. I have everything I want within reach; all I have to do is not fuck it up.

# CHAPTER 22

# OLIVIA

MY HAIR IS STILL WET. I'm in one of Jason's shirts and I'm sitting next to him on the couch, We've showered, eaten, and had sex again. Right now, I'm sitting here trying to figure out how long I have to wait before we can go another round.

"What are you thinking?"

He's always so worried about how I'm feeling and what I'm thinking. "You probably don't want to know."

He laughs, threading his fingers through mine. "Oh, I definitely want to know now."

I lean my head on his shoulder. "I'm wondering when we get to have sex again."

He laughs, and it's loud, relaxed, and boisterous. "Woman, you are going to wear me out I can see that now."

"Okay, I can give you a few minutes to recoup. Can I ask you something?"

He brings our hands up and kisses my knuckles. "You can ask me anything."

"I'm assuming you're going to Abby and Davis' wedding next weekend, right?"

He nods his head. "Yeah, I'm one of the best men. Are you a bridesmaid?"

*Just ask him, Olivia. Don't be a wuss.* "Yes, I'm the maid of honor, actually."



He freezes next to me, and I raise up to look at him. “What’s wrong?”

He has a sour look on his face. “Pardon me if I’m not up on wedding etiquette. So you’re maid of honor and Kanan is best man. What does that mean?”

I laugh and tickle his sides to soften the blow. “It means that Kanan and I are Abby and Davis’ favorites.”

He grabs my hand. “I’m not worried about being their favorite. What I’m asking is does that mean you’re walking down the aisle with Kanan? And is there some kind of protocol where you have to dance with him?”

“Well,” I start, trying to think of the last wedding I went to. “I won’t be walking down the aisle with him, but yeah, after the ceremony, I’ll be walking up the aisle with him. And I’m not sure if there’s a bridal party dance or not.”

He shakes his head. “Well, fuck. It’s going to kill me to know you’re walking or dancing arm in arm with Kanan.”

I shake my head not understanding. “What? He’s a good guy.”

He growls. He literally growls at me. “I don’t want to hear you talk about other men, Liv.”

I can’t help but laugh. He’s being ridiculous. “Jason, Kanan is your best friend.”

He reaches for me, wrapping his hands around my waist and then pulling me to his lap. I go to his favorite position, straddling him. I pull at his shirt I’m wearing. “I’m not wearing any underwear.”

He groans and reaches between my legs, stroking his finger through my slit. I press into his hand. “Argh! What are you doing to me, Jason Hawk?”

“Go to the wedding with me, be my date?”

My eyes snap open. “That’s what I was going to ask you.”

He grits his teeth. “There’s more.”

I press my finger against his forehead to try and smooth the pinched-up skin. “Okay. What is it?”

He does that thing I like. He puts his hands at my waist and slides me down until I'm pressed against his core. Between that and his fingers gently stroking my clit, I can barely think straight. He's slow in his response and words it as he touches me. "When you walk with Kanan, you think of me. When you dance with Kanan, which will be one dance and only one dance, you think of me. And then when you're not doing your bridesmaid duties, you are with me, by my side, in my arms."

A heat envelops me. If I hadn't already fallen for this man, there's no resisting him now. It's like he knows exactly what I need to hear from him. I try to calm my voice, but it's a little shaky. "I can do that."

He smiles. "Good. And tomorrow is the bachelor/bachelorette party."

I lift up and glide my core against the bulge in his shorts. I know I'm making a mess of them, but I doubt he cares. "Yes, it is. I'll be there."

He leans his forehead against mine. "Yeah, and as you're there with your friends, probably drinking and misbehaving, know that afterwards you'll be coming home with me."

I reach into his shorts and wrap my hand around his girth. "So basically what you're saying is that all our friends are going to know we're together."

He pauses for a second, and a strained look comes over his face. "Is that a problem?"

"No," I tell him instantly.

He nods in approval. "That's good because it won't be our friends. Any man that comes near you is going to know you're mine, Liv. Remember what I told you. I wasn't joking. You're mine. I don't share."

I tremble. What he's saying should freak me out right now, but surprisingly it doesn't. "Okay." I moan as I take him out of his shorts and hover over him to put him where I want him.

He holds my hips, not letting me slide down on him. I search his face and whine, "Jason."

He shakes his head. His face is strained, but he's not giving in.  
"Say it first, Liv. Tell me what I want to hear."

I don't hesitate. "I'm yours."

He nods his head and pulls me down, sheathing his cock with my body. "That's right, baby. You're mine."

He takes great pleasure in proving it to me the rest of the night.

# CHAPTER 23

# JASON

I WALKED Olivia to her car this morning and now I'm sitting outside the procedure room at the compound. I'm thinking about last night and this morning with Olivia. It couldn't have been more perfect. When I woke up with her body pressed against me and in my arms, I lay there as still as I possibly could. I want more mornings like today.

But first I have to get through this appointment.

"Hey, Jason, Dr. Beem will see you now."

I stand up and slowly walk through the room, down the hallway and follow the nurse into the procedure room. "Dr. Beem will be in shortly."

I nod and mumble, "Thanks."

The door clicks as it closes, and I sit here in silence. I'm completely on edge. The feelings from yesterday resurface. Months ago, the question I would always ask myself is how will I function if my sight doesn't come back? Now all I can think about is what will happen between Olivia and me if my sight doesn't return. She doesn't want to spend the rest of her life with a blind guy.

I unclench my hand that is wrapped tightly around my cane and then set it between my legs.

The door opens, and a man starts talking. "Jason Hawk, it's nice to meet you. I've heard all about you from Walker."

I stand up and hold my hand out. When he shakes it, I nod my head. "I've heard all about you too, Dr. Beem. Thanks for

fitting me into your schedule.”

He laughs and drops my hand. “Well, Walker didn’t give me much of a choice.”

I laugh. “Yeah, Walker’s a good guy.”

“The best,” he agrees. “So here’s the game plan for today. “We’re going to do vision screenings—”

I cut him off. “But I can’t see. I mean, nothing. Not even shadows.”

I hear him roll a chair, and I assume he sits down, so I do the same. He clears his throat. “Right, well, it still needs to be done. Then we’re going to do an MRI of your head, run a few tests and...”

I cut him off. “So when will I know? No offense, Dr. Beem, but for two years I’ve been told my sight is going to come back, but everything is still black. I spend every day wondering if today is the day. I just want to know. I’m sorry, I don’t want to be pushy but...” My voice trails off.

“But you need to get on with your life, right? I get it. I’m here and I’m not leaving town until we have some answers.”

I take a deep breath, and even though I’m scared, fuck I’m scared, but it feels good to know that by the end of the day, I’ll know something. “Okay, sounds good. Let’s get started.”

Dr. Beem laughs. “Okay, let’s do it.”

“Are you going to have your nurse do the tests?” I ask him, wondering if he’s going to leave and I’ll have to track him down later.

He opens the door. “Nope, you’re stuck with me. Walker wants me to run all the tests myself.”

I whistle softly. “Wow, he’s pulling in all his favors. I’m never going to be able to pay him back.”

“We’re turning left out of the room. Testing room is the last room down the hall on the left.” We start to walk, and Dr. Beem fills me in. “Walker saved my life over twenty years ago. If he calls me and asks me to do something, I do it.”

I grunt. "He saved me too."

Dr. Beem laughs. "I have a feeling most of the men and women here at the compound can say the same thing."

I nod in agreement. "I'd say you're right."

We get into the room and go through a number of tests. There's nothing to them, and for the most part, I lie back and let him do his thing. He asks me what feels like a thousand questions, but I answer every one of them truthfully.

After numerous tests, Dr. Beem comes to stand next to me. "You doing okay?"

I nod tiredly. "Yep, I'm good."

"Okay, so the MRI is next. It will take around forty-five minutes. I need you to lie as still as possible."

I nod. "I can do it."

He attaches something to my head and then gears grind as I slide into a machine. There's knocking as the machine starts to process and I concentrate on laying still. Of course my thoughts go to Olivia. I should have told her about my appointment today. but I felt that might be pushing it. She seemed fine with everything, even when I got a little too possessive of her. I wasn't thinking, but at least she didn't act like it was freaking her out. But asking her to come to a doctor's appointment, well, that's just too real and I'm not sure she's ready for it. And even though I'd love to have her here with me, I don't want this to get too intense for her.

When the test is complete, the machine starts to move, and I roll out of the tunnel. Dr. Beem is at my side and undoes the basket wrapped around my head.

I stand up, and he lets me put my jeans and T-shirt back on. When I come out of the room, Dr. Beem is outside in the hallway. "I'm going to take you back to the room and let you have a seat." We start to move, and I follow behind him until we're walking into the room I was in earlier. "I'm going to be a little while. I want to go through all the tests, and I want to be thorough. I'll be back as soon as I know something and have a plan in place."

“Okay,” I tell him. There are at least a thousand questions going through my head, but I don’t ask any of them. Right now, they’re all ‘what if’ questions, and there’s no sense in wasting the man’s time. When he has an answer, I’ll ask all my questions.

“There’s a couch next to this chair if you want to lie down. I don’t know how comfortable that plastic chair is.”

“I’m fine,” I tell him with my rigid posture. I just need to know at this point. I don’t care how uncomfortable I am.

“I’ll be back,” he says, and then the door closes. I’m left in silence trying to calm my nerves. The longer I sit here, the more nervous I get. I have no idea how much time passes. It seems like hours when the door opens. I freeze and wait for someone to say something.

“Hey, Jason.”

I suck in a breath. Dr. Beem called in Walker, and that can’t be a good sign.

“Hey, Walker. It’s not good, is it?”

His silence is telling.

Dr. Beem walks in and closes the door behind him. “So, Jason, sorry that took a little longer than I thought it would. I wanted to make sure I didn’t miss—”

I cut him off. “Just tell it to me straight, Dr. Beem. I’m not getting my sight back, am I?”

He sighs, and the chair creaks when he sits down. “Okay. I get it. You guys always want it straight and not sugar-coated. So no, you won’t get your sight back. Well, to be completely clear, there is a one percent chance you may regain your sight if you do nothing. If we do surgery, that is quite invasive and is considered high risk, but it would raise the rate to 25 percent.”

I lean back in my chair. I had a feeling this is what I would find out today, but the shock is real. I wasn’t ready.

Walker is gruff. “Jason, I know it sucks.”



“Yeah, it sucks.”

“You have a place here. Chris said he told you about the job. As long as you finish your therapy and keep talking it out, you’ll have a job here.”

I nod. “Thanks, Walker.” I stand up and hold my hand out. “Thank you, Dr. Beem. And thank you, Walker, for setting this all up. It’s not the answer I wanted, but at least now I know.”

They both start to talk, and then Dr. Beam asks, “Do you have any questions, Jason?”

I shake my head and move toward the door. “No, the only question I had was if I would see again. You answered that.”

I try to soften it with a smile. I raise my hand. “Thank you. See you later, Walker.”

I get out the door and am walking down the hallway when I hear the footsteps behind me. “You going to be all right with this?”

Walker’s right in asking me this. I know he’s worried about me. That’s just who he is. “Yeah, well I will be, anyway. I’m going to give myself a day to pull myself together. Tomorrow, I’ll be good.”

We walk in silence, side by side. We go through the commons area, and many of the guys talk to Walker, but he sticks by my side. We get outside and on the path to the apartments. “You walking me all the way home?”

He laughs. “I thought about it.”

“Look, I’m not going to do anything stupid, Walker.”

He pats me on the shoulder. “I know that. I just want you to know I’m here if you want to talk about it.”

We get to my apartment building, and I stop. “This is me.”

He laughs. “You want me to come in?”

I shake my head. “Nope. I promise. I’m going to be all right, Walker. Thank you for the job offer.”

He asks me timidly, “Are you going to take it?”

“Yes, I’m not stupid. I understand the opportunity you’re giving me, and I won’t fuck it up. Plus, I want to stay in Whiskey Run.”

He puts his hand on my shoulder again. “Does this have anything to do with the woman you’re seeing?”

I don’t even question how he knows. “Yeah, I mean, I told her my sight would be coming back, so I’m not sure how she’s going to take this news, but yeah, I like Whiskey Run, and I want to stay close to Olivia.”

After talking for a few minutes, I convince him I’m okay. I make my way inside to my apartment. I had a feeling this would be the outcome, and I’m upset about it. But I’m more concerned about how Olivia is going to feel about it. I already know she doesn’t want forever... but is she even going to want right now?

# CHAPTER 24

# OLIVIA

THE PARTY IS in full swing, and Jason is nowhere to be found. Of all the places, Abby and Davis chose to have their bachelor/bachelorette parties at The Whiskey Whistler in downtown Whiskey Run. The place is packed, and at first, I thought I missed him. But after making two rounds around the whole perimeter of the bar and not finding him, I knew something was up.

Everyone is having a great time, and the two parties have merged into one. Abby is having a blast. She usually doesn't like being the center of attention, but having Davis here, she's absolutely glowing. I hate to bother her with this, but after so many unreturned phone calls and texts to Jason, I have to know something.

“Abby.”

She smiles at me, and her eyes are glazed over. She's had a few drinks and has a little buzz. She wraps her arms around me. “Olivia! My maid of honor! This is the best party ever.”

I roll my eyes. She pretty much planned this whole thing. The only thing I was allowed to do was pick up the cake. “Yes, it's perfect. Hey, have you seen Jason? He was supposed to be here tonight, but I haven't seen him.”

“Oh, Davis said he wasn't coming.”

When she doesn't say anything else, I roll my hand at her. “Oookay, do you know why?”

She shrugs. “Davis said he'd tell me later.” When she sees the expression on my face, her mouth forms an O. “I should have

asked him, shouldn't I? Come on, let's go ask him now."

We don't have to go far. Davis is right behind her. All she has to do is turn to look for him and he opens his arms, pulling her against him. "You having fun, wifey?"

She slaps his chest. "I'm not you're wife yet."

His voice is adamant. "Oh, you're my wife. I don't need a piece of paper to prove it. You're mine, Abby."

She laughs and then clears her throat when she remembers I'm standing here. "Where's Jason?"

Davis' eyes widen as he looks at me. "Oh."

I nod and cross my arms over my chest. "Yeah, oh. Where is he?"

He shakes his head. "Shit. He didn't tell you?"

I uncross my arms and hold my fists at my side. "Tell me what?"

He starts to backtrack, but there's no way he's going to leave me hanging like this. "What is it, Davis? What is it he didn't tell me?"

He tilts his head to the side, and it's obvious he's having an internal struggle on whether he should tell me or not. When it looks as if he's not going to answer me, I take a step forward. "Davis, listen. He said he was going to be here tonight, and he's not answering my texts or my calls. I'm worried about him. Please, tell me what's going on."

He blows out a breath and brushes his hand through his hair. "He had a doctor's appointment today. He didn't tell you?"

I try to recall last night and this morning, but I don't remember him saying anything about a doctor's appointment. I shake my head. "No, he didn't. Is he okay?"

He leans down as if what he's about to say is some kind of secret. "Look, it's not my place to tell you. I can say that he's okay and he's at his apartment. I checked on him before I came here."

I look at Abby, and she's able to read my face without me even saying a thing. "Go. God, of course, go Olivia."

"But..." I start.

She rolls her eyes and starts pushing me through the crowd. "Go, Olivia. Check on your man. It sounds like he may need you. The party will be winding down soon anyway."

I stop and turn. "Are you sure?"

"Yes, absolutely I'm sure. Wait, have you been drinking? I can get someone to drive you."

I shake my head. "No, not a drop."

She laughs and hugs me. "Go talk to Jason and make sure he's okay. If it was Davis, I would go too."

And that is what convinces me. I hug her back and practically run out the door to my car. I make it to the compound in record time, and when I walk over to his apartment, I pound on the door and wait for him to open it.

When he opens the door, he says, "Hello." All I can do is look at him. I'm not sure what I expected, but it feels good to see him standing in front of me. He looks tired. Exhausted, really, but he's standing and looks okay from where I'm at.

"Olivia?" he asks.

I pull myself together. "Are you going to ask me in?"

He grips the door. "What are you doing here? I thought you'd be at the party."

"I was, but I got worried when you wouldn't answer your phone or respond to my texts."

He doesn't invite me in. "I turned my phone off. You should have stayed at the party. I won't be good company tonight, Liv."

The fact that he calls me by the nickname he gave me gives me some peace. "Ask me to come in, Jason."

He finally steps to the side, and I walk past him. I toss my purse onto the coffee table and settle onto the couch. "What

doctor appointment did you have today? And why didn't you tell me about it?"

I wait for him to sit next to me, but he doesn't. Instead he's standing up with his arms crossed over his chest. It's obvious he doesn't want to talk about it, but I'm not giving him an out. "You can't just stand me up and not answer your phone, Jason."

He still doesn't say anything.

I can feel the tears start to well in my eyes. "If you want to break up with me, then you just have to tell me. I'm not going to chase someone that doesn't want me."

He pushes his hand through his hair in frustration. "I wasn't trying to break up with you, Liv. I thought I was doing you a favor. I meant what I said when I said I wouldn't be good company. I got some... bad news today, and I didn't feel like going to a party. Davis understood."

I toss a hand in the air. "And what? I wouldn't understand?"

"No, I mean yeah, you would understand, but I didn't want to put that on you, Liv. This is my shit. I didn't want to drag you into it."

I clutch my stomach. It feels as if he just raised his foot and kicked me in it. I rise slowly to my feet. I'm trying to remain calm even though it's the last thing I'm feeling. "You don't want to drag me into it?"

He starts to talk, and I hold my hand up. "No, it's my turn. Was I the only one here last night and this morning? I'm in it, Jason Hawk. I told you I didn't want a relationship and I just wanted a good time. But you made me fall in love with you, dammit. And what? Now you're pushing me away."

He moves toward me. "You love me?"

"Geez, Jason, how can you even doubt it? Even though you never said it, I know you felt something for me too."

"I did. I do," he says.

When there is a silence, I ask him, "What doctors appointment did you not tell me about? What doctors appointment did you

keep to yourself and not let me go to so I could be there with you? I'm assuming it was bad news. Well, give it to me. Whatever it is, we can work through it."

He juts his chin at me. "I'm blind... and I won't be getting my eyesight back."

I wait for the rest of it, and when he doesn't continue, I realize I sound like a bitch as soon as the words leave my mouth. "Is that it?"

"Is that it?" he repeats. "Yeah, that's it. I told you that my eyesight would be coming back, but I found out today that's not possible. Well, that's not completely true. If I have a surgery, which has a really high risk that comes along with it, my chances of getting my sight back would be 25 percent."

"You're not getting the surgery," I say and then realize I may be overstepping. "I mean, ultimately the decision is yours, but I hope you don't. I'd rather have you here with me than you do something crazy, Jason."

He comes near me, and this time I don't move. "So you're telling me that the fact I will always be blind doesn't freak you out."

I shrug. "Honestly, Jason, I should have paid more attention. I know you mentioned at one time you could get your eyesight back, but sight or no sight doesn't change how I feel about you."

He puts his hands on my shoulders. "And you love me?"

When I don't say anything in return, he pulls me in closer. "You can't take it back now, Olivia. You said it, and I'm holding you to it."

I let out a sigh. "Yes. I love you."

I wait, expecting myself to freak out or something, but I don't. There's a calm that comes over me, and I know there's no doubt that I love this man. He hugs me, holding me to him like I'm the most precious thing he's ever held in his arms. I pull back, but he doesn't let me go far. "Jason, you can't do this to me again. If you have an important appointment, you tell me. If you can't do something you had planned with me, you tell



me. I can only do this if we have complete honesty and you don't push me away."

He laughs huskily. "I promise. Fuck, Olivia. I promise."

I loop my arms around his neck and go to my tiptoes. "Okay, so maybe we should seal it with a kiss."

He doesn't make me wait. His lips press to mine. He catches me off guard when he picks me up and carries me to the couch, settling me on his lap. I move so we're in our favorite position, and once I'm straddling him, I whisper in his ear, "I love you, Jason Hawk."

He squeezes me a little tighter. His voice is filled with emotion. "I love you too."

# EPILOGUE

## JASON

THE WEDDING RECEPTION is in full swing. I've already had to endure knowing that Olivia walked down the aisle with another man. Kanan is one of my best friends and I trust him, but I don't like the idea of my woman on another man's arm.

And yes, Olivia is my woman.

Since the night I fucked up and we confessed our love for each other, Olivia has stayed at my apartment every night. We've grown closer in the last week, and my need to have her in my life has grown.

At this point, there's no other option. Like I told her, she's mine.

"What are you thinking about?" Olivia asks as she walks up to me. She presses her finger to my forehead, no doubt trying to rub my frown away.

I lean down and inhale her scent. "I'm thinking about you dancing with Kanan."

"Well, I have good news."

I hold her tightly, and she fits right against me. "The only good news I want to hear is that I'm not going to have to suffer through a whole fucking song with you in another man's arms. You know that fucker told me the song is eight minutes long? I'll fuckin' throat punch him if you're in his arms for eight minutes."

She leans up, pressing her breasts to my chest. "You really are possessive, aren't you?"

I kiss her neck and then nibble on her earlobe before whispering, “Only with you. I’ve never been like this with anyone else, but just the thought of you with someone else makes me crazy, Olivia. It’s not fair that they get to look at you and I don’t.”

She pulls me down so she can whisper in my ear, “Yeah, but you’re the one that gets to touch me. You’re the one that makes me come and scream your name. You’re the one that I get to love.”

“Fuck me, can we just leave?”

I pat his chest. “I’ll tell you what. I’ll give you the good news, and if you still want to leave, we’ll blow off the rest of the party, the dance and everything, and we’ll go home and make love.”

“Mmmm,” I say.

She smiles against my neck. “What’s that ‘mmmmm’ about?”

“I like it when you call it home and when you say make love.”

She pulls back, and I can feel her gazing up at me. “Yeah, well that’s what it is, Mr. Hawk.”

I nod, tucking her against me, not wanting to let her go. “Yes, it is. It’s our home, and we do make love. Lots of it.”

“It’s because you’re insatiable.”

I blurt out a laugh. “Me? Honey, when I woke up this morning, my dick was in your mouth.”

She groans as she covers my mouth with her hand. “Jason, my high school music teacher was walking by when you said that. Oh God, now he’s watching us from across the room.”

I’m completely unfazed. “Good. I want every man to know I’m the only dick you want.”

“Ugh” she moans. “Really, Jason?”

I shrug. “It’s the truth.”

She moves to my side, and I tuck her against me. “All right, well, back to the good news. Kanan had to leave. Walker came

and got him. He said there was some woman at the compound looking for him, and he ran out of here. So he's not going to be able to dance with me after all."

"Fuck yeah." I punch my fist in the air triumphantly.

"So you'll dance with me?" she asks.

I laugh. "As long as you realize I'm not a dancer. I will give it my best shot."

She giggles. "All you have to do is hold me in your arms and sway back and forth. That's it."

I shrug. "I can definitely do that."

Just as I say it, the announcer comes on. "Now that the bride and groom have had their first dance, we are inviting the wedding party to the dance floor."

Olivia pats my chest. "That's us, big guy."

I walk with her side by side to the dance floor. "Natalie's dancing with Beau," she announces as I take her in my arms.

"Yeah, I didn't figure Beau would be game on letting me dance with his wife anyway."

Olivia grunts, "Yeah, even though she's married, I didn't like when you had to escort her down the aisle."

I circle my arms around her and whisper in her ear, "You were jealous."

She nods. "I was. I'll admit it. I know you joke about it all the time, but you're mine too, Jason Hawk. I don't like to share either."

"Noted. I got you. But there's something else we should probably talk about while we're being all honest and up front with each other."

She asks me softly, "Oh yeah, what's that?"

"Someday, probably soon, I'm going to ask you to marry me, and I'm hoping you'll say yes. So I need you to get ready for it. Get your head wrapped around it or whatever you need to

do because you and I are going to have forever together, Mrs. Future Olivia Hawk.”

I wait for her to tell me it’s too fast or I need to slow down. I’m holding my breath, and I let it out in a big gust when she says. ‘Yeah, okay. I’ll be ready.’”

I stop dancing. “Wait. That’s it? You’ll be ready?”

She feathers her fingers through my hair. “I told you I love you, Jason. So yeah, I don’t ever want to be without you either. So I agree, when you’re ready to ask, you should do it.”

“Well fuck me, you’re full of surprises.”

She giggles and slides her hands up and down my chest. “We can do that when we get home.”

I lean down and kiss her. “I’ll hold you to that.”

She sighs happily, resting her cheek against my chest.

Now I’m in even more of a hurry to get us home. Not because of the promise of sex but for a whole different reason. I thought for sure I’d have to give her time or even hell, talk her into it. I had no idea that she was waiting for me. It’s a good thing I went and bought a ring this week. As soon as we get home, I’m going to put my ring on Olivia’s finger, and she’ll truly be mine. Forever.

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# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

USA Today Bestselling Author Hope Ford writes short, steamy, sweet romances. She loves tattooed, alpha men, instant love stories, and ALWAYS happily ever afters.

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