



She didn't expect
him to be the one
teaching her

for the
love of
English

USA Today Bestselling Author
A.M. HARGROVE

for the
love of
English

A.M. HARGROVE

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Epilogue

**Sneak Peek of Sidelined: A Wilde Players Dirty
Romance**

Sneak Peek of Fastball: A Wilde Players Dirty Romance

FOR THE LOVE OF ENGLISH

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characters are figments of the author’s imagination, or, if real,
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About the Author

A.M. Hargrove

One day, on her way home from work as a sales manager, USA Today bestselling author, A. M. Hargrove, realized her life was on fast forward and if she didn't do something soon, it would be too late to write that work of fiction she had been dreaming of her whole life. So she made a quick decision to quit her job and reinvented herself as a Naughty and Nice Romance Author.

Annie fancies herself all of the following: Reader, Writer, Dark Chocolate Lover, Ice Cream Worshipper, Coffee Drinker (swears the coffee, chocolate, and ice cream should be added as part of the USDA food groups), Lover of Grey Goose (and an extra dirty martini), #WalterThePuppy Lover, and if you're ever around her for more than five minutes, you'll find out she's a non-stop talker. Other than loving writing about romance, she loves hanging out with her family and binge watching TV with her husband. You can find out more about her books at <http://www.amhargrove.com>.

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Everyone always asks about where book ideas come from. This one came from my husband. He was a single, divorced, dad of two before we married. He went through hell at times but he never let the kids see it. Life was an emotional roller coaster for him, and there were times where he had to trudge through some serious shit to be able to get to the better times. He made it and the kids turned out to be amazing adults, thanks to all he did for them, but I always look back at what he faced and honestly, it was absolutely awful on him. This book was written using my experience with him as a basis for it. Though the book is an entirely different story, my husband and his untiring dedication to his kids inspired it. You totally rocked it, Henry!

To keep up with all the latest information about my books, you can subscribe to my newsletter [here](#).

Dedication

This book is dedicated to single dads
everywhere.

Prologue

BECK

About Six Years Ago

“Beck, you’d better get in here.”

It’s still dark, but then again, it is December and the sun won’t rise until seven thirty. But I’m home for Christmas break, so why is my dad waking me up so damn early?

“What?” I groan.

“Just get your butt out of bed and get in here. Now.”

When he uses that tone, I know not to argue. So I drag my ass out of my warm and toasty bed and shuffle into the kitchen. My parents stand by the island, looking into a large cardboard box as my mother stuffs a letter into my hands.

“What’s this?” I ask.

“I don’t know, but it was on top of this.” She points at the box.

“A Christmas gift?” I ask. “A little early.”

“I wouldn’t say it’s early if I were you,” my dad answers.

Rubbing the sleep out of my eyes, I attempt to clear my head. I’d partied hard last night. All the guys got together as they usually did when everyone came in town from college. I barely remember what time I came home last night.

“Can someone tell me what this is all about?”

All of a sudden, a baby starts crying.

My mother says, “Well, we were hoping you could shed a little light on this.”

“Whose baby is that?” I ask.

“Beck, read the damn letter!” My father’s patience comes to an end. “It was in the box with the baby on the front porch. I walked outside to get the paper, and there it sat. Now, read the letter so we can get some answers.”

I look at the envelope in his hand. Sure enough, my name is scrawled across it. I tear open the seal and pull out a folded page of paper, the kind with the lines you tear off from a spiral notebook. I rub my fingers across those little tags left behind because suddenly I’m scared, totally freaked out. I don’t want to read what’s on this piece of paper.

Raising my eyes, I instantly feel five years old again when the accusatory gazes of my parents drill holes into me. I swallow, but my saliva has taken a hike to places unknown.

In a soft voice, Mom urges, “Beck.”

Nodding, I unfold the paper and read.

Beck,

I tried. I really did. But it was too much. So I’m giving her to you. She was a lot more than I bargained for. If you don’t want her, then you can give her up for adoption. In the box under her blankets, you’ll find the legal papers, signed by a lawyer and me, which give total custody to you. I’ve given up all legal rights to her. If you’re wondering, she was conceived homecoming night at the fraternity party in November our freshman year. I doubt you even remember since we were both drunk. I don’t blame you, as the fault was mine as much as yours. On the documents, you’ll find my name. I’m sure you will follow up with DNA testing, which I encourage you to do. But you are her father, as you were the only one I was with. In the envelope with her legal documents, I’ve also enclosed her medical records. She is healthy—if you’re wondering. That’s not why I’m leaving her with you. And so you know, I couldn’t go through with the abortion I scheduled.

I’m sorry. I guess I wasn’t cut out for motherhood.

Abby

I’m completely stunned, frozen.

“Well?” Dad asks. I hand over the letter. And then I somehow summon up the courage to peek into the box and get my first glimpse of my daughter—the daughter whose name I don’t even know. The deepest blue-green eyes lock onto my own, and I can’t breathe for what seems like an eternity. Because I’m staring into a mirror. All I want to do is touch her, but I’m scared to death. I’ve never held a baby before. Will I hurt her? Is she fragile?

“Go on. Pick her up, Beck,” Mom says.

My shaking arms reach for her, and her pink blankets fall away to unveil a tiny body encased in a pale pink one-piece suit as her arms and legs flail about. Her small head is layered in pale fuzz, and I rub my cheek against it. It’s the softest stuff I’ve ever felt, and I don’t want to let her go.

“Well, kiddo, looks like you got yourself a kid,” my father grumbles.

Mom chuckles and says, “Looks like you’ve got yourself a granddaughter.”

“Dad, did you read the letter?” I ask.

“Yep.”

“Will you check her medical records? I want to know her name.”

Dad ruffles some papers around, and he finally says, “Hmm. Says here it’s English. English Beckley Bridges.”

“English.” What the hell am I gonna do with a baby?

Suddenly, a loud sounding prrrft escapes as I feel the vibrations on my hand. The room fills with a noxious odor.

“Ugh, what’s that?” I ask.

Dad laughs, roots around in the box, and hands me a plastic pad. “I know one thing you’re gonna be doing. Looks like you’re gonna be changing a diaper. Make that plural.” I hear him laughing all the way down the hall.

Part One

MISS MONROE

One

SHERIDAN

Present Day

My scrutinizing glance takes in all the trimmings and accessories I've strategically placed on every wall, looking for any little fault I can find. There isn't much left of my nails as I chew them down to the quick while I analyze my decorating skills. I frown, admitting to myself it's apparent why I chose the profession I did. No doubt my roommate would waltz in here and have a dozen or more ideas on how to make this room much more appealing to the eye. She'd probably recommend hand-sewn decorative pillows strewn about with lavish artwork hung on the walls and those cool things you see on Pinterest made out of used pallets. And most likely, she'd have all new desks made out of them with little cubbyholes for pencils and slots for books. Unfortunately, my budget and time won't allow for that. My stomach quivers in anticipation, but why shouldn't it? It's the first day of school. My *very first* day. This is the moment I've been waiting for and working toward my whole life. Okay, maybe not my *whole* life, but whatever. In a few minutes, twenty-two six-year-old kids will be running through the door, minds like sponges, and if I'm not prepared to be the very best sponge filler in the world to them, I will forever destroy their love and zest for learning.

Melodramatic much? Maybe. I am a first grade teacher, and it's my overwhelming duty to offer them a chance to love school. If I fail, they will hate school forever, and it will all be on my shoulders. And to top it all off, this is my very first day as a bona fide teacher. I just graduated from college, so this is it. My chance to change the world! My dream job, my career, and my path I've chosen.

Clearing out the toxic carbon dioxide, I fill my eager lungs with a dump truck load of fresh oxygen. And then I hear them. The pounding of minuscule feet on tiled floors and the screaming of young voices. In the midst of all that, I can hear Susan Jorgensen, the principal, telling the children to calm down and line up, single file in the hall. I stifle a giggle because I can remember hearing those very same words from my own principal. The door swings open, and Susan sticks her head inside.

“Miss Monroe, are you ready to meet your new students?”

“I am.” I cross my fingers and pray.

She holds the door open, and a line of kids, resembling marching ants, walks into the room. A smile replaces my frown, and I can't help but feel the excitement replace my anxiety. They look scared to death, but if cute could be a picture, it would be lined up in front of me. Oh. My. God. How can I not fall in love with every single one of these mites? I am going to be mashed potatoes with them.

“Good morning, everyone. My name is Miss Monroe, and I'm going to be your teacher this year. How is everyone today?”

One little boy immediately pops a thumb into his mouth, and his bottom jaw goes to town. A few of the girls offer me a shy grin, and a couple of the boys look around and don't give me the time of day. Susan catches my eye, points to the door, and heads out. I have prearranged seating, so I go to the front row and start calling out names and seating the children. When I'm about halfway down the second row, I get to the name, English Bridges, and no one responds, so I keep on. I have about three-quarters of the students seated when the door bursts open, and a woman, who is perhaps in her late forties, stands with a child clinging to her neck.

“I'm so sorry to interrupt, but is this the first grade classroom?” she asks out of breath.

“Yes, it is,” I answer, smiling. “Can I help you?”

“I’m sorry we’re late. I’m Anna Bridges, and this is English. English Bridges.”

“Oh, yes.”

“Would you mind if I had a word in the hall with you?”

I glance at the unseated students and say, “Can you give me a couple of minutes to seat the rest of the students?”

“Sure.” I watch her exit and then finish with the rest of the children.

“Now, all of you remain in your seats, and I’ll be right back. Remember, no getting out of your seats. Do you understand me?”

“Yes,” they all answer. I walk into the hallway, and Anna Bridges stands there, still holding English.

“Is English all right?” I ask.

Anna rolls her eyes at me. Of course, English can’t see her. I wonder what this is all about.

“She’s fine. She just has a case of I-don’t-want-to-go-to-school, but I told her that if she didn’t come, she would grow up to be intellectually challenged.”

I hear a muffled voice say, “I will not be intellectually challenged. I’m smart. You said so. I can learn on those school videos I see on TV.”

Hmm. This one’s quite precocious, so I ask, “But, English, wouldn’t you miss out on making friends and having all sorts of fun at school?”

“School’s not fun.”

“Hmm. Didn’t you like kindergarten?”

“Yes,” she mumbles.

“Then how do you know you won’t like first grade if you’ve never been?”

Her shoulders practically meet her ears as she gives me an exaggerated shrug.

“Tell you what. Why don’t you try it for a week? Then you can decide if you like it or not.”

The little girl lifts her head and turns to look at me. A head full of blond ringlets greets me highlighted by a pair of blue-green eyes. But what also captures my attention is she’s dressed in a kaleidoscope of colors—striped leggings and a flowery shirt that somehow go together on her. This one will have me wrapped around her pinky in no time flat. I’m not sure who will be teaching whom.

“Okay. But you promise I’ll like it?”

“I can’t make that kind of promise, English, but I’ll do my best.”

She turns back around to face the woman and says, “Come on. Let’s go.”

“Oh, sweetie, I’m leaving you here.”

“Noo! You can’t leave me, Banana!”

Banana?

The woman looks at me and grins. “Yup, she calls me her Banana. Great substitute for Grandma Anna, huh?”

The confusion must be flashing on my face like neon.

The woman clarifies it. “Since my name is Anna, I had this brainiac idea that instead of just Grandma, I’d have her call me Grandma Anna, but she couldn’t get that mouthful out, so it turned into her Banana. It’s gotten better. I used to be her Big Banana. Nice, huh? I’m the brunt of many jokes.”

I cover my mouth to stop the rush of laughter that threatens.

“So, you’re the grandmother, then?”

“Yes, my son is out of town, so I have parenting duties until tomorrow. Oh, I nearly forgot. Can you accept texts during school hours? He’s so nervous about not being here for her first day, so I told him I’d run interference, but he’d love a text or two from you, if at all possible today.”

It makes my heart happy to see a parent so involved. After all the horror stories I've heard during my student teaching about how parents don't care anymore, I'm thrilled about this.

"We encourage parents to email, but in this case, I'll be happy to text him. I can't imagine how worried he is. Can you leave me his number?"

She quickly hands me a note with a name and number on it. "I'll let him know you'll text and tell him your name."

"Perfect. Are you ready, English, to start your education?"

She gives me her little hand, and before we head inside the room, she yells out, "Banana, tell Daddy I'm under the rainbow today."

"Okay, Munchkin, I will." She gives English a smile and a thumbs-up. I guess "under the rainbow" is a good thing, then.

When we walk inside, all things good turn topsy-turvy and the classroom is mayhem. Students are running wild, chasing each other, and yelling like they are on the playground. I need to take control. I waste no time in walking to the front of the class and clapping my hands. It does no good. Then I say, "Students, take your seats." No response. You'd think it was a free-for-all. I stick my fingers in my mouth and let the biggest, loudest whistle loose. If there's one thing I can do, it's whistle.

They all come to a freezing halt and turn to me.

"Did I not ask you to remain in your seats?"

They nod.

"When I ask you a question, I expect you to respond with words, not gestures. That means you either say, 'Yes, Miss Monroe or no, Miss Monroe.' Is that clear?"

"Yes, Miss Monroe."

"So, did I not give clear instructions that you were to remain in your seats?"

"Yes, Miss Monroe."

I sweep my arm in front of me, asking, “Is this remaining in your seats?”

“No, Miss Monroe.”

“And that’s really quite a shame because I had a special treat for all of you today, but since we’ve only been in class for fifteen minutes, and you can’t seem to follow my instructions in this short period of time, it looks like there will be no treats for anyone today.”

“Oh, Miss Monroe, we’re sorry. We didn’t think you’d care,” a little girl pipes up.

“All of you take your seats, please.” I wait for them to be seated and show English to her desk. Once everyone is sitting, I say, “I do care. If I didn’t, I wouldn’t have said to stay seated in the first place. And ... if you have any doubt or question my instructions, all you have to do is check with me.”

English raises her hand.

“Yes, English.”

With a big grin, she asks, “Since I wasn’t bad, can I get a treat?”

I can already tell this child is quite clever.

“We’ll see. But first, what I’d like to do is go around the room and have everyone say their names so we can all get to know each other.”

Sometime during the hectic morning, I remember to send a text to Beckley Bridges.

Your mother asked me to let you know how English’s first day is going, and I’m happy to report she’s doing very well. Feel free to text me back at any time. Sheridan Monroe

I anticipate a quick response since Anna indicated how nervous he was about his daughter’s first day of school, but I hear nothing. Maybe he was busy and didn’t see it, so I let it go. I check my phone an hour later, when I’m able to break away from my team of tiny monsters, and still no answer. It

makes me wonder if he ever got the text, so I send him another.

Hi, Mr. Bridges, it's Sheridan Monroe, English's teacher. Just checking in to let you know the day is going well for her. She hasn't missed a beat and is already making friends.

There isn't time for me to wait for a reply. The students are raising Cain about something, and when I check, English is in the middle of the altercation. She's telling all the boys she can "take them down because she's a tomboy."

"Okay, we'll have none of that in here. That's not nice talk, English."

English stomps her foot and says, "He pushed me, Miss Monroe, and I told him not to do that anymore, but he did it again. My daddy told me not to allow anyone to bully me."

And how do you argue with that?

"Jordan, did you push English?"

"No."

Someone is lying, and I need to find out.

"Okay, one of you isn't telling the truth. Who in this room saw what happened?"

Melanie, a dark-haired shy girl, steps forward. "They both are."

So now I have the equivalent of a soap opera taking place.

"Melanie, can you tell me what happened?"

She bobs her head up and down. "He pushed her, and she said to stop. And then she said she could take all the boys in here down."

I look at English, and her lower lip sticks out. She wears the badge of guilt quite well.

"So let this be a lesson. There will be no bullying in this classroom, or on the playground by either boys or girls. Does each of you understand me?"

A chorus of “Yes, Miss Monroe,” comes back to me.

“Good. So this time, no punishment will take place, but if this happens again, I’ll be forced to report it to the principal.” A sea of solemn faces greets me.

The rest of the day passes without event, and at the end of the day, I walk my students to the exit. When I return to my desk, I check my phone and notice I never received a response from Mr. Bridges. So much for the caring father I had him pegged for.

And that’s how my first day of school goes.

Two

SHERIDAN

“So, how was your first day?” my roommate, Michelle, asks.

“Ugh. They are fierce. You don’t ever get a break. I mean, I can’t leave the room to pee. And I mean it.”

“Oh, come on.”

“No, I’m serious. And I have this one little girl, English, who is a ... I’m not quite sure how to describe her. She told the boys she could take every one of them down.”

Michelle spits out her wine. “No shit!”

“Yes, shit. And what do you say to that? Booyah? I wanted to die laughing, but I couldn’t.”

“That’s epic.”

I rub my eyes because my contacts are stinging like fire. “I hope I don’t let these kids down.” The memory of what my teachers did for me, and the quest for constant discovery of new ideas they instilled in me makes me want to be the very best at what I do. Suddenly, I have giant doubts over my abilities.

“What’s that look for?” Michelle knows me too well.

“Nothing.”

She points a finger at me. “Nothing my rear end. I know you better than you know yourself.”

“It’s just I never want to let my students down.”

“You won’t. And do you know why?”

“Why?”

“Because you are the most caring person I know. That’s why. Now stop worrying.”

It’s easy to care about others when you don’t have anyone who cares about you. Well, almost anyone. Michelle cares. A boatload. Unless she has a new boyfriend, and then she gets boy obsessed.

“Now what are you thinking about?”

I look her square in the eye and speak the truth. “How nice it would be to tell my mom and dad about my first day as a teacher.”

“Yeah, and they would be so proud of you, Sheridan. You have to know that, right?”

She’s right. I do know that. But the fact remains that they’re gone, and they’re no longer here to talk to or to tell things to anymore. Or to bounce ideas off of or to ask them for advice. Or to run home to when I just plain and simple need a hug. It’s not easy being alone. Not that I want to complain, because honestly, it doesn’t do any good, and it sure as hell won’t bring either of them back.

“Don’t be sad, Sher. This is what you’ve worked so hard for. And you’re going to be the teacher that every kid remembers and every parent praises.”

“Promise?”

“Promise.”

The next morning, my little army of ants marches in. Once they’re seated, I ask for their homework from the day before. For the most part, with the exception of a few minor squabbles, the day is going remarkably well. I even hand out my treats from the previous day, since everyone is behaving so admirably. Our mid-morning snack time arrives and time for the brief rest period. Soon it’s lunchtime, and I breathe a sigh, desperate for a break. The cafeteria monitors take over, and since I’m not a monitor this week, I head to the teachers’ lounge to eat.

“How’s it going, Sheridan?” I look over my shoulder to see Susan, the principal, behind me.

“Whew, those little buggers can wear you out, can’t they?”

She laughs and says, “You bet. They are relentless. Any problems so far?”

“None. They seem to be a bright bunch.”

“Yeah, their test scores indicated that. I think you’ll have a challenging year, though, because of it.”

“As long as they love to learn, I’m good with that.”

“Sheridan, the trick is getting that love to stick with them.”

“I know. And that’s my goal. Make learning fun and interesting.”

The room fills as other teachers trickle in, and someone pulls Susan away. She’s been wonderful so far, and I hope she continues to be the kind of principal who will support my classroom decisions. Right now, I get great vibes from her. Let’s hope it continues that way.

I finish up my lunch and make my way back to the classroom. On my way there, I stick my head inside the cafeteria to see how my students are acting. I see the usual of hands grabbing each other’s food, but everything seems fine.

After lunch, we sail through our math and science exercises, and toward the end of the day, I decide to play a game.

“How about we have some fun? Who wants to play a game?”

They all get excited and jump out of their seats. In the corner of the room, I have a chair I use for story time, so I have them move there and I bring the big alphabet chart.

“Let’s all say the ABC’s.” And they do. When they finish, we start the game. “Okay, who can name something that starts with an A?”

Everything is great until we get to the letter V. That seems to be giving them trouble until English raises her hand and yells out, “I know, I know. Vagina!”

Twenty-one sets of curious eyes laser in on her, and when she doodles around like everything is perfectly normal, they focus on me. But before I can speak, English blurts out, “You know,” and her thumb jabs down in the direction of said vagina. It’s like twenty-one heads watching a tennis match. They look at her, then me. I’ve become mute; all capability to speak has been stripped away. I was told to expect the unexpected, but this takes it to a completely new level.

And then ... English adds the cake topper. “You know, it’s where the penis goes.”

For the love of everything, why me? It quickly rolls downhill from there. Robert shoves his hands into his pockets and stares right at English’s crotch. I know exactly what he’s thinking, and I know I need a quick change of topic, but as soon as I open my mouth, Millicent shouts out, “My little brother has a penis. He had an operation on it when he was born, and my mom had to clean it every day.” And then she giggles. “When he pee-pees, it shoots up in the air if Mommy forgets to put a diaper on it.”

English adds, “I don’t have a baby brother. Only my daddy. I’m sure his penis is big, though, because my daddy is big.”

“Okay, everyone, who can think of something that starts with the letter W?”

“Miss Monroe, why is your face so red?”

Because we’re talking about penises and vaginas, for the love of God. “Hmm, I guess it’s a bit warm in here. So, who wants to take a try at the letter W?”

I could barely pay attention due to the debacle that occurred. I pray none of the kids go home and recount what happened. Oh my God. What if they do? Susan will kill me. I vaguely hear one of them say the word *whale*.

“Miss Monroe? Do whales have penises?” Now even the boys want to know.

“Okay, great. Whale is a good word. Now what about X? That’s a tough one,” I say enthusiastically.

“X-rated,” English screams, jumps up and down, and claps her hands. What kind of house does this child live in? I don’t even know what to say to this.

“That’s not quite a word, English. Can we choose another?”

Miguel hollers, “X-ray!”

Whew. “Very good, Miguel.”

I can see I’ve hurt English’s feelings, but I’m not sure what to do. Maybe she’ll get the final letter. “And anyone for the letter Z?”

About five students yell, “Zebra!” Most of the kids are laughing, but not English. Her blond curls dangle as her chin touches her chest.

“Very good, class, and just for being such excellent participants, I have a surprise for all of you.” I hand out some homemade chocolate chip cookies to each student.

When I get to English, she mutters, “No, thank you.”

“Why don’t you take it home then, and maybe you can have it later?” It sits on her desk, and she looks terribly forlorn. My tone must’ve been harsher than I thought. I’ll have to take care with her. She must be really sensitive.

The bell rings, signaling the end of class, and the kids all line up to make the march down the hall. Susan runs a tight ship, which is a good thing. I watch the students as they run to their respective cars or buses, but English seems so sad. I can’t stop thinking about her. And it lasts all night.

Three

SHERIDAN

It takes about three weeks to hit my stride. I've memorized each of the student's names, their favorite subjects, and something special they love. Now I'm running with it all. It's true what they say. Make learning like a game or a movie, and kids will soak it up like a girl getting rays on the beach. They are insatiable when it comes to understanding things.

But English takes it to a higher level. Her favorite word is *why*. Some days I pray for extra patience because she wears me down with all her questions. Her quirky outfits make me laugh. I never know if she's going to be dressed in checks and polka dots or red and pink. Her love for leggings is apparent because she wears them every day. Patterns, plain bright colors or black, it's what her choice of clothing is. But she loves color. And her father must let her have free rein. Admittedly, I love it. She's like looking at an artist's paint palette every day.

It's her mood swings that worry me. One day she's happy-go-lucky, and then next, she's downcast and depressed. I've even tried to check her arms for bruises because it worries me a bit she may be hiding abuse. I can't show any preference or favoritism, but it's hard because I sense she needs a hug at times. And I don't know why. Maybe it's because I need one, too.

Next week are my parent-teacher conferences. They run after school from four to eight every day, which will make the week awful. I work my butt off so I can have everything prepared because I know the week will be packed.

When Monday arrives, my eight appointments go by with ease. The parents rave about my teaching skills and praise me for my efforts with their children. Tuesday is much the same. On Wednesday, I only have two appointments, leaving my

final two for Thursday. My last appointment, which is scheduled for five, is with Beckley Bridges, English's father. Five o'clock comes and goes and no Mr. Bridges. I wait until six and nothing. It pisses me off because this is about his child, and if he can't find the time to come and see how she's progressing in school, that tells me a lot about him as a father.

Four

BECK

Goddamn airlines. Always running behind and the Atlanta airport has to be the worst. I've checked my watch at least a dozen times, but I don't know why. It's not like that is going to make things move any faster. We finally get to the gate, and it takes them forever to open the damn door. I nearly mow down the flight attendant to get out, but I need to get to that parent-teacher conference. The last thing I want to do is miss it. English is the most important thing to me, and finding out about her progress in school is paramount.

But once again, fate has other plans. My damn luggage is fucked. I can't carry it on because it's too big, but what happens? One flight. One goddamn flight with zero plane changes and they lose the fucker. My camera equipment is in that bag. And my favorite camera with the brand new lens. So now I'm in line at baggage claim, trying to locate my goddamn luggage with over twenty grand worth of photography gear in it. Thank God it's insured. When I check my watch, I know there's no way I'll make that appointment on time.

And, of course, traffic is a mother. Why wouldn't it be? I'm trying to get somewhere, and I'm late. Fuck everything. Not to mention, Dad said I got another letter. Slamming my hands on the steering wheel, I let out a series of expletives. I'm glad English isn't in the car with me.

I should've checked my texts before I started driving, but too late now.

Five

SHERIDAN

I'm still waiting for Mr. Bridges when I remember I have his number, so I shoot him a text, reminding him of his appointment with me. And I wait. Nothing. After another thirty minutes, I figure he considers his time more valuable than mine, so I pack my stuff up to leave. I'm backing out of my classroom, pulling the door shut to lock it behind me when I walk into someone. Turning my head to see who I accidentally bumped into, I look up, and up, and don't stop until I hit the most arresting pair of blue-green eyes in existence. Even better are the slightly parted full pink lips that lie beneath those eyes. Holy motherfucker. He runs a hand through his blondish hair that's thick and just slightly wavy, and all I want to do is bury my fingers in it.

"Miss Monroe?" His voice is deep and raspy, almost sounding like he just woke up.

"Yes."

"I'm Beckley Bridges, English's father. Sorry I'm late. I was out of town and just got back," he offers a bit brusquely as an explanation.

"Oh. Well, I was heading out, but in that case—"

"Good," he cuts me off. "This can't take too long."

What? This is about your kid, for Christ's sake.

"Um, no, but ..."

"Fine."

He looks at me expectantly. I open the door, and we walk in. We both take seats, me at my desk and he in one of the chairs I have arranged next to it. I have to pull everything out

of my bag, and it takes me a minute to find it, all while he sits and thrums his fingers on the desk in an annoying manner. As I'm pulling my folders out, one gets stuck on the side of the bag, and the entire contents go flying out of my hands. All the papers end up scattered across the floor, in complete disarray. I glance up, and he arches a brow as he leans forward, rests his elbows on his crossed leg, and steeples his fingers.

Rat bastard. He's trying to intimidate me or make fun of me. Or at least that's the way I interpret it. I huff as I get down on my knees to retrieve the mess created. He doesn't offer to help, but I can feel those remarkable eyes of his burning holes into my back. Dammit!

When I have all the papers back in hand, I now have to make some sense out of them. Sitting down, I proceed to go through them in search of English's.

"Did you do this with each of the parents?" His snarky comment makes me grit my teeth.

"Yes, Mr. Bridges, I purposely dropped my entire class's folders on the floor, threw them about so I didn't know what was up or down, and then had to put them back in order before each meeting." I toss him a sickly sweet grin. And as an afterthought, I add, "Oh, and that was after I waited," I check my watch, "an extra hour and forty-five minutes for each appointment to arrive."

"Guess I deserved that." If I think I'm going to get another apology, I'm off the charts wrong.

I mutter a nasty comment and continue to organize my papers. When I find English's, I pull them out and proceed.

"So, English is very bright and shows a great aptitude for vocabul—"

"Yeah, let's cut to the chase. Tell me what I *don't* know. She's got great vocabulary, math, reasoning, blah, blah, blah, skills. What do I need to do at home?"

Before I knew what I was doing, I blurted out, "Talk less about penises, vaginas, and X-rated topics and hug her more."

His leg drops down, and his shoulders lift and square. “Care to elucidate?”

I’ve definitely touched a nerve. A raw one. His full pink lips flatten and thin into a firm line.

The explanation I give him on the alphabet game doesn’t satisfy him. To the contrary, it further inflames him.

“So, let me get this straight. You play a game and ask for things that start with each letter. My daughter, in her innocence, supplies you with said things, and in her defense, we don’t fluff up anatomy in our home, Miss Monroe. We don’t call vaginas *pee-pees*, nor do we call penises *wee-wees*. We don’t make a fuss about them. They are what they are. So, when she answers you, this is what happens?”

I quickly shrivel like a flower in the Georgia August sun directly in front of this man. Now I must find a way to gain my confidence back. “The point is, Mr. Bridges, English can’t be saying those things in class.”

“No, Miss Monroe, the point is, if *your* students say things such as that, *you* need to be better prepared to handle them. Is this the best they can do for teachers these days?” he mumbles. Only it’s loud enough for me to pick up on. All the confidence and faith I’ve built over the past few weeks is utterly shattered by a few carelessly muttered words.

His eyes spear me as he asks, “Is there anything else on your agenda for English, because if we’re going to discuss this kind of drivel, I consider this meeting concluded.”

There isn’t a thing in the world that comes to mind for me to say to this horrid man. Beckley Bridges is the world’s biggest prick.

Tears sting the backs of my eyes, but I push them away, forcing myself to smile and shake my head. He stands, and without so much as a single syllable, strides out of the room. I didn’t even get him to sign the form he was supposed to because I don’t trust myself to speak. Oh my gosh. I am

stunned, glued to my seat, and it's not until an hour later that I find the energy to get up and leave.

When I get home, my hand still trembles as I slowly turn the handle to open the door. Michelle sits there waiting.

“Another stellar night of meetings for teacher of the year?” her cheery voice asks.

My hand covers my mouth as I keep repeating in my head, *you will not cry, you will not cry*. I rein it in and vigorously shake my head.

She sits straight up on the couch. “What the hell happened?” She wants to know.

The bits and pieces edge their way out, and she's every bit as shocked as I am.

“See, this is when I need my mom or dad. They would advise me on what to do.” My hands clench, and I swear I want to punch the guy.

“Maybe he had a bad day?” she volunteers in a weak voice.

“Oh, Michelle, what am I going to do? I have to call him back because I didn't get him to sign English's paper. I don't know if I can be civil to the assface.”

She massages her forehead and says, “Can you send it home with the little girl? My teachers used to do that kind of thing all the time.”

Pulling off my glasses, I pinch the bridge of my nose to ease the ache that's there. “I'll need to discuss this with my principal. I hope she doesn't think I'm incapable of handling these types of things.”

“How can she? He didn't give you a chance.”

The next morning, I arrive at school early with the hopes of catching Susan to discuss my little issue. When I explain, I almost have to close her mouth for her.

“He did what?” she asks at last.

“You heard me correctly. I don’t know exactly how to handle him.” *Because he’s a shithead and I hate him.*

Her pen slams the desk for a few seconds, and then she says, “Let’s send the form home for him to sign with the student. She’s very bright, correct?”

“Yes. And the word game was done in all innocence. I shouldn’t have mentioned it to him in retrospect, but I let him provoke me, and that was my fault.”

“I can see why you’re angry. He shows up so late, which by the way, I would’ve been long gone, and then is such a smartass with you. Maybe you shouldn’t have brought that up, but you’d think he’d want to hear how awesome his kid was doing.”

“I agree. Or that’s what all the other parents were interested in.”

“Oh, by the way, your reports are fantastic. Listen, don’t let this get the best of you. Keep doing what you’re doing, and that’s being an excellent teacher. You have a genuine concern for your students. This will pass, Sheridan.”

Susan makes me feel a bit better about the situation, but I can’t shake the negative mood his encounter has shrouded me in.

My students’ cheery faces perk me up, and the day is running well until activity time on the playground. It all starts innocently enough when English is play sword fighting with the boys. She’s not one to hang out with the other girls much. It’s usually a sports activity for her. But somehow she’s found a stick, and I see it all happen in slow motion. She takes the stick and holds it with both hands, swings around, and acts like she’s slicing off one of her classmate’s heads. It’s all intended to be playful, but the stick has a pointed edge, and it accidentally cuts the boy’s neck. Even though it’s superficial, he grabs his neck and starts screaming, “My head is falling off!”

Then all hell breaks loose. Teachers run from all corners, including me, to examine the wailing boy, and English is telling him to, “Buck up,” and that it’s only a scratch. Then she proceeds to tell him to, “Quit being such a sissy pants and act like you’re wearing big boy panties.”

The truth is, I want to roll on the playground and die laughing because she’s right. I’m wondering if Jordan isn’t exaggerating just for the extra attention. Susan takes Jordan by the hand and walks him to the nurse’s office. Now I need to have a chat with English.

“English, where did you get that stick?”

“Over there.” She points to an area that’s off limits.

“You know you’re not supposed to go over there, don’t you?”

Her lower lip pokes out, and she bobs her head.

“Then why did you do it?”

“I wanted to get the stick so I could play with it like on *Star Wars*.”

Ahh, she was acting like it was a light saber. “Okay, but you still did something wrong. You understand that, right?”

“I was only play acting. And Jordan is a baby.”

I hold my hand out so she can give me the stick. “See the sharp edges on it? That’s why it hurt him. Sometimes things that don’t look dangerous can hurt others.”

“I don’t think he was really hurt. It was only a scratch. I get those all the time.”

“Yes, but it could’ve been worse. And maybe your scratches don’t hurt you as much as Jordan’s hurt him.”

“Jordan is mean to me.”

“Why haven’t you told me this before?”

“Because it’s not good to be a tattletale.”

I'm going to have to keep an eye on little Jordan. I hold out my hand, and English puts hers in it. "How about you come with me?" We go inside to Susan's office where I give her my rendition of the story. She tells me Jordan insisted the nurse call his mother, which she would've done anyway.

When Mrs. McLean arrives, I expect her to be like any normal parent—brush it aside and move on. It's nothing but a red welt by this time. In the morning, it will probably be gone. But no. She wants English's parents called. Susan and I look at each other, and her eyes roll while my nostrils flare. Jordan seems to be the prima donna here.

"Sheridan, I can call him if you'd like," Susan offers.

"No, that's fine. I'll do it." To be perfectly honest, I'd rather jam bamboo under my fingernails, but I have no other choice than to make the call. I walk back to my classroom and find my phone to do the dreaded deed.

Six

SHERIDAN

“Bridges.”

“Mr. Bridges, this is Sheridan Monroe, English’s—”

“I know who you are. Is she okay?” His voice interrupts me and pisses me off. Why? Because even though he’s rude as hell, he still manages to sound sexy. There should be a written law against that.

“Yes, but there has been an incident. Can you come to the school, please?”

His rapid-fire response hits back. “English? Is she hurt?”

“No, she’s perfectly fine. There was a slight altercation with another student.”

Dead silence. I wonder if the call dropped. “Mr. Bridges?”

“Yes.”

“Oh, I thought I lost you.”

“No. Still here,” comes back in a clipped response.

“Can you come? Um, I mean to the school?” Jeez. He’s going to think I’m a dork. Can you come? What the hell?

“Yes. Right away.”

We wait in the principal’s office, all five of us, for him to arrive. And when he does, it’s quite the show. There are many things about Beckley Bridges I didn’t take note of the night I met him, such as how impressive his physique is, or the way his muscles are structured, as though they are hand drawn by a famous artist, or how he fills a room when he occupies it. A knit cap covers his hair, and he wears dark jeans that mold the contours of his butt. I know this because as soon as he enters

the room, English screams, “Daddy!” And said figure, crouches down and hugs the little mite saying, “What’s up, English?” Then he grabs her by both cheeks and plants a kiss on her lips. Her half-pint arms automatically wind around his neck, and he stands while she hangs on, giggling the entire time. Is this the same man who was such a grouch during our parent-teacher conference? Or has some alien invaded his body and made him pleasant for the moment?

Susan breaks the love-fest up by saying, “Mr. Bridges, we’ve had a bit of a situation here today.” She gets no further before Mrs. McLean jumps in.

“I’ll say. Your daughter accosted my Jordan and practically cut his head off.” Her tone is squeaky.

For multiple reasons, my eyes haven’t left Mr. Bridges, and I’m not gonna lie. It’s not totally because of the situation here. His full, almost-too-perfect-to-be-a-man’s-lips twitch on one side for a fraction of a second, and if I hadn’t been watching his face so intently, I probably would’ve missed it. Then those same lips press into a thin line as his eyes scan Mrs. McLean. He’s completely silent for a long uncomfortable moment—which he’s very good at—and finally says, “Yes, I can see your son is mortally wounded. Has anyone called the paramedics yet?” His dry remark almost has me cracking up, but I know I can’t possibly do that.

“Mr. Bridges, this is no laughing matter. Your daughter is a bully and needs to be severely punished.” Mrs. McLean leans forward as she finishes her statement and taps her foot. Mr. Bridges is no longer amused. He’s now thoroughly pissed. Can’t say that I blame him.

English hangs on his neck and still I can see the tendons cording with anger. “Mrs. ... what did you say your name was?”

I jump in and supply, “McLean. It’s McLean.”

He never bothers to look at me.

“Mrs. McLean, I have raised English to *never ever* bully, under any circumstances, but she has also been taught not to *be* bullied.” He says each word with razor-sharp pronunciation that even I cringe. “My daughter doesn’t lie either.” In a much softer tone, he turns to his daughter and asks, “English, did you bully this boy here?”

“No, sir.”

“Did you hit him intentionally?”

“No, sir. I was playing light sabers with the stick. I didn’t think it would cut his head off. It’s just a tiny scratch, sir. But he’s mean to me all the time.”

He picks up a handful of her blond curls and asks, “Mean to you? How so?”

“He pushes me around and trips me and makes me fall, Daddy.”

“Have you told anyone?”

“No, sir.”

“Why not?”

“You said tattletales are bad.”

Mr. Bridges squeezes his eyes shut and grimaces for a second. “Yes, but when someone is bullying you, because that’s what he was doing, you need to speak out.” Then Mr. Bridges turns those magnificent blue-green eyes of his on Mrs. McLean, and she starts to say something but stops when he arches his brows. In that same crisp tone, he says, “Mrs. McLean, I think you have a much larger problem at hand than a welt on your son’s neck. If he doesn’t stop bullying my English here, you’re going to have some even bigger issues to deal with. Am I clear?”

This gut-punches me. Am I such a crappy teacher that I’m missing all the signals? Has this been going on all year, and have I been blind to it?

Susan and I share another glance, and she says to Mrs. McLean, “I believe I’m going to switch Jordan from Miss Monroe’s class into another first grade.”

“Well, I can’t believe you would do that,” Mrs. McLean spews.

“Of course, we do that. Bullying is not accepted at this school. If we hear of this behavior continuing, we may have to consider an alternate school for him. And now that we know his wound is superficial, it might be best to get him acclimated to his new class immediately.”

Jordan didn’t look happy at all about his situation.

“Mr. Bridges, could I have a word with you and English privately?”

We go into one of the small conference rooms located off of Susan’s office.

“I’m sorry all this happened. English, when would Jordan do those things to you?”

“When you weren’t looking. Or on the playground when no one was watching.”

He’s a sneaky little shit. “English, will you promise me something? From now on, if anything like that ever happens to you or anyone else, please tell me. That’s not being a tattletale. Will you do that for me?”

She smiles and agrees.

“And one more promise. No more sticks on the playground.”

“Okay.”

I look at Mr. Bridges and apologize for getting him out of work.

“It’s my job as a parent,” he says gruffly. Then he kisses his daughter good-bye.

I watch him leave and continue to stare until English asks, “You like my daddy?”

“Hmm? What?” Then I realize I was practically ogling the man in front of his daughter, even though he made me feel like shit. “Well, yes, he’s a nice person.” I pray my lie is convincing.

“I don’t have a mommy. She went away when I was a baby and didn’t come home.”

Whoa. That’s a piece of news I didn’t necessarily need to hear.

“My daddy takes pictures. Lots and lots of them. He has some real big cameras.”

“Oh, so he’s a photographer?”

“Yep.”

Kids. They’ll tell you everything.

English grabs my hand, and we walk together toward the classroom. “Why did you make Jordan go to a different class? I’m not afraid of him.”

I stop and bend down so we’re level. “It’s about doing what’s right. Being mean to someone isn’t right, and when that happens, we think it’s best to separate those students. Since you weren’t the one causing the problem, you aren’t the one that has to switch classes. Only Jordan.”

“Daddy says to never pick a fight, but I’m not sure what that means.”

“It means not to start one.”

“Oh, that’s the same as Banana says. Geepa calls me Champ sometimes. He says I’m a tomboy. Banana wants me to play with dolls, but I think they’re boring.” Then she sticks her tongue out and blows a raspberry. I want to laugh. But I’m on her side. I much preferred to run and kick a ball than to play with dolls when I was her age.

“Can I tell you a secret?”

Her almond-shaped eyes grow round as marbles. “Yeah! I love secrets.”

“Well, you have to promise not to tell anyone.”

“I promise.”

Bending down, I whisper into her ear, “I never liked dolls much either. When I was about your age, I had a big doll, and I cut off all her hair. Boy, did I get in trouble. Do you know why?”

“Because she looked silly?”

“Well, that, too. But I thought her hair would grow back, and it never did. When my mom found out what I did, she was upset with me because I ruined the doll. And it was a fancy doll. It wasn’t very fancy after I got ahold of her, though.”

English lets out a bubble of giggles that has me laughing right along with her.

The rest of the day goes by without any issues, as we are one less in our class now. No one asks where Jordan is, and I decide to tell them the next day. When I do, no one even comments. Apparently, not too many of the kids were very fond of him.

Seven

BECK

“I’m going, even though it’s against my better judgment.”

Mom and Dad grin. They’ve been after me for months to go out, saying I’m too young to sit at home every weekend and center every single thing in my life on my daughter. But that’s what I want to do, especially now. Oh, God, I can’t even think of what might happen if ...

“Daddy, just pretend you’re with Anna and Olaf. You’ll have so much fun. Maybe the place you’re going will play “Let It Go.” And maybe you can dance like we do,” English says.

The thought gets a chuckle out of me. “Well, if they do, it won’t be near as much fun without you.”

My mom essentially pushes me out the door, and that’s how I end up hanging out at a club on a Friday night, which is not my usual MO.

Eight

SHERIDAN

“Aren’t you ready yet?” I yell at Michelle through her door. That girl takes forever.

“I’m coming,” is all I get back. Twenty minutes later, she prances out of her room, ready to go out on the town.

“Okay, you are way more dressed up than I am. Do I need to change?” She’s wearing a short black dress, and I’m in jeans.

“No,” she says after she checks me out. “You look fantastic. You rock those jeans with those booties you’re wearing.” She always says I look great, even though I need to shed some pounds. My hips and thighs aren’t what you’d call obese, but I would give anything to be as thin as Michelle.

Eyeing her dress, I’m still skeptical. “You’re not just saying that?”

She circles around me and says, “Nope. You’re perfect. And I love your hair curly, too. You never wear it curly.”

“I know. It’s a pain. I usually flat iron it.”

“You need to let those curls run free more often.”

Our Uber arrives, so we hop in and go. It’s Friday night, and we both need a break from the workweek. The club is fairly packed, and the band is one of our favorites. We dance and are having a great time, but halfway into the night, I notice him. Beckley Bridges. He stands on the side of the dance floor, watching me. And I have no idea why he would be interested in someone like me. But there he is, his eyes searing me like fire. Lips slightly parted, his long frame perched against the wall. I’m conflicted as to whether I should ignore him or

wave. So I do the nice thing—bring my hand up and wiggle my fingers just a tad.

If I think that would get a response from him, I should know better by now. Well, if you count one blink, then I guess I do. But that's it. He stands there with that more than perfect mouth and those stupidly stellar eyes, not to mention his sexy hair that looks like he just rolled out of bed and did nothing. Absolutely nothing. Ugh—I hate him. I've dated a few guys in my time. Not many, mostly because I'm not that perfect Barbie doll that a lot of men love. And then there was the time factor. I was busy with school, working my butt off to keep my head above water financially. I had to pay my own way through college, and because of that, there was very little free time to date. It's not like I can't relate to men. I can because I've had men friends. But this man is—well, I can't come up with an adequate description for him. Asshole doesn't work because I witnessed him with his daughter, and that just blows.

About the time I've had enough of his eye pinning, Michelle wraps her fingers around my wrist and drags me over to the bar. "Cosmo time." She orders up a round for us.

"Did you see that guy over there?"

She laughs too loud in my ear, and I pull my head back a tinch.

"There are only dozens of men in here, so you're not giving me much to go on."

I take a peek over my shoulder to make sure he's not watching, and I can't see him anywhere. "Never mind. He's gone."

"Did you know him?"

"It was the father of that student who was such a prick to me."

Michelle's mouth forms an O, and she says, "In here? The club? What's an old guy doing in here?"

"Who said anything about him being old?"

“Well, I just figured since he was a dad, you know.”

Of course, she would jump to those conclusions. “No, he’s probably not much older than we are. And he’s ...” I blow out a breath. “He’s dangerous. Let’s leave it at that.”

“Wait. What? You can’t say stuff like that and drop it. What do you mean ‘dangerous’?”

I roll my lips between my upper and lower teeth, trying to figure out exactly how to put it. “Let me say this. If I were twelve, his poster would be hanging on my bedroom wall.”

“No kidding?” She pushes my shoulder, and I step back a foot.

“Not one single bit.”

Twirling a chunk of hair, she asks, “Light or dark hair?”

“Lightish blond. As far as I can tell, it looks like a mix of blond shades. But the last time I saw him he was wearing a hat, and the first time I was so pissed off I didn’t pay much attention.”

“Hmm. Eyes?”

“Oh, God. Magni-fucking-gorgeous can’t come close. Bluish-greenish. Enormous. Lashes that don’t end. And his lips are this dusky pink color.”

“How tall?” she prods.

“Very and a muscular physique you want to—let’s just say he’s the Reese’s Peanut Butter Cup of eye candy, and you know how much I love those. He had this T-shirt on that showcased his muscles.”

“Holy shit. He sounds amazing.”

“Yeah. Pretty much.” I lick my lips as though I just tasted a lollipop.

Michelle fans herself. “I have got to see this dangerous person. Where is he?”

“I don’t know, but he’s totally weird. Like almost monosyllabic.”

“What do you mean?”

“Okay, so it would be like if you and I were chatting it up and you asked me, ‘What do you think about this drink?’ and I stand here and am completely silent. And then you ask again, and I would maybe shrug. Or something like that. And when he did talk, he was an asshole. The only time he spoke more than two or three words consecutively was when he came to school regarding an incident with his daughter. Then he was all in.”

“Maybe he has a gas problem.”

I’m getting ready to agree with her until her statement sinks in, and I bust out laughing. “You’re a crazy bitch. You know that, right?”

“And that’s what you love about me.”

It is. She always finds a way to lift my spirits. We go back a long way. All the way to junior high. When the shit started to hit the big old fan and all my other friends didn’t know how to react or what to say. Not Michelle. I remember the day when she came up to me at cross-country practice. I was tying my shoes, putting my special double knot in them, and she nudged me with her shoe.

“Hey, I just want you to know I’m here any time you need to talk or whatever. But you know something?”

“What?” I was curious because we’d been friends but not really that close.

“When life hands you rotten eggs, don’t eat the fuckers. Just throw them at someone you hate.”

“Huh?” I was trying to put some perspective on what she said, but it was plain idiotic.

“Yeah, that was stupid, wasn’t it?”

And then we both laughed, and I'm talking snort laughed. And that's where our solid friendship began, and it's still going strong.

"Yeah, you're definitely a nutface."

The music blares, so we bounce back to the dance floor, and that's when he finds me again. His brooding, intense glare burns through me, and I know he's there, watching me. When I spin around to the beat of the music, he's in the same spot he was before, leaning on the wall with his arms crossed. For a solitary moment, our eyes connect, but as brief as it is, the discomfort is so potent, I snap my attention back to the band. I avoid looking that way again, for his gaze is very unsettling. Too bad he's so damn beautiful.

Several times men approach me to dance, but it's weird because Mr. Bridges stands there, pinning me with his heated gaze. I forbid myself to look at him, but every now and then, I sneak a peek out of the corner of my eye. One minute he's there, and the next he's gone. It's a relief, and I relax and begin to dance with abandon. Michelle even comments.

"You look like you're having fun now. What was wrong with you? You looked like a wooden doll there for a while."

"Yeah, I just needed for those Cosmos to hit me, I guess."

After a few more songs, we head back to the bar where we order another round. "Good thing we took an Uber," I say.

"Uh, after the week you had, I didn't figure tonight would be light on the alcohol."

A cute, sexy, dark-haired guy scoots into our conversation and steals Michelle away for a dance. I'm left hanging out at the bar alone, which I've never been a fan of.

"Can I get you another?" the bartender asks.

"Yeah, but I want to switch to vodka and soda, please. And can you throw in a couple of limes?"

"Sure thing."

I rest my elbows on the bar, look to my right, and there he sits. I'm more than a bit captivated as I watch him drain his glass of dark amber liquid. Bourbon, whiskey, scotch? I wonder what his vice is tonight. He sets his glass down, and long, perfectly-shaped fingers rub a circular motion on his forehead. So being the nosy person that I am, a quick scan around him lets me know that he's alone. No one talks to him or ... wait. A woman comes up to him. A very attractive woman. She bends forward, and an ample amount of her voluptuous cleavage is on display as she rests her hand on his forearm and says something to him. They talk for a while, and I stare at them. He's facing away from me, so my spying goes unnoticed. She's flirting openly. Her suggestive smile and the way she licks her lips are an all-out invitation for him to go home with her, or wherever she can get him. Does she laugh at something he says? I can't tell because I can't see him speak. And it's a surprise that he says anything at all. She keeps chatting away, but soon she frowns, and not much later, saunters off.

It makes me wonder even more about the mysterious Mr. Bridges. There's such a sharp contrast between the man I've dealt with and the one I've seen with English. And now he sits, alone, with no friends or female companion to keep him company, and it further increases my curiosity. As I'm lost in my musings, it doesn't occur to me that said subject of these introspections has turned his attention toward me. It's the heat of his blue-green scrutiny that draws my awareness. He blinks lazily, and then his shuddered gaze nails me to the floor.

“Hey, what's up over here?”

Michelle's voice makes me leap out of my booties.

“N-nothing. Nothing at all,” I answer, swinging my head around.

“You okay?”

“Mmm hmm.” The cute guy she went to dance with stands next to her with his arm slung over her shoulders. I watch her hand move up to hold his. This may be a new find for her.

“Oh, Sheridan, meet Oliver.”

We exchange greetings, and they grab some drinks. I keep glancing to the end of the bar where Mr. Bridges sits. Every time I do, he tips his head in response. He’s keeping track of me. Once, he even raises his glass.

Oliver and Michelle take off for another twirl to the music, so I decide to risk it and go have a talk with Mr. Mysterious. When I reach his side, I tap him on the shoulder.

“Hey.”

I get an arched brow as a response.

“So, is this your usual hangout because I don’t recall ever seeing you here before.”

Now one corner of his mouth curls up, but nothing other than that.

“Are you always this talkative?”

“When I have something to say.”

Either the man is just plain rude or he’s off the charts messed up. “Okay then. Nice chatting with you.” *Asshole.*

That is the extent of it. Now I’ve encountered odd people in my life and have been through some rough times. And I mean so rough I was pretty damn sure all the skin on my body was scraped off—that kind of rough. But this dude is a conundrum to me, and maybe that’s why I can’t stop thinking about him. And, of course, there’s that precious little kid of his that I see every day of the week. How can such a quirky, outgoing, adorable, little girl be the product of this rude, morose man?

“What’s got that scowl on your face? Your brows are drawn so tight they’re almost a unibrow.” Michelle stands there with her new man of the hour.

I flap my hand in front of me. “It’s nothing. You having a good time?” I wink at her.

“Sure am. I hope you are.”

I get her meaning. She feels bad for abandoning me, but I'm okay with that. She needs to have fun, too. "It's good. I'm people-watching."

"Wait. Did you find him again?"

"Sort of."

"What the hell does that mean?"

I don't want to get into it all, so I change the subject. "Oliver, are you from around here?"

"Not from Atlanta per se. I grew up about an hour from here. I just moved here about six months ago, but I love it. I'm in IT."

"Stop! I'm already lost," I say.

He laughs. "You sound like Michelle."

The two of them look pretty cozy, so it's no surprise when they take off for more dancing. Someone approaches me for a dance, and I accept. We don't talk much because it's really too loud for any conversation, but I love the music. Several songs later, I wave bye and wander back to the bar for another cold beverage to quench my thirst. It's so crowded, the best place to get close to getting a drink is where Mr. Mysterious sits. I finally wedge my way up close and end up next to him.

"What can I get you?"

"I'll have a—"

"Vodka, soda, and limes."

The bartender looks at me for confirmation, and I can only nod I'm so shocked. Has he been watching me that closely he knows exactly what I've been drinking? That's a lot creepy. The bartender slides me my fresh drink, and I pretty near guzzle the entire thing.

I'm down to the ice when he's in front of me again, and I nod in response to his question.

"Think you need to slow it down a bit?"

The question is deep and husky. I don't want to answer, but I do. "Nah, I'm good. It's Friday," I say, grinning. But I think my grin is lopsided.

Michelle catches my attention about three rows of people back. She mouths, "We're leaving. Are you okay to stay by yourself? You can catch an Uber with us."

"No, I'm good. You all have fun." I must've shouted it pretty loud because Mr. Mysterious is looking at me quite oddly.

I don't want to tag along with them like a total loser. Sheridan the L-O-S-E-R. Always the dorky ass. I'll give them time to get out of here, then I'll get my own Uber.

"Loser, huh?"

I wobble in my shoes as I look at him. The room tilts just a little. Those drinks I had are hitting me good now. "What do you mean?"

"You said you were a loser and a dorky ass."

My mouth hangs open, and then my hand covers it. "I said that out loud?" It sounds more like "Ishadthaotlud?"

His head moves fractionally up and down one time. I hadn't meant to say that out loud. What the hell! I must be drunk. Okay, it's time for me to go. But wait. When I reach for my purse, I remember that I didn't bring one. All my junk is in Michelle's. And Michelle is gone. Now I have a huge problem. "Fuck me hard and fast!"

"Excuse me?"

Lost in my own world of up-shit-creek-without-a-paddle, I don't pay Mr. Mysterious a bit of attention but keep ranting. "What am I gonna do? Of all the rotten dicks around, how come I get butt fucked like this? Suck a giant boner." My fists pound my head, but I quit and look up to see his gigantic orbs locked onto me. Did he hear me droning on and on in my foul language? Dear Lord, say he didn't.

“Is there a problem, or is this how you speak to your first graders?”

He heard. Every single word. My cheeks burn like the fires of the ninth ring of Hell. Sweat beads on my forehead and upper lip. I grab a handful of napkins from the bar, and without a thought, start furiously dabbing at what I’m sure is dripping from under my arms. When it dawns on me what I’m doing in public, abject mortification hits. And then I start vomiting words, and they won’t stop.

“I ... I ... I’m an idiot. My friend left, and she has all my stuff, and I can’t get home. And I don’t know what to do. I live too far to walk, and I was going to take an Uber, but now I can’t because I don’t have my phone, and I can’t call a cab because I don’t have my credit card or cash, and I don’t have my phone to call her to get me, so I think I’ll just leave. But they’ll arrest me now because I can’t even close out my tab because she probably closed out hers, but she has my credit card, and she’s gone, and I’m babbling like that stupid dork I am. Oh, Jesus, come into this bar right now and save my ass from complete and utter humiliation.”

“Too late for that.” His dry remark sails over my head.

If I expect him to come to my rescue, I am dead wrong. So, what do I do? I turn and sneak on out of there. Well, I don’t actually sneak. I hold my head high and walk forward as if I know exactly what I’m doing. Only I have no idea whatsoever. I guess my plan is to walk home if I have to. My pride refuses to allow me to beg. I won’t ever do that. I’m out the door and several blocks down the street, weaving my way home in those God forsaken booties I decided to wear, when a car pulls up alongside of me, and I hear that voice.

“Get in the car.”

Nine

SHERIDAN

I've gone from feeling pretty good, to mildly drunk, to utterly plastered in a short span of time. When I hear his voice, I do my best not to give my slap-ass drunk self away.

"Me?" I point my thumb toward my chest.

His passenger window is down, and he leans toward it. "Who else would I be talking to?"

"Who else indeed?" I mutter. "The man of many words."

"Get in."

My arm sort of does this funny thing as I wave it in front of me. "Phhft. It's fine. I can walk." And as those very words leave my mouth, I stumble and catch myself from face planting on the sidewalk. "Oopsie." I giggle.

"Miss Monroe. In the car. Now."

With hands on my hips, I face him squarely and point. "You are not the boss of me. And besides, I don't even like you." I'm so proud of myself for standing up to him. Confidence in place, I proceed with my journey home. Until that fissure in the sidewalk traps the heel of my bootie and I twist my ankle. I played sports in high school, and I know what that cracking sound means.

"Aww, double fuck me sideways with a big fat dildo. Now look what I've done." The heel of my bootie is jammed in the crack of the sidewalk, and I'm sitting on my rear end. I hear the engine stop running and the door opening, but I'm trying to figure out how I can walk the rest of the way home with a broken shoe and sprained ankle. Those jumbled thoughts are disturbed when two sculpted arms slip under and around me, lifting me off the ground.

“Jeez, you must be pretty damn strong to be able to lift my big ass up.” Next thing I know, I’m sitting in a nice comfy car that smells like buttery leather. “This is much nicer than the Uber car I rode over in. But I don’t want to ride in your car. I hate you. You’re an assdouche.”

“Where do you live?” he asks.

“What if I don’t tell you? Then you can’t take me home.”

“Miss Monroe.” His tone isn’t too friendly and warm, so I give in.

“Over by the Publix.”

He huffs out something, but I’m not sure what. I close my eyes, because the seats in this car are so nice, I can’t help it. I’m real sleepy, too.

“Miss Monroe, what is your address?”

I rattle off my address, and we drive some more. Soon he’s shaking me. “We’re here.”

Blinking the sleep away, I look out the window and say, “Where?”

“Your house.”

“This isn’t my house.”

He must be angry now. He sounds like he’s breaking his teeth. “This is the address you gave me.”

“Oh. But there isn’t a Publix over there.” I gesture with my thumb over my shoulder. “And our house we rent is white.”

“What is your address?” He sounds like a cat hissing at me.

I tell him.

“That’s not what you said before.”

We eventually arrive at my house, but I don’t have a key to get in. I hate to tell him that, so I look at him and make one of those faces that says it all.

“What now?”

“I don’t have a key to get in.”

He slams his hands on the steering wheel. Then he looks at me and smiles. “Maybe your roommate is home.”

“Oh, I hadn’t thought of that.”

I open the door, and when I go to stand on my foot, pain shoots straight up my leg and out the top of my head.

“Ow!” I fall to my hands and knees. “I’m okay. All good here. See?” I start crawling to the door.

“Miss Monroe, will you stop?”

When I do, two long legs are in front of me. It seems like I have to look up as far as Mt. Everest until I reach his eyes. “Well, howdy there, Stretch.” He doesn’t crack a grin. Mr. Personality here.

“Stay put. I’ll check for you.” He has zero luck.

“Why don’t you try breaking in?”

He glares at me as if I’m a moron, and apparently I am.

“I’m not doing that.” He holds out his phone. “Call your friend.”

“I can’t.”

“Why?”

I grimace and it sounds so stupid, but it’s true. “I don’t know her number.”

His hand furrows a path through his hair. “Unbelievable.”

“It’s in my favorites, and I’ve never memorized it.”

“That’s ridiculous. Even my six-year-old has my number memorized.”

“Yeah, yeah, I get it.” Oh, my head is starting to hurt as much as my ankle throbs. I stand and hop past him to my porch. “Look, I’m fine. I’ll stay here until she gets home, and everything will be good.”

“You’ve got to be kidding me?”

“No, but I’m not making much sense right now. I’ve had too much to drink, and my head and ankle hurt. I just want to sleep.” My words are definitely slurred, even though I’m doing my best to enunciate them.

“What about your parents? Surely you remember Mommy and Daddy’s number?” His sarcasm is so sharp I flinch.

“No,” I say in a soft voice.

“You can’t be serious. You don’t even remember your home phone number?”

“I don’t have any parents, and this is my home.”

Suddenly, I feel crushed. Even in my drunken state, I note that he doesn’t acknowledge this. Usually, people tell me they’re sorry or something, even if it’s lame. He says nothing.

“Get back in the car.”

“No!”

“You can’t stay out here all night. It’s not safe.”

“So, where will I go?”

“Maybe I should take you to the hospital to have that ankle checked. You can’t put any weight on it.”

I weakly wave my arm. “Nah. It’s a sprain. I’ve had a ton from when I ran track and cross-country. I’m good. I swear.”

“Then I’m taking you home with me. It seems there is no other option.”

“I can’t go home with you. You have a child. And how will that look if her teacher comes over drunk?”

“Yes, how will that look?” he asks snidely. I know I deserve a good chastising, but he doesn’t have to add the super mean undertones to his comment.

“I won’t go. Besides, you’re mean.”

We have a stare down for a few seconds before he admits, “You don’t have to worry about English. She’s with her grandparents this weekend.”

Giving in, I hobble back to the car a few steps when he picks me up again. “If you won’t go to the hospital, then you need to ice this ankle, too.”

Don’t I know. I really do hope I didn’t break the dang thing.

The motion of the car makes it impossible for me to stay awake. He shakes me when we arrive, and I’m surprised to see the size of his place. It’s a craftsman style home that’s lovely. There’s an entrance from the garage, and he helps me inside, as I insist on walking. His large kitchen opens to the living area where there is a huge sectional sofa. He hands me a big baggie filled with ice and props my leg up on the coffee table, telling me to put the ice on top.

“You should take one of those to bed with you.”

“Um, I can sleep right here.”

“No, I have a guest room.”

“I don’t want to put you out.”

His brows shoot up. I know. That was dumb. I’ve already put him way out. “Really. This couch is bigger than my bed.”

“What do you sleep in? A crib?”

That’s the first thing he’s said that’s remotely funny, and I laugh. Then I laugh harder, and it’s uncharacteristic for what he said, but it’s one of those things that I can’t seem to stop. Tears roll down my cheeks because I’m dying.

“It wasn’t that funny.” His straight-laced persona is back.

“Yes, it was. Because you rarely speak, and when you do, you never say anything funny. Someone must’ve stolen the fun right out of you. Then you come up with that, and even though it wasn’t that funny, it was, because it came out of your unfunny mouth.”

“I do say funny things.”

“Do not.”

“Do, too.”

“Shut up. That’s stupid,” I tell him.

He reaches for my foot and unzips my bootie.

“What are you doing?”

“I’m frying an egg. What do you think I’m doing? Taking this contraption off your foot.”

“Contraption?”

“Yes. Had you been wearing something normal, you wouldn’t have hurt yourself.”

“Normal, huh? I suppose you want me to walk around in grandma shoes.”

He moves his attention away from my foot to my face and asks, “Are you trying to pick a fight?”

“English didn’t know what that meant—to pick a fight.”

“Hmm. Well, I hope she never learns what fuck me hard and fast, rotten dicks, getting butt fucked, sucking a giant boner, *and* double fucking a big fat dildo are.”

My face heats from instant mortification. “Oh, gawd. That was awful. You weren’t meant to hear any of that. I’m so sorry. And English will never hear that from me. I swear.”

“Hmm, yeah, do teachers always run around and get drunk and talk like sailors on Friday nights? Do I need to worry about my daughter?”

My hand flies to my chest as I practically wheeze, “No. Oh my gosh, never would I do anything to put those children in jeopardy.” And that’s when I see the corners of his mouth turn up. “Oh, my. He smiles.”

“Of course, he smiles. You have this opinion of me that I’m nothing but an ogre.”

“Well, you are. The first time I met you I nearly had my head bitten off.”

“Because you basically accused me of using sexual words around my daughter, and now I come to find out you’re nothing but a trash mouth.” He’s jesting, and it’s hard for him to keep a straight face.

But still, I gasp. My mouth opens and closes several times, but I have no adequate response because he’s right. I took my frustrations out on him for losing control of the class. English was playing the alphabet game and calling out words she didn’t think a thing about. I was the one who became flustered. Grabbing a pillow on the couch, I cover my face.

“Ugh, it was awful that day. None of the kids had heard those terms, and it got out of hand.”

I watch as he rises and moves to the kitchen where he takes out two glasses and fills them with ice water. It’s then I glance around the room and take in the surroundings. Everything is clean lines yet comfort. There are signs of English here and there—a stuffed bunny, shoes, a sweatshirt, and some coloring books with crayons. But the walls are what grab my attention. Photo after photo of her in a collage that dates back to her infancy. And the pictures are definitely not amateurish. And then I remember her telling me that her dad took pictures.

“You’re a photographer?”

One nod. He hands me the glass of water.

“Listen, there’s a guest room upstairs with a bath.”

“No, I really don’t want to put you out. This is more than fine.”

“Suit yourself. I’m going to bed then. I’ll get you a blanket.”

He returns shortly after that and hands me a blanket and pillow before walking down the hall, but then he stops. “There’s a bathroom just off the kitchen.”

“Oh, okay. Thanks. Night.”

There is some impressive photography on these walls as I sit here and glance around. It appears as though he’s well

traveled and whatever he does, it must pay well because this is a very nice house. But I need to rest, so I lay my head on the pillow he gave me, and sleep takes me to dreamland.

The smell of coffee wafting under my nose awakens me, and I groan because my head throbs. I roll over to see a set of gorgeous eyes looking at me. A yawn the size of a bottomless pit hits me, and his lids widen to enormous proportions, reminding me of a Pekinese we used to have when I was a kid.

“Did you leave any for me?”

“Any what?”

“Oxygen.”

“Smartass,” I mutter.

He hands me the mug, and I take it. “I hope you like it black.”

I scrunch up my face.

“By the looks of your face, I take it that’s a no.”

“I’m a cream and sugar girl.”

He grabs the mug out of my hand and walks away with it, only to return moments later. “Here, princess.”

“Thanks.” And it’s divine. But it hits me how awkward this all is. “Um, thanks for rescuing me last night. I didn’t mean to crash your party.” I rub my eyes because they burn like hell.

“I know.”

Lifting up my butt, I pull out a stuffed bunny. “Tell English thanks for letting me sleep with her friend,” I say, grinning.

He grabs the stuffed creature out of my hand and sets it onto the table. His eyes grow dark, and his mouth hardens. “I’ll do no such thing, and she is not to know you were here. Am I clear?” His tone is clipped as though I’ve pissed him off.

“I’m sorry if I did something wrong.” And I am because I have no idea why he’s so angry.

Our gazes lock, but he says nothing further.

“If you don’t mind too much, I’d like a ride home, please.”

His head tips up and down once, and he disappears down the hall. I need to use the restroom, so I get up to go, but my ankle is next to impossible to put weight on. Doing my best, I hop to the bathroom, and when I get a good look at myself, I nearly croak. Raccoon eyes meets bird’s nest on steroids. My eyes are on fire, and I figure out why. I slept in my contacts. Holy shit. I’m surprised he didn’t scream when he saw me. My hair is one huge knot. It’s plastered to the side of my head, and then ... well, I’m not sure what the heck I did on that couch, but it couldn’t have been good. Or safe. I can’t even run my fingers through the snarls to untangle them. I get my face a bit cleaned up, but oh, brother, am I scary.

When I return, it takes me a while. His back is toward me, and he says, “Thought you fell in.”

“Nah, I had to do damage control, and it took a while. I forgot to take my contacts out, and now they feel like potato chips.”

Without an acknowledgement, he heads to the door leading to the garage. I hobble-hop behind him. Maybe it was the noise of me walking that clued him in, but he finally turns around and says, “Christ. You better get that thing looked at today.”

Really? *You better get that thing looked at today?* I want to flip him off, but I can’t because he has to drive me home. There are elements to this man that are nice. I mean, there have to be. But I’m trying very hard to find them right now. Impatience coats him as he waits for me by the door. I hurry as much as I can, but it’s a bit hard with this stupid foot. Then I have to go down several stairs. There isn’t a railing for me to hold, and he’s already headed to the car. No offer of help coming from him. So I sit on my butt and scoot down the steps one at a time. The garage door opens, and he opens the driver’s door of his expensive SUV. A BMW, I believe. I’m not into cars, mostly because I’m poor and trying to pay off

my student loans. My car is old, and I pray it lasts me another ten years.

But then he turns my way and looks pissed off. I'm not sure if it's because I'm taking too long or what. In a few long strides, he's at the foot of the steps and says, "Don't move another inch. What do you think you're doing?"

"Going to the car. What else?"

He mutters something and then reaches underneath me and picks me up.

"I'm sorry I'm such an inconvenience," I say.

He grumbles something that I can't quite make out, but it's about over imbibing. And he's right. I should have never drunk so much last night. Boy, did I mess up.

After he deposits me in the seat, he jogs around to his side and then backs out of the garage. I squeeze the bridge of my nose. It's a bad habit from wearing glasses. Usually I do it because my glasses drive me crazy after a while, but now it's because he's making me turn into a head case.

I take some long deep breaths, and then I say, "I'm sorry I've been such a burden to you. But thank you again for letting me stay with you."

No response. We pull up in front of my house, and before I can get out, he's there to help. After we get to my porch, I thank him again. I don't want it to be said that I wasn't grateful. Without his assistance, I would've been forced to walk home, and that would've been very dangerous.

"You really did a good deed, you know."

Again, nothing. I give up. "Well, see ya."

Ten

SHERIDAN

Mr. Mysterious drives off, and that's that. It's then I realize we never called each other by any name.

When I get to the door, Michelle is still not home. Great. Excellent. How long will my wait be? I never thought to look at the time, and I'm not wearing a watch. There's a small wicker settee on our porch, so I have no other choice but to sit and wait.

Oliver brings her home, and they're having a grand time as I watch them both get out of his car from my little perch. When she sees me, she asks, "What are you doing there?"

By this time, my blood is simmering. I would think she would've checked her purse and would've seen my phone and other stuff.

"I'm not sure I can even tell you. Can you unlock the door, please?"

I see it all register on her face. "Oh, shit. I had your stuff. I'm so sorry."

I stand and almost trip because of my damn ankle.

"What happened?" she asks, looking down.

"Just unlock the door."

When she does, I make straight for the shower. Cleaning up is number one. Number two is food, then three is the medical clinic for an X-ray, where I get the bad news. I have a fracture accompanying my severe sprain, so I have to wear one of those stupid boots until the orthopedist, whom I will see on Monday, decides the time is appropriate to stop. Best news ever—except for the crutches to go along with the effing boot.

As I drive up to the house, Michelle and her newfound love, Oliver, are leaving. I was hoping she was going to be around so I wouldn't have to go to the store. Now that plan is blown.

“So?” she asks.

“I have a fracture, and I'm on crutches and wearing a boot.”

“Oh, no. That's awful.”

“Yeah. My luck.” I try to laugh it off, but the fact is it pisses me off, and when I'm pissed like this, I cry. And that pisses me off even more.

She looks at Oliver and says, “We're going to a movie, so we'll be out of your hair. Call if you need me.”

Call if you need me? I want her to say—“Hey, Oliver, let's cancel our plans for tonight. My roommate needs me, and we can go to a movie another time.” But she doesn't, so I'm stuck with heading back out to the store, feeling overwhelmed with these crutches and boot. At least it's my left foot so I'm able to drive.

It's very difficult navigating a grocery cart and a pair of crutches by yourself. I get to the Publix, and am trying to figure this whole thing out when I nearly topple over the apple cart. Literally. I'm standing there and trying to juggle my crutches and the bag I want to drop my apples into when one of my crutches starts to fall. As I reach for it, my grocery cart rolls a bit. I panic, hop to get it to stop, and I begin to fall. My hand latches on to the apple stand to halt myself, and the whole thing crashes. Apples roll every which way but Sunday, and all the produce people come running to help. But the worst part of all is I look up and there he is. The jerk of the century. He stands there shaking his head. And don't I look like a fool?

Two strong hands reach under my armpits, which I'm sure are sweaty, and set me on my foot. He then hands me my crutches and pulls my cart to me.

“Thanks. You’re always in the wrong place at the right time,” I mumble.

He saunters off as I watch. It’s quite a view, and I really wish it wasn’t. I wish he were an ugly man. A very ugly nasty icky looking thing with warts and pimples, and I wish he smelled bad. Like poop. Or farts. And now his hands smell like my sweaty armpits. Gawd. What else can happen?

The poor produce workers get the apple stand put back together again, and I move on to the salad stuff and bananas, careful not to let things get away from me. By the time I have everything I need, I’m exhausted.

As I get in line at the checkout, you know who is right in front of me with his cart filled to the brim. My God, he has enough food in there for the entire neighborhood.

I’m not gonna lie. I scope out everything he’s buying, and I have to say the man didn’t load up on the junky crap. Bonus points for him.

“Hungry?” he asks. “I think you have a bit of drool on your chin.”

Smartass. In actuality, I haven’t eaten since six the night before, and it’s about two. “Starving. I haven’t eaten since last night.”

A pretty pink blush blooms on his cheeks. Hmm. I’ve embarrassed him. I didn’t mean to insinuate that it was his fault. I didn’t bother to grab anything when I left the house.

“Why didn’t your roommate come with you?”

“She had a date.”

One flick of his head, as usual.

He pays and walks out. No wave, no good-bye, or fuck me, you, whatever.

One thing about Publix is they always help you out with your groceries. So once my car is loaded, I’m on the way home. Now I’m trying to figure out how I’ll lug them inside.

Maybe I can hang them around my neck. Much to my surprise, Mr. Bridges is waiting for me when I arrive.

“Thought you might need a hand.”

I get out of the car with the intention of unlocking the front door, but he holds out his hand. The man simply doesn't talk. I drop my keys into it and off he goes with several bags. He unlocks the door, and by the time I get up the stairs, he's back for the next and last load. He's set everything in the kitchen, and then he hands me my keys and tells me to lock up, and he's gone before I can thank him. Weird.

About thirty minutes later, my phone buzzes.

I locked your car.

It was from Mr. Bridges.

I send him a *Thank you for your help* right back.

This crutches thing is truly going to be a large hemorrhoid for me.

Eleven

SHERIDAN

Monday morning starts out with the orthopedist. I'm hoping he'll tell me I only have to use the crutches and boot for a week or so. Oh, no.

"Miss Monroe, I'm sorry to tell you, but the break is in such a place that you need to be off that foot for at least four weeks. By that, I mean no weight on it at all."

I stare at him. "I don't understand. I didn't even think it was broken."

"Breaks can be like that sometimes, but if it doesn't heal properly, you could lose range of motion in that ankle."

Enough said. The crutches will be used, even though I'll hate them. And that translates to four weeks plus another two for the boot. Then he will reassess. He prescribes more pain pills, but the dang things make me too woozy to take during the day, so I have to tough it out with ibuprofen, which is like killing an elephant with a flyswatter.

It's about nine thirty when I get to school and relieve the substitute teacher. All my students want to touch my boot and ask me questions, so I take fifteen minutes to satisfy their inquisitive nature. Then it's back to the curriculum. By afternoon, I'm so weary I need some toothpicks to keep my eyes from slamming shut. I count the minutes until dismissal.

We have about an hour to go, when I excuse myself for a short bathroom break. With ten minutes to go, I notice my phone is gone. I always leave it on my desk in case I get a text from the principal. And it was there when I went to the restroom, but now it's gone.

"Students, has anyone touched my phone?"

Every single one of them turns to look at English, but she is silent.

“Anyone? Can you please tell me where my phone is?”

No one says anything. We sit there, and it’s getting closer to dismissal time. I decide on a different tactic and ask each student individually. English is the sixth person in line, and when I say her name, at first she squirms, and then she admits to taking it.

The bell rings, and the kids jump up to leave.

“English, I’d like you to wait, please.”

“But my daddy will be waiting on me.”

“Yes, I know. Can I have my phone, please?”

She digs in her backpack, which like most of the students, is a brightly colored one, and hands it over.

“Why did you take this?”

She’s strangely silent as she stands there and shifts from one foot to the other. After a couple of minutes, I decide to text Mr. Bridges.

Are you outside the school?

Mr. B.: *Yes*

Can you come to my classroom, please? English is here with me.

I don’t expect a response and don’t get one. A little while later, his long strides carry him into the room.

“What’s wrong? English, are you okay?”

“She’s fine. She took my cell phone and won’t tell me why,” I say.

His brow furrows, and I can almost see the wheels spinning. This isn’t her normal behavior, so I’m sure he’s as baffled as I am.

“Hey, English, why’d you take Miss Monroe’s phone?”

She clasps her hands together and holds them away from her little body then pulls her shoulders up in an overstated shrug.

His voice is gentle, not the gruff I expect. “Yes, you do. Now tell us why, Munch.”

Blond curls jiggle as her head dips, and she says with her lower lip poked out, “You know how you say when you’re sad that when you look at my picture it always puts you under the rainbow?”

“Yeah,” he answers.

“I just wanted to take a picture of me on Miss Monroe’s phone so she could look at it and be under the rainbow. She’s been sad today.”

Oh. My. God. This child. Can I hug her now?

He squats down in front of her, and in that same gentle voice says, “That’s so thoughtful of you, Munch, but you know what would’ve been better? To tell her you wanted to do that. Do you understand why? Remember how we talked about taking other people’s things without asking?”

“Yes, but then it wouldn’t have been a surprise. Only after I took her phone, I didn’t know how to get it open.”

“How about this?” I ask. “Why don’t we take a picture together, and then I can always have it to make me happy and put me under the rainbow?”

Her head bobs vigorously.

“Mr. Bridges, since you’re the photographer, will you do the honors?” I hold out my phone to him. He takes it from me, and I have to sit in a chair since I can’t squat down with a broken ankle. He takes the picture and hands my phone back to me.

“Thank you. And, English, thank you for noticing I was sad.”

“Don’t be sad, Miss Monroe. Your foot will be all better. Maybe my daddy should kiss it for you.” She looks at her dad, and he looks at me.

“Thank you, but I’m supposed to keep my boot on all the time.”

“Daddy, kiss her toes. You can kiss those.”

Oh, dear Lord. “No, really, my toes don’t hurt.”

“But, Miss Monroe, my daddy’s kisses are like magic. They make everything feel better.”

Now I’m biting my lips to keep from laughing, and I think just maybe, Mr. Bridges is, too.

He finally says, “English, that might only work on blond-headed little girls. With lots of curls. Who talk way more than they should.”

“Oh,” she says as her little mouth forms a perfect O.

“Good-bye, English. See you tomorrow.”

She waves as Mr. Bridges takes her hand, and they walk away. Every single reproductive organ in my body clenches and squeezes at the sight they make. He is so precious with her. I can’t understand how he can be so taciturn everywhere else.

Twelve

BECK

We leave the school, and all English can talk about is how Miss Monroe needs to come over for dinner. It's nonstop from the time we walk out the door until the child witnesses me sending the text. In actuality, I'm not looking forward to having Miss Monroe back over here. She was pleasant enough, but I have too much to worry about, too much on my mind, without the added intrusion of entertaining English's teacher.

"Daddy, let's make her a pretty picture to take home. Maybe with Anna and a castle."

It's always *Frozen* with this one. "How about you draw a picture for her when she's here?"

"I think she would like it better if it would be from the both of us."

She stands there and has her tiny hands folded together, and how in the hell can I say no?

Holding out my larger one, I say, "Let's go." She grabs on to mine and about hauls me into her room where we make a picture of Anna and English under the rainbow.

Thirteen

SHERIDAN

Later that night as I'm working on my lesson plans for the week, a text comes in. I'm surprised to see who it's from.

English would like to invite you over for dinner tomorrow night at 6:30.

The invitation shocks me. It's a little weird. Will he be there? Of course, he will, and I have to go. It would break English's little heart, even though I don't give a hoot about her hot dad. I think he's an ass. Maybe around her he'll be nicer.

I would love to come. What can I bring?

As usual, there is no response. The man needs a lesson in texting etiquette. He is just rude. I decide to make my special chocolate chip cookies, gluten-free and healthy, of course. I use cacao nibs and coconut sugar, coconut flour, and ghee. But you'd never know by the taste. They're so yummy. My friends love them, but don't know they're healthy.

The next day I text Mr. Bridges again and ask for directions because I honestly don't remember how to get to his house. He sends me his address, which isn't far from me, with a short *and don't bring anything. It's handled.*

I arrive a few minutes before six thirty, but by the time I get out of the car with my crap, it's time. And then I have to send him to the car for the cookies.

"I said not to bring anything." He sounds aggravated and not appreciative in the least.

"When you didn't respond, I thought it would be nice if I brought dessert. And they're only cookies." I smile.

He stares, then does that slow blink thing. One nod later, minus any words, he turns away, and I'm left standing there.

"Miss Monroe!" English runs up to me and hugs my leg. "Does your foot still hurt?"

"Yes, a bit, but it's getting better, thank you."

"Wanna see my room?"

"If it's okay with your daddy."

"Why wouldn't it be?"

Well, I don't know. Maybe because he's a jerkface?

A few tugs on my wrist and off we go. Her room is a fantasyland. It's the greatest thing I've ever seen. One wall is a scenic mural containing all kinds of imaginary figures—fairies, unicorns, a princess, and other mystical creatures. But in the center, at her height, is a blackboard; only it's painted directly on the wall, so she can draw pictures there.

A sheer canopy that hangs over the top frames her bed, giving it a fantasy-like feel, and all the colors of the rainbow are present in here. Everything is well organized and in its place, with lots of shelves and nooks for storage. Framed pictures of English with her father and grandparents dot the nightstand, dresser, and shelves.

"I love your room. This is awesome!"

"Yeah, I have one just like it at my Banana's and Geepa's."

Wow. That's impressive. They've duplicated her room to make her feel at home. "You do?"

"Hmm mmm. Let's play. Wanna draw something?"

"Okay."

She pulls out some sketchpads, and we draw a while until Mr. Bridges comes in.

"Hey, English, do you think Miss Monroe might want to come into the living room and sit on the sofa so she can put her foot up?"

Her little mouth makes that cute O, then she nods and sends her curls bouncing. Off we go to the living room. And soon dinner is served, which is shrimp, salad, and an array of vegetables. I watch in surprise as English devours everything. It's always been my understanding that kids are picky eaters, but this child seems to eat what's put in front of her.

Mr. Bridges offers me coffee, and I remind him of the cookies I brought for dessert, but English yells out, "We're not allowed that stuff here. We don't eat lots of junk."

"Ah, then you'll be happy to know these are healthy cookies, because I don't eat junk and sweets either. These are made with healthy ingredients."

English looks at me and then her father. I do the same and see a grin on his face. Well, glory be. And what a grin it is.

"You can have one, English. And, for the record, I'm not that bad of a junk food Nazi."

"Oh, I don't know about that. I brought cookies to school one day, and she wouldn't take one."

His eyes widen a bit, and he asks English about it. She confirms what I said, and he tells her it's okay to treat herself in school.

"I'm actually on your side with this. I tend to avoid processed foods when I can. And I have a confession. I eyeballed what was in your grocery cart the other day, and I was impressed."

"Is that why you were drooling?" he teases.

"Well, that and I was really hungry."

"Tell me the verdict on your foot."

"It's my ankle, and I need to become close friends with this boot."

I give him the details, and he says, "Those shoes," while shaking his head.

English pipes in with, “Daddy says girls don’t wear sensible shoes.”

“But girls have to stay in style,” I protest.

Mr. Bridges scowls at me. I better keep my mouth shut on the subject. He gets up and collects the plates.

“Can I help?”

He tilts his head, and those brows say it all, giving me a look that says *really?* His eyes flick down to my boot and then my crutches. I only want to help. What can I say?

“English.”

She pops off her chair and starts to help him. Soon, all is cleared, and he brings me a mug of piping hot coffee, saying, “Cream and sugar.” He remembered.

“Thank you.”

Then he sets the plate of cookies onto the table. We all grab one, and I observe him as he takes a bite.

His lids flutter, then snap open, and bore into me as he slowly chews. My breath hitches in my chest as though a two-ton hippo is sitting there. I can’t eat mine because watching him is more than a view. It’s an experience, a sight that’s far too erotic to be on display at the dinner table. Does he even know what effect he has on me? I need to fan myself, but that would look stupid, but if I don’t do something fast, I’m going to be dripping with sweat.

“These cookies are good. Daddy, can I have another?” English’s voice cracks through the barrier of sexual tension that threatens to make a fool out of me.

“Yeah, Munch,” that gruff voice replies. “Go ahead.” She grabs one as I set mine down and take a large swig of my coffee and then nearly choke. The stuff is hot. I may have swallowed lava.

“You okay?” he asks.

“Yes,” I wheeze. “Just a bit warm.” I suck in a breath and fan my face, trying to cool my mouth. There can’t be any skin left on my tongue. “Do you have any ice?” I croak.

“Sure.” He brings me some, and I put a cube on my tongue.

“That’s the hottest coffee I’ve ever had,” I mumble around the ice.

“Maybe you should try sipping it next time.”

Smartass.

After I finish my coffee, I say, “I guess I should get going.”

English jumps up and says, “You can’t leave yet, Miss Monroe. We have a special surprise for you.”

Glancing at Mr. Bridges, I lift my brows in question, but he only shrugs a shoulder. English runs out of the room and skips back in a minute later, carrying a large picture. Wearing a huge smile that spreads across her beautiful fresh face, she says, “This is for you. Daddy and I made it special because of your broke foot.”

I have to smile at her. She’s fixated on my foot and not ankle, but I don’t correct her. She’s so excited about this, but Mr. Bridges, not so much. In fact, he’s kind of squirming. Then I take a look at the picture and nearly gasp. It’s almost a perfect rendition of Anna from *Frozen*, with English, Mr. Bridges, and me added under a rainbow by the ice castle from the movie.

“This is amazing, English.”

“Do you like it? I wanted you to be under the rainbow with us.”

“I think you did a fantastic job of making that happen.”

Mr. Bridges says, still acting uncomfortable, “If you didn’t know, English has a love for that movie.”

“It’s not hard to tell.” Looking at English, I say, “I will treasure this lovely piece of art forever. Thank you so much for this.” I hug it to my chest. And, honestly, the burn of tears

threatens, because I can't remember anyone offering me something this precious before.

English holds my new masterpiece as all three of us walk to the door.

"Thank you for the invitation for dinner, English, Mr. Bridges. It was delicious."

"Don't you think it's time you call me Beck?" he asks. I find this a bit odd, because he could've mentioned this earlier, but didn't.

Not knowing how to respond, I just hold out my hand. "Beck, thank you. And call me Sheridan."

"I was planning on it."

"English, I'll see you tomorrow."

"Bye, Miss Monroe. Thanks for the cookies."

They help me to my car, and I drive off, waving. That was interestingly odd. Beck was nicer tonight, but at times he almost seemed as though he was ill at ease with me there. He is a difficult person to figure out.

Fourteen

BECK

Traffic is a bitch as I head to my photo shoot. And I'm in a pissed-off mood to top it off. The dumbass cancelled on me four times and called yesterday saying he needs the photos by next week. Today was the only day we could work it out. Saturday. The day I love to spend with my daughter. Now I have to give up an entire half day, maybe even more, depending on whether this guy I'm meeting has his shit together.

As I'm driving, I can't help but notice this car weaving in and out of traffic at an unusually high speed for the road we're on. The speed is bad enough, but add to that the driver swerves constantly and almost causes several wrecks. My phone is on the dash, so I tap the photo app and hit the video button. In a matter of a few seconds, I'm recording this crazy motherfucker.

But then I see her old hunk of metal as he comes behind her. She doesn't know what's about to happen. Goddammit. Why does that asshole have to drive like that, and why the fuck isn't she paying attention to what's going on around her? Didn't anyone ever teach her defensive driving?

Fifteen

SHERIDAN

No doubt about it, I've turned into the biggest grump in the world. This ankle thing has taken every bit of patience in my jar and drained it. Michelle and I moved here this past July to take our new jobs, so I'm still trying to find my way around this vast city of Atlanta. We chose Brookhaven as a place to live because it's convenient for work, and it offers everything we need. However, the traffic can be bad depending on the time of day, and when I have to venture outside of this area or Buckhead, I'm at a loss. I use the GPS on my phone, because my car is so old it doesn't have one, but it still unnerves me. I grew up in a small town and went to UGA, which is not in a large city, so this is all new for me.

My ten-year-old Honda Accord started acting up, so I scheduled an appointment on a Saturday to get it checked out. As I'm driving in the crazy traffic, I get twisted up, listening to the directions coming from my phone. Realizing I need to cross three lanes of traffic to turn right, I end up in a fender bender. This is not what I need. And if Michelle hadn't been staying with Oliver last night, she would've been with me and this wouldn't have happened, or that's what my ridiculously irrational brain tells me.

After I pull my car off the road, I reach for my crutches to get out, and when I do, a terrifying man confronts me. It's disturbing the way he gets in my face and screams at me. I am so shaken up by the incident, it doesn't occur to me to call the police. He stands there and berates me for my horrible driving and stupid move of cutting him off and causing a life-threatening situation. He presses my back into the side of the car, and I lean away from him in fear. He raises his hands, and at exactly the time I think he's going to strike me, someone

pulls him off me. I sag in relief and lean on my crutches to keep from crumbling to the gravel under my feet.

Then I hear his voice. “You okay?”

With fingers pressed to my forehead, I raise my head and stare. My voice is locked somewhere between my larynx and mouth. Nothing emerges.

“The police are on the way.”

He stands between the enraged man and me. For once, it appears as though he has a heart where someone other than English is concerned.

But then my illusion scatters like dust in the wind when he says, “You really shouldn’t let people treat you that way. Didn’t anyone ever tell you that you should stand up for yourself? And you should’ve been driving defensively.”

My potential savior has turned into an idiot. I hate this man.

But he doesn’t quit. “He could’ve hurt you.”

And then the worst happens. My bottom lip quivers. This can’t be. I’m much stronger than this. I’ve been through a shit ton worse than this incident. I will not cry. Repeat. I will not cry. *No tears, do you hear that, Sheridan? Buck up, pussy face.*

All the head chanting in the world doesn’t stop them. The fuck-tastrophe hits, and I stand there like a dork, a waterfall rolling down my cheeks as he watches. I furiously scratch at them, hoping to make them go away.

“Don’t let him see he got to you. He doesn’t need to know he has that kind of power.”

That’s it. I’m done with this jack face. Between my sobs, I hiccup, “I’m not crying about him, you moron.”

A V forms between his brows as his head slants, and I’m pinned by blue-green orbs that seem to keep growing.

I refuse to give him an opportunity to speak. “I couldn’t stand up for myself because I was afraid he was going to punch me. He’s a lot bigger than I am, or didn’t you notice

when you stepped between us?” By this time, my hiccups turn into what sounds more like a cat meowing, and I end the question on a near groan. “Just don’t say another word. I liked it better when you kept your mouth shut.” I pretend to zip my lips closed in an imitation of what he should do.

His lips form one straight line, and the tiny muscle in his jaw flexes. He’s pissed, too, but I don’t give a green fuck. I set my crutches in place and rise to my fullest height, nudge him out of the way, and move in front of the other man. “You, mister, are one giant asshole bully. You need to go suck a pig’s dick.” Then I remain there, and we have a standoff until the police arrive.

When they do, it’s a shouting match until they break us up. Beck finally shows them the video of what happened. Evidently, he was behind us and recorded the entire thing. The accident I thought I caused wasn’t my fault at all. It was the angry asshole’s. He was clipping cars off right and left and nicked my rear end, but acted like it was *me* who cut *him* off. Along with his road rage, they end up charging him with assault.

I owe Beck a huge favor. If it hadn’t been for him, no telling what would’ve happened.

The police officer comes back and asks Beck if he could send the video to his computer. And then he gives Beck a talking to. “You are lucky, young man. Although it’s not illegal to use your phone while driving, it is distracting filming a video, so don’t make a habit of this.”

“Yes, sir. I usually don’t do anything like this. It was a special case.”

“Good.” Then he and Beck walk over to the police car. It makes me realize how lucky my timing was.

When Beck comes back, I say, “Thank you. I’m sorry for the way I spoke to you. It’s not been a good day, obviously. But it was wrong of me to say those things. How did you know that was me?”

One shoulder lifts. “Your car. I remembered it. I knew that driver was going to cause a wreck. Was hoping it wasn’t going to be you.”

Rubbing my eyes with the heels of my hands, I say, “My luck doesn’t run that way. I’d better go. I had an appointment at the Honda place. Thanks again.”

Since my rear bumper is only slightly dented, I decide I won’t even worry about that repair since my car is so old.

But there’s more bad news. The little noise is coming from my transmission, and it’s going to be a costly repair, to the tune of two thousand dollars. I ask about patching it up, but they say they can’t do it. It’s either fix it or drive it until it falls apart.

Now I truly want to bawl like a freakin’ baby. The money I have in my bank account doesn’t come close to that, so I guess I will have to use my credit cards. My student loans are my first priority, so I make extra payments every month, which has limited my ability to save.

Michelle is home, alone for once, when I walk in.

“Hey, girlie, what’s cooking?” she asks. When I get finished filling her in, she’s quiet for so long, I wonder if she’s heard me. Then she sits next to me and hugs me. “You’ve had some awful luck lately. I think we need to go out tonight.”

What? Out? “Where’s Oliver?”

“He’s got some family thing.” Her eyes dart around, and I know something is bothering her.

“What’s wrong?”

She crosses her arms and pouts. “Here’s the thing. We’ve spent all this time together, and he tells me how much he likes me. Then he has this family thing, whatever that means, and doesn’t invite me. Do you think that’s weird?”

“Hmm. Maybe it wasn’t him, but his family, you know. Maybe they said no guests or something like that. Has your

family ever done anything like that ... told you not to bring a date?"

"Yeah, I guess." She's still pouting.

"Then I wouldn't worry. It's not like you've been dating for a year. You've only been going out for what? A month?"

"Yeah, a month this weekend."

"That's right because I go for my four-week check on my ankle Monday."

"Then I won't worry. So, how is it? Your ankle?" She leans over to take a peek, though I'm not sure why. It's not like she can see anything through my big boot.

"Better. I hope he tells me I can quit with these dang crutches. It's hard going grocery shopping and doing other things when I don't have any free hands." It all comes out before I even think about it.

Her face morphs from confused to happy, and then it's like watching her Jenga tower tumble down. "Oh, God, I've been so selfish these last few weeks. I've left you all alone to fend for yourself. I'm the biggest shit around. The worst roommate in the world."

"Stop. It's not that big of a deal." But it is and has been, and it's too late for me to retract it. "But I have to figure out what to do about my car. I'm going to ask my principal about doing some after school tutoring."

"That sounds like an idea."

"Maybe some weekend work, too. Learning centers are always hiring."

She clicks her fingers. "I've been meaning to ask you. Oliver and his roommate are throwing a Halloween party, and he's invited you. Say you'll come."

"That's next weekend, right?"

"Yeah, Halloween parties usually fall on Halloween," she says with a smirk.

“Smartass. I’ll go if I’m done with those.” I point to my crutches.

“Are you up for going out tonight?”

I give her an *are you crazy* look. “Navigating a club, using crutches, while holding a drink would be a total nightmare.”

“I get it. What about a movie and popcorn instead?”

“Now that I can do.”

It’s mid-afternoon when we load up and head to the closest theater, one of those multiplex places, and settle in for a relaxing time. On the way out, we’re chatting about our likes and dislikes of it when I happen to hear, “Miss Monroe.”

Glancing to my right, there are English and Beck leaving the theater, too.

“Did you eat popcorn?” She wants to know.

“I did. This is my roommate, Michelle. Michelle, this is one of my students, English, and her dad, Beck.”

We stand and talk a bit, but Michelle ogles Beck. Beck is his usual inarticulate self, and after a few more slightly awkward exchanges, we say good-bye. But as we are leaving, he tosses out a question.

“Did you get an estimate on your car?”

“Yeah, and I also got bad news. My transmission is bad. I think my poor old car is doomed.” I make a frowny face.

He nods, and they leave.

Michelle clamps my arm so hard I fear her nails are going to gouge all the way through the sweater I’m wearing. “Ow!”

“Sorry. But that is one fine man.”

“He is, but he’s very odd. I can’t figure him out for the life of me.”

We’re walking again, and she asks, “What do you mean?”

“One minute he’s nice, and the next he’s withdrawn and then turns into a butthole. But to see him with his daughter blows every asshole theory I have of him.”

“Maybe he’s shy,” Michelle suggests.

“I don’t think that’s it.” We’re at the car now, and we both get in.

“So what?”

“Like I said, I don’t know. I can’t figure it out, but he can be a rude piece of work.”

“A gorgeous rude piece of work.”

“One I don’t have time for. But his eyes. When he looks at me, they dig in so deep, they make me squirm.”

“One thing is true—that little kid is the cutest thing since puppies were invented.”

I have to agree with her on that. English is the most adorable kid. When I tell Michelle about the time she took my phone, she almost gets us into a wreck.

“Hey, watch the road!”

“Sorry, but that’s the sweetest story I’ve ever heard.”

Back at home, I get a text. It’s from Beck.

I may know someone who can help with your transmission.

Wow. That’s nice of him.

Really? That’s awesome. What do I need to do?

I figure it would take him several hours or a day to get back. Not this time.

Can you bring it by his place Monday morning for him to check it out?

This puts me in a bind. I have an orthopedist appointment and then school. How will I get around? Maybe if I can get there real early, I can order an Uber from there.

Can I get it there around seven-seven thirty? I have a doctor's appointment at eight thirty, and I need to allow enough time for an Uber.

No response for a few minutes, but then he answers.

Yes, and I can drive you to your appointment.

That's weird. Why would he do that? Another text from him comes in.

I'll meet you there after I drop E off at school. Here's the address.

Deciding not to refuse this gift, I accept. Michelle is all over this stuff, reading much more into it than she should. The reason is she hasn't been around him much. She can't possibly understand his mood swings.

Sunday night, my body acts as though I drank several triple shot lattes. Sleep is not very attainable because all I see are huge blue-green orbs staring intently at me, so I finally give up and decide to open up my iPad and read a book. At five in the morning, I shower and put on a pot of coffee. This is going to be an exhausting day. Dealing with a roomful of six-year-olds after a night of insomnia will be brutal.

Sixteen

SHERIDAN

The transmission shop is fairly close to my home, and I arrive at seven fifteen with the paperwork in hand from the Honda place. An older man, perhaps in his early fifties, greets me. I introduce myself, and he tells me his name is Joe. He's been expecting me, so that's good. He scans the papers and says he wants to do a thorough check. There may be something he can do that wouldn't involve the replacement of the costly transmission. If it's doable, it may get me another chunk of mileage out of my old car.

"I can't make you any promises until I see what's going on in there, you understand?"

"Yeah, but if you could do that, it would be so great. I'm not in a position to buy a new one right now. Do you know how much it would run to do what you're talking about?"

"I can't really say, but not anywhere near this." He holds up the paperwork in his hand. "Can I get your phone number so I can call you?"

After I jot it down for him, I tell him I'm a teacher, and if I don't answer, to please leave a message. As we're talking, Beck pulls up and heads our way. Joe fills him in on what's going on. A few minutes later, we're on the way to the doctor's office after I give him the address.

"Thank you for this. You didn't have to take me."

"I know."

Bam. That's it.

I take the leap and ask before I can think about it, "Why are you so blunt?"

He flicks his eyes to me and then back to the road. “Blunt? I say what I think is all.”

“Sometimes it’s not the most pleasant thing to hear. And then there are those times you don’t say anything at all.”

He glances at me again and gives me a brief nod. “Miss Monroe, I’m not one to say a bunch of inane or flowery things for the hell of it.”

“Miss Monroe?”

After a slight shake of his head, he says, “Sheridan.”

The temperature inside the vehicle has escalated to an uncomfortable level.

“I wasn’t asking for you to say inane or flowery things. Maybe we need to drop it.”

He blows out his breath. “You started it. You’re exasperating.”

“Me? I haven’t done a thing,” I huff.

“You did. You brought the whole thing up, and now you want to drop it. And you’re wrong about me. I do say things. A lot of things.”

He is now, and I wish he weren’t.

I hold up my hands, palms facing out, and say, “Look, I happen to think that most of the time you border on rude.”

“So, texting you about my friend who fixes transmissions is rude, and inviting you to dinner is rude?”

Shit. When he puts it like that, I feel like the biggest twatface alive. “No, you’re right. I’m being ungrateful. Thank you.” It’s time for me to shut my mouth and move on.

Only he won’t let it be. “I’m glad you’re starting to see it my way.”

Oh. My. Gawd! Of all the nerve. I clamp my teeth together so hard, I swear they must have cracked. Right now I could

chew through rocks. Does he really think that? He totally thinks that!

The doctor's office is just ahead, and I can't wait to bail out of this car. When he pulls in, I expect him to drop me off at the front, but instead he parks and gets out. What is he doing? He walks around and opens my door.

"You coming or not?"

He's going with me?

"I can go on my own and grab an Uber back to school."

"I'm taking you." And that's that. His mouth is set in a rigid line, so there's no point in arguing with him.

The doctor is an epic fail. After another X-ray, he's determined that I need to wear the boot for two more weeks and stay on the crutches, too. According to him, ankles are touchy situations because of all the bones coming together, and he wants to make sure they have fused properly before I'm weight bearing again. Fuck me every which way, and then fuck my life, too.

When I tell Mr. McGrumpyface, he acts like it's not a big deal. And that sets me off on a rant.

"It's a huge pain. The grocery store, trying to do laundry, I can't work out, or carry anything at all. Changing the sheets is a fucking nightmare. Every fucking thing in my life is fucked to the damn fucking moon and back."

He looks at me, his face completely serious and asks, "Why don't you tell me how you really feel?"

If anyone else had asked me that, it would've sounded stupid, but the way he says it, compounded with his inscrutable expression, has me spitting out laughing.

"Better now?"

"Much, thank you."

Then he says, "By the way, you really have a severe potty mouth at times."

“Yeah, it usually only happens when I’m super angry or alcohol is involved.”

“Noted. I know I’ve asked you this before, but please tell me you don’t talk like that in front of your students.”

“Only on Fridays.”

A deep chuckle rises out of him, and I’m so shocked I gape at him.

“What?”

“I’ve never heard you laugh.”

“I laugh all the time.”

“Not around me you don’t,” I say.

“If you care to get specific, we haven’t been around each other that much.”

“True, but admit it. You’re not a very lighthearted person.”

His mouth pinches in, telling me I’ve hit a nerve.

“There are things going on right now that ...” he stops, and the tiny muscle in his jaw starts twitching.

“Oh, sorry.”

The hand on the steering wheel has such a tight grip his knuckles are white. I don’t want to pry, but maybe he needs a friend.

“If you need to talk, I have good ears.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

His bark makes me jump in my seat. Holding up a palm, I quickly say, “Nothing. Just a friend trying to help.”

“I’m fine, and I appreciate the offer.” Then he shuts up as tight as a brand new jar of pickles that won’t open. I blatantly stare at him as I attempt to puzzle him out.

“Is everything okay with English?”

We stop at a traffic light, and when he faces me, his nostrils flare. “English is fine. Don’t bring her into this,” he grits out.

“Whoa, I was only trying to help. Sorry.”

A couple of minutes later, we pull into the school parking lot, and if those damn crutches weren’t my ball and chain, I would have sprinted into the building.

“I can’t tell you how much I appreciate you doing this for me. You really went above and beyond.” And he did. Even though he was a prick.

“I’m sorry for snapping at you. I’ve been a little stressed lately.”

I pause before opening the door and soften my voice when I say, “It’s fairly obvious. Like I said before, if you need to talk, I am a good listener, and I never gossip.” That’s the truth.

He offers up a tiny nod and gets out to help me.

“I’ll see you Friday.”

“Friday?” I ask, bewildered.

“The school Halloween party, remember?” he reminds me.

My hand flies to my forehead. “Oh, fuck.” Then my eyes turn pug-like as they nearly pop out of my head. I quickly scan the area to make sure no one heard me.

“You’re safe.”

“Phew, I forgot about a costume. And now with these crutches.”

“Go as an accident victim.”

My snarky self says, “Well, that’s original.”

“It could be. You could mummify yourself but use the crutches.”

There’s a thought. “Yeah, but using the restroom would be a pain.”

“Come on. You’re bright. You can figure that out.”

I'll have to work on it, but for now, school is on the agenda. I wave bye and head inside.

When I walk into the classroom, the substitute smiles, and I thank her. English waves and wants to know if I'll have to use my crutches until Christmas.

In the cheeriest voice I can muster, I say, "I hope not. Two more weeks and I get checked again. Maybe by then I'll be done with them."

"Maybe Thanksgiving?" she asks.

"Yes. Thanksgiving." I grin, but don't feel very cheerful.

Then she walks up to my desk and hands me something.

"What's this?"

She says, "I knew you were going to the doctor today and that maybe you would get a shot. I hate shots, so I drew you a picture."

I open up the folded piece of paper, and it's a drawing of a little girl standing between a woman and a man underneath a brightly colored rainbow. My heart wants to sing because of this little girl who stands before me with the sweetest smile.

I'm sitting at my desk, so I extend my arms and say, "A picture this lovely deserves a hug. Can I have one from you?"

She puts those cute tiny arms around me and gives me a squeeze.

"That's the best present I've ever gotten after going to the doctor. Thank you for thinking about me."

"You're welcome." She skips back to her chair.

The other students are looking at us curiously, so I hold up the picture and show them. "English was worried I'd have to get a shot at the doctor's office today, so she drew me this picture."

A sea of horrified faces stare at me. "But it's okay," I quickly reassure them. "I didn't have to get a shot."

Madison, a little girl who's missing her two front teeth, shouts out, "I get two shots all the time." She has allergies, so she has to take shots.

"Madison, why don't you tell the class about it?" She goes into this long, drawn-out rendition of her visits to the doctor and how they mutilate her arms each time. I realize my mistake midway through her explanation and hurry her along. When she finishes, I pray none of these children ever develop allergies. It will be like dragging a cow out of a foot of mud trying to get them to the doctor.

I quickly remind the students even though shots hurt, they make us feel better in the end. They don't buy it one single bit. Okay, on to language. The rest of the day goes much smoother.

As I'm gathering up my things to go home, I reach for the picture English drew. It's hard to deny how my heart melts every time I think of this precious child. And then, I shift gears to her dad. I'm not quite sure what to think about him. His offer to help with my car was more than kind, and yet, his snappy and irritable disposition leaves me gnashing my teeth. How can this man have raised such a lovely child?

My car is ready to be picked up, so Susan offers to drive me over there. Thankfully, Joe is only charging me two hundred dollars. I won't have to work around the clock to pay it off, and it will be nice to have my own wheels back again.

That evening, Michelle and I figure out how to make my mummy costume. We'll use ACE bandages over toilet paper, so I'll be able to go to the restroom. Since I'll be wearing the thing all day, I hope it doesn't fall apart.

"Only wear a tank and shorts underneath, and take extra toilet paper just in case," she suggests.

"Yeah, I guess that would work."

We hunt down my supplies, so I'm set for my costume by Thursday.

"Can you wrap me up in the morning?" I ask.

She agrees, but we decide we need to get up extra early.

In the end, I'm not sure if I look more like a toilet paper job gone bad, or a mummy that got a raw deal. We both laugh too hard to do anything about it. I take an extra roll of toilet paper, extra white tape, and an ACE bandage just in case.

As I'm gimping it out the door, I hear Michelle laughing behind me. I'm not sure if that's a good thing or a bad thing.

Seventeen

BECK

“Did you ask her?”

“No, Dad, I didn’t. I wish you’d back off. I went out like you asked. Let me amend that. You and Mom didn’t ask. You hassled the shit out of me until I finally gave in.” I’m so fed up with this conversation I want to walk out of here, but I can’t because I need them to watch English while I’m on this shoot today.

“Yeah, and look what happened. You ended up with that lovely woman at your place.”

“It wasn’t like that. I gave her a hand when she needed it. And how do you know she’s lovely? You’ve never even seen her.”

“Just going by what your mother said. I happen to think she has great taste.” He has the nerve to preen.

Groaning, I say, “Give it up, Dad.”

“You did think she was lovely, didn’t you?”

“Jesus.”

“Well?”

“Okay, yeah, she’s all right.”

“Hmmp. Then ask her out to dinner. You know what John said. I’m not trying to pressure you.”

Glaring at him, I say, “Then what do you call this? Look, I’ve got to be somewhere.” And I stomp out of the house, closing the door a little too hard. I’m sure he’ll give me a dressing down when I get back, but I don’t want to think about what he mentioned. Not now anyway.

Eighteen

SHERIDAN

My students arrive in the classroom, and none of them know what I'm supposed to be. When I tell them, they don't know what a mummy is. All the other teachers give me hell and laugh. Susan can't look at me with a straight face. Another teacher is dressed up like Tinker Bell, and here I am looking like something that belongs in a dumpster. This was a really bad idea.

Classes are dismissed early so we can have the school party that starts at two o'clock. All the parents are invited, but most won't come. I'm surprised when Beck walks in.

English is dressed as Elsa from *Frozen*, which seems appropriate, and her costume is amazing. Even her braided hair is perfect.

Beck takes one look at me, and his brow lifts. He scans me from head to toe, and then I wait for the sarcastic remark to follow. But all I get is, "Mummy, huh?"

"Daddy, doesn't Miss Monroe look funny?"

"She sure does."

I skew my mouth to the side and nod my thanks.

"Miss Monroe, you should've had Daddy make your costume. He's good at costumes."

Before I can form a sassy response, an announcement is made for all teachers to come together for a group photo. Oh, brother. I have toilet paper hanging off me everywhere, and all I want to do is pull it off, but I can't because I'm only wearing shorts and a tank underneath. This idea of mine was not a good one at all.

When I make it to the group, I try to slink in the back, but no. Susan makes me stand in the front row, claiming mine is a costume to be remembered throughout the ages. I'll say.

I need a drink, and not the kind of punch they're serving here.

"You look stressed." It's Beck again. I'm sure I'll have to endure more of his teasing.

"Can I vent without any sarcasm in return?"

A half a nod later and I'm at it in full steam about my mummy-wear. Midway through, he pulls his lips between his teeth, and then I see him doing his best to hold it back.

"Okay, just go ahead and laugh. Everyone else has."

"You have to admit, it's damn funny." And a guffaw leaves him that has heads turning our way.

I don't say a word. Deciding the best course of action is to let him get it all out, I only watch. At last, he says, "Come on, Cookie. Let's get some candy."

"Cookie?" *Where the heck did that come from?*

"Hmm. I can't stop thinking about those cookies you made for us." He holds my elbow as we walk. It doesn't go unnoticed that others watch us.

We arrive at one of the candy stations, and he asks, "What's your poison? Snickers or Kisses?"

"Kisses, of course," I say it so nonchalantly, I almost miss the way his eyes land on me. Almost. But when I see how he's looking at me, I can't stop the shiver that runs down me. Or the heat that fires through my veins. Why does he have to be so hot? And why does he have to be so damn weird? Quickly, I add, "If there had been Reese's Peanut Butter Cups, my choice would've been different."

He shuffles his feet for a second as that place between his brows crimps. "English is with my parents tomorrow. Trick-or-treating is their thing with her. Would you be interested in

grabbing some dinner?” Before I can answer, he picks up a piece of wayward toilet paper and tucks it back into the edge of my tank. The brush of his finger against my skin sends a slight tingle down my spine.

“I, uh, yeah, sure.” *Dinner? Just the two of us? Shit! He caught me by surprise, and what else could I say?*

He shoves his hands into the pockets of his worn jeans, and his eyes dart around the room before they come back to me. He clears his throat and says, “Right. Good. How about I pick you up say, seven?”

“Yeah, okay.”

“Sheridan, I think you should know that you’ve won English over. She talks about you nonstop.”

A smile stretches across my face as I relax. I wasn’t even conscious of how stiff I had been. “Is that right?”

“That’s right. If you teach her something, she’ll retain it if she likes you. I’m not sure if the other kids are that way, but that’s how English operates. And if she doesn’t, you won’t convince her the sun rises every day.”

“Did you know she drew me a picture when she knew I was going to the doctor?”

“No, she never told me.”

I chuckle and tell him about the shot.

“Oh, she hates them.”

Then I tell him about the picture.

“Hmm. That’s interesting. She must be very fond of you. I’ve never known her to do that before.”

“It was adorable.”

A pained expression distorts his features as his eyes cloud. He looks directly at his daughter, and I watch a man who appears to be in agony. And I have no idea why.

“Is English sick?” That’s the first thing I can think of with the way she was so afraid of shots.

“What? No! Why would you ask me that?”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to offend you, but the way you were looking at her just then. You scared me for a second.”

His posture droops momentarily, but then the blades of his shoulders straighten, and he gives me a full-on smile. Even though he’s not a hundred percent here, that broad grin makes me realize the potency behind Beck Bridges’ looks. The man is stunning, and if he pressed a finger to my chest this very second, he could most likely knock me over.

“I’d better make my rounds to the other students and parents. I look forward to tomorrow night.” Maybe he’ll open up more at dinner.

“Yes. Tomorrow,” he says absently.

For the rest of the party, he doesn’t really engage, but observes English as she interacts and plays. There’s something completely wrong about all of this, and I want to help, but I can’t. Maybe tomorrow.

Nineteen

SHERIDAN

“I can’t believe you’re dumping the Halloween party for dinner.”

“Yes, you can. You would, too. Besides, that mummy costume was a disaster. By the end of the day, lengths of toilet paper trailed behind me making me look like I had dozens of ratty tails. It was awful, and I’ve never been made fun of so much.”

Michelle grabs my shoulder a little too hard.

“Hey. Careful.” I stumble a little.

“Oops. Sorry. I’ll be so glad when you can get rid of those things. They’re so annoying.”

I’m going to strangle her. “Really? And how would you know?”

“Okay, you got me there, but I want you to come to Oliver’s.” She’s using her whiny begging voice.

“And standing around on crutches in a costume that’s stupid looking, holding a drink, isn’t any fun. Trust me.”

She sticks out her tongue and finally agrees with me. “Well, at least you landed a hot date.”

“I did indeed. I only hope he talks.”

And now I stress about what to wear. Michelle reads my mind.

“Your black pants with that white sweater I love.”

“You think?”

“Uh-huh.” And she disappears into her room to get ready, I suppose.

Michelle leaves around six thirty, all decked out like Raggedy Ann. “Where did you get the costume?” I ask.

“Oliver. He’s dressing up as Andy.”

“No, you two aren’t doing that already?”

“He insisted.”

I wrinkle my nose at her like I just smelled something bad.

“Don’t,” she whines.

“Of everyone I know, you’re the last I suspected who would do that.”

Her expression collapses. “Do I look weird?”

“Like the biggest dork ever, but I still love you. Have fun.”

“Now I want to change into Elvira or something. And this yarn wig itches.”

Just for kicks and whatnots, I say, “Do you know who wore that thing before you? I hope they didn’t have lice.”

She rips it off her head and starts scratching like crazy. “Ewwww! That’s disgusting. What if they did?”

“I was only yanking your bra strap. Put the damn thing on, and get out of here.”

She turns puppy dog eyes on me and asks, “Really?”

“Jeez. Yes, really. Now go, or your Ollie-Andy will be wondering if you hooked up with SpongeBob.”

“You’re bad. Have fun.”

At seven on the nose, the bell rings, and Beck stands on the porch. He’s ... wow. He wears dark jeans and a black button-down shirt with the sleeves rolled up halfway. It’s a warm night, so he doesn’t have a jacket on. I grab my purse and hang it across my body, get my crutches, and open the door. He leans in and presses his lips to my cheek. Those crutches turn into my new best friends. I’m pretty damn sure if they weren’t holding me up, I’d be in a heap on the floor.

“You look very nice. Much better than in your mummy getup.” The corners of his beautiful mouth turn up.

Oh, does he smell good. Like he just came in from the beach. Would he think it was weird if I stuck my nose up to his neck and sniffed? Hell, yeah, he would. *Stop it, Sheridan.* He’s so perfect that I want to stand here and gawk at him. Or maybe touch him to make sure he’s real.

“You ready?”

“Uh-huh.” My vast vocabulary just took a hike out the back door. I follow him down to the car, and he patiently assists me. *Whoa, he must’ve taken a be-nice-to-Sheridan pill.*

“I thought we’d go to one of my favorite places. They serve all kinds of food, but their specialty is smoked meats—pork, beef, chicken. I hope you’re not a vegetarian.”

“Not at all. I eat meat like crazy. I just try to keep a check on the other stuff. Like we talked about before.”

“That’s right. I remember from when you came for dinner.” He laughs. “Except Halloween candy. Kisses.”

“Can’t pass up a kiss, can I?”

He gives me a pointed look. “You tell me.” Where did that come from? I feel my armpits grow sweaty.

His deep voice has me suddenly wishing for a kiss, and not the chocolate kind. He seems much more relaxed today, so I ask, “Did you and English have a nice day today?”

“We did. I took some shots downtown, and she went with me.”

“What exactly do you do?”

“I’m a photographer.”

“Yeah, I know that. She said you had a really large camera.”

He laughs. “She did, did she?”

“Yep.”

“I do all kinds of photography. Commercial photography, but also outdoor and nature, mostly scenic stuff. Travel magazine photos, outdoor magazines, also the kind of stuff you’d see in *Nat Geo*. I travel some, too.”

“Wow. How did you get into that?”

“Sheer luck. Photography was a hobby of mine, and while I was at Georgia Tech, there was an ad for a part-time job that I answered. After submitting some photos, it totally snowballed. I ended up dropping out of Georgia Tech and only getting an associate’s degree because of my daughter, but my business took off like a rocket, so it didn’t really matter. Now I’m sort of in demand, which is still hard to wrap my head around.”

“Do you ever photograph people?”

“Sometimes. You want me to shoot you?”

“Oh, God, no! I was just curious if you did anybody famous.”

We’re pulling into the parking lot by now, and he says, “I’d love to shoot you. English loves it, but she’s a ham. She’s got her poses down pat. She would have a ball if you came over and we did a shoot. I can already hear her telling you what to do. ‘Lean this way. Wet your lips. Turn your head. Drop your chin.’ It would be fun.”

We enter the restaurant, and the hostess leads us to our table, which turns out to be a booth near the back. After handing us our menus, she leaves. In no time flat, we’re served drinks and our appetizers arrive.

“The service here is fast.”

He grins. “I come here a lot with English. I think they know me.”

I’m sure they do. How could they not notice this tall, gorgeous specimen walking around with his adorable daughter?

“I see. So tell me, are things really okay with English? I’m a pretty perceptive person.”

The curve of his mouth morphs into a frown. “English is fine for now.”

“What does that mean?”

He scrapes his teeth over his lower lip as though he’s weighing his options.

“If it makes you feel any better, whatever you tell me, I promise not to share with anyone.”

He takes a bite of an appetizer and swallows. “It has to do with her birth mother.”

“Oh.” That shocks me, as it’s the last thing I expected.

“I was nineteen when English was born. She arrived on my doorstep in a box with custody papers and a letter. I didn’t know a thing about her until then. Now, after all these years, her mother wants to see her, but I have reservations.”

My silence expands for so long until he finally says, “You can close your mouth now, Sheridan.”

Shaking my head, I say, “Jeez. I’m sorry.”

“It’s fine. It’s not exactly your run-of-the-mill story. English doesn’t know the truth. She only knows her mom had to go away, and that’s it. I never had the heart to tell her she didn’t want that beautiful little girl.”

“Did she say why?” I ask, because I’m truly curious.

“She said she just couldn’t do it. Honestly, I didn’t remember much about that night. It was a drunken moment, and I’m not too proud of it, but damn, I wouldn’t trade English for anything in the world. The weird thing is, after we got her, my dad had one of his friends, who’s an attorney, run a background check on the mother, and she comes from a very well-to-do family in Macon. She was a serious party girl in college, drugs and alcohol, but that’s about all I can remember of her.”

“Maybe they kicked her out. Some families still believe in that reputation thing. It’s ridiculous, but who can say what

happened?”

“True, but I’m concerned now, and I’m running another check on her to see what the deal is.”

“That’s wise.” It would freak the hell out of me, too, if someone would want access to my kid after all this time.

“My attorney’s also advising me,” he says.

“If there’s anything I can do, let me know.”

“Thanks. English has no idea. I worry what will happen if she’d have to meet that woman.”

“You may be jumping to conclusions. But if the mother’s heart is in the right place, it may be a good thing.”

“I hope so, but for some reason, the vibes I’m feeling aren’t good ones.”

I touch his wrist. “That’s because you want to protect her from every possible harm. You’re her father.”

Our waiter shows up to deliver our food, and we start to eat. Then a thought strikes me. “Beck, was she threatening in any way? English’s mother?”

He sets his fork down. “I didn’t talk to her. She sent a letter, and everyone agreed it wasn’t exactly a sweet expression of *hey, I’d love a chance to see my child* kind of thing.”

“Ouch.”

“Yeah, she’s given me until Thanksgiving to prepare English, and then if I don’t let her see her, she says she’ll take legal action. My attorney advised me not to respond, which is what I’ve done. With everything we’re uncovering, he thinks she’s in it for the money.”

What if the woman made a huge mistake, and it took her a while to come to terms with it? I take the gentle approach on this. “This may not be easy to hear and not what you want to hear, but as a woman, I can’t imagine carrying a child for all that time and easily giving her up. It must’ve nearly killed her.

So I'm wondering if maybe, just maybe, she's grown up and realized what she's done, and now wants to make reparations."

He glares at me as his expression tightens. "So, at first, that's what my attorney wanted to think. I, on the other hand, wanted to fight her tooth and nail. But after a lot of investigating, we've discovered things that freak me out. There is a history of drug rehab, and I'm all about recovery, but what if she wants money for more drugs? She did them in college, and it was bad enough to land her in rehab. I'm happy that she was wise enough to seek help. But the question nags at me—what if she's using again? That's what we're all concerned about. I don't want my child exposed to that type of environment."

"If that's the case, then wouldn't it be hard for her to get custody?"

"Not necessarily. The courts would have to prove she was using again, and if we don't have concrete evidence of that, we're screwed."

My inquisitive nature wants to probe further, but I refrain. Still, I can't help feeling a bit sympathetic toward the mother. Putting myself in her shoes, what if that had happened to me? My parents would never have kicked me out, but I was alone in college, barely able to take care of myself.

"When I was in college, I was super poor. Like eating one or two at the most meals a day. If I had become pregnant, I don't know what I would've done."

His eyes narrow, and his voice verges on a snarl. "Sheridan, I didn't tell you this for you to champion English's mother. I told you so you could understand the predicament I'm in. The biological mother was not in the same position as you obviously were. She was in a sorority, went to a prestigious university, and came from a wealthy family. Money was not the issue. Perhaps her family didn't want their name sullied with an unwed mother, or a pregnancy without the father around, but I can't answer to that. Whatever the case, my daughter ended up on my doorstep six years ago, and I've

heard nothing from that woman in all those years. Until now. And I find that odd.”

“Sorry. I shouldn’t have said that. It wasn’t my place.”

He leans back, rubs his eyes, and sighs. “The thought of English going somewhere, and me not knowing how she’s being treated just—”

“I totally get it.” That would put me in a tailspin, too. And English isn’t even my daughter, so I can’t begin to imagine how he feels.

All of a sudden, he sits up and says abruptly, “I probably shouldn’t have told you all of this.” His hand reaches for his drink, and he takes a long swallow.

“Sometimes it helps to talk to an outsider.”

In the dim lighting, his eyes have lost their greenish tint. They’ve become dark as the color of midnight as he drills me with their fierceness. It’s as though he’s assessing me. Why does he have to be so easy on the eyes?

I turn my focus back to my plate of food and take another bite. When I raise my head, he still stares at me.

“What are you looking at?”

“You.”

“I know that. But why?” Do I have a hunk of food wedged between my teeth? I do a check with my tongue and don’t feel anything, yet his gaze is still riveted on me.

For a few more seconds, our eyes are pinned on each other’s, but then he breaks the connection to finish eating. On the way home from the restaurant, he tells me he’s leaving on Monday for Northern Canada. He’ll be gone a week on a polar bear photo shoot.

“What? Polar bears?”

“Yes.”

If I could wrap my hands around his neck and choke him, I would. This is huge, and all he does is say *yes*.

“Can you at least give me more information?”

“Like what?”

“What does one do when they photograph polar bears? Is it dangerous? Do you ever get frightened? Is this your first time? Have you ever been in any situations where you actually feared for your life? Isn't it going to be cold as shit up there? What will you wear? How will you get there?”

“Do you actually expect me to answer all of those?” he asks sourly.

“Hell yes.”

“I lie in the snow, in a safe, off the beaten path, and wait. It can be dangerous, but I'm far enough away because I have a zoom lens. It's not my first time. I have a guide who drives me. I've never had to worry about being chased before. We go in, set up and wait, and the guide knows exactly when they'll be coming around because he's studied their movements for weeks, maybe even months. And, yes, it's freezing. I'll be close to the Arctic Circle, but I have the right gear. I fly into a small town, and the guide will pick me up.”

“That's so cool.”

My enthusiastic bubble bursts when he says flatly, “It's my job. It gets old real fast.”

I chew my upper lip for a second, then say, “Yeah, but you can't deny that it beats teaching.”

“I'd rather teach my kid any day than fly off to photograph polar bears.”

“You have a point, but someday maybe you can teach her photography, and she can go with you.”

We pull in front of my house, and he jumps out to help me.

“I had a nice time,” I say as I reach for my crutches.

“Right. Up until the time I turned into the grump. Sorry I ruined the evening,” he says flatly. He takes my elbow and assists me to the door.

“It’s fine, and you didn’t ruin it. You have a lot on your mind, and that’s understandable.”

“Yeah, I hope it all works out the right way.” He leans in to kiss my cheek and strolls away.

“Beck?”

He turns back from the steps.

“Have a safe trip.”

One nod later and he’s in the car.

Twenty

SHERIDAN

It's Wednesday afternoon and English is a bit subdued, but I figure it's because Beck is out of town. Deciding to check just to make sure, I ask, "Hey, kiddo, everything good with you?"

"I'm not under the rainbow this week, Miss Monroe. Daddy went to see the polar bears and didn't take me with him."

She's dressed in black and pink horizontal striped leggings and an orange and white-checkered dress. I want to hug and tickle some laughs into her she's so damn cute.

"Polar bears, huh? Don't they live where it's super cold?"

"Yeah, they have to have lots of snow because their fur is white and thick."

"Don't you think it would be awfully cold up there?" I ask.

She pinches her bottom lip as she thinks. "Probably if there's snow."

"It might be so cold you'd get popsicle toes."

"Huh?"

I laugh. "You know, your toes would turn into popsicles because they'd freeze."

"What flavor would they be?" And she laughs, too. "But I'd wear extra socks and boots. Like when Daddy took me skiing."

She has an answer for everything. "Well, maybe one day when you're older, your daddy will take you with him."

"But I wanna go now." Her lower lip sticks out.

“Right, but your daddy wants you to go to school and become real smart.”

“But he says I’m already smart.”

I need to have a talk with him about that. “Yes, but there are lots of things you need to learn so when you’re a grown-up, you’ll know everything that grown-ups do.”

“So I’m not an idiot? Daddy calls people that a lot when he drives.”

“Kind of, but a little different.” Oh, brother, do I need to have a talk with him.

The bell rings for playtime, and all the kids put on their jackets to go to the playground. I gather my things together, quickly get my desk organized, and join the kids on the playground. Another teacher is out there with her class, along with a few other playground monitors, and we are chatting when I happen to notice English standing by the fence talking to a woman.

I point over to the fence and ask the other teacher with me, “Is it weird for that woman to be talking to English over there?”

She follows the direction of my hand and says, “Oh, gosh, yes. I’ve never seen anything like that before.”

“What should we do?”

Before we do anything, English turns away and looks frantically around until she sees me, then runs full steam ahead into me, wrapping her arms around my hips. She cries hysterically, which is out of character for her. It’s awkward, because I can’t move without the crutches and I’d like to get her inside, but she won’t loosen her grip enough so I can move. My only alternative is to let the crutches go for this one time, so I hand them off to the other teacher who raises her brows at me. But I shake my head and motion to the doors. She follows, and we head inside to Susan’s office.

“What happened?” Susan asks.

I take a seat, situating English on my lap so I can get off my foot, but now her arms circle my neck and she won't release her grip. I explain to Susan the event that took place.

When I'm finished, I ask English, "Honey, can you please tell us what happened so we can help you?"

"You won't let her take me, will you?" her muffled voice comes from against my chest.

"Who? The lady you were talking to?" I ask.

English bobs her head so hard and fast, her ringlets fly up and down and cover my face. I have to push them out of the way to see.

"No one is taking you anywhere."

I can feel some of the tension leaving her small body. "She said she was going to take me from Daddy and that she was my mommy. I told her my mommy went away when I was born, and it wasn't her. She said it was, and she was back. I was going to live with her 'cuz that's where I should be. I don't want to live with her. I want to live with Daddy. I told her that, and she said it didn't matter what I wanted. I was gonna live with her."

Susan and I share a look, and then I ask, "English, did she say anything else?"

"No, 'cuz I ran away. She scared me."

"Don't be scared, honey. She can't take you from here, but we're going to let Banana know just to be safe, okay?"

"But call Daddy, too."

"Okay, I'll call your daddy after Banana."

Susan eyes me curiously, I imagine wondering who Banana is. "Banana is her grandmother."

"Oh." Then she nods. "I want to check something, too." She walks out of the office and comes back a few minutes later. "English, I want you to stay with Miss Sanders for a little bit. Can you do that?"

English nods. Miss Sanders is the assistant principal. English looks at me, and I believe it's for approval.

"It's okay, sweets. I'll be right in here if you need me."

She scoots off my lap, and Susan walks her to the next office where Linda Sanders is. When Susan comes back, she says, "I've called Anna Bridges, but you should know a woman came to the school earlier and wanted access to English, claiming she was the child's mother. She had no documentation or custody papers, so obviously she was refused."

"Oh, no. It must've been her. English's biological mother. She's trying to get to English this way. Do we need to call the police?"

"That may be our next step, but let's see what Mrs. Bridges says."

When Anna arrives, we decide Beck needs to know. "He'll fly home you know," I say.

"Yes, he will. And he's going to be loaded for bear, and not the polar kind. I'll call his attorney and text him. We never thought she'd try to make contact. Sheridan, did you see her?"

"Only from a distance. Long, dark, curly hair was all I got."

Susan pipes in, "Our receptionist and the camera at the front desk can probably provide you with a true description if you need one."

"Yes, can we look at that?" Anna asks.

We go and pull up the video of the school lobby and front desk, and sure enough, there she is. About my size, but long, dark, super curly hair, like English's. She looks harmless enough, but what kind of person would say those things to a child? A desperate one, obviously.

Out of curiosity, I throw out, "I wonder if she was on drugs. This just isn't normal behavior for someone."

“That’s what we’ve suspected, and that’s why all the interest in English now. Because of the money for drugs,” Anna says.

“Beck told me as much.” Now my concern is for English. The thought of her with that woman makes me ill.

“We’re doing all we can to keep her away.” Anna looks sick, which is exactly how I feel.

Anna’s phone buzzes. “It’s Beck calling.” I’m able to hear the conversation between them, and Beck is worried about English’s safety. He’s ready to jump on the next plane or charter one if necessary.

“She’s perfectly safe. Let’s wait to hear back from John. I’ll text you what he says. Stay calm, Beck.” She hangs up and glances at me. Her grimace explains it all.

When the attorney calls, he says we need to get the police involved. If anything were to happen, it would already be on record. Anna texts Beck, and he decides to fly home. His shoot is complete enough that he’ll be fine with the pictures he’s already taken. Now it’s a matter of getting on a flight.

I check the clock and realize I have to get back to my students. Anna knows where to reach me if need be, and I head back to my classroom.

When all the students are assembled, they want to know what happened to English. I tell them a stranger approached her on the playground and to remember the stranger-danger lesson. For the remainder of the afternoon, my mind is on that sweet child and her fears of being taken away from her daddy. I’m also worried that somehow the courts, in their sometimes skewed view that children should always be with their mothers, will make a wrong decision in this case and grant custody to that woman. If that happens, I fear for English having to stay with her. After today’s event, I’m now in agreement with Beck. Something’s not right with her. Who does what she did today and says things like that to her child? Not a mother who truly cares.

The next week at school, I watch English's personality diminish. I haven't heard from Beck either, and it worries me that something has gone wrong. I text him, asking to meet about her. This time my phone immediately rings.

"Can you come over?" he asks.

My heart drops. "Is everything okay?"

He groans. "If you can call it that."

He sounds awful, depressed, and listless. "I'll come after I get everything organized for my day tomorrow. Is that okay?"

"Fine. Plan on eating with us." It's not an invitation. It's a demand.

"Okay."

"English talks about you incessantly."

"I'm sorry."

"No, that's a good thing. You put her under the rainbow."

"Jeez. I suppose that is a good thing then." After we end our call, I sit and think about that little girl who's stolen my heart. I don't know how parents who face adversity with their kids handle it. This child isn't even mine, and my heart is getting jabbed by tiny fists every time I think of her being hurt. I'm sure Beck is tearing his hair out by now. And then to risk having her torn away from him is an unbearable pain to even fathom.

By the time I get to his house, my anxiety level is killing me. He opens the door, and his messy hair and unshaven face tell me enough. He leads me through the house, and his parents are here. I've never met his father, so he introduces us. English doesn't run up to me like she usually does.

"Hi, Miss Monroe." Her sad voice causes my heart to fall to my feet.

"Hey, sweet cakes. What's cooking?"

"Pizza. Daddy's ordering it."

That gets a laugh out of everyone because she didn't quite get my question. When I explain it to her, she laughs, too. Then Anna says, "Munchkin, how about we go to your room for a minute."

"Why?"

"So Daddy and Miss Monroe can talk."

"Okay." She gives us a big grin. What was that all about?

When they're gone, Beck asks, "So?"

"She's been very withdrawn in school. Her bubbly self has vanished."

Beck sighs. "I figured that's what you wanted. She's afraid to sleep alone. If she does, she wakes up with a bad nightmare and ends up in my bed."

Touching his arm, I say, "The counselor at school is great. We should get English in to talk with her. I think it would help with her fears of losing you."

Mark, Beck's father, adds, "I think that's an excellent idea. And now, especially if the worst happens."

"What does that mean?" I ask.

The two men share a pained look. Then Beck says, "My attorney told us today there's a possibility the mother could get visitation rights."

It feels like Beck just sucker punched me. All the air gushes out of me, and I stumble around, silently, like a street corner mime, until a red-hot fury ignites inside of me, and then I can't shut up.

"That's ... that's insane! That woman came to the playground and said all kinds of horrible things to English and scared the shit out of her, and now you're saying that the courts may deem it safe for her to go with that crazy ass bitch?"

Beck and Mark stare at me, Beck wide-eyed and Mark with his mouth gaping like a fish. When I realize what I just said, I

clamp my hand over my face and mutter, “Sorry,” only it’s unintelligible.

Mark says to Beck, “I really love her spirit,” and Beck throws his head back and barks out a laugh.

Pressing the backs of my fingers to my cheeks, I say, “I didn’t realize what I said. I let my angry tongue get the best of me.”

“Yeah, she has quite a potty mouth, Dad.”

I can’t believe Beck threw me under the bus like that, so I give him the stink eye. Mark laughs and says, “It’s not like I haven’t heard any of it before.”

“But you only just met me, and I’m your granddaughter’s teacher for Pete’s sake.”

“Yeah, I was going to comment about the educational system here.” He’s so straight-faced for a second I believe he’s serious, but then he chuckles and I find he’s nothing but a big tease.

“So, can I bring you two back to the subject at heart here? English?” I ask.

Beck’s face transforms into that of a distressed parent once more. “Anything she needs. Whatever you think best. I know how much you care for her, so if you think the counselor will help, then I’m all in.”

“I think that’s a good call.”

“Beck, have you talked to her about—” Mark begins.

“Not now, Dad.”

“But, son, you heard John. You’re the one who—”

Beck’s tone took on a warning edge. “Dad. Not now. Later.”

“Do you two want me to go and hang out with the girls?” I ask.

A quick *no* from Beck resolves that question. It's more than a little uncomfortable being in the middle of this cryptic conversation, so I stand there feeling awkward as hell.

"Sheridan, what do you like on your pizza? I'm going to order from the Pizza Palacio," Beck says.

"Everything. Not picky here."

He places the order, then the silence expands until it nearly swallows the room. Maybe I can sneak out the back door, and no one will notice.

"So, Sheridan, are you from Atlanta?" Mark asks.

"No, sir, I'm from south Georgia. A small town called Morganville."

He nods as though he's familiar with it.

"Have you been?" I ask.

"No, but I imagine it's a wonderful place," he says.

"It was." I have no idea why I said that. I never talk about my hometown because it's not home anymore.

"And you ended up here after college, I take it?" he asks.

"Yes, sir, this is my first teaching position. I graduated from UGA in the spring, so this is my debut year."

"My granddaughter is lucky to have such a caring teacher as yourself. She talks about you all the time."

I find myself blushing not only from his compliment, but Beck's eyes haven't left me for a second.

"Then I'm in stellar company because she talks about her Banana and Geepa all the time, too."

"She's something, isn't she?" Mark asks.

"She sure is," I agree.

As if on cue, a headful of bouncing curls comes streaking through the kitchen, and she latches on to my hips.

“Miss Monroe, are you staying overnight tonight? You can sleep with me in my bed, and then I won’t have to sleep with Daddy.” Her bright eyes plead with me, and I want to pull her onto my lap and hug her forever. How has this little mite wiggled her way into my heart so quickly?

“I’m afraid not. I have to go home because it’s a school night.”

“Can you come and have a spend the night party with me on Friday then?”

“English, don’t you think Miss Monroe is a bit too old to have a spend the night party with you?” I’m saved from answering her when Anna asks the question.

“No, Banana, she’s not too old. I have them with Daddy all the time, and she’s as old as Daddy is.”

I glance at Beck, and he’s smirking at me. I flash him a *help me out here* look, but he shakes his head, letting me know I’m on my own. He must love this.

Mark comes to my rescue when he asks, “So, Sheridan, are you headed home for Thanksgiving?”

Jeez. Why did he have to bring *that* up?

“No, sir, I’ll be staying here.” I didn’t add alone. They didn’t need to hear about my woes. They have enough of their own.

Instead of moving away from that topic, he digs in further. “Oh? Why aren’t you traveling home?”

“Um, actually, this is my home now.”

His mouth opens, then snaps shuts. He doesn’t ask any more questions, but it would take a dumbass not to be aware that he totally wanted to. I put him out of his misery.

“My mother passed away when I was fourteen, and my father followed when I was eighteen.” Bam. End of story.

“Oh, Sheridan, that’s terrible.” Anna’s arm circles my shoulders. “How tragic for you.” I do not want to be the center

of attention on this subject. At all. It still gouges out my guts to think about it.

But English doesn't understand, sweet child that she is. "What does that mean to pass away?"

Beck picks her up and sets her on the island at which I'm seated. "It means they went up to heaven."

"Like Boonie did?" she asks.

"Just like Boonie," Beck says.

"Do you think they're petting Boonie and throwing the ball for him?"

"I think they are," Beck answers. I figure that Boonie must've been a dog.

"Daddy, you said we were gonna get another Boonie. When can we?"

"You have to ask Banana and Geepa because they have to take care of him when I'm out of town."

Thank God for Boonie because now the attention has moved to getting a dog.

"Maybe Miss Monroe can take care of him, too."

Whoa! Now the attention is back on me, but it's dog related. "Yeah, well, I don't know a whole lot about puppies. The only dog we ever had was already a grown-up when we got him."

English wrinkles up her nose and says, "I think she needs a new Boonie, Daddy. When you're gone, she can come over and sleep in your bed and take care of him."

Double whoa!

The older adults snicker, and Geepa, I mean Mark, says, "I think that sounds like a good idea."

Anna elbows him and says, "Mark."

Beck's face flushes to a pale pink, and I can't begin to imagine what color mine is. Maroon?

But English doesn't stop. "Daddy's bed is real big. There's enough room for all of us. Come on. I'll show you."

After climbing off the island, she grabs my hand and starts to pull me.

"English, let Miss Monroe rest a bit," Beck says.

"Daddy, she can rest on your bed. Maybe we can all watch a movie."

Mark dips his head as he looks at his son. There's nothing I can do but follow her. When we get to Beck's room, I'm surprised at how organized everything is. Like the rest of the house, it's clean lines and comfort. An upholstered headboard with expensive looking bed linens covers his king-sized bed. Shutters showcase his large windows, and one wall is lined with built-ins. There is a hall that I assume leads to a bathroom or a closet. I don't know, and I don't explore, though I would love to. A large flat screen sits among the built-ins, and I can envision him and English watching movies here at night. It all seems so perfect.

She takes a running jump onto the bed and starts to trampoline her way around the huge thing. It makes me laugh as I remember getting scolded as a kid for doing the exact same thing.

"Too bad your leg is broke, Miss Monroe, or you could jump with me."

The thought makes me giggle.

Then she grabs a remote and says, "Watch this." She pushes a button, and the top part of the mattress moves up to a sitting position. "Isn't this fun? Daddy works on his computer in bed a lot while I watch movies."

"I see you're giving my secrets away." A deep voice comes from the doorway. Beck stands there, leaning on the doorframe, observing us.

"Daddy, play roll 'em so Miss Monroe can watch."

"I don't think—"

I interrupt him, saying, "I'd love to see it." It's hard to contain my laugh.

He takes a flying leap and lands, face down, on the bed. Then he rolls one way, and English jumps over him, then he rolls the other way, and she leaps again. They keep doing this back and forth thing, as English gurgles with laughs the entire time. Seeing these two together like this breaks my heart to think of her being taken away from him. It would crush them both.

Anna comes in and breaks up the party to tell us our pizza has arrived.

English grabs my hand, even though it's on my crutch, and says, "When you get your broke leg fixed, you'll have to play roll 'em with us."

"I'd love to play roll 'em with you, English." And I realize I would.

Twenty-One

BECK

“Not another word, Dad.”

“Son, I know you think I’m pestering you, but—”

“That’s because you are!” If they don’t get off my back about this, I’m going to have a meltdown. “Look, I don’t even know how to act around her when we’re alone. She loves English. But me, I’m positive she thinks I suck.”

“Send her flowers.”

“Flowers? That’d be like putting a circle Band-Aid on a severed artery. Just leave it alone.”

“Beck.” His tone stops me in my tracks. Dad has a long fuse, but when I hear his tone, I know he means business. “You’re running out of time. I love that little girl out there,” he jabs his fist toward the backyard where English is playing, “and you and your damned hard head are risking losing her.”

“I’m not. It’s more than—”

“I don’t want to hear any more of your bullshit.” He storms out. That takes me back a step, too. While I swear all the time, ever since English arrived, I rarely hear Dad utter a bad word. Now I have to smooth things over, but I just don’t know how I can possibly do what they want.

Twenty-Two

SHERIDAN

The week before Thanksgiving, I'm free of my crutches. The orthopedist still says I need to wear the boot until Thanksgiving, and then I should be healed sufficiently to go without it. Hallelujah!

Beck calls and invites me to dinner again. We go to a different restaurant this time, a quaint one that he's never tried. He orders a bottle of wine, and for whatever reason, he appears nervous. He messes around with everything on the table.

"What's my favorite student up to tonight?"

"She's with my parents. She loves to go there. They spoil her, of course."

"It would be hard not to."

He drinks his wine fairly fast, finishing his glass before I've barely made a dent in mine. Our food is ordered, and he makes small talk. But something is up, and I can't put my finger on it.

I assume everything's going well with English and the court ordeal because he hasn't mentioned it since the pizza night. She's been acting much better at school and has seen the counselor a few times, so I figure everything is on track in a good way. But his fidgety actions make me think I should ask.

As I'm getting ready to formulate a question, he blurts out, "I need you to marry me."

I'm caught in suspended animation as the fork floats in midair, halfway to my mouth, and instantly forgotten. The cogwheels in my brain shift, and things fall into place. *Is he*

crazy? “Excuse me. Did you just tell me you need me to marry you?”

A fringe of dark golden lashes slowly fans over the rim of his cheekbone while he blinks. His chest expands as he inhales before I clearly hear him say, “I did.”

“And you’re serious?” Because he sounds like he just Ubered it to Looneyville.

“I am.” His tongue rubs a spot on his lower lip as he contemplates what to say. “It’s complicated.”

“Yeah, marriage usually is.”

He leans his elbows onto the table and steeples his fingers, pressing them to his lips. Taciturn Beck has returned.

“I’m gonna need a little more than this, Beck.”

“I’d imagine so. This has to do with English. She adores you. So much that you’re all she talks about. Well, that and getting another Boonie. And my attorney is convinced if I were married, it would look better in court for me as far as the custody battle goes.” His hangdog look has guilt written all over it.

Fuck me hard and fast. This is all wrapped around that little nugget that has opened up my heart and poured a bucket of love in it. What the hell am I to do?

“Marriage is a pretty big deal. I always thought it was supposed to involve love.”

“It does. You love English, don’t you? I can see it in your eyes when you look at her,” he says.

“But what about us? Aren’t two people supposed to be in love when they marry?”

“Look, I know this is asking way above and beyond what anyone should ever ask of another. But I am so afraid, not for me. If English gets taken away from me, I’m an adult. I’ll survive. But what will it do to her? She’s a little kid who knows nothing about how to handle this stuff. It could damage

her forever. And that sweet child has so much love in her it would kill me more than anything to watch the light in her eyes get extinguished. I'm not asking for myself. I'm asking for her. I'll do anything for you. Anything at all. You'd live with me, and you wouldn't have to pay rent. I'll do whatever it is you want, give you what you need. You can have everything I own as long as English is provided for. My family will accept you with open arms. You already know English will. And if you do this for her, I'll be indebted to you forever."

My skepticism about his sincerity in this is gone, but I still think he's a nut. "You're serious about this, aren't you?"

"Dead serious."

"I can't do this. Marriage is all about commitment and a relationship between two people."

He scoots forward in his seat as though he's actually eager for this conversation. "Exactly. Which is why you should do it. I'll be totally committed to you and English. I already am with her, and I enjoy talking with you."

Is he kidding? He barely speaks. This is the most talkative I've ever heard him. So I bring that up.

His voice turns a little sharp when he answers, "I've had too much going on. I think a lot when I'm under pressure."

Grabbing a chunk of my hair, I pull it through my hand. Then I pinch my lip as I think.

"Stop doing that," he says in a harsh tone.

"What?" I don't know what he's referring to.

"Playing with your mouth."

Sitting up straighter, I comment, "That's a strange thing to say."

"You wouldn't think so if you were me."

"What's that supposed to mean?" I ask, suddenly put out with him. "See, this is another example of why you infuriate me."

“That’s ridiculous.”

“No, it isn’t. And what if this *marriage* doesn’t work? I mean, between us. What if we end up hating each other? Like wickedly hate each other, considering you’re not my favorite person as it is.”

“I’ve thought of that, too. I would ask that you stay married to me until English is at least twelve.”

“Twelve! That’s a long time!”

His hand scrapes through his hair. “The legal age this state allows the child to decide which parent she chooses to live with is fourteen, but they begin to consider what the child wants at the age of twelve. That’s not to say her bio-mom wouldn’t put up a fight, but English would be older and more capable then, too. It’s six years. I know I’m asking a lot, but I’ll beg if I have to.”

My mind spins so hard with this, thinking it’s absurdly out of the question, so I do the next best thing. I start with my objections.

Holding out my hand, I start with my index finger. “You already know I don’t even like you.”

“Yes, you do. You just don’t want to admit it.”

Damn, he’s cocky. I’m sexually attracted to him. So much that I’d crawl across this table and bite his lip if I could. But never in a million years will I let that cat out of the bag. Using my second and third fingers, I say, “You’re wrong, but I do love your daughter. However, I have scruples. And a lease.”

A half-smile lifts the corner of his mouth. The same one I’d love to kiss. “I’ll pay your rent for you. Your roommate will be able to stay there for however long she wants, even if it’s the entire six years.”

I fold my arms over my chest, and I can almost hear my heart pounding against my ribcage. I wonder if he can, too. “I can’t live with you if you don’t talk to me.”

“What do you mean?” He sounds truly puzzled.

“Sometimes you don’t say anything, or when you do, it’s one or two words. I need more than that.”

He unsteeples his fingers and rubs his chin. “I’ve been accused of withdrawing when I’m stressed. You’ll have to work with me a little because I’ve been on my own, with only English for a while. And I’ve been living under a lot of stress lately.”

In a tiny voice, I add, “And don’t snap.”

“I snap?”

“Yes, you were rude to me at the parent-teacher conference.”

He blows out air. “Okay, I had a long flight home, it was delayed, I lost my luggage, I was late, and then you threw a bunch of crap at me about body parts, which I thought was inane.”

“Fine. But say it nicely, not disrespectfully. Would you speak to your daughter that way?”

“Excellent point.”

I thrum my fingers on the table. “I have to think about this. I mean, we haven’t even kissed, and we’re discussing marriage. What if I don’t like the way you—” my eyes bulge at the thought of what I was going to say.

A cocky grin appears. Damn him. Why does he have to be so confident? “Like the way I what?” he asks. He knows damn well what I was referring to.

“Never mind.”

“No, I want to know.”

I squiggle around in my seat.

“Does it have anything to do with *fucking hard and fast*?” he asks, emphasizing the last words and still smiling smugly.

My jaw nearly slams on the table.

“Sheridan, I don’t think you have anything to worry about in that regard.”

My wine glass beckons, so I grab it and chug down the contents.

“Care for some more?” he asks as he waggles his brows.

I can’t answer him, so he pours me a glass anyway. The dog. Then he leans forward and draws a circle on the top of my hand. That circle has a direct path to my girly bits, and it’s not fair at all because I honestly don’t like the man.

“You have to know I like you, and that I’m attracted to you.” *What?* “I’ve made no secret of it. I wouldn’t be hanging around you or spending time with you otherwise. Even if English liked you, I would’ve steered things in a different direction, made excuses to her, or whatever. But I didn’t. Because I like you. I happen to think you’re gorgeous. And sexy. And funny. And I want to kiss you and do other things, but I walk the straight and narrow because I try to be the best dad I can and set a good example. So there you have it.”

“You think I’m gorgeous and sexy? Why would you think that?” The question popped out before I could stop it.

His expression immediately changes into one of exasperation. “Why wouldn’t I?”

“Because. Guys like you don’t go for girls like me.”

“*Guys like me?* What’s that supposed to mean?” He not only is surprised, but sounds borderline insulted by my statement.

“Look at me.”

“That’s what I’m doing.”

“No, I mean, haven’t you seen me? And you ... you’re all, well, you could have any woman you wanted.”

“First, you act as though I’m blind. Second, I like what I see. And third, I want what’s right here.”

“That doesn’t make sense.”

“Sheridan, I’m a photographer. I have a very good eye.”

“You may, but you haven’t seen me naked.” Then I clamp my hand over my mouth. Why the hell do I always say shit like this? I’m forever putting my foot in my mouth.

“Is that an offer?” he asks with an arched brow.

“What would your guy friends say about me?”

He lets out a derisive laugh. “Guy friends? I’m a twenty-five-year-old single dad. I was nineteen when English pretty much fell into my life. All my guy friends were frat rats who were more interested in fucking a different girl every weekend and getting as drunk as possible before they did it. Do you think they were interested in me with an infant? My guy friends dropped me like I had the fucking plague. The closest thing I have to guy friends is my dad. Parents with kids English’s age are usually older than me, married with a family, and don’t want to hang out with a young single dad. So my friends are nonexistent.”

Our fingers are touching, and his explanation suddenly makes him more appealing to me. I want this man. In my bed. I want to find out if we’re sexually compatible. But I’m pretty damn sure he’d be disappointed. On the other hand, what do I have to lose? Okay, rejection is pretty hard to take, but it sounds as though he’s sort of into me. Or at least he’s putting on a good show. At least he’s honest about what he wants from me, and it’s all out in the open.

“Is English coming home tonight?”

“No,” he says, smiling. “Wanna test out my big bed and play roll ’em?”

I start laughing so hard I can’t stop. “I can’t.”

“Why not?”

“I have this damn boot.”

“I have an idea,” he says with a twinkle in his eye.

“What’s that?”

“You can do the rolling, and I’ll do the jumping.”

With the most serious face I can manage, I ask, “Didn’t your mom ever teach you?”

“Teach me what?”

“Not to jump on the bed.”

His eyes narrow, and he says, “Yeah, but it’s my bed, and I can do whatever I want in it.”

“I have to sleep on it.”

“We can do that, too, if you want.”

I laugh. “Not your bed. I have to sleep on the whole marriage thing. This is a lot to take in. And as much as I’d like to play roll ’em with you, I think I need to wait until this boot is a part of my past.”

With half-hooded eyes, he says, “Chicken.”

He may be right. What if we end up in the sack and I want him way more than he wants me? Or what if he thinks I’m a huge zero? And that my thighs look like they belong on an elephant instead of a human?

“Why don’t we go back to my place and watch a movie or something? I have another bottle of wine there, and we can talk about this some more.”

I shake my head. “I have a better idea. Why don’t you come to my place instead?” He knows very little about me, and if he truly wants to do this, he needs to find out more about who I am.

“Okay, let’s go.”

Michelle is out with Oliver, as usual, so we have the place to ourselves. I offer him a drink and let him choose between some kind of whiskey, vodka, or white wine. We both choose vodka.

“Cheers. Here’s to a long and happy life together,” he says.

“A bit optimistic, huh?”

He lifts a shoulder and then walks around the living room picking up a framed photo of Michelle and me, one that dates back to our freshman year in college.

“Did you love it?” he asks, examining the picture.

“Love it’?” His question confuses me.

“College?”

“I think Michelle loved it far more than I did. I was way too busy to enjoy it like most of my friends did.”

He sets the picture down and picks up another. “You two are close, yeah?”

“Yeah.” I smile as I reply. “Michelle and I have known each other since elementary school, but became close in junior high. Then we were roommates in college, and well, here we are.”

“So, why did you work so much?”

“I needed the money.” This is generally a taboo subject that I run and bury my head from. Telling him the finer details of my life isn’t something I have any intention of doing tonight. He knows a little, but not the gritty part, and for now, I plan to keep it this way.

He gives me a *no shit* look and doesn’t budge.

For a brief moment, we appear to be in a standoff.

“Sheridan, don’t you think it would be best if we shared things about each other?”

“Yes, I do, but there are some things I can’t let go of just yet.”

He startles me when he sets the picture down and starts to move again. Only this time he stops right in front of me. Large hands wrap around my upper arms, and he leans down, whispering close to my ear, “Sometimes the past can do things to you that aren’t necessarily good. Letting go may be the best thing you ever do.”

“And sometimes letting go will only cause me to lose what’s most important to me.”

“If it’s that important, it should be worth sharing.”

His irises darken— more green than blue now—a deep shade that reminds me of the forest. I see fine striations of navy in their depths, and their beauty traps me. He blinks, once, twice, waiting, I imagine for me to say something. But I’m not sure what to say. What I have secreted away in my heart should be worth sharing, but it isn’t. It’s painful and not something I wish to discuss.

Then his expression alters and takes on a pained appearance. “Do you not trust me?”

“Trust doesn’t have anything to do with it.” And it doesn’t. Baring my soul to this man about something that I have great difficulty thinking of has nothing to do with trusting him.

“I don’t understand. If you won’t tell me, it must be about trust. But I swear to you, I am probably one of the most honorable and faithful people you’ll ever meet. I won’t break your trust. I promise.”

“It’s not about that,” I insist.

“Then what is it?”

I swear he’s going to wear me down if he doesn’t stop. “It’s about something that’s too painful to discuss. That’s it.”

His eyes continue to bear down on me until he does an exaggerated nod, and that’s it. End of questions. A broad hand wraps around his glass, and he drains it in one swallow as he finds a seat on the couch. He reminds me of a graceful animal as he stretches his long legs and then crosses them at the ankles. I wish he weren’t so damned attractive. He’s a magnet, and it’s not easy to disengage myself from the view.

“Do you have any ice cream?” he asks.

The question pulls me into the present. “Um, I can check.”

When I open the freezer, it's bereft of any of the frozen concoction, and it's weird because I find that I'm disappointed.

"Sorry. No ice cream."

"Let's go get some."

"Now?" I ask.

"Yeah, why not? I take English to get ice cream all the time."

"But we've been drinking."

"How many have you had?"

"I had one glass of wine at dinner and then this. I never drank the second one." I hold up my glass, which I've barely touched.

He flashes me a crooked grin. "Good. That's only one drink. You can drive my car. That is, if you're comfortable driving."

"You mean because I only had one glass of wine?"

"That's exactly what I mean."

"I'm fine. I'm more worried about driving your car."

"Why?"

I rub my palms on my thighs. "Because it's an expensive car. My car is ten years old. If I wreck your car, I couldn't pay to have it fixed."

"Jesus, Sheridan, that's what I have insurance for. Stop worrying about that. Let's go get some ice cream. I'm in the mood for it."

Bam. There isn't any *how about you, Sheridan? Are you?* It's a no-nonsense approach to what he wants. Maybe that's the manly side of him taking over. I don't know. Not having much to go on, since I've never had any solid relationships to base my opinion on, maybe I need to ask.

"Don't I get a vote in this?"

His expression is priceless. His face morphs into a mask of utter shock. “Why in the world wouldn’t you want ice cream?”

“Maybe because I’m lactose intolerant?”

“That’s heresy! Can’t you take those little pills before you eat?”

My head swivels as I say, “Nope, they don’t do a thing for me.”

His forehead crinkles with lines as he responds, “I couldn’t imagine life without the benefits of ice cream. It would be like a day without air.”

I’ve pulled his leg long enough, so I give in. “Okay, I’m teasing. I’m not lactose intolerant.”

Those full dusky pink lips form a perfect circle as he stares. “Why would you say that?”

“Because you made a unilateral decision without asking me.”

“Jeez, Sheridan, it was only ice cream,” he huffs.

“I know, but what if I didn’t like it or something. I kinda felt like you were steamrolling me.”

He tilts his head and smirks. Holding out his hand, he asks, “Hey, Sheridan, how about let’s go and get some ice cream?”

“That’s sounds like a great idea.”

We climb into his car, and on the way he wants to know my favorite flavor.

“I don’t have one.”

“You don’t?”

“I like all the non-fruity ones without nuts.”

“Chocolate?” he asks.

“Yep. And peanut butter. Especially the kind with those itty bitty peanut butter cups.”

“You and English. She’s the same.”

“What about you?” I ask.

“Butter pecan. Always. In a waffle cone.”

“A man of habit.”

“I suppose,” he agrees.

“You really need to venture out of that.”

I pull into the ice cream parking lot, and we get our delights. “Stay or go?” I ask.

“Let’s go. It’s not far. Are you good to drive with yours?” he asks.

“Sure.” We’re back to my place, eating our desserts. I’m going to town on mine when I catch his eye. “What?”

“You’re not going to share?” He seems hurt. I had no idea I was supposed to.

“Oh, sorry.” I hand him my cone for a taste, and his eyes never leave mine as he licks my ice cream. Oh my fucking peanut butter cups. My throat tightens as I swallow, and all the air takes a hike right on out of the room. Is he doing this on purpose or what, because if so, it’s working. My poor vagina is begging for some Beck.

“Wanna taste mine?” He appears smug, which tells me he’s not referring to his butter pecan.

Um, yeah, but not your stupid ice cream.

“O-okay,” I choke on the words, as well as the ice cream. He has to tap my back a few times to help me stop coughing.

“You okay?”

“Yeah,” I cough out one last time.

When I finally glance up, I want to knock off that devilish grin of his.

“I can see mine was a bit overwhelming for you.”

“Not really. I didn’t much care for the nuts.” And when I realize what I just said, my face turns the temperature of an

oven when I bake a cake.

“Not a fan of nuts, are you?”

Shit! “No, I love nuts. Adore them, really. Just not when they’re all crammed in my throat.”

“Hmm. We need to take care then and make sure that all your throat stays nut free.”

I’m speechless. He licks the last drop of golden cream from the corner of his mouth, and I want to follow him with my own tongue. My fingers dab at my chin just to make sure there isn’t any drool running down there. How embarrassing would that be? Particularly after I told him I didn’t want his nuts in my throat. God, is there anything else I can say that would further this humiliation of mine?

“So, would you care to watch a movie?” he asks.

“Sure.”

“What would you like to see?”

“Oh, I’m easy.” Did I just say that?

His sexy half-grin reappears, and he asks, “What about *Fast and Furious*?”

“Fuck me.” I didn’t even bother adding the hard and fast this time.

Twenty-Three

SHERIDAN

Saturday is my favorite day of the week, mostly because I don't have to work. And the key to that is sleeping in. Generally, I'm an early riser, but today I want to snuggle in and stay in bed until nine or later. Unfortunately, the urge to pee hits. Kicking off the covers, I push myself up when a deep voice filled with morning fog halts my progress.

"Hey, what gives?"

"Ayyyyy!" I scream. Then I'm spurred into action. Only my feet are tangled because the covers didn't quite get pushed off all the way. My legs are on the bed while my arms are on the floor as I frantically try to make my escape from my would-be killer.

"What the hell are you doing?" said killer asks.

My fingertips reach for something, anything I can use for a weapon, and the only thing they come up with is a dainty ruffled accent pillow, the kind with eyelet lace around the edges. I fire it at him, hoping it works. My legs are finally free as they plop on the floor, and I grab my giant panda bear, the one my mom bought for me the year before she died. It's huge. I figure I can use it as a block of some kind.

"Stay away from me or I'll—"

"You'll what? Clobber me with your teddy bear?" Then he laughs. "I hope he has a giant set of nuts." Then he really laughs. Oh, shit. It's Beck.

"What are you doing in my bed?"

"Turn the light on, Cookie."

There's a lamp on the bedside table that I switch on. He's in my bed, fully clothed, and so am I.

"You fell sound asleep during the movie, and I was too tired to go home. I figured you wouldn't mind. I carried you to bed. That's all. Why'd you get up?"

After I set my panda back down, I tell him, "I have to pee."

"Well, go pee and can I just say, nice weapon?" He rolls over, and that's it. A few minutes pass when I climb back in, and he says, "Next time you get up, don't pull my covers off."

"Next time? Who says there's going to be a next time?"

"Cookie, there's gonna be a lot of next times. You'll see." Then his hand reaches behind him searching for mine and pulls it until my arm is wound around him. That forces me to roll on my side until I'm up against his back. My arm isn't very long, so I'm huddled up right next to his body. His fresh scent is almost more than I can take. It makes me want to touch more of him than only his hand. I have a desire to explore the curves and dips of his firm muscles, comb my fingers through his thick hair, touch the chiseled planes of his cheeks. But I'm not that person. I'm the one who waits. And I'll wait for Beck, to see what he'll do. Resting my forehead against the blade of his shoulder, I think about what his lips would taste like, or how it would feel to have his mouth on me, between my legs, and I swallow the moan that almost escapes. He makes it difficult to relax, as my body is tense with lust. And I wonder again how I can feel this way about someone who I don't particularly like very much. It's much later before I drift away on the gentle waves of sleep.

Something brushes the tip of my nose, tickling it. It annoys me to no end, so I swat it away. But it does no good. It must be a mosquito, but then a thought strikes. What's a mosquito doing in my bedroom in November? There's already been a hard freeze, so those biting buggers should be gone for a while. There it goes again, so this time, I finally clap my hands together and catch the culprit. It's a rather large finger and not a bug after all.

“Wake up, Cookie. You’re a lazy head.”

“Grr. It’s Saturday. And stop messing with me. I thought you were a bug.”

“That’s what I was supposed to be. Come on. Rise and shine. We have to take someone to get pancakes.”

“Huh?”

“English called and wants to know where her daddy is.”

Rubbing the sleep out of my eyes, I ask, “What do you mean?”

“What I mean is my parents brought her home, and her daddy wasn’t there.”

“Shit.”

“Yep, I told her I had a slumber party with you.”

That bolts me into a sitting position. “What the hell’d you do that for?”

He wears a mask of confusion. “Why wouldn’t I?”

“She’s going to think I’m terrible.”

“She’s six. She doesn’t know anything about what grown-ups do in bed, other than sleep and play roll ’em. You’re taking quite the leap here.”

“Yeah, but your parents do.”

“Relax. They’re cool. They’ve been after me to date anyway. Go get dressed so we can pick English up. Knowing her, she’ll be calling again in a few.”

I watch him as he unwinds himself from the bed, like a graceful dancer, and heads to my bathroom. Okay, if he’s in there, how am I going to shower? Then I hear the water turn on. Not much later, he calls out, “Hey, Cookie, can you toss me a towel?”

When I enter the small bath, he inches open the curtain and asks, “Why aren’t you dressed?”

“Because someone stole the shower.”

“Oh, that. Take one later.”

With hands on my hips, I wait, only I don't expect the eyeful when he yanks back the curtain.

“That's what you get for dilly-dallying.”

“I-I'm n-not d-dilly-dallying. I want to take the shower you stole,” I sputter.

“Take it after pancakes. Now, brush your teeth and, by the way, I borrowed your toothbrush.”

“Did you use any of my tampons, too?”

His ass is toward me as he dries his hair, but at my comment, he spins without any regard for his nudity.

I try my damnedest not to react, but naked Beck is impossible to ignore. My breath rattles my lips as it whooshes past them. *Big. Luscious. Grab him now.* That's what comes to mind. I don't want to openly stare, but I want to openly stare. Because Beckley Bridges looks like one of his gorgeous photos—all perfection with zero flaws. My gaze rivets on the large dusky rose penis, and it's inconceivable for me to tear my eyes off it. My fingers twitch with the need to touch it as it hangs there in all its fine glory.

“Sheridan?”

“Huh?”

“You okay there?”

“Hmm.”

In two steps, he stands in front of me and places his hands on my arms. “You sure you're okay?” he whispers with a cocky grin.

“I, uh, think so.” I swallow the clump that's gathered in my throat.

“Do I need to kiss you and make you better?” He doesn't wait for my response, but lowers his head and brushes my lips

with his. First, he nips my upper lip and then moves to my lower one. And finally he drives it all the way home. Thick arms wind around me, lifting me up as his tongue presses through the opening of my mouth. With nowhere else to go, my hands latch on to his shoulders.

I can't stop the moan that seeps out of me. My heart punches my breastbone as it batters the space behind it. Electrical impulses discharge through my veins, heating me through to my core. This kiss ... his kiss takes me beyond where kisses should be allowed to go. My hands tangle in his hair, and I give back what he takes. My tongue slides against the wetness of his, and I want more than this. And so does he by what I feel against my hip. But I don't even like the guy. Do I?

“As much as I'd like to continue this, Munchkindoodle will kill us if we don't get over there.”

“Mmm.”

He sets me back down and swats my ass. “Get a move on, Cookie.”

“Why do you call me Cookie?”

“Two reasons now. Like I told you, because of those damn cookies you made. English didn't stop talking about them for days. They were the best things I'd ever tasted. Every time I think of a cookie, I think of you.”

“And the other?”

“You taste warm and sweet, like the best thing in the world, which is a cookie.” Then he spins me around and shoves me toward the sink.

When I look at myself in the mirror, I wear the goofiest grin ever, and I'm pretty damn sure it's still there when we pull into Beck's driveway. I really need to get ahold of myself.

“You good?” he asks.

“Yeah.” Then he leans across and kisses me again.

“Let’s go get the little one.”

We don’t even make it to the door before a blur of blond ringlets flies out to nail us.

“I never thought you’d get here. I’m starving. See?” She pulls up her shirt to show us her tummy.

“Yep, all starved out, I see,” Beck says. “Where are Banana and Geepa?”

“Inside. Looking for a new Boonie.”

“I’ll kill them,” he mutters so only I can hear.

“Hey,” Beck says to them as we walk inside.

“Hey, you two,” Anna says.

“Hey! Beck, take a look at this,” Mark says.

“Oh, no, you don’t.”

“You don’t even know—”

“I can’t have a Boonie.”

“We’ll keep him. You can have him on occasion.”

Beck huffs, and I laugh because it’s obvious there’s no way he’s going to win. English is hopping around rabbit-style, excitement all over her adorable face.

“Daddy, we can call him Boonior.”

“Boonior?”

“Yeah, you know. Like Boonie Junior. Boonior.”

I cup my hand over my mouth so I don’t snort. Beck looks at Mark with arched brows while Mark returns the look and shrugs.

“Munchkindoodle, where’d you get that name?”

“I made it up. Can we go eat now?”

Beck looks at his parents and says, “Lock up when you leave, and thanks for keeping her.”

I tell them good-bye, and then Anna asks us to come to dinner. “Short notice but—”

Beck checks with me, as if I’m going to say no? Awkward. “Sounds great,” I say.

“Good. We’ll see you around six then.”

We head to the pancake place and slide in our booth. Beck and English sit together, and I’m across from them. The waitress comes, and English has me laughing.

English orders first. “I’d like the chocolate chip pancakes, please, and can you please ask the pancake maker to put a smiley face on mine with the whipped cream? And can you ask him to make some teeth with the chocolate chips, please, too? Do you think I could get extra chocolate chip teeth? Daddy doesn’t like for me to have too many sweets, but it’s for breakfast so it’s okay. I don’t want the pancake maker to get in trouble, though.”

“English, you make me sound like an ogre.”

“What’s an ocher?”

“Never mind.”

Beck and I give our orders, and the waitress leaves with, I’m sure, a spinning head.

“Did you and Daddy have a fun spend the night party? Did Daddy like your pajammies? Did he like your bed? Did you have to share your pillow? Daddy snores sometimes. Did he snore last night?”

Beck bites his lip in order not to laugh. I open and close my mouth a few times before answering.

“We had a great time, but it would’ve been more fun if you would’ve been there. And your daddy slept on the couch.”

English’s little brow wrinkles. “Why would he do that?”

“He fell asleep and was too big for me to carry to bed.”

“Oh.” And thank God, that’s the end of it.

When our pancakes arrive, English is all business, and don't bother asking her a thing. If you do, she holds up a finger and doesn't answer. When she fills her belly with as much as it can hold, she asks Beck, "Daddy, can we get Boonior?"

Beck finishes swallowing and says, "We'll see, Munch. You know what I've said before."

"Yeah, but that was before. Banana and Geepa said they'd keep him mostly. And if they do that, then why won't you?"

He looks at me for a rescue, so I ask, "Where did Geepa's name come from?"

Beck grins. "This one said she didn't like Grandpa, so she shortened it. It's really the letter G. Like G-dash-PA. But then it turned into Geepa."

"Ah, I get it. That's pretty catchy."

"So, can we get Boonior? Can we?"

Catching Beck's eye, I say, "It's a hopeless cause, you know."

"Yeah, and I'm going to strangle someone."

"Who, Geepa?" English asks.

"Who brought it all up, Munch?"

"Me. I want a new Boonie."

"Do you ever take no for an answer?" he asks.

"You tell me no all the time."

He pays the bill, and we head back to his place. From all the signs, it seems to me that Beck will be the owner of a new Boonior. English runs inside, full of energy like a six-year-old often has, and now she's fueled by chocolate chip pancakes. Beck stops to grab the mail, and I'm chasing after the little one when he walks into the house like he's seen a ghost.

"What is it?"

He doesn't answer me, but keeps moving until he disappears into his office, I presume. English is oblivious and tearing around the place and then calls me into her room.

"Let's draw a picture, Miss Monroe, and the best one wins a prize."

"What kind of prize?"

"Candy!" She kicks off her shoes and jumps on her bed. Up and down she goes. "Wish you didn't have that thing on your foot still."

"Me, too. So what kind of picture do you want to draw?"

"Let's draw our new Boonior."

"Okay." I grab two sketchpads and some pencils, and we start working on our masterpieces. I'm the worst artist, so I'm hoping my dog is discernible. However, my mind isn't really on this. I'm thinking of Beck and what happened.

We're both almost finished with our sketches when I hear the front door opening and Anna calling out for English. Why is she back?

I walk into the living room, and both Mark and Anna are there. "Hey, I thought we weren't coming until six."

"Beck called. He hasn't said anything?"

"No, I've been in English's room playing."

They share a look clueing me that something isn't right. "What's happened?"

"We're going to take English back with us to give you two some privacy."

"I don't—"

Beck walks in and says, "Thanks for coming."

He looks like a different man than when we came home from breakfast.

"What's going on?" I ask.

“In a minute, Sheridan,” he says. Then he nods to his parents. “I appreciate this.”

“Beck, darling, you know we’re here for you anytime.”

The expression on his face terrifies me. The muscles in his cheeks seem to jump out of his skin, and yet his bearing is almost that of a defeated man.

Mark says, “Come on, English. We’re going to check out some Booniors this afternoon.”

“Really?” She glances at Beck, and he nods. He’s given in.

“I’ll see you tonight.” He leans over and hugs her.

She grabs her coat and is out the door. When everyone is gone, he faces me and hands me an envelope.

“It came in the mail. Certified today.”

When I see that it’s from an attorney, I know immediately what it’s about. “Shit.”

“That’s about right.”

Quickly, I scan the contents, and it says the mother is pursuing her rights for custody. She wants fifty percent, and blah, blah, blah. I can’t get past that fifty percent part. She’s not starting out small or messing around.

“Did you call your attorney?”

He grimaces. “Yeah, he didn’t answer, so I left a message. This is not good, Sheridan. We were hoping she’d go for a weekend here or there. Start in small increments or something. But not fifty percent.”

He drops on the couch and rubs his neck. I’m at a complete loss.

“What can I do?”

“Honestly?”

“Yes!”

“Marry me. I know how much it is to ask, but now more than ever, English needs this.”

Twenty-Four

BECK

The letter was a devastating blow. I should've expected it, been mentally prepared, but it came at me like a damn nuclear warhead, scrambling my brain until I couldn't think straight.

I don't think Sheridan will go for the marriage thing, and honestly, how can I blame her? It's a steep thing to ask, but I do think she's warming up to me. The thing is, this is pressuring her, and a large part of me feels terrible about it. But that part is outweighed by my love for English. Make no mistake. I will do anything for my daughter. Anything.

Twenty-Five

SHERIDAN

Leaving Beck in his state of distress isn't easy, but with what he presents, I have no choice. I can't be around him and think straight. This isn't a decision I'll jump into without weighing all the options.

"Thanksgiving is Thursday. We could go away on Friday—elope somewhere."

"What would English think?" I ask.

"Cookie, she's in love with you. If we came home and I told her we'd gotten married and you were her new mom, she'd be under the rainbow about it."

"And school? How do you think they'd react?"

"Is there a rule somewhere that states you can't get married?"

I pinch the bridge of my nose. "No, and you know that's not what I meant. English is my student."

"Is there something that stipulates you can't teach your own child? I would think you'd be harder on her as your own."

"I have to check into it. There's just so much to think about."

"You can say that again." The lines of tension around his mouth and eyes seem to have deepened in the short time since we've been back from breakfast. I can't even begin to imagine what he's going through.

"Beck, I need to be alone to think about this."

He takes my hands in his. "I understand. If there's anything, anything at all that you need to help you make your

decision, call me. Sheridan, I'll do anything for you. I hope you understand that."

The words aren't necessary. His heart is being ripped apart, piece by piece, and what will happen if English finds out. By the time I get home, I'm a wreck. Michelle wants to know what's wrong, but I can barely speak, so I head to my room and take a shower. I have a minor breakdown while in there, but I need to get my head on straight. Maybe talking it out with my bestie will help.

When I make it downstairs, Michelle is there, and alone.

"Where's Oliver?"

"At his parents' house. I don't think he wants to introduce me to them." She pouts.

"Why do you say that?"

"He never takes me there."

"Hmm. Maybe he's hiding them from you."

"You think?"

"I don't know, but could be."

Then she notices me for the first time and asks, "Who died? You've been crying. And a lot by the looks of things."

It's such a long story I almost don't want to tell the whole thing to her, but I have to. She's my Michelle. By the time I finish, she's sniffing back her own tears. "Oh, God, I can't imagine that poor kid. What are you going to do?"

"I don't know. I love that little girl. She's adorable. And when the mom showed up at school—"

"Wait. What? She showed up at school?"

I explain what happened that day and how frightened English was at the time. "It was awful. She told English she was going to take her from Beck. We had to call the police."

"Damn, Sher, that's terrible. What do you think you'll do?"

Groaning, I say, “I don’t know. I hate this position I’m in. He wants me to commit for six years.”

“What if you fall in love with him?”

“That’s the most ridiculous thing in the world.”

“Why?”

“Because, that’s why,” I say. “I can barely tolerate him.”

“It isn’t ridiculous. And stop lying to yourself. You appear to be tolerating him pretty well. But the bigger question is, what if he falls in love with you?” Her finger makes circles in the air.

My hand waves the air in front of me, dismissing her foolish comment. “I’m worried about him hating me after a week, maybe two, and you’re talking about us falling in love.” The entire notion is absurd.

“Answer me this. Are you attracted to him?”

“Have you seen the man?”

“You know I have, and he’s hot, but that doesn’t mean you’re attracted to him.”

“Well, I am. And the crazy thing is, he says he’s attracted to me, but falling in love is something completely different.”

“Okay, Sher, listen to me. First off, it’s not crazy for him to be attracted to you. You are gorgeous. Like I keep telling you—look in the damn mirror. Second, if you do this, you’ll be living with him and his daughter as a family, probably sleeping with him, and it’s a distinct possibility falling in love could happen.”

“I get what you’re saying, and I would agree with you if things were normal, but Beck is different. He’s moody and taciturn. I think I’ll more likely be pissed off more than anything. I did tell him he couldn’t act that way, and he said he’d try, but I’m not sure he will.”

“You have a huge decision to make. And what about school? Can you still keep her in your class?”

I'm checking with my principal this week. With Thanksgiving on Thursday, we'd go away for the weekend."

Michelle's expression clues me into something I didn't mention to her. "One other thing. Beck told me he'd pay for my portion of the rent, so you'd be fine for however long you'd want to live here or until you found another roommate."

"Seriously? That's so cool of him."

"No, that's just how much he wants me to do this thing. And, Michelle, you can't say a word of this to anyone, and I mean *anyone*. If the mother were to catch wind of us getting married for convenience, this could really spell trouble for Beck. I trust you with all my secrets, even this."

"I've got your back. Does he know about your parents?"

"He knows they died, but doesn't know how."

"Are you going to tell him?" she asks.

"I imagine I will one day, but not now."

Michelle flashes me a knowing grin. "You're going to do this. You love that little kid. For the first couple of weeks of school, she was all you talked about. And now, the last thing you want is to see her whisked away by some stranger who you believe doesn't have her best interests at heart. I know you, Sheridan Monroe. You may as well call Beck right now and plan your elopement. Get the damn thing over. You're going to be Mrs. Bridges, stepmom to English Bridges, adorable curly-headed six-year-old who stole your heart. Too bad you just can't marry the kid."

I automatically pull my shirt up to hide my face. "You're right, and I know it, dammit. I'm such a sucker."

She grabs my shirt to free my head. "What?"

"I said you were right. And I'm scared shitless. I don't know how to be married, much less a mom." A pillow whacks me on the side of my head. "Ow! Why'd you do that?"

“Because you were born to be both. A wife and a mom. You’ll be great. Why do you think you went into teaching? You adore those rugrats.”

She’s right. Kids, no matter how annoying they can be at times, are my joy in life.

“Okay, I’ll give you the kids part, but being a wife’s another issue.”

“Whatever. Pack a bag, and go get married. Go love on that little girl. If things turn south, she’s going to need you.” She laughs at me. “I’m leaving on Wednesday. You’re off school after Tuesday. Have fun.”

Michelle notices I don’t make a move to do anything, so she grabs my phone and hands it to me. “Call him, Sher.”

“What’s your rush?”

“I know you. You’re going to sit here and talk yourself out of this. And then you’ll be missing out on the single most important thing in your life, not to mention you’ll be slapping yourself in the forehead for the next however long, when that little girl gets carried away by some maniacal drug-addicted bitch.”

“Fuck.” I start frantically tapping Beck’s number.

It rings four times before he answers.

“Cookie, this can’t be good.”

“I’ll do it,” I rush to say.

“What?”

“I’ll do it. I’ll marry you.”

Nothing. Dead silence. Maybe he changed his mind. “What? Are you rescinding the offer?”

“No! Not at all. I’m shocked. I thought it would take you at least a couple of days to decide.”

“Yeah, well, it didn’t. And let’s get something straight right this minute. I’m doing this for English. Not you. So let’s plan.

I have to move, and how are we going to tell English? And your parents?”

“My parents already know. They were part of the plan. They adore you.”

“Hmm. And they don’t think this is a crazy idea?”

“Not at all. They think it’s great.”

“How are we going to tell English? And are we going to do it before we get hitched or after?”

“Hitched, huh?”

I look over at Michelle and she has this wicked grin on her face. That woman loves this. Of course, why should this surprise me? She’s always been the drama queen out of the two of us, so this is falling right into one of her things. I can see her practically rubbing her palms together.

“Cookie, don’t you think we should discuss all this in person and not over the phone?”

“That’s probably a good idea.”

“I’ll pick you up in a half hour. And we’re eating dinner with my parents, remember?”

“Fuck me. I forgot.”

“What happened to hard and fast?”

“I’m in a slow and easy mood today.”

He doesn’t respond.

“Hello? Beck?”

“Yes.”

“Oh, I thought I lost you there.”

“No worries on that. See you in thirty.”

Michelle sits there with that smart-ass grin on her face.

“He’s picking me up in thirty minutes. I have to get ready.”

“And I can’t wait to really meet this guy.”

“You’ve already met him. At the movie theater, remember?”

“Yeah, but this is different.”

When the doorbell rings, Michelle runs and literally tears the door open. Beck jumps back. That’s how hard she ripped the thing apart from the frame.

“Jeez, girl. You’ve been lifting weights or something?” I ask.

She giggles and then takes a good, hard look at Beck as I call out to him from inside, “Come on in, Beck.”

Beck says, “Hey, I’m Beck. We met at the movies briefly.” He sticks out his hand, but she numbly stares at him. What the hell is wrong with her? And then it hits me. She’s in a stupor.

I lean in and whisper, “You’re drooling, Michelle.”

Her hand runs over her chin, and then she gives me the evil eye because I was only joking.

“Beck, you remember Michelle.”

“Nice to see you again,” she collects her wits and says. “I understand congratulations are in order?”

“I suppose they are,” he says, smiling. Beck looks toward me and asks, “Did you pack a bag?”

“Nah, I need to come back here. It’s a school night.”

“Okay. Let’s go.” When he turns around, Michelle gives me two thumbs-up and a big grin. I knew she would approve.

When we get in his car, he says, “Your roommate always that strange?”

“She was a bit tongue-tied.”

“Why’s that?”

“Never mind.” Men are clueless. “So on to us. How should we do this?”

“Vegas. This weekend.”

“Vegas?” What the hell!

“Yeah. Why not?”

“You mean like the Elvis Chapel and all?”

A gust of laughter bursts from him. “I’m pretty certain there are other places to get married besides the Elvis Chapel.”

“Oh.”

“Please tell me you didn’t think that’s all Vegas has to offer?”

“I’ve never been, so how was I to know?” I ask defensively.

He continues to laugh without an end in sight. I actually see tears in the corners of his eyes.

“Stop! You’re making fun of me.” It is pretty funny, but I can’t let him know that.

“Well, damn, Cookie, Vegas is huge. It’s not like they have nothing but fake Elvises marrying people off on every corner. That would kill their quickie marriage business.”

“Whatever.”

“You’re pissed at me.”

“No, I’m not.” My lower lip is nearly dragging on the floor of the car.

“Yes, you are.”

“I’m not, but I will be if you keep pestering me.”

He chuckles all the way back to his place.

“I thought we were going to your parents’ house.”

“Not until six or so. We need to make plans.”

“Right. So this weekend. Vegas, huh?”

“Yes, let’s leave Wednesday and come back on Saturday.”

“What about Thanksgiving and English?”

“Here’s the thing. Abby’s attorney has requested a visit with English on that day.”

“I take it Abby is English’s mom.”

“Yeah. So Mom and Dad are taking English to Disney World on Wednesday. They’ll bring her back on Saturday night. We can tell her then. My attorney will deliver a letter saying—*Sorry, she’s not here*. But it’s stupid because it’s not court ordered or anything. It’s just a letter from her attorney requesting that we do it.”

“Why would she go for that on Thanksgiving? That makes zero sense.”

“That’s what my attorney says, too. But she is pursuing her custody through the courts. This is only the beginning.”

“I see. So, should I tell the school when I get back?”

“That’s completely up to you. Whatever you think works best.”

“Beck, won’t the mother find out? I mean, we left and then got married. Won’t they say we did it just because of all this?”

“They may, but they can’t prove anything. As long as we act the loving couple in front of them and as long as English loves you, which she does, none of that matters.”

He means what he says, but it scares me nonetheless. What if they call me to testify and I have to tell the truth?

“Why the long face?” he asks. I explain my concerns.

“No need to worry. My attorney won’t allow them to put you on the stand unless you agree to it. That’s it.”

Once everything is decided, Beck makes our plane and hotel reservations. Since he is the frequent traveler, he handles it all. I hesitate to tell him I’ve never flown before.

“How long is the flight?” I ask.

“About four and a half hours.”

“That long?”

“Uh-huh. Vegas isn’t that far from the West Coast.”

“I know that, but I ... well, I’ve never flown before, so I was wondering.”

His head tilts, and his eyes burn holes through me as he asks, “You’ve never flown?”

“No, never.”

“How does that happen in this day and age?”

This is not a comfortable topic for me. “It just does.”

“Is there something I need to know here?”

“Not really.”

His voice turns soft and husky. “Look, Cookie, you’re doing a lot for English and me. You can tell me anything, and it will stay right in this room. I promise.”

“It’s not that big of a deal. My dad wouldn’t fly because he was afraid, so our family vacations were to places we could drive. That’s all.” That isn’t all, but it’s enough for now.

“You sure about that?”

“Why wouldn’t I be?” He isn’t buying it, but he’ll have to for now. I’m not ready to share with him. And who knows when I will be?

“Oh, I don’t know. Because you’re not comfortable with me. You don’t want to let me into your inner sanctum. And I get that. But I hope you do someday because I think I will show you I can be an excellent friend.”

We are only inches apart, and what I want to do is kiss him. It’s hard to think of anything else when he’s this close. But he switches gears on me when he asks, “So, how much stuff do you have?”

“Everything in my bedroom and some of the kitchen stuff is mine.”

In a brusque manner, which I’m growing more accustomed to, he says, “You won’t be needing any of that. Leave it for

your roommate.”

“No.”

“No?”

“That’s what I said.”

“Cookie, you’ve seen the kitchen. I have everything.”

“Beck, the things I have are from my mom. I’m not parting with them.”

“Fine. We’ll collect them when we can. Does your roommate need to replace them?”

“I’ll check with her,” I huff.

“Don’t get your hackles up,” he says.

“Then don’t order me around.”

After a good, hard look, he nods. “How about this? Why don’t we just have you pack a bag or three and have you live here until the Christmas holidays when we can take a few days to really get you moved in?”

“Sounds perfect. Thank you.” I offer him a sweet smile.

“Glad you approve. Are you ready to tell my parents?”

“Sure.”

Then he reminds me, “Don’t forget. We’re not telling English until we get back.”

I agree as we head to Beck’s car. I hope English will be as happy as Beck thinks she will.

Twenty-Six

SHERIDAN

When we get to Beck's parents' house, I can't seem to keep my mouth from hanging open. They live in Buckhead in one of those old coveted homes that people dream about. There's a wrought iron gate that Beck has to enter a code for us to pass through. The drive to the house isn't long, but the manicured lawn is picturesque.

"After English was dropped off in the box, Dad had this gate installed. I lived here with her for a year, and he became a bit of an overprotective Geepa," Beck explains.

"It's so pretty here."

"Yeah, it's nice."

It's way beyond nice, but I suppose he's so used to it, it doesn't phase him like it does me. We park in the circular drive out front and walk through the door into a large foyer that goes straight up to the second story. There's a huge chandelier hanging over us, and even though I'm standing in a multimillion-dollar home, it's not stuffy at all. It's very comfortable and inviting.

"Come on." Beck motions, and I follow him. We walk down a long hall, and it opens into a living room kitchen combination that is in the back of the house. The room is stunning with glass windows lining the back wall and looking out over a terrace. I don't want to gawk, but I'm helpless. Then an excited six-year-old diverts my attention.

English is bouncing around Banana and Geepa's house because apparently they have located a new Boonior. He can't come home until Christmas, but he's a Boykin Spaniel puppy. Beck shakes his head.

“What?” Mark asks.

“That’s a high energy dog. You know you’ll have to play with him a lot. Throw the ball all the time. Get him outside for lots and lots of exercise. You know what I’m saying?”

“I do, and it’ll be taken care of.”

“I’m holding you to it. Um, I think you need to take English to Disney World on Wednesday night.”

Mark asks Beck why.

“Because Sheridan and I are flying out to Vegas that night.”

Without saying a word, Mark grins broadly, walks over to me, and wraps me in the biggest hug I can remember getting since my mom died. It brings tears to my eyes.

“You can’t possibly know how much this means to our family,” he murmurs. “I’ll go distract the little one while your mother changes our reservations. Are you going to tell her?”

“Not until we get back,” Beck says.

Mark nods as he goes and snatches English. A couple of minutes later, Anna runs into the room and almost knocks me down with a hug. She’s every bit, if not more, excited than Mark.

“Oh, Sheridan, we’re so thrilled about this. You can’t know how much this means to us. Thank you.”

I’m not sure what to say. You’re welcome doesn’t really sound appropriate.

“I adore English, and I’m happy to help.” That sounds like the lamest thing in the world. I look at Beck and make a face.

He laughs and says, “We only have to cover this up around English. It is what it is, Sheridan. They both know the truth behind what we’re doing.”

The tension drains out of me.

“Yes, we do. We were part of this scheme, if you want the truth. And if there’s anything at all we can do to help, let us

know.”

“Thanks. But the truth is, I adore that child. She’s precious, and I want to do everything I can to help.”

“Hopefully, this will be exactly what we need to keep the wolf at bay,” Anna says.

“I hope so. The last thing I want is for English to get hurt.”

Anna’s expression of joy turns to pain as she processes my words. But then English skips into the room, turning things upside down with her antics, and Anna says, “Let me get back to dinner.”

As usual, dinner is entertaining, with the nonstop chatterbox of English’s questions. Her new thing is Christmas and Boonior. Now that the puppy is a sure thing, she’s trying to figure out what Santa will be bringing the pup for presents.

Beck interrupts her, saying, “Munch, you’ve got this a bit mixed up. Your Christmas present is Boonior. How can you be worried about what your present is getting as a present?”

That works for a little while as her wheels churn, but then the light bulb goes on. “No! How can Boonior be my present? Santa hasn’t gotten here yet?”

Beck gives each one of us a long look. Mark and Anna only shrug while I come to his rescue.

“English, Santa isn’t the only one who brings you presents on Christmas. You know that, don’t you?”

Her cute little mouth scrunches up and she says, “Uh-huh.”

“Well, Boonior is a non-Santa present.”

“Okay.”

“So, you see, since he’s already a present, he doesn’t get a present. Maybe he will next year.”

Her ringlets jiggle as she bobs her head in agreement. Score for Sheridan.

That evening when Beck drives me home, I tell him I plan to inform Susan, my principal, about our plans. “I think I’ll talk to her after school on Tuesday. That will give me a day to check if I can still keep English in my class. If not, she’ll have to make arrangements to transfer her to another class.”

“Hmm. I hope it’s not an issue, but if so, English will have to deal with it. I think knowing you’re her mom will more than make up for it.”

By the time Tuesday gets here, I’m a bundle of nervous energy. I stop by Susan’s office to ask if I can talk with her after school, and she says to come right in when the students are dismissed.

The day flies by without a problem, and when I get to Susan’s office, her admin tells me she’s on the phone and to give her a minute. A minute turns into quite a long time, so I return to my classroom to collect my things and lock the door. When I get back, she’s still on the phone. Finally, she motions me in.

“Have a seat. We have an issue.”

“An issue?” I ask.

“That was the superintendent. Apparently, English is telling all her classmates you and her father had a slumber party, and he spent the night at your house.”

“Oh, God.” I drop my head in my hands for a second, then I say, “It wasn’t like that at all. We went out, and we both fell asleep. He stayed on the couch. I told her that.”

“It doesn’t matter. We both know how things get lost in translation, and perception is more important than reality at times. Several parents bypassed me and called the superintendent directly to file a complaint. Because of that, they have to place you on suspension.”

“You’ve got to be kidding?”

“I wish I were,” she says.

A derisive laugh escapes me. “Ironically, I wanted to see you because Beck and I are eloping this weekend. English doesn’t know it, but his parents do.”

“Maybe when the school board realizes this, they will drop everything. But the bottom line is, the parents have to be pleased as well.”

“How many days will I be suspended?”

Susan rubs her forehead. “I honestly don’t know. I’ve never dealt with anything like this before. I guess until they deem you safe for the children to be around.”

“Oh, this is crazy. I would never do anything to harm the kids.”

“I know that, Sheridan, and I’m going to do everything I can to make them understand this.”

“If they don’t fire me and I come back, can I teach English, or will she have to be transferred to another class?”

“You can still teach her. There’s nothing that says you can’t. In fact, we’ve had several parents teach their children before. We’ve found they’re usually harder on their own than on the other students.”

“So, after the holidays, I don’t come back until I hear something?”

Susan scowls. “No, I want you here. I’m taking a stand against this. The entire thing is absurd, and I want everyone to know it.”

“I appreciate your trust and belief in me.”

Her eyes glance down, and she says, “So, this is your final week for the boot, huh?”

“Yep, I think I’m going to burn the darn thing.” In actuality, instead of celebrating, right now I feel like crying.

“Hey, hang in there, Sheridan. You’re getting married. You have a lot to celebrate, and this is only a tiny bump in the road.”

“Thanks for your support.”

As soon as I get into my car, I call Beck and tell him what happened. He can't believe it. Then he says, “Don't worry about a thing.”

“I could potentially lose my job.”

“If you do, you can go to work for me. I need some help as it is.”

“Beck, thank you for that, but I want to teach. I love my job. I love those kids. That's why I went to school. Besides, what if that other woman's lawyers find that out about me?”

He doesn't say a word.

“Could that cause a problem for you?”

“I don't think so. We never slept together.”

“We can't prove it. You'd better call your lawyer.”

“Maybe I should,” he says.

“And then you need to decide if you still want to marry me.”

“Oh, that's a definite. We're leaving on a jet plane in the morning. I don't give a shit if they fire you or not. You got that?”

My head spins with so many things, I'm not sure what's right and what isn't.

“Cookie, answer me.”

“Yeah, I got that.”

“Go home and pack your bags, sweetheart. Munchkindoodle is with my parents. They leave in the morning, so she's staying with them tonight. And you're going to stay with me.”

He's so forceful I can only nod. Words are stuck in the clump of air that's jammed in my trachea.

“Sheridan, you there?”

“Uh, yeah.”

“Good. I’ll come around your place about seven thirty, and we’ll go grab some dinner. That good for you?”

“Good. Great.”

It hits me that from tonight on I’ll be sleeping with this man. Beckley Bridges. What the hell have I agreed to? Oh my fucking shit. I need to buy new panties. Mine look like something I wore in the tenth grade. My tires squeal as I leave the school parking lot and head to Target. My credit card, which I rarely use because I have enough debt as it is, is going to feel the burn today.

First stop, lingerie department. Next, I need a couple of tops. Last, I head to the luggage where I snag a cute bag I can either check in or carry on. Then as I’m heading to the cashier, I realize I need a new makeup bag. I make a quick detour and grab one. Oh, and I almost forgot travel-sized shampoo, conditioner, lotion, and those items.

Michelle is pulling in when I get home.

“Why are you so late?” she asks.

I tell her, and she checks out my stuff. After getting her approval, I explain what happened at school with my suspension. She doesn’t seem at all worried.

“Ah,” her arm flies up in the air, “they’re going to find it was nothing but some little kids talking about stuff they didn’t know anything about.” Then she giggles. “It is pretty funny, though. You and Beck having a slumber party.”

“Well, yeah. She wanted to know if he liked my pajammies.”

“She did?”

“Yeah, but I told her he slept on the couch.”

Michelle snaps her fingers. “Then that’s it. All you have to do is have English tell them that.”

“I suppose so, but kids are so fickle. They sometimes forget from one minute to the next.”

“Then you’re golden.”

“My principal says she supports me, so maybe.”

“Quit worrying about it. You’re getting married to the hottest thing since sliced bread.”

“Bread isn’t hot unless it’s toasted,” I remind her.

She shoots me a sly grin. “It is when the buns are just out of the oven. Not only that, you totally deserve to get laid. When was the last time, by the way?”

“You don’t want to know the answer to that.” It was so long ago, even I don’t remember when.

“See, you need to take advantage of that.”

“But, Michelle, I’m not sure I can.”

If a look could spell horrified, hers would do it. “What the hell do you mean? You’re marrying the guy. Why wouldn’t you do the dirty with him?”

“Because. What if he doesn’t want to do it with me?”

She points a finger at me. “I’ve had it with you. Go pack.” She turns and walks away.

Beck will be here in an hour and a half, and I have no idea what to take. Vegas is hot, right? Or wait. It’s November, maybe it’s not. I better check. So I do and find it’s cool. Good thing I did that, or I would’ve frozen to death. My closet looks like a hurricane went through it by the time I’m done, but I think I’m ready. Or not. I don’t know.

“Michelle! I need help! Hurry!”

She runs into my room and wants to know what’s wrong. She checks my bag and gives me her stamp of approval.

“What about shoes?”

“I’m taking my boots and one more pair. Is that enough?”

She tosses in another pair of heels. “For your wedding day.”

“Oh, I don’t think I can walk in those yet. This is my first venture without the boot, remember?”

She pulls those out and hands me a different pair that doesn’t have heels. “Better?” she asks.

“Yeah.”

“Now you’re good.”

“Oh my God, I’m nervous.”

“Why?”

“Seriously?” I ask.

“No, just kidding.” Then she pulls me into her arms and says, “You are going to be the very best mom ever. Not to mention wife. And you’d better be a good lay, too. And remember—no teeth when you suck him off. Unless he wants some. But if he does, only a little.”

“Thanks. Jeez. That last bit didn’t help at all.” I play punch her shoulder.

“What? I just gave you the thirty-second refresher course.” She grabs my bag while I get my oversized purse. “Let me carry this for you.”

My belly is tied in knots, and I blurt out, “Oh, God, this anxiety is killing me.”

“Calm down. Do you need a drink?”

“I’m not sure. I need something. How am I going to eat?”

“Just stare at the man sitting across from you, and all your worries will fade away,” she says.

“Will you be serious?”

“I am.”

The doorbell rings. “This is it.” I give Michelle a spontaneous hug. “Who knows? In six years, we may be

roomies again.” A nervous laugh that resembles a maniacal cackle bursts out of me.

“You have to get control of yourself. He’s going to think he’s marrying a lunatic that got a day pass from the local asylum.”

My hands slide up and down on my jeans to remove the accumulated dampness. “Okay, yes, you’re right. Open the door.”

I can hear her saying, “Hello, Beck, it’s nice to see you again.” I’m happy to know she can talk to him this time.

Beck answers her, and I finally move toward the door. This is it. My first steps in the direction of becoming Mrs. Bridges.

“Hey, Cookie.”

Michelle raises a brow at the use of his little moniker for me. I don’t bother to explain.

“I’m ready,” I say, indicating my bags.

“Great. Let’s go,” he says as the corners of his mouth curve up.

Michelle surprises me when she says, “Sheridan, can you go out to the car? I’d like to have a word with Beck.”

My head swings back and forth between the two of them. It’s obvious he’s curious, as am I. She gives me that *skedaddle* look. Beck holds out his keys and says, “I’ll get your bag for you and meet you out there.”

“Okay.”

“I’ll only keep him a minute or two,” Michelle adds.

She sticks to her promise, and Beck joins me in the car a couple of minutes later.

“That girl totally has your back,” he says.

“What did she say?”

“I can’t tell you everything, but I have orders to treat you like a queen.”

She better not have given away any of my secrets.

He reaches for my hand and asks, “You ready, Your Majesty?”

Taking a deep breath, I say, “I guess so.” I watch the house I’ve lived in with Michelle disappear from sight as we drive off, and I begin a new page in my life.

Part Two

MRS. BRIDGES

One

SHERIDAN

We board the plane, and Beck taps my elbow. “Right here.”

I look at our first class seats in awe. Since I’ve never flown before, I have nothing to compare them to other than what I’ve seen on TV and in the movies. And they’re nice. Very nice. I snuff the urge to giggle. For whatever reason, I get the feeling Beck wouldn’t have the patience for a giggling female by his side.

He takes my bag from me and stuffs it in the overhead bin as I slide into the window seat. Glancing out the tiny plastic square, I check out the guys on the tarmac working to get our flight ready. My excitement blooms as I realize I’m about to take my first plane ride.

“What are you thinking about?” Beck asks.

“That I’m a little scared and a lot excited.”

“About flying?”

Feeling a bit dorky, I scrunch up my face and say, “Yeah, is that weird? To be scared, I mean?”

“Not at all. I take it for granted because it’s required for my work, but for someone who never has, I can see how it would be a bit daunting. I do think it’s strange that you’ve never flown, though.”

I focus on the knotted fingers bunched up on my lap. “Like I explained before, my dad wouldn’t fly, and after my mom died, we didn’t take many vacations.” The truth is, we didn’t take any at all. Not wanting to dwell too much on that, I divert his attention. “Exactly how often do you travel?”

“Under normal conditions, I’m gone about once or twice a month,” he says.

“Normal conditions?”

“I’ve been working a lot in town lately because of what’s been going on with English. I refuse to leave because I worry so much about her.”

That makes complete sense, and I tell him. It also drives home the fact of how great a father he is. Family before work and all.

“You impress me,” I say.

“I do? Why?”

“Because of how you’ve put your life on hold for her.”

“You’d do the same.”

“Maybe. But I’m proud of you for doing it.”

His beautiful, sexy mouth curves up in a smile, and my body heats. It would be so much easier if he weren’t so pretty.

“Thank you.”

The flight attendant starts talking about seatbelts and all that jazz. Beck reaches across my lap and buckles me in.

The plane begins to move, and it makes me wonder something. “Beck, are you nervous?”

“About what?”

“Getting married?”

“Not at all.”

His blue-green eyes burn right through me as though he knows something I don’t. Then he picks up my hand and kisses it. It’s such an endearing gesture, and one so uncharacteristic of him, my heart melts just a little. “Can I get you something to drink? A mimosa maybe?”

My head spins. Maybe a drink is exactly what I need. “I can get one now? Before we take off?”

He chuckles. “Yeah, in first class you can. Or would you rather have a coffee drink of some kind?”

“No, a mimosa would be great. Maybe it will help me sleep.”

“You’re tired?”

“A little.”

He regards me curiously. “Did you not sleep well in my bed?”

I don’t dare tell him his half-naked body lying next to mine made it impossible for me to get even one ounce of sleep. “Too much on my mind. You know, since I’ve never flown or gone anywhere quite this extravagant before.” Or gotten married to someone who is being super nice to me, but in the past has been quite a asshole.

He nods very slowly, and I’m not sure he buys it. The good thing is, he doesn’t question me any further. Frankly, I’m a bit surprised because I’m sure he can see the flush on my cheeks.

The diversion of my mimosa arriving is exactly what I need. The plane taking off makes me guzzle the damn thing, though. When I get to thinking about the large metal tube I’m riding in, it defies all logic that it can remain suspended in the air traveling at God only knows how fast. *Shit. What the hell was I thinking?* No wonder my dad never flew anywhere after —

“You okay over there, Cookie? You’re white knuckling the armrest.”

“Um, you sure this is safe?”

“All’s good. You’ll know if things are bad. Don’t worry.”

“What the fuck does that mean?” I practically shout.

“Shh. You don’t have to yell.”

“I’m not yelling.” But I think I must be because the man in front of us turns around. Beck tells him I’m a newbie suffering from a slight panic attack. I can see his eyeball between the

seats, and I want to give him the stink eye back, but I'm too freaked out right now.

"Take a slow, deep breath and hold it for four counts."

"What the hell is that gonna do? Land the plane?"

Beck, in an extremely calm voice, says, "No, it will help with your anxiety. Come on. Give it a go."

I inhale slowly and hold it. Then he says, "Now release to a count of four." He keeps prodding me along until I halfway feel okay.

"Better?" He wants to know.

"Somewhat. I need another mimosa."

"You have to wait until we clear ten thousand feet."

"I don't know what that means."

He explains how the flight attendants have to stay in their seats until the pilot gives them the go ahead to move around. That happens when we clear ten thousand feet, unless it's real turbulent, which it doesn't seem to be today.

"Oh." And that's all I can say to that. "How can you do this all the time?"

He smiles, and I think for a minute that maybe if I could crawl onto his lap I would feel better. But then I'd look like a big wuss, and who wants a wuss for a wife?

"You get used to it." He picks up my hand, and I try to smile, but it comes off more like a grimace. "You can do better than that, Cookie."

"It's kind of creepy in here, don't you think, when you analyze it? I mean, we're in a piece of metal for crying out loud, shooting through the air at light speed."

He leans in close to me and says, "Not even close. Light speed?" His brows wiggle, and then a raspy chuckle comes out of him.

"You know what I meant." My lower lip sticks out.

“Now you’re acting like English when she doesn’t get her way.”

I puff my chest out, saying, “I am most definitely not.”

Beck suddenly tugs on my hand, and I find his mouth on mine, as he captures me in a heated kiss. All the air I had inflated my chest with comes out in a rush as his fingers tangle into my hair. He angles my head as he deepens the kiss, and those perfectly shaped lips of his mold to mine and caress, nibble, and taste me until I forget where the hell I am. He works his way from one corner of my mouth to the other and finally declares I’m the best mimosa he’s ever tasted.

In a gutsy move that I don’t dare dissect, I fist the front of his shirt and pull him closer. My hand grabs the back of his neck, and this time I am the kiss initiator. If we were anywhere besides this damn plane, I would climb on top of him and let myself get carried away. I can feel the corners of his mouth curl upward in a smile. That’s a good sign, right? I tell myself it is. He kisses me back, pushing me over and into my seat. This man knows how to kiss. That’s for damn sure. All of a sudden, I hear someone clear her throat. Beck pulls back, and the flight attendant stands there with a sly grin on her face.

Beck turns back to me and asks if I want something. I opt for another mimosa. He orders an orange juice and vodka. When she leaves, he grabs my hand again and kisses it.

“I liked that, Cookie.”

“So did I,” I say. My fear of flying momentarily forgotten, we sit together with our arms entwined, drinking our drinks, and I listen to his deep voice as he tells me stories about his travels. Soon I drift to sleep with my head on his shoulder, feeling completely at ease with this man, who I really don’t like, but who will shortly become my husband.

Two

SHERIDAN

Vegas reminds me of an oversized Myrtle Beach minus the coastline. We went there several times for vacation when I was a kid. It was nothing but miles and miles of hotel after hotel. That's what Vegas is, only much more glitzy and higher end. Our limo—because Beck didn't want to take a regular old cab or even Uber—pulls up to one of the fanciest hotels I've ever seen. As we drive in, there is a huge water-like feature in front.

“Are those the fountains you told me about?” I ask.

“Yes, we're going to have dinner in the restaurant that overlooks them, so you can enjoy the show,” Beck says.

“Sounds amazing.”

“I've also booked us tickets to see Cirque du Soleil while we're here. They have a show at the hotel.”

“Seriously? I've always wanted to see them, but never had the chance.”

“You'll love it,” he says as he helps me out of the car. When we walk inside, I can't help but stare open-mouthed. There are gorgeous floral arrangements everywhere, and glass artwork that also resembles flowers hang from the ceiling. Flowers grow everywhere—around walkways, in pots, just about any place one looks. It's a living garden in here. Beck checks in, and they act as if they know him. He's very friendly with the staff, and they confirm all his restaurant and activity reservations. A valet assists us to our room and then leaves. I keep wondering if it will turn awkward between us, but I'm so enamored with this place, that thought is only fleeting.

“Are you tired? As in do you need a nap, or are you up for some exploring?”

“I’m up for exploring. What time is dinner?”

“Not until nine.” He approaches me and takes my hands. “I thought we could get married today. Are you okay with this?”

A nervous giggle erupts out of me. “Oh, sure. Like let’s get it out of the way?”

His brow creases. “No, that’s not what I meant at all. I sort of want this vacation to be our little honeymoon.”

“Oh.” He takes me by surprise. What’s happened to the jerkface I used to know? But it hits me that he’s totally into trying to do what’s right, and my heart squeezes a tiny bit. A grin spreads across my face as I say, “I think that would be very nice, Beck.”

He tilts his head and stares at my hands for a second. “Come on. There’s somewhere we need to go first.”

We get down to the strip, and it’s a beautiful day, a bit cool, but blue skies and cloudless. Beck holds my hand as we walk, and he has a tendency to take long strides with those legs of his. I have to remind him about my sore ankle.

“Do you need to ride? I can order a cab.”

“No, I’m fine as long as we take it slow.”

He says we’re not going far. The shopping area is just ahead.

“Shopping? I’m not that big of a fan.”

“It’s fine. There’s something I need to get.”

Maybe he’s thinking of English, so I keep on, enjoying the sights. There are more casinos here than Carter has little liver pills, whatever that means. That’s what my old neighbor used to say growing up. I never knew what a little liver pill was, though.

Beck finally pulls me inside a store, and when I realize where we are, I’m kind of surprised. It’s a jewelry store.

“We need rings.”

“Oh, I guess so.” That thought never crossed my mind, and it makes me feel a bit guilty.

“What’s your pleasure, Cookie?”

“Jeez, I don’t know. Just a silver band, I suppose. Can we have the date engraved inside?”

“You’re getting more than a plain old band. Now, either you pick out something or I will.”

Talk about awkward. I don’t know where to start or what to look for. Then I make a decision. “You pick.”

“You sure?”

“Yep, then I can say it was a true surprise.”

“Okay, wait here.”

“And, Beck, you need a band, too. Maybe one that matches mine.”

He nods and says, “Got it.”

The store is quite large, and he’s gone forever, it seems. Finally, a man comes over to me and has me slip on some ring sizers to gauge what size my finger is. He smiles and thanks me, and I’m alone again. Beck joins me a little bit later, and we leave.

“All set?” I ask.

“All set. We’re ready. I thought we could get dressed for dinner sometime around seven and then take a cab to the chapel, get married, then come back to the hotel for champagne, and then our dinner reservation.”

“Sounds romantic.”

“You think?”

“Well, yeah, I do.”

“Good. So, have you ever been in a casino?”

“Yeah, but only the cheesy kind.”

“Come on.”

We are right by Caesar's Palace, so we go there, and Beck walks me around and shows me everything. "Want to play?"

"I think I'd rather watch."

He plays craps and explains the game to me—which confuses me to no end. Poker is next on the list, and he ends up winning a little. Then we go to grab something for lunch. He tells me he enjoys gambling a little but isn't in love with it.

"It would scare me to pieces spending that kind of money and thinking I could lose it in the blink of an eye. I think I'm too cheap for gambling."

"The key is setting a certain amount aside, and when you spend that amount, you quit. That's where a lot of people get in trouble. They keep trying to recoup their losses because they never set that figure aside."

"Makes sense. But my amount would be so little, it wouldn't be worth spending it."

Beck laughs. "Yeah, you have to spend at least a couple hundred bucks."

"Umm. No way. That's my grocery money for the month. If I did that, I wouldn't eat."

"Not anymore, Cookie. You can spend whatever you want."

The idea of that is completely foreign to me. "I could never do that."

"You'll have to retrain yourself."

This is something we never discussed before today. It never entered my mind that we should, but I can see we need to have this discussion.

"Beck, I can't spend your money freely. In fact, I'd like to contribute to the pot, so to speak. I still have rent to pay Michelle, and I have school loans, plus my car expense, but I didn't marry you to take care of my bills. I really didn't, and I don't want you to think I did."

“Let me explain something to you, Sheridan. When my grandmother died, I inherited a large amount of money in the form of a trust fund. I can tell you the exact amount, but it’s irrelevant now because of my investments. It’s grown substantially. I’ve also done quite well as a photographer in my own right. Therefore, money is not an issue with me. I know you’re not marrying me for my money. If you were, I wouldn’t have had to ask you more than once. I don’t want you to have to scrape by. I don’t live like that, and I certainly don’t want my wife to live like that. Am I making sense here?”

“You are, but it makes me feel guilty using your money like that.”

“It shouldn’t. Now if you go to the grocery store for us, and you don’t use the household credit card, I will make you return every last item you bought. Am I being clear enough on this?”

“Yes. Okay, though I still want to contribute.”

“You will by being English’s mother. We need to get your debts paid off, and I want you to concentrate on that first. And another thing, we’re getting you a new car.”

“Oh, no. I’m not ... I can’t afford it.”

“I’ll handle it.” The way he stares at me tells me he’s not up for any arguments. However, I’m not going to be railroaded into this either.

“Beck, I’ll get a new car when I need one.”

“You’ve long passed the day you need one, Cookie.”

“I know it may not look like much, but it’s all I can afford.”

“I don’t want to argue this point, but you’re going to have to retrain yourself here. Hear me out. You’ll be responsible for driving English to and from school. And—no offense—your car doesn’t look like the safest thing on the road. I want the top of the line in safety when it comes to carting her around. So, you’re getting a new car, like it or not.”

It’s difficult to argue that point when he puts it like that.

“Okay, but I’m not sure I can swing the payment. I may have to go in halves with you.”

“I’ll take care of the damn thing,” he reassures me.

“What if we don’t work out?”

He frowns. “Then you’ll take the car with you. It’ll be in your name. I’m not going to buy you a car and take it away from you.”

“If you say so. I just don’t want anyone to think I’m taking advantage of you.”

“First, *I* don’t think you’re taking advantage of me. And second, I don’t quite care what others think.”

We leave a while later to go back to our room and change. I want to shower and so does Beck, so I give him the bathroom first, since it will take me longer to do my hair.

I’m standing at one of the sinks brushing my teeth, my wet hair hanging down my back in tight waves, and my body wrapped in a plush towel when he barges in.

“I wondered if you ... wow, you look ... beautiful.” He pulls the toothbrush out of my hand and sets it down. “Spit.”

“Huh?”

“Spit,” he says again. I spit out the foamy mess and rinse my mouth right before he grabs me, turns me in his arms, and says, “I’ve been wanting to do this all day.” At first his lips tickle as they brush over mine, then he sucks on my lower one as he softly sinks his teeth into it. His tongue flicks over the edges of it right before he presses it past the opening of my mouth. I lean into him, sighing, stretching my arms to thread my fingers through thick waves of his hair. He groans and pulls away from my mouth, kissing the way to my ear. “Can I take this damn towel off?”

Instead of answering him, I slip my hand between us and detach the thing from where I’ve twisted the ends together. It lands on our feet between us. Our eyes are connected, but

when the towel swooshes away, Beck's instantly move downward, and I close mine, shyness overtaking me.

"Christ, Cookie. Look at you. I wish I had my camera in here. Your tits are perfect." His hand smooths over one of my breasts, and my nipple puckers. Then his mouth latches on to it as he sucks. Air traps in my chest as I yank on his head. I know I'm going to make a fool of myself because it's been way too long for me. And I'm not exactly the most experienced at this either. Will he think I'm a doofus? Or will he make some smart-ass comment that will have me running out of the room in tears? But then he does something with his teeth and tongue—what is that? It's so damn good, I forget all my insecurities and want to dry hump him instead.

"Beck, I ... can we ...?" How do I ask this man to fuck me? Or rub me between my legs? What's appropriate and what isn't?

"Hard and fast?"

"No, soft and slow. So I can watch." *Did I just say that?*

With a grin on his face, he says, "Wow. Yeah. Okay. I can do that."

Am I reading too much into his reaction, and should I even care at this point? I think I'm getting sweaty from being too anxious. Shit.

He takes my hand and leads me to the huge bed where I watch him strip. If his body was a sight clothed, it's nothing short of miraculous naked. How did I ever land a man who looks like Beck? Oh, wait—reality check. He's using me to make himself look good in court. But right now, I couldn't care less.

He pulls back the covers, and as I'm getting ready to climb in, he stops me with a hand on my hip. "Not yet." His penetrating stare makes me squirm, but I clench my thighs because the pressure down below has increased to the point where I need to do something about it. He gives me a gentle shove so I fall to the bed, my behind on the edge. "Scoot back

a little.” He drops to his knees in front of me, and it seems a little weird for a second, but as soon as he starts kissing me again, the weirdness is secondary to the heat of his lips. His mouth is like crack. I can’t get enough. Not that I’ve ever done crack, but whatever. Admittedly, I’m a little—okay, a lot—aggressive, as I lean into his kiss, accidentally cracking my teeth against his. But at this point, I’ve lost my apprehension, and I don’t hesitate for even a second. I go for it. When his lips leave mine, I mewl a little, but they make their descent down my neck to the hollow of my throat. Now I whine in earnest.

Large hands spread my legs apart, wide enough for him to move between them, and he bends my knees and places the bottoms of my feet flat on the bed. By the time he gets to his target, my pussy, I want to scream, and I don’t even know why. Hell, what am I saying? Of course, I know why! My skin tingles from head to toe, and the building pressure between my legs is almost too much to bear. It’s so fierce I can’t catch my breath. While I’ve had sex before, though not very often, it’s never made me react like this. Even when I’ve used my own hand I haven’t had this reaction, I’m ashamed to say.

He settles in the apex of my thighs, looks up at me over the horizon of my body, and says, “Cookie, you are one sweet dessert, and your pussy is gorgeous. I love that it’s perfectly bare.” Michelle was right. Thank God I followed her suggestion and got waxed. My heart takes off on a gallop that would impress the crowd at the Run for the Roses. I feel wetness pooling, and it makes me want to squeeze my thighs together, just to ease the tension, or maybe add some friction to my clit. But when his mouth lands on me and begins to caress me, it comes to mind that *this* is what oral sex should be. All the books that describe it, all the sex scenes that are written about it, all the girls that discuss it behind closed doors, talk about *this*. And in this very moment, I realize I’ve never had true oral sex before. I’ve only experienced an absurd imitation of it. His talented tongue swipes me from clit to opening, rimming me first, then tunneling inside, and repeats

this over and over, eventually settling on my clit, sucking and biting it gently. Circling, massaging, and when he inserts not one but two long fingers, pressing on a place deep inside I didn't know existed, I want to shred the sheets in the palms of my hands. I may have screamed, or yelled, or maybe cried out his name. Repeatedly. One thing I do know. I pulled the hell out of his hair. And maybe even smashed his face against me as I humped him.

“You are a greedy little thing. And damn, woman, you came like a fucking rocket.”

I don't dare tell him I've never come like *that* before. In fact, I don't usually orgasm during sexual encounters, unless they're with myself. How sad. Always thought it was me. Guess not.

Grabbing a pillow, I hide my face as embarrassment consumes me. “Is that bad?” I ask, the pillow muffling my voice. Should I be embarrassed about how hard I came?

He climbs over me, but his cock is pointing straight out. It's so pretty, all I want to do is put the thing in my mouth.

He rubs his cheek on mine and says, “Bad? Why would you think that? You were perfection.”

I keep eyeing his dick, and suddenly the words pour out of my mouth, “I want to suck you off.” Why did I tell him that? I seriously just told him that. I've never told any man that in my life. Why him?

“I'm all yours, Cookie.” His raspy voice has ramped up my desire again. The pressure is already mounting, and I just had the best orgasm of my life. How can that be? And, oh, shit. What if I suck at sucking? It can't be that hard, right? I'll throw a little honesty out there.

“Tell me what you like. And if I do it wrong or something. I don't want to suck. I mean, I do, but, well, you know.”

His body shakes as he laughs. “You won't, but, oh yeah, you will.” His hand rubs my cheek, as I look up at him right before I take him into my mouth. The smirk he wears is so

sexy I swear I almost come again. I need to get this over with so maybe he can go down on me again.

With that thought, I put my lips around him and do my best imitation of a vacuum cleaner. Up, down, up, down, add a little tongue at the tip, running it around that super sensitive part, and then down along the underside. I lick all the way to his balls and do my best to suck those, too. Thank God he's a manscaper. Can't bear the thought if he wasn't. And then I do it all in reverse. Tip, lick, tongue, suck. I vacuum him as far as I can down to his base to where he's deep in the back of my throat. He groans and tells me to squeeze him harder. This is such a turn-on that one of my hands creeps in between my thighs and finds my clit so I can ease my discomfort. My mouth is as full as the pressure down below. A bit later he says he's close to coming. I wonder if he'd like a little anal play. I've always heard guys like that. I finish myself off and then take my slick finger and press it to the place right behind his balls. "Jesus!" he growls and grabs my face with both hands as he pumps himself into me. He groans out his climax, and liquid warmth pours down my throat.

His hands scrub his face, and then blue-green eyes dig into mine, almost as though he's searching for something.

Then halting words come. "Jesus, Sheridan, I ... I've never done that before."

"Which part? The blow job or the other thing?" I ask skeptically.

The corner of his mouth curls. "No. I've never been sucked off to the point of coming in someone's mouth."

How odd. "Isn't that the point of a blow job?" Guess I must be pretty damn dumb.

"Most women don't allow men to come in their mouths."

"Oh." My face heats to a thousand degrees. "Guess you could say I'm pretty naïve in this area. And to be honest, it's been a while for me." There, it's out in the open now. I feel

like blowing on my fingers and wiping them on my shoulder. Brave me.

He wraps a big chunk of my hair around his hand and lays over me, resting his weight on his forearms. “Did you get yourself off while you were blowing me?”

“Um. Yeah.”

“You’re an insatiable little thing, aren’t you?” He chuckles. “I love that about you. And I love your blow jobs.”

“It was okay then?” Jeez, I sound like an eager pup. Wait, pups bark and whine; they don’t talk.

“Do you really have to ask?” One side of his mouth curls up.

“No, but a girl likes to hear,” I say.

“I do have to ask, the anal thing? You’re into that?” His eyes pierce me, making me squirm. Maybe I shouldn’t have done that.

“I don’t really know,” I say honestly.

“You’ve never done that?”

“No! I only heard guys like that,” I say.

“You did, huh?” he says, grinning.

“Yeah. Didn’t you? Like it, I mean?” I ask. Maybe he thought it was awful.

“You don’t need me to answer that. But one day, and soon, I’m going to return the favor. But I have bad news.”

“Bad news?” Is it about anal? Does it do something horrid to you like give you eternal diarrhea?

“If we don’t get a move on, we’ll be late for our wedding.”

The whole idea makes me crack up. “”Oh, that. I thought you were going to tell me something about anal. Well, at least we broke the oral sex ice. Now all we have left to do is fucking.”

Beck looks at me and dies laughing.

Three

SHERIDAN

We get to the Elvis-not-Elvis wedding chapel, and I'm pleasantly surprised. It's a small bona fide chapel, but it's quaint and lovely inside. There's a wrought iron arbor covered in a variety of every kind of flower one can imagine. It's absolutely stunning. We're barely on time for our seven thirty wedding appointment, so the minister and his assistant rush us inside where we sign all the appropriate paperwork before our ceremony is performed.

"Nothing like cutting it close on your special day," I say. Since we were running late, I didn't have time to do my hair, so it's super wavy, and not in a good way, but I am wearing my dress and "fancy," but sensible shoes. I say that because they're flats. Beck loves my curly hair, saying it reminds him of English's.

"You really could be her mother."

"English's hair has symmetry. Mine looks like it got stuck in a wind tunnel."

"You're too hard on yourself, Sheridan." His hand reaches for a chunk of twisted locks, and he rubs his fingers back and forth through the mess.

The wedding lasts all of five minutes, but when the ring time comes, I'm amazed at what he slips on my finger. Beck bought a stunning diamond band with a huge center stone for me. It works as both an engagement and wedding ring. He also bought himself a plain, but lovely platinum band. Our wedding date is engraved in both rings.

I thought I'd feel empty during the ceremony, but oddly, a warmth spreads throughout me. It's not so much because of the wedding itself, but because Beck, usually a douche face,

has suddenly become kind and is trying his best to make this special. This, coupled with our little romp in the sack before we came here, is softening me up toward him. Whether or not it's a good thing remains to be seen, but it's the way it is. And it makes me happy.

On the way back to the hotel, I can't stop staring at my ring. "This is too much."

"It's perfect on your hand, and I want this to mean something, even though this can't be what you would have chosen for your ideal engagement and wedding. I know running away to Vegas isn't everyone's idea of a great wedding, but I want us to look back and remember this day as something we enjoyed."

I lean over and kiss him. "Thank you for being so thoughtful."

Dinner is amazing. The fountain show is every bit as beautiful as Beck told me it would be. The food is delicious, and Beck tells me about the first time he came here. It was his first travel shoot, and he was super nervous. Young and naïve, he didn't know what to expect, but the magazine insisted on him, and he showed up freaked as hell. They had him shoot the fountains and wanted to see what he could do, so he gave them something different. He shot them in sequence, as each one blasted up in the air. He was able to get great shots, even though it took a while, and those photos are still used today by the hotel to promote the fountain show.

Dinner lasts until after eleven, and I ask Beck if he minds very much if we go back to our room. I'm tired, and it's been a long day, but I do have an ulterior motive. I want to get naked with him. By the time we get off the elevator, he knows my game plan. When we walk in the door, he asks, "Hard and fast?"

"Like I said earlier, slow and easy. You weren't paying attention."

“Oh, but I was, Mrs. Bridges. I just thought maybe you might have changed your mind.”

He unzips my dress and takes off my bra. Then my panties follow, leaving me in my flats. “I think you can kick those off on your own.”

“Yeah, I’ll do that while I undress you.”

With clumsy fingers, I unknot his tie. Next, I stumble through the process of unbuttoning his shirt, then his pants. Finally, I notice he’s commando.

Awkwardly, I stand there, my hands flexing, itching to touch him, but too shy to do so.

“Well?” he asks.

Does he want me to take the first step? I wish I weren’t so unsure of myself. “Well, what?”

“Aren’t you going to touch me?”

“Yes.” I reach for him, and my hand trembles.

In a gravelly voice, he says, “Don’t be afraid. You should probably know it doesn’t bite.”

“I didn’t think it did. It’s very nice.” That’s an understatement, but I don’t want to overinflate his ego. He’s like velvet, reminding me of those plants my mother used to grow called Lamb’s Ears. I used to tear the leaves off and rub them against my cheeks because I loved the way they felt.

“That’s good, Mrs. Bridges, because my cock and your pussy are going to become very well acquainted. In fact, one might say they are going to be best friends.”

“That a fact?” I whisper.

“Indeed it is.” His voice is deep and husky.

“Then we should introduce them to each other so they are on a first name basis,” I say.

“A couple of things first. Are you on birth control because I don’t want any little surprises?”

My mouth forms a circle. “Are you saying I do?”

“Not at all. I was just saying we need to be responsible.”

“I agree. The reason we’re here is because you weren’t,” I say.

“You’re exactly right, and I thought I was. I’d always used condoms, and I can’t really say what happened that night because of the alcohol. And while I wouldn’t trade English for anything in the world, I believe pregnancies should be planned.”

“Again, I agree. Yes, I’m on the pill.”

He nods. “Are you clean?”

“I’ve never been tested, and maybe I should be, but I’ve only been with three men. And my last relationship ended over a year ago.”

He slowly flicks his head up and down.

“What about you?” I ask.

“I haven’t had any relationships other than the two I had in high school. I’ve kept my life free of them because of English. However, I’ve had sexual partners including the one I had with her mother. I was tested after English arrived, and with the exception of that one night—and again, I don’t know what happened for sure—I’ve never had sex without a condom.”

“Neither have I,” I say.

He smiles. “Good. I guess we’re on the same page then.”

“So, the question is, do we continue to use condoms? And are you going to be faithful to this marriage?” He looks as though I’ve struck him.

“What the hell kind of question is that? Do you think I’ll be out fucking around on you?”

He raises his voice in anger, and I actually flinch at the sound of it because it scares me a bit. “Well, I know this is just a marriage—”

“Yes, it’s a *marriage*. We’re *married*, Sheridan. Married people don’t go fucking around on each other.”

Tears sting the backs of my eyes, and I tell myself I will not cry. Only I don’t listen to me. Dammit! “You know what I mean. This isn’t the *normal*,” I have to stop and swipe the mess off my face and snort through my clogged nose, “kind of marriage. I don’t expect you to—”

“Well I expect *you* to be faithful to *me*!” Large hands wrap around my upper arms. “I didn’t leap into this without thinking this through. I knew what I was getting into, and it included fidelity on my part. I’d hoped it did for you, too.”

I roll my lips between my teeth before I speak. “Being unfaithful is something I would never do. I only said that because I thought that maybe you wouldn’t want to be with me all the time. When we got on that condom discussion, I only wanted you to know that if you were messing around with other women, I wanted you to wear a condom with me.”

“Fuck. Sheridan, you and I will be providing a loving home for my daughter. That does *not* entail me running around on you and having extramarital affairs. I would hope you’d see that I’m a better person than that. I’d like for her to see us at least act like we’re in a loving relationship, which includes sharing a bedroom at home. Besides, I could never do anything like that.”

“We’re going to share a bedroom?” Of course, we are. How stupid was that?

“Yeah. What else did you think? You can’t share hers, and you can’t sleep in the guest room. Kids talk, and she would be blabbing that all over the school.”

“I don’t know why I even said that. Dumbass me.”

“I *want* you to share my room. You’re my wife now, and while I’m sure this isn’t exactly how you envisioned your marriage to be, I’d like to try to make this as agreeable for you as possible.”

We can go on and on about this, but the bottom line is he's right. So I hold out my hand in the form of a truce.

"What's this?" he asks.

"You're right, and I agree, so let's say we shake on it and call it a day."

His warm palm wraps around my smaller one, and he pulls me into the wall of his chest. "I'd rather call it a night and see what other tricks you might have waiting for me under the covers with that dirty little mind of yours."

As my mouth opens to protest, his lips crash into mine, and he becomes impatient with his kiss. No air is left to breathe because he's consumed every last bit of it as our tongues wrestle against each other's. With our mouths pressed together, he mumbles into mine, "It was rather interesting arguing with you naked. I liked seeing your tits with their hardened nipples, Cookie." He cups my ass and gives it a firm squeeze. "Now onto fucking. On the bed you go."

When I move to my back, he stops me and says, "No, I want you on top of my face."

"What?" I ask, only he doesn't say a word back to me.

His half-lidded stare leaves me stuttering. "Wh-what do you mean?" This is a new thing for me. Most sex is admittedly. I'm realizing that more and more, and I've only been with Beck this short time.

He crooks a finger and motions me toward him. I straddle his head and watch in fascination as his fingers spread my lips, and he starts to lick me. His tongue must have fairy dust on it or something, because as soon as it touches me, I jolt.

"Hold on to the headboard, Cookie, and spread your legs more."

Doing as he asks, I look down to see his blue-green gaze on me. Losing myself in his magical tongue ministrations, I gasp when his fingers join in. He inserts one, then another inside of me and thrusts, hooking one so he hits that secret spot. How

does he find it so fast? I've been on a scavenger hunt for that thing for years. Oh, God, and what comes next almost has me shooting off the bed. He takes one of those fingers out and rubs that puckered spot where no man has dared to venture. Maybe I should tell him he's like Captain Kirk going to the final frontier. Okay, maybe not. When that finger actually slowly enters, Captain Kirk is forgotten because in two point five seconds I experience the most fantastically epic orgasm I've ever had.

Beck rolls me onto my back and asks, "Condom or no? I plan on being faithful."

"As do I. No condom."

Tossing the foil packet aside, he throws my left leg over his shoulder and hooks the other leg around his arm, as he slowly, slowly sinks his cock into me. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah," I pant out.

"Good. Because I'm getting ready to unleash hard and fast on you so get the fuck ready." And then he proceeds to do exactly that. I'm lost in the pleasure-pain threshold and whimper as he continues to pound into me. I guess he forgot about slow and easy. I'm not gonna lie. I'm waiting for the choir of angels to start singing it's that fucking great.

"Do not take your eyes off of this, Sheridan, and I mean it." His gaze briefly flicks to his cock and back up to my eyes.

Taking his cue, I watch where we're joined and see his penis, shiny and slick with the wetness from my orgasm. My vagina clenches around him. Oh, good Lord, I'm gonna come again.

"Oh, God, your dick deserves a gold medal," I pant. Watching it pump in and out of me with such finesse is much more than anyone should be asked to do. My fingers grab a handful each of his ass, and I yell my orgasm out. Maybe something about a hallelujah moment. I really don't remember. He doesn't stop. The pumping continues. My husband—holy shit, I'm married—is a stud.

“I want one more. Touch yourself. Get yourself off for me, Cookie.”

He doesn't have to ask me twice. My hand finds that hypersensitive spot, and I massage it in a somewhat choppy circle, but before I know it, I feel his finger probing my behind again.

“Lift up for me,” he says.

I raise my hips, and a finger slides in.

“I can feel my cock inside of you here.”

“Oh, that's ...” I can't talk anymore because he's resumed his plunging. And then he slows it down to a rocking motion. That finger, along with his dick, my finger, and *wham!* I'm a goner.

All of a sudden, he stills. His dick pulsates in my vagina. I love his warmth spreading inside of me.

His mouth is on mine, tugging my lower lip into his mouth, gently biting on it. He marks a trail straight to my breast, and when he reaches my nipple, he's merciless. He sucks hard and then bites. How is it possible I'm turned on again? He moves to the other breast, and I moan. Loudly.

“On your stomach.” I do as he orders. Then his body covers mine, and he spreads my legs apart with his knees. I feel his tip entering me, and he seats himself all the way to the hilt. My back arches to accommodate the motion. Then, weirdly enough, he pushes my legs together and—oh my God—the friction is a-fucking-mazing.

We find a rhythm, but the pressure builds too fast because soon I cry out, “I'm gonna come.” I pant like a dog in summer.

Once my orgasm passes, he goes at it like a wild man until he gets his, and then collapses on me. I don't mind the weight. In fact, I like it. He kisses me everywhere his mouth can reach. Then his breath fans across my ear as he says, “I'm going to have you in the ass one day, Cookie. That tight ass of yours is too tempting.”

“What is it with guys and the ass?”

“It’s tight. We like tight,” he explains.

“So, my pussy isn’t tight?”

A husky laugh escapes that makes my belly clench. “Your pussy is very tight. I love your pussy. It couldn’t be more perfect.”

“But you want my ass, too?”

“Of course. It’s the greatest ass. Why wouldn’t I?” He rolls off me and flips me to my side.

“You’re crazy.”

“You had *my* ass,” he counters with a little smirk.

“That’s not the same.”

“Oh, and let’s get something straight. No other guys will ever have this pussy or this ass,” he reaches around me and squeezes mine, “as long as you’re my wife. Got it?”

“Got it.” He’s damn serious about this marriage thing. I smile to myself because as far as husbands go, I have to admit, I scored big on this one. Huge actually.

“What’s up with that smile? You look like the cat that ate the canary.”

“Swallowed.”

He arches a brow and in a low voice asks, “Excuse me?”

“Swallowed. Not ate.”

His tongue, that very same one that brought me to how many orgasms—runs over his lower lip, and I can feel my pussy heating up again. I’m growing wetter by the minute.

“Why are you staring at my mouth like that, Sheridan?”

I don’t even bother answering him. I wrap my arms around his neck and go for it. In the end, I figure what the hell. He’s my husband. I can do whatever the heck I want with him.

Two days later, on Saturday, we wait in line at the airport to check in for our flight home. My jeans rub me in all the wrong places. I'm so sore I can barely walk. Beck leans over and whispers, "I promise I'll bring you back, and the next time we'll see Cirque du Soleil." He presses his lips to that sensitive spot behind my ear. It didn't take him long to figure out all my hot zones. The man is on fire in the bedroom. And on the floor. And the counter. In the shower. And the bathtub. I think I'm bowlegged.

"It's fine. I rather enjoyed our room service," I say, my tongue poking the inside of my cheek. We get through the big X-ray machine thingy and walk to our gate.

"Want anything before we board?"

"An ice pack," I say with a wink.

His eyes spell confusion, and I give him a thumbs-down, cluing him into my issue. The light bulb goes on, and he says, "Hmm. I have all kinds of ideas on what to do with ice, Cookie."

"I'm sure you do."

He slings an arm around me, and we walk to our gate. Moments later, they make the call for first class to board, right as his phone buzzes.

"Who is it? English?"

He frowns as he reads the message. The frown he wears turns into something worse. His mood completely darkens as the corners of his eyes pull down, reminding me of the old version of Beck. I'm instantly on alert.

"What's happened?"

"It's John, my attorney. She somehow discovered us. That we ran off to Vegas."

"How can that be? We told no one."

"She must have a PI on me. But there's worse. She found out about the disciplinary action against you at school. John's

recommending you resign.”

My heart tumbles to my toes as my world, the only world I've ever wanted, crashes around me.

Four

SHERIDAN

The flight home is miserable, and John waits for us at the house. It doesn't make sense—none of it. How could she have found out about it so quickly? And to resign my position, in my mind, only admits guilt. But according to John, it defrays the situation, sends them the message that if—and he says this as a huge if—the court sees it as behaving inappropriately, we rectified the situation immediately. We were in love and quickly married because we knew we couldn't live without each other. John maintains it's that simple. I say bullshit. Anyone with a brain will see through it and call us out. But it falls on deaf ears. He looks at me through condescending eyes and snaps, yes, snaps, that I am unaware of legalities and don't know what I'm talking about.

The argument continues to escalate, and I stammer with rage. "I know one thing. If I were sitting on a jury and heard all of this, I wouldn't believe it for a minute."

John, who is about done with me by this time, offers me a withering stare. My first instinct is to shrink from him. He is the authoritative one, but I load my spine with steel and stand firm. In a mocking tone, he responds, "Well, you won't be on the jury, will you?"

Beck finally pulls out of his trance and says, "John, that's enough. Sheridan has a valid point."

"No, she—"

Beck's hand flies out as he says, "Hear me out. If she resigns, she's right. She's admitting guilt, which is not what we need. We did absolutely nothing wrong. We barely kissed before we got married. The fact is, there is no reason for her to resign."

“Can you prove it?”

The tiny muscle in Beck’s jaw ticks. “Your job as my attorney is to find that woman incompetent as a mother. I thought you had hired a PI to figure out what was going on in her life. What’s going on with that? Why do I feel like you’re putting Sheridan on trial here? And me?”

John rubs the back of his neck and says, “Yeah, I need to find out about that, but if we go to trial, you will be up there, being asked these questions. And I don’t have to tell you how the courts usually find in favor of the woman.”

“I can’t even believe this is happening. What about the legal document she signed saying she gave up all custodial rights to me? Doesn’t that count for anything?”

“Beck, you know we’ve been through this already. She claims she was under mental stress when she signed that, so that means it would become void if the court decides in her favor. And we can’t go back and attest to her mental stability or sanity now.”

“Fuck. So, Sheridan, you really think you shouldn’t resign?” Beck asks.

“I do. I think it sends the wrong message.” The pain in Beck’s face worries me. “But I’ll do anything you want me to.” I emphasize the *you* so he knows I trust *him*, not his lawyer. For whatever reason, I don’t like that man.

I can feel John’s eyes on me, and not in a positive way. After he leaves, I broach a very touchy subject.

“Beck, do you think John is the best attorney for you?”

“What do you mean?”

I pick and choose my words carefully. “Okay, so I don’t know much about this stuff, and I pretty much feel like an outsider here since I haven’t been involved from the beginning, but I wonder if there is someone in town who only practices this kind of law.”

He pinches his lower lip and doesn't speak for a moment. "You know John is a friend of my dad's." I knew that, which surprises me now that I've been around John a bit. I can't see Mark talking to anyone like that. Basically, I think John is an ass. I wouldn't pick him out as one of Mark's friends.

"Yeah, but does that mean you're tied in to using only him?"

"No, but when Dad called him for advice, he said he'd take the case. So we were grateful. It would be sort of awkward pulling out now."

"Awkward my butt. This is your daughter we're talking about." I'm surprised and a bit pissed by his response.

"You're exactly right."

"This is my humble opinion, but I think he's out of his realm, if you will. And I believe he's wrong, Beck. Maybe I'm the one who is, but I would feel so much better if you got a second opinion."

"You're right."

"Let's get on the computer and check things out now." It's a good suggestion, because there's a law office that specializes in this, and we immediately make a call. Knowing it's a holiday weekend, we don't expect a call back, but are surprised when we get one. They actually want to set up an appointment for Sunday, the next day. We do it for the afternoon, hoping Mark and Anna will watch English.

By mid-afternoon, they return home, and the house becomes a living breathing entity with English running all over the place, telling her Disney tales, talking nonstop about seeing the characters, taking pictures with them, and going on the rides. All of a sudden, a ginormous pang of remorse nails me in the ribs, causing my breath to leave me in a rush, and my hand immediately clutches that place where my heart is. I instantly know that I want to witness these moments. I want to be there when she hops around Cinderella and Princess Jasmine. I want to take the pictures of her when she puts her

little arm around Mickey Mouse or Anna and Elsa. The sting of tears is so poignant I excuse myself and run to Beck's room, where I lock myself in his bathroom. This is crazy. I can't be falling apart like this around her. She's too perceptive not to pick up on it.

After I splash copious amounts of water onto my face and pull myself together, I open the door to Beck standing there.

"Cookie, you okay?"

"I'll quit. I'll do whatever it takes, Beck. I don't care." And a giant case of tears takes over as he wraps his arms around me. The words pour out of me, but they're unrecognizable.

Two large hands grip each side of my face, and he looks down at me from his vantage point of six plus however many inches. Then his mouth smashes onto mine in a bruising kiss. But it's not clumsy or sloppy in any way. Quite the opposite. It's heated and intense. It's one of those kinds of kisses that lead to something else, that leaves you begging for more. But there's not time for that as we hear English's feet pounding, getting closer, and just in time Beck tears his mouth away from mine and I'm left fighting for air as the little mite runs into the room, oblivious to it all.

"Miss Monroe, come on. You have to look at my pictures." She takes ahold of my hands and tugs me behind her as I put my fingers up to my lips, still tasting Beck on them.

"Munchkindoodle, why don't you come in the kitchen? We have something to tell you."

"Can't it wait, Daddy? I want to show Miss Monroe my under the rainbow pictures."

I cast a hopeless glance at Beck, and he shakes his head. English talks fifty miles an hour. I can't possibly keep up with everything. Maybe if my mind weren't preoccupied, it wouldn't be so bad, but as it is, I'm impossible right now.

"What do you think? I bet you wish you had been there."

“Oh, yes, I can’t think of something I’d want to do more.”
But not for the reason she thinks.

“Munchkin,” Beck calls from the door, “come in the kitchen. Banana and Geepa have to leave soon.”

English grabs me and kisses me. “Come on, Miss Monroe. Let’s go. Gotta say good-bye to Banana and Geepa.”

Our hands swing back and forth between us, and I want to squeeze this child. She’s such a love bug. When we get to the kitchen, Beck grabs her and swings her up in the air before setting her down on the counter.

“We have a surprise for you, Munch.”

“A surprise?”

“Yep.” He puts his arm around me and pulls me into his side. “While you were at Disney World, Sheridan and I went on our own vacation of sorts. We went to Las Vegas. And while we were out there, we decided to get married. What I’m saying is—”

“You mean Miss Monroe is my mommy now?” English blurts out.

“Well, I guess she is,” he says.

A silly grin grows on my face, and I’m sure it’s so big you can see every tooth in my mouth.

English claps her hands together and asks, “Does that mean we can all watch movies together in your big bed, Daddy?”

“I guess it does.”

“Can we eat popcorn, too?”

“Yes, we can eat popcorn, too.”

She beams, and I want to eat her smile right up. Then she spreads her arms out wide and says, “I wanna give you a big fat love squeeze, Mommy.”

The rock of emotion that develops in my throat expands to the size of Gibraltar as I walk into her incredible little arms

and wrap her in a hug as tears streak my cheeks. For a brief moment, I forget what looms ahead and allow myself to experience this feeling of joy singing through my veins—the joy of being loved by this amazing child.

While we're hugging, she says, "I think I'm under the biggest rainbow in the whole wide world." Can this kid possibly own any more of my heart?

My eyes meet Beck's over her blond curls, and his don't look exactly dry either. He asks, "How about we all go out to dinner tonight to our favorite restaurant?"

Anna and Mark decline, saying they have to unpack. I have a feeling they want us to have some alone time. Before they leave, Beck pulls them aside. The expression on Mark's face tells me what it's about. He nods a few times, and then they say good-bye after they give English big hugs and kisses. She shouts out her thank yous, and reminds them to say their prayers tonight and wash their hands after they use the restroom. I almost die laughing. They're really great about keeping a straight face.

When they're gone, English asks to play in her room with all her new Disney toys. I crash land on the sofa, only Beck pulls me back up and drags me into his room. Or maybe I should say our room. Still seems weird.

"Do you know how much I want to hold you? Get in the bed."

"Are you crazy?" I whisper-shout. "We can't do anything with English down the hall."

"Calm down, you filthy minded little wife of mine." He chuckles. "I only want to lie in the bed and snuggle up to you. Jeez, does everything have to be about fucking hard and fast with you?"

My mouth hangs open in utter shock.

"Sweetheart, if you don't close your mouth, I'm going to drag that sweet little ass of yours in the bathroom and shove my dick in your mouth."

“Uh...what?”

“You heard me. You’d like that, wouldn’t you?”

Oh my God. Did my pussy just clench when he spoke those words? An ache builds between my thighs, and I cross my legs and squeeze.

“I asked you a question, Sheridan.” His voice sends shivers down my spine.

“Um, yes, I’d like that,” I mumble as I tighten my quads in a feeble attempt to ease my burgeoning desire. Shit. I look around the room for I have no idea what.

“What’s the matter, sweetheart?”

He knows exactly what the problem is.

“You’re wet, aren’t you?”

My eyes dart around the room, wondering if I have time to run into the bathroom and quickly masturbate.

“Are you thinking about getting yourself off?”

“How did you know that?” I squeak.

“Your nipples are poking through your shirt.”

“They are not. I’m wearing a bra.”

“Cookie, you’d better get some different bras then. Look.” He walks me in front of a mirror, and damn, my nipples could be used as directional pointers on the highway. Fuck!

Beck stands behind me and cups my mound and then smacks it through my jeans.

“I’m gonna need a little more than that.”

“That so?” Without breaking eye contact in the mirror, he presses the seam of my jeans directly on my clit as I stand there with my legs spread. His middle finger works the seam around, creating exquisite friction, and I’m so heated up, in no time at all, my climax hits, as I come moaning his name.

He bends down and whispers into my ear, “My dick gets hard listening to the sounds you make when you come. That dirty mouth of yours is the biggest turn-on, Cookie. And I wish I could go down on you, but that best wait until tonight. Now, get in bed so I can hold you.”

“Okay,” I say, sounding breathy. I climb in the bed and say, “Ah, this bed.”

“What about it?”

“It feels like a giant puffy cloud.”

Beck falls into bed next to me and says, “Glad you like it.” He’s facing me and cups my cheek. “English was so happy about us getting married.”

“God, Beck, could she be any sweeter? I want to eat that kid up. Every time she says something, I think my heart is going to burst open and butterflies are going to fly right out of it. It sounds so kooky, I know, but she makes me feel gooey inside.”

“I knew this would put her under the rainbow.” He kisses my head and pulls me in close to his chest. “I hope tomorrow will give us some good news.”

“I won’t let myself think of anything other than good.” I kiss him. Not much later, a curly-headed little munchkin crawls into bed between us, and the three of us take a nap together. It reminds me of when I was a little girl and my mom and dad were still alive. Those moments were special, only I didn’t know how much I would come to treasure them. Having English with us is one of those things I will hold close to my heart and not take for granted. She didn’t ask to come into this world the way she did, and she certainly didn’t ask for this upcoming battle that is about to take place over her. My silent vow to her, as she lies next to me, is to protect her at all cost, no matter what.

Five

SHERIDAN

Sunday morning we have to finagle a way to get English to church without us. She is so inquisitive; it's not easy to come up with an excuse, other than to make one up. Beck tells her I have to go back to my place and get some things and then go and work a bit. Her forehead pinches together with a mass of turbulence.

“Why can't you wait to work tomorrow, Mommy?”

Jeez, she's already calling me Mommy.

“Because I have some catching up to do. But you can go with Banana and Geepa, and we'll come and pick you up later.”

“But I wanna be with you.”

Beck crouches down in front of her and says, “And we want you to, Munch, but we have some grown-up things to do. I promise you, as soon as we're through, we'll come and get you and have some fun together. How about we go to the movies later?”

“Okay. Can I have popcorn and M&M's?”

“You bet.” He gives her a big hug. He must be feeling as guilty as I am if he's letting her have candy *and* popcorn.

She's wearing a rhinestone tiara and heart-shaped sunglasses Banana bought her at Disney, and she looks quite the picture. “Okay, but do you think I can wear this to church?” She's pointing up at her tiara.

Beck looks up at the ceiling, and I have to cover my mouth. “Tell you what. Leave it here, but you can wear it to the movie theater.”

She holds out her tiny fist waiting for his larger one to bump it before she scampers off to get ready for church.

“You need to photograph her in that get-up. She’s so damn cute.”

He shakes his head with a laugh. “Yeah, and she knows it, too.”

When she emerges from her room, she’s wearing red and white striped leggings, a black and white checkered skirt, and a bright green sweater. All in all, it’s a super cute look. Beck swipes his hand over his hair.

“Ah, you look awesome. And sort of Christmas-y. I love it, English,” I tell her.

“You do?”

“Yep, I see fashion in your future.”

A dimpled grin spreads across her sweet little face. “Mommy, I love you. You always put me under the rainbow.”

“You want to know something? You put me under the rainbow, too.”

A tornado of blond curls crashes into me, and I’m encased in an English hug. Then she kisses my cheek, and I’m absolute putty in this kid’s hands. Maybe it would be a good idea if she were to be transferred to another class. I don’t think I could ever reprimand her. She just too freakin’ cute.

We drop her off at Mark and Anna’s, and when we get back in the car, Beck is silent as he drives.

“You okay?” I ask.

“Yeah, I never thought she’d take to you like that. It’s ... it means more than I can say, Sheridan.”

“What’s not to love about her? She’s a special child, and that’s the truth. You’ve done such a wonderful job with her.”

“No, she’s always been like that. From day one she was this tiny bundle of love that never did anything wrong. Or barely

anyway. You know how you hear of these things? Dogs that never chew or act up? Kids that are golden? That's English. It makes me really worried, though."

"What do you mean?"

His eyes flick to me for a second and then switch back to the road. "Like maybe I'm not good enough to have a kid like her."

"That's ridiculous. You can't think that way."

"I'm sometimes of the opinion that she's an angel. And maybe she's only supposed to be with me for a short time. That's why I'm so freaked about this custody battle. Like maybe my time with her is up. Are you following me?"

"Yeah, but I disagree. You were given your own child because her mother didn't want her. She abandoned her on your doorstep in a box, Beck, with a letter telling you that. It's not like English magically appeared in a cabbage leaf without any explanation. There was DNA evidence. It wasn't a mystery. You are her father and have spent the last six years raising her. Don't give up. Believe in yourself. Look at what you've accomplished. She's by far one of the best kids in my class, and that's putting her up against those that are raised in a home with two parents. Don't ever take what you've done with her away from yourself."

"I wish I weren't driving so I could kiss you for saying that."

"It's only the truth."

His mood lightens until we confer with the attorney. Then both of our worlds crash into thousands of pieces.

"I think it's a mistake that you got married. The way the court may view it is it was rushed and it appears as a cover. It looks like Mr. Bridges was wife hunting and you fit the perfect bill—young, attractive, school teacher who the child was fond of. You follow me here?"

We both nod. I feel like the man has just gut-punched me.

He's very intimidating with his beady eyes and thick brows. "May I ask you something?" The question is directed at Beck.

"Of course," Beck answers.

"Do you love her?" he asks, flicking his head in my direction.

Beck doesn't say anything for a moment, and Mr. Morgan says, "So, what will you say if you're asked that in court?"

"I'll say what I have to."

"Then you intend to perjure yourself."

Beck shifts in his seat, and I ask, "Should we have our marriage annulled, or should we get divorced?"

Mr. Morgan shakes his head. "That would cause even more damage. I don't know who's been advising you, but the advice hasn't been the best."

"What about my job?" I ask.

He is uninformed, so I explain.

"Whatever you do, do not quit. First, it admits guilt, but second, it looks like you married Mr. Bridges for his money. And that won't do at all."

"What if I get fired?"

"They may suspend you, but I doubt they'll fire you. It's supposition, and they can't do it on a six-year-old's comment when she wasn't even there."

Glancing over at Beck, I notice his hands are fisted. He's having a tough time with this.

"Look, it's better we hear this now than never at all, Beck."

He slices his head up and down but doesn't speak at all.

Mr. Morgan looks over the custody paperwork Beck gave him. "This looks in order, but I can see where she'll say she was under stress of being young when she made this decision."

“She’s on drugs. I know it,” Beck grits out.

“Can you *prove* that? What has your PI come up with?”

“Nothing.”

“How long have you had them out there, and who are you using?”

Beck answers him, and he says, “You need to fire them and hire someone else. They should’ve had something, even people coming and going from her house, by now.” He opens his laptop, and after a few clicks, asks Beck for his email. “I just sent you a few of the names I’ll be contacting on your behalf if you hire me. If you don’t, you can contact them yourself. They’re all people I use, and they’re excellent. So, Mrs. Bridges, what is your relationship with English, besides being her teacher?”

“I love her,” I say.

“I need specifics.”

He has me baffled. “I’m not sure what you mean.”

“If Mr. Bridges went out of town for a week, what would you and English do?”

“I’d do everything he does. I’d make her meals, help her bathe, and make sure she does her homework. I’d play with her, draw pictures, watch movies, play outside, go to the park, and do things kids love to do. Since I’m a teacher, it’s not that hard for me to find things she’s interested in.”

“In other words, you’re her mother. You could’ve just said that in the first place.”

“You asked for specifics, and I gave them to you.”

“How is she with you?”

“The fact that she already calls me Mommy, I’d say she’s pretty good,” I answer.

“If possible, I’d like to observe her with you, but it would be best if she didn’t know I was there.”

“That’s okay by me,” I reply. “Beck?”

He shrugs. “Fine with me,” he clips.

“Mr. Bridges, I know you find this invasive, but I can assure it’s only going to get worse. If you truly want sole custody of your child, I’m afraid you’re going to have to jump through more hoops than I can possibly tell you. Our court system can be brutal. On the next day or two, think over what we’ve discussed, and let me know if you want to hire me. You don’t have long, though, because the mother wants to move on this. If you don’t have legal representation, you’re going to have to tell her something yourself soon.”

“No, I’ve already made up my mind. I want you on board. Now. I can’t wait. Every day I stand a chance of losing English, and from what it sounds like, I’ve already screwed up as it is.”

“We’ll go into damage control and then plan our strategic moves against her. But first, we need to fire your PI firm and hire someone new. I’ll get you the paperwork ready for that and we can have everything in motion by tomorrow. Do you want me to fire your firm, or do you want to?”

“The law firm?” Beck asks.

“Well, both actually.”

“I’d better handle the law firm. John is a family friend, and it’ll be sticky.”

“I understand. I need your cell phone and yours, too, Mrs. Bridges.”

We give him our numbers and trade a few more comments and leave. Beck is quiet and unresponsive on the drive home. Other than the, “I’m sorry I dragged you into all of this,” he doesn’t say another word, even though I try to engage him in conversation.

“It’s going to be okay. I have a good feeling about Mr. Morgan. He’s so intimidating with his dark widow’s peak and that angular jaw. He reminds me of a vampire or something.”

I was trying to be a little lighthearted, but Beck didn't even take the bait.

“Okay, Beck, you need to put on a happy face because when we pick up English I don't want to give her the idea that anything dreadful is going on. She'll think it's something between us, and that won't be good.”

He inhales long and slow, but shakes his head. “You're right, but it's hard to dispel this horrible feeling I have.”

“I know. And I'm right there with you. But this man—I don't know. He knows what he's doing, and it won't be easy, but he's going to make some progress.” Reaching for his hand, I grab on to it and squeeze it.

“Sheridan, I want you to know something.”

“What is it?”

“Even though I'm not in love with you and I know you're not in love with me, I'm not sorry we got married, and I know English isn't either.”

My heavy heart just became a little lighter with his words.

Six

SHERIDAN

My suspension from school only lasted one day, and that was because the school board couldn't meet until Monday night. They determined it was ridiculous and required more than just the ramblings of a six-year-old about pajammies and a slumber party to remove a teacher from her job. They allowed me to go back to my job the following day. The fact that I was married now didn't even enter into it. English was also allowed to remain in my class.

Beck and I fall into a sort of uncomfortable cohabitation the first couple of weeks of our marriage. Granted, neither of us is used to sharing a bathroom, which only adds to it. Like the time when he barges in on me peeing, even though I had the door closed. Or the time when I walk in on him, because he didn't bother to shut the door at all.

And then there's the time my period arrives. Where the hell do I store my tampons? Move over shaving cream? And he is not one bit shy about his nudity. I, on the other hand, am still running for cover when he sees me naked. One morning, I'm under the shower spray rinsing the shampoo from my hair when I hear the click of the shower door opening.

"What are you doing?" I ask.

"Taking a shower."

"Now?" I squeak.

"Uh-huh."

Then a warm arm wraps around my waist, and before I can get my eyes cleared of soap, his lips land on mine. Not a bad way to start the day.

The next weeks fly by, and in preparation for Christmas, I have shopping to do, along with decorating both the classroom and the house.

Unfortunately, one afternoon after school, English complains her tummy hurts. By dinner, it quickly escalates into the full-blown stomach bug. Poor mite, it's one of those horrid viruses she picked up that's going around school. She's crying, and according to Beck, she never gets sick. As he explains this to me, she flies into my arms and proceeds to throw up all over me.

I carry her to her bathroom, where I strip us both out of our clothes, but as I'm doing it, another episode hits her. I make it halfway to the toilet, but I'm a complete mess. Beck comes running with towels to help, but there's not a lot he can do until it passes. When she's done, I finish stripping and catch him staring at me. His eyes are soft, but he has an odd look in them.

"What?" I ask.

"Nothing." He stays while I shower with English, taking the time to ensure everything is cleaned off us both.

When we step out of the shower, he wraps her in a towel and then hands me one.

"Thanks," I say.

Even though he holds her, he pulls me against him and kisses me gently. "Thank you for taking such great care of her."

I smile at him before I say, "We need to check her temperature and try to keep fluids in her."

He smiles back. "Yeah, I know." And he would. He's probably been through this before.

By morning, she's much better, but still pale so we keep her on liquids until afternoon. The next day, she's back to her usual chipper English.

Beck buys a huge tree, and I forgot what it's like to be around a small child during the holidays, but English reminds me on a daily basis. Beck hangs the stockings, and every day sneaks a little something into hers at night before we go to bed. In the morning after she wakes up, she runs to the fireplace and grabs her stocking, squishing it to see if there's more inside of it.

“Do you think the elves stopped by during the night?”

“What do you think? Does it feel like it has more in it?” he asks.

“Maybe. You feel,” she says in a swirl of blond ringlets, squeezing the hell out of the stocking. Thank God there isn't anything breakable in there.

“Mommy, see?”

“Yeah, I think it looks fatter. But you better go and wash your face and brush your teeth. It's time to get ready for school.”

Her forehead scrunches up. “But what about breakfast?”

“We can eat before we go to school.”

“Okay.” She skips off to her bathroom.

“Mr. Morgan called me yesterday,” Beck says out of the blue.

“What?” I'm a bit shocked he didn't tell me.

“Sorry, so much went on last night that it slipped my mind.”

“I guess that's a good thing if you forgot.”

One sculptured shoulder lifts, then lowers. “He says the PI is getting some stuff. Lots of people going in and out of her house at odd hours.”

“You think she's dealing drugs?” I ask.

“There's a guy living with her who may be, but that doesn't make sense if she wants money.”

“That’s what I was thinking.”

“This bothers me even more now that there’s a man involved.”

“Is she married?”

“No, I’m not sure if they’re together or if he’s just staying there.”

“Maybe she’s letting him stay there to help her with the rent.”

“Could be. But whatever the case, it still spells trouble either way.” He walks to the kitchen and begins breakfast for us.

“Eggs okay for you?” he asks.

“Yeah, I need to finish getting ready. I’ll be back to help in a minute.” This whole thing about the guy has me worried. That puts English in more danger if we lose. What if she has to stay there and they’re doing drugs or something? Neither one of us will ever rest if that’s the case. The PI has to find something.

All day long, that’s the only thing I can think of. Even the students notice my mind is somewhere else. English asks me several times if I have a tummy ache. I reassure her I’m fine and try to concentrate at my task of teaching.

By day’s end, I’m so glad to gather up English and go home I feel as frazzled as frayed electrical wire.

We have to make a quick stop at the store to pick up a few items. As we’re navigating the aisles, I look toward the end of the one we’re on, and I swear Abby is standing there. Long, brown, super curly hair, like English’s, she doesn’t do anything but stare at us. I turn my cart around and grab English’s hand.

“Come on, honey. I think I forgot something back here.”

I hurry to finish and drive home as quickly as I can.

Beck greets us as English plows into him, hugging him as she usually does, but one look at me has him send her off to her room for playtime.

“What happened?” he asks, putting his arms around me.

When I tell Beck, he wonders if it was really her.

“It had to be. Who else would stand and stare at us like that? She must be stalking us, Beck.”

“Maybe so. Perhaps I should start having her followed.”

“That might be a good idea. I’ve also been stewing over what the PI said.”

“Cookie, the last thing I need is to worry about you, too.” His hands palm my butt as he picks me up so we’re eye level with each other. “Don’t do this to yourself. I need you to stay clear-headed.”

Before I can answer, his mouth claims mine in a slow, passionate kiss, and all thoughts of everything but his lips fly straight out the window. He grabs my legs and places them around his hips, and in an instant I know I want this man, right here.

As though he’s read my mind, he says on my lips, “I need inside you, baby.”

“Yeah, but how?”

A deep chuckle vibrates me. “It’s kinda funny. I used to fear getting caught by my parents. Now I’m afraid of getting caught by my daughter.”

“How about the bathroom?”

“Right here?” He looks over my shoulder to the powder room right off the kitchen where we stand.

“Uh-huh.” I sink my teeth into his lower lip. That gets him moving. About six strides later, he shuts the door and locks it.

“Undo your pants.”

“I have to take off my panties, too.”

“Yeah, I can slide them over.”

As soon as I unbutton and unzip, he tugs my pants down and does the same for him. Then he moves my thong to the side, takes his tip, and slides it around me until I press myself against it.

“A little eager are you?”

“That and I’m worried we’re gonna get caught.”

“Shit! I forgot.” He thrusts in deep. “Fuck, I forgot to check if you’re ready, but I’m glad you are.”

“Oh, I’m ready. Now hurry.”

He gives me a half-lidded stare that nearly has me coming. I dig my heels into his ass, and that’s all the encouragement he needs. I suddenly feel like the announcer at the Indy 500. But instead of, “Gentlemen, start your engines,” I feel like saying, “Let the pounding begin.” Because boy does it ever. Our bodies slap against each other’s, and his dick hits me in every place that’s perfect.

“Use your hand, Sheridan, because I’m going to come.”

I slip a hand between us and rub my clit, but it doesn’t take much before I climax, and he lets himself go.

It’s good timing because as soon as we’re zipped and buttoned, we hear English calling our names. Beck runs out first, and then I follow.

The next day, the attorney calls and tells us he’s pushed back any kind of communication with the bio-mom until after the first of the year. That’s good news, sort of. At least we can go through the holidays without any threat of a dark cloud knocking on our door.

On Christmas Eve, we go to Mark and Anna’s for dinner. In the past, Beck would spend the night there and English would open her gifts in the morning at their house. But we all decided it would be best to start a new tradition of having Christmas at Beck’s, and I guess my house, from now on. English is a little sad because Boonior comes home on Christmas Eve, and she

wants to stay there with him. To be honest, I can't blame her. That puppy is precious. Chocolate brown wavy fur that feels like silk covers his chubby little body, and his golden eyes just melt the frost right off your heart. He is the sweetest little thing, and what's not to love about puppy breath?

"Banana and Geepa will bring him over in the morning. Besides, don't you want to see what Santa is bringing you?"

"But Santa always brought my presents here," she insists, dragging the *here* out.

"That's before your daddy got married. Now that you have a mommy, Santa knows to go to your house," Anna says.

English puts her index up to her cheek as though she's thinking about this. She must decide it's a good enough answer, so she says, "Good night, Boonior. See ya in the morning. Now don't forget to take him out to pee, Banana."

"That's Geepa's job, honey."

"Geepa, don't forget because puppies don't wear diapers like babies," English gives Mark his reminder.

"Yes, ma'am," Mark says seriously.

"Come on, Munchkindoodle. Let's go," Beck says.

We give hugs all around and head out. I have an idea tomorrow is going to be a very long day.

When we get home, English hops in bed after brushing her teeth. She's eager for morning to arrive. After we wait for her to fall asleep, Beck and I pull out her Christmas gifts. This is so exciting for me because it's completely new for me. I skip around the room, putting things under the tree and creating cute little scenes with stuffed animals and other toys. She wanted an Easy Bake Oven so she could make cakes and cookies. Beck assembles it, along with Cinderella's castle and a scene from *Frozen*. It's impossible for me to contain my excitement as I hop around like a grasshopper.

"You act like you're five," Beck comments.

“I can’t wait. I haven’t had a Christmas like this in years. This is like fantasyland.” I skitter about, putting extra touches here and there, trying to make things look special. I haven’t noticed him staring at me until I bend down to pick something up. “What?”

“You never talk about your family.”

Crash, boom. My heart that had been soaring is now lying in slices at my feet. He didn’t mean it, but it’s the memories that always crush me.

“No, because I don’t have any family. They’re dead, remember?”

“True, but you never mention them at all. Most people would talk about their past. You never do.”

“There’s nothing to say, Beck.” My voice sounds dead, even to me.

I wasn’t aware that he walked up to me and stands before me. His arms enfold me in a huge hug as if he knows I need it. Leaning into him, I allow myself to feel comforted and then realize it’s the first time I’ve ever felt safe since my dad died. The first time I haven’t felt the need to be worried about self-preservation. And if it weren’t for the whole English situation, I would call this life damn near perfect.

“Whatever happened must be very difficult on you. The light was extinguished when I brought it up. But you’re wrong about something, Cookie. You do have a family. You’re a part of this one now, and don’t forget it.”

His finger lifts the bottom of my chin up so he can press his full lips to mine. Even though it’s brief, heat rockets through my veins, and I slip my hands beneath his shirt. I slide my hands under the waist of his jeans and sink my fingers into his glutes. He suddenly breaks off the kiss, and I moan in protest.

“We have to get the rest of these presents out, and then I’m taking you to bed so I can properly fuck you. I want to taste your pussy first, though, so let’s get a move on here.”

The way he sounds when he says those words makes me want to press my hand between my legs. The pressure is so much I know it would take very little to get me off. I cross one leg over the other instead and squeeze.

When he notices that I'm still standing there, he asks, "What?" He glances at me suspiciously. Then he looks at my legs. "Don't you even think about it. That orgasm is all mine." One hand wraps around my arm and tugs me to where the toys are, and he puts me back to work. The thought of having sex spurs us into action, and we both work like maniacs, finishing up in record time. In a surprise move, Beck picks me up and throws me over his shoulder as he walks to the bedroom.

When we get inside, he shuts the door and gently tosses me onto the bed. Our clothes fly off, and he pulls me to the edge of the bed, bends my knees, feet flat on the bed.

"Now, for that orgasm you tried to sneak behind my back. What were you thinking, Cookie? Were you thinking about this?" He slides a finger inside me, and I feel myself getting wetter. "Or this?" He drops his mouth down and adds some tongue action to my clit. "Or maybe even this?" He takes his thumb, dips it inside my pussy to get it slick, and then rubs it across the bud of my ass. A long moan rips out of me as he repeats everything as he asks, "What is it? You haven't answered me."

"Yes. All of it. Well, maybe not the butt thing."

A deep chuckle rolls out of him, and he says, "One day I'm going to give you the real butt thing. Or maybe you'll gift me that on my birthday. What do you think?"

"Yeah. Fuck. Anything. Not fuck anything. Oh, hell. Just fuck." I pant because it's true. I'd let him do just about whatever he wanted.

Another deep laugh. "Hmm. Did you know I think about this all the time? How I can get you off? How I can arouse you? Let's see what I want to do to this beautiful pink pussy now." One finger slips in deep, and he says, "You're so tight. I

can't wait to feel this stretched tight around my cock." His tongue licks me solidly up and back, only stopping to pay great attention to my precious clit. He covers me completely with his mouth and sucks, but he does this licking thing at the same time, while his finger works inside me, pressing on my G-spot. By now I'm dripping wet and whimpering his name. This is turning into an insane-gasm. I grab his hair, and with a near scream, come with deep spasms rocketing my core.

"Fuck, Sheridan, I love it when you do that. Say my name like that over and over when you come."

That orgasm was super intense. I'm still feeling the ripples shooting through me. Winding my arms around his neck, I kiss him and taste myself on his mouth and tongue. He immediately deepens the kiss as though he were fucking my mouth. Once more, I feel the wetness gathering between my legs.

I could kiss Beck for hours on end and never have enough. And it's not that he takes over, but he coaxes things out of me, explores in a way that's intoxicating. The sounds he makes, the scraping of his beard against my cheek, how his tongue traces my lower, then upper lips, and how he uses his teeth to make me moan. We fit perfectly together, not a conflict, but a true harmony.

"Mrs. Bridges, my cock is in urgent need of fucking you. If your pussy would be so kind as to accommodate me."

A giggle bubbles out of me. "I think that can be arranged."

"You wouldn't be interested in a little Christmas butt fucking, would you?"

My eyes bulge out in a comedic fashion, and he laughs so hard he jiggles the bed. "What I would've paid to have a camera handy to capture that expression. Oh, was it ever priceless."

"Well, that kind of came out of nowhere."

"It did not. I've been thumbing your ass all night."

My face wrinkles up. “Yeah, you have, haven’t you?”

“And from the sounds of it, you liked it a whole lot. A hole. Get it?”

Oh my God. I try to hide my head in his armpit. “That’s dumb.” My voice is muffled.

“Where ya going, Cookie? It’s not like I can’t see the rest of you. Besides, what’s the big deal?”

“Because.”

“Oh, come on. You have to know every guy wants to stick his dick up his girl’s ass. What’s to hide over? It’s not a big deal.”

“It is if it’s your ass.”

“Might I remind you, little dirty girl, what you did to me in Vegas?”

“That’s a finger, not a dick.”

He pulls my head out of my hidey-hole and rubs his cheek on mine. In that deep voice, he murmurs, “Do you think I’m just going to ram my dick up your ass? I’d take it slow,” he drags his finger across my cheek, “and start with my finger first, stretch you, use a ton of lube, and if it would hurt, I’d stop.” His finger draws tiny circles down to that little spot behind my ear. “I’m not in the game of seeing you in pain, love. But I promise, I wouldn’t hurt. And you’d beg me not to stop.”

I’m wet again. That fast. Swallowing the thick lump of desire, I say, “Okay, I’m not opposed to it when you say things like that. But can we have regular sex right now and maybe save it for a special occasion or something? Or our anniversary? That way I have eleven months to get my butt ready.”

He spits with laughter. “What are you gonna do? Put your butt muscle on an exercise plan?”

I think about that for a second. “You know, will doing that ruin my butt?”

“What do you mean?”

“Will it damage me in any way?”

“Millions of people have anal sex. I seriously doubt it will damage you, especially if we do it in the proper way.”

“Maybe we should google it.”

“Okay, that’s what we’ll do,” he says with sarcasm. He’s making fun of me, but currently I want him to fuck me, so I grab his cock and give it a good hard squeeze.

“You want some of me?” I ask in a hoarse voice.

He lifts up and slides his tip into my pussy and then back out, in and out until he’s seated deep. My legs bracket his hips, and he thrusts hard and fast, just how I love it.

“Tell me. Is this what you want, my dirty wife?”

“Yesss,” I hiss. “So good.”

With my legs still hooked around him, he leans back on his heels and keeps pounding into me. “Grab your tits and squeeze your nipples. I want to watch you do that.”

“Uh, what?” I pant.

“Yeah. Your tits. Do it.”

My palms slide over my tits, and I massage them as he watches. “Your nipples. Tug on them.”

I’m so turned on by the way he watches me, I obey without question. “This?” I tweak my nipples. It seems a little weird at first, but then I’m so close to coming I forget about it.

He does this motion where he lifts up somewhat but rubs a bit against my clit as he lowers and pushes back inside me, and oh my shit. Then he takes the heel of his hand and presses down on my pubic bone as he does it, and I forget about my nipples. Until he stops.

“You stop. I stop.”

“Huh?”

“Your nipples. Keep pinching them.”

“Oh.” I go at them again, and he starts pumping into me hard. “Ahhh. Right there. That’s so good.” The pleasure is so intense I moan. Or maybe scream. His hand spreads my knees further apart, and he continues to slide in and out.

“I’m going to come. I love to watch my cum run out of you around my cock, Sheridan. Fuck, you’re so damn tight around me.”

My orgasm nails me, and he groans a second later as his does, too. “This is perfect.” He slows down the motion, but he’s still inside. Then he pulls out, and his furtive smile tells me he loves what he sees. He uses his hand to rub his cum around me, spreading it up and over my mound. “Jesus, Sheridan, you have the most beautiful pussy, but it looks best covered in my cum. I’m going to fuck you several times a day just to keep it looking like this.”

His mouth canvases mine in a kiss filled with passion but something else. Reverence, awe, maybe?

“We should sleep. English will be up around five.”

Checking the clock, I find it’s already past one. We both chuckle.

“I should ask if you mind being messy,” he says.

“No, not really.” And it’s strange because I’ve never had sex without a condom, so this is the first man I’ve ever been messy with.

“Good, because I love you this way. We’ll shower in the morning.”

We kiss again before snuggling up and falling asleep.

Seven

SHERIDAN

“Daddy! Mommy! Wake up! Santa’s been here!” English scampers into our room, hollering at the top of her lungs and scaring the ever-loving crap out of me. I fly out of bed, forgetting that I’m buck naked and run out of the room with English yelling, “Mommy’s naked! Mommy’s naked!”

By this time, I’m already in the living room, so I grab two throw pillows in a feeble attempt to cover myself up. English is giggling and pointing her finger at me saying, “I see your breasts and vagina.”

“Jesus Christ on an ornament,” I mutter under my breath when Beck comes up behind me and wraps me in a large robe that is undoubtedly his.

“Better?” he asks.

“No, I’ll never recover from this.”

Meanwhile, English still has the giggles, and Beck is laughing, too. “Cookie, go shower. I’ll cook breakfast.”

“Thanks, Captain.”

“You should’ve seen you, Mommy. You were funny. I can’t wait to tell Banana and Geepa.”

Great. Just what I need. I raise my hand and give them the peace sign as I head to the bathroom. Note to self: never jump out of bed. Ever.

My shower is the quickest in history because I want to be out there when the rest of the crew arrives. Anna and Mark will be bringing Boonior to spend the day with us. I don’t bother drying my hair, so it’ll be wavy today.

When I go back out, Beck is cooking, and English is tearing around the room, checking out all the toys.

“So, what did you score from Santa?” I ask. She shows me, and I laugh.

“You totally lucked out.”

“Yeah, and next year I’m going to ask him to bring you extra pajammies. That way you won’t hafta sleep naked.”

“Great idea.” She’s never going to forget it. I hope she at least puts it in the back of her mind by the time Christmas break is over or every kid at school will hear about it.

I wander into the kitchen to see if Beck needs a hand. He’s got the eggs, sausage, and bacon going.

“If you don’t mind, grab the bread and put it in the oven to toast.”

“Sure thing. When are your parents coming?”

“They should be here any minute.”

“Beck, go shower, and I’ll finish up.”

He leans in to kiss me and heads to the bathroom. I finish everything up, placing it all in the warming drawer, and get the bread going in the oven.

English starts to squeak when Banana and Geepa walk in because they’re carrying Boonior in his little crate. Beck walks out of the back with wet hair, and it’s a circus with the puppy, English, and everything else happening. I finally grab everyone’s attention with the breakfast announcement, so we all head to the kitchen, with the exception of English. She’s so wound up, I doubt we’ll get her to settle down enough to be able to eat a thing.

Beck has to tell her if she doesn’t eat, Boonior goes back to Banana and Geepa’s house. That does the trick. She gobbles up her eggs and bacon, and she’s off again.

“Is everybody ready to open gifts?” Beck asks.

We all yell that we are. Of course, English goes first. Aside from Boonior and her Santa gifts, we give her clothes because she's outgrowing the ones she has. She also gets shoes and boots.

Beck gets a set of Mickey Mouse ears from English and some new boxers with Mickey Mouse on them. I get a *Frozen* coloring book and some *Frozen* panties. I think they are in little girls' sizes. Anna gives me a conspiratorial smile. They say it's the thought that counts, and that sure is true on this gift. I gush over it because I truly feel special that she picked out something with her favorite characters on it to give to me.

"Thank you, English. I love them." I give her a big hug and kiss.

"Make sure you don't wear them with white though because you might see through, and then people can see your panties," she says.

"I'll be careful of that. Thanks."

Beck and I give his parents the gifts he picked out for them. A really cool painting done by some semi-famous artist he's fond of, a photo of English in her tiara and funny sunglasses they bought her, a new golf club for his dad, and a new purse for his mom, which I helped pick out.

They give us a week stay to their mountain house, and they'll babysit English during spring break.

I give Beck his gifts. One is a picture of English and me, the one he took of us together, that I had framed. It's not a big deal of a photo, but the look on his face tells me how much it means to him. He pulls me into his arms and kisses me. "This is the greatest gift you could have ever given me."

"But I'm not done yet." I hand him his next present and watch while he unwraps it. His eyes tell a story of what's in his mind, and I know I've scored on this one. His narrow and then expand in wonder. I've gifted him with a book filled with all of English's artwork she's done the first semester of the year. I had it photographed and then bound into a coffee table

book. It turned out to be quite beautiful, and his eyes glaze with tears.

“How ...?”

“I found a local printer to do it. I kept a file of them, and I have it for you so you can have the originals to frame if you’d like. But I figured that this way they would be preserved forever.”

We are sitting on the couch, and he surprises me when he pulls me onto his lap and kisses me. I’m talking a full-on major lip locking, tongue probing kiss, as his parents watch. When he releases me, his hands are on either side of my head, and he says, “That is the best gift I’ve ever received. Thank you.” Then he goes in for another. I don’t push him away because kissing Beck is my crack. The more I do it, the more I want it.

We stop when Mark clears his throat. He motions with his head, and Beck jumps off the couch, almost dumping me on the floor.

“Oh, sorry, Cookie.” He settles me back in the seat and says, “Don’t move one tiny muscle.”

“Okay.”

Mark, Anna, and Beck share a sidelong glance, and Beck dashes out the door that leads to the garage. I hear the low hum of the garage door opening and then nothing. Anna and Mark make small talk to distract me, but I’m trying to figure out what the hell Beck is doing outside. He finally runs back in, out of breath, and grinning like he won the lottery.

“Okay, come with me,” he says, “but keep your eyes closed. I’ll guide you.”

His arms are around me as we step carefully out the front door to stand on the porch.

“Open up.”

I open my eyes to find a brand new SUV, a fancy one like Beck’s, but in silver instead of black, sitting in the driveway.

There is a huge red bow on the windshield.

“Merry Christmas, Sheridan,” he murmurs into my ear.

“What? You got me a car for Christmas?”

“Yeah, it’s the newer version of the one I have. Go check it out.”

I numbly walk down the front steps toward the car, thinking about this monstrous present that I can’t possibly accept. There are two things wrong with this scenario. One is the obvious. This sends warning bells, looking like I’ve married him for his money. That is the wrong image we want to show. Of course, it’s slightly accurate, or was at the time. Now, I can’t say that’s the case anymore. Two, I’m so out of my league with emotions that if we were alone, I would probably run and hide under the bed or something equally as ludicrous. My hands touch the shiny silver paint, and even though it’s stupid, every molecule feels like I’m in a pot of water getting ready to boil—all quivery and bubbly inside.

“Don’t you want to get in and drive it?” His sexy voice hits me in the heart. Wait. What? Hits me in the heart? What’s happening here? What have I done? Pull your shit together, Sheridan, and act like the girl you swore you’d always be—tough and resistant to all things called love. English is one thing, but toughen your damn heart where Beck is concerned.

“Sure,” my voice comes out all raspy sounding.

“You okay?”

“Fine. Just fine. But isn’t this a bit over the top?”

“No. Remember that talk we had? I need my two girls to be safe when they’re riding around, and this baby is going to ensure all of that.”

Right. I remember now. That eases the whole guilt thing a bit. He didn’t do this for *me*. He did this for *English* because I drive her to and from school every day. Makes sense now.

“Come on. Let’s go!”

We take her for a spin, and there's no denying it. This BMW 6 Series, or whatever the hell it's called, is sweet. Like his. The engine sounds deep, and it purrs. We run through all the fancy gadgets and whatnots in here, and there are a ton of them.

"Whatever happened to plain old cars?" I ask.

He laughs. "You're going to get so spoiled."

"I already was driving yours."

"This one's even better."

Feeling ungracious because I totally let it slip, I say, "Thank you. You could've gotten me a Corolla, and I would've loved it just the same."

"I know, but I wanted you to have this. Now, enjoy the hell out of it."

"Thank you, Beck. It's beautiful. My gift doesn't compare."

"Cookie, your gift is miles beyond this. It's filled with memories that will last a lifetime, and there isn't enough money to buy that. This car," he pounds his fist lightly on the console, "won't last but maybe ten years, if you're lucky. But that book will be mine until I die." His lips press to my cheek, and I'm happy I chose it to give him.

When we come home, English is running around the house with Boonior chasing her, and the living room looks like a bomb went off with all the wrapping paper strewn about. But I have the best feeling in my heart that I've had in ages. Beck's arm is around me hugging me close to him, and his parents are laughing and playing with the pup, too. Boonior is so damn cute, it's hard not to pick him up and let him give you his puppy kisses.

At about ten, Mark and Anna decide it's time to leave, and they take English with them, along with Boonior and some of her new toys. We are having Christmas dinner at their house

later this afternoon. But right now, I want a long nap because the four hours of sleep I had wasn't nearly enough.

We say our good-byes with a promise to be there around three thirty. After a quick clean up, I look at Beck and say, "I need a nap."

"I'm with you."

We crawl into bed, and after he curls around me like a cocoon, we drop off into a hard sleep.

Eight

SHERIDAN

During the Christmas holidays, our lives became idyllic. Beck takes some time off so he can spend it with English and me. I suppose it's to grow the family bond or something. But it doesn't seem necessary as we all fall into this comfortable, cozy life together. English takes to me like a fish to water, and at night after dinner she crawls onto my lap and falls asleep as we watch her favorite things on TV. A few times I catch Beck eyeing us, and he even snaps a few photos.

We also move the remainder of my things over, sans furniture. Michelle decides not to get another roommate since she and Oliver are spending so much time together. So, for the time being, she's asked me to leave my bedroom furniture in case she has family come and visit. That's fine by me since I would've had to figure out what to do with it.

When we're there, Michelle invites us to an after Christmas holiday party she and Oliver are throwing. It's a few days before New Year's Eve, and she begs us to come, so we agree. I'm excited because we haven't been to any holiday parties, and it'll be fun to meet Michelle and Oliver's friends.

Beck and I offer to help, and we have food brought in from one of the local barbecue places. We also help them with setting up the bar.

Oliver's friends are very nice. Some of them are super geeky, and all they want to do is talk about techy stuff. Beck and I laugh because neither of us understands a bit of what they're saying. They're discussing hackers, spoofers, sock puppets, worms, and all kinds of crap as we stand there and act interested. When we move away to the next group, I say, "I feel like I'm in a foreign country and don't speak their language."

“I picked up some of it,” Beck says, “but they talked so fast I quickly got lost.”

Michelle skips over to us, giggling. “Y’all having fun?”

“Yeah, but does Oliver talk tech-speak with you? Some of these guys are way over my head.”

“Oh, he tries, but I shut him down. I’m stupid with that stuff.”

I say, “I feel better.”

Michelle grabs Beck’s arm. “Hey, can you come out back for a minute? Oliver is trying to start a fire in the pit, and he can’t get it going.”

“Sure.” Beck leans over and kisses me and follows Michelle through the house.

Left standing there, I move to the side so I don’t look like a doofus all alone, and I people-watch. There’s a fairly large crowd by now as the party’s gotten underway. People are mingling, and it appears that everyone is having a good time. I’m surprised when I feel an arm snake around my waist, and someone leans into my ear to say, “What’s a pretty little thing like you doing standing all by yourself?”

Turning to see who it is, I find I’ve never seen the guy before. “Actually, I’m not alone. My husband is outside starting the fire.”

“Hmm. If I were your husband, I’d never leave you alone.”

Pushing him off and moving away, I say, “Guess you don’t have to worry about that, do you?” The man’s words are slurred, so he’s definitely had enough to drink.

How ironic. Before I got married, I barely got hit on. And now this dude persisted even after I told him I had a husband.

When Beck returns, I ask him how the fire is, and he tells me it’s starting to grow. Then he wants to know how I’m faring. I tell him about my would-be suitor, and he gets pissed. “Calm down, Mr. Jealous. I handled it.”

“I want to know who he is.”

“Forget it. If I tell you, you’ll make an ass out of yourself, and we’ll have to leave.”

His blue-green gaze lasers me, but I stand my ground.

“I’m a big girl, Beck. It’s fine.”

He doesn’t like it, but there’s nothing he can do. He pouts for a while, but then gets over it. The rest of the night is fine. As we’re leaving, Michelle says some of the girls she knows are getting together the following Friday for a girls’ night out and wants to know if I can join them. Beck encourages me to go.

“You should do it. Just because you’re married doesn’t mean you can’t go out and have fun with your friends.”

So the following Friday we all plan to go to What’s Your Pleasure. There’s a live band starting at nine, so we meet up at eight. It’s fun meeting some of Michelle’s friends from work that I haven’t met before. We drink a fair amount, and when the band starts playing, we hit the dance floor, all eight of us. They play rock, and we all jump around like a bunch of goofy asses. But one thing—I miss Beck. I keep thinking about him. And when an arm winds around my waist, I’ve had just enough to drink to think it’s him. So I lean back and sway a minute until I see the look on Michelle’s face. I turn to find it’s some strange dude, and I’m horrified by my behavior. What the hell was I thinking? I dash off the floor and hurry to our table, almost in tears. Michelle follows, trying to calm me down.

“It was an honest mistake,” she says.

“I need to go home. That was disgusting. If Beck did that, I would kill him.”

Michelle says, putting her arm over my shoulders, “But he wouldn’t instigate that. You were into the music and weren’t thinking.”

“Then why did you look at me like that?”

“I was shocked because I knew you didn’t know what you were doing,” she explains.

“Ugh, I feel terrible.”

“You’re acting like a baby. Like you cheated or something. It was a mistake, Sher,” Michelle insists.

“Whatever. I’m ordering an Uber so I can leave. Sorry to spoil your party.”

“It’s fine. It’s not worth staying if you’re going to be miserable. You should go.”

I hug her and leave. When I walk in the door, Beck immediately knows something’s wrong.

“What happened?” he asks.

“Is English asleep?”

“Yeah.”

I launch into my explanation, and he laughs. He pulls me into his arms, and his chest rumbles with his chuckles.

“Cookie, I’m sorry it ruined your night and made you feel bad, but stop torturing yourself. It was a dumb mistake. You thought it was me, and it wasn’t. End of story.”

“You’re not mad at me?”

“What? Why the hell would I be mad?”

“After what happened with that guy at Michelle and Oliver’s party, I just thought—”

“This is completely different. It’s kind of funny. I wish I could’ve seen your face when you realized it wasn’t me.”

“So much for my girls’ night out. Epic fail. I suck.”

He gets a devilish look on his face. “If you really want to suck—”

I hit him in the head with a pillow.

The week after English and I return to school, Beck leaves for a ten-day trip to Tierra del Fuego, which is at the southern

tip of South America. The jitters hit me about him going because it's so remote, but he's assured me all is fine. He relies on small planes for the last part of his journey because the roads are virtually nonexistent. He's been before, so that eases my mind somewhat, but still, my raw nerves are rattled. Normal cell service is out of the question, and his calls will be infrequent. The place is an archipelago, so he'll be photographing the wildlife.

"Won't you be afraid?" I ask as I help him pack.

"No, it's not my first rodeo, Cookie. It's fine. Besides, there's an actual village in the harbor, and I'm not going alone. There's a whole team with me. Don't worry. That will only make English afraid, and I don't want that." He lifts my chin with his finger, forcing me to meet his eyes. "Promise?"

"Fuck, no, I won't promise that."

His deep chuckle rattles my hormones. How can he have this effect on me? I clench my thighs to ease the pressure. Of course, it doesn't help.

"Why are you crossing your legs?" He has a sly look in his eyes.

"You know damn well why."

"Where's Munch?"

"Watching a movie. Don't even think about it."

"Oh, Cookie, I'm going to do much more than think about it." And damn, if he doesn't. He picks me up, carries me into the bathroom, locks the door, and we have the hottest speed sex, with me bent over the sink, imaginable.

When we're done, I can't help the question that shoots out of my mouth. "Did you plan that? Because you get an A plus in quickies."

"No, and you get an A plus in hot pussy."

We're back in the bedroom by now, and I grab two fistfuls of his shirt, pull him to me, and say, "Just promise me you'll

be careful, Beck. I mean it.”

His blue-green eyes tunnel into my own, and his head moves up and down. “I swear it.” Then he kisses me like his life depends on it. When he stops, he says, “You’ve brought more meaning into my life than I ever thought possible.” I watch his Adam’s apple move as he swallows. I sense he wants to say more, but then he gives his head a slight shake and adds, “Take care of yourself and Munchkindoodle while I’m gone. I’ll be back before you know it.”

“I will,” I whisper. “And hurry.”

During his absence, things are fine. He is able to call a few times when they go into the village to get supplies. But other than that, we only hear from him when he gets to the main airport in Argentina.

The day before he is due home, the attorney calls, trying to reach Beck. He asks to have Beck call him as soon as he can, and that it is urgent.

“Is there anything I can help you with?” I ask.

“No, but I should warn you, Mrs. Bridges, it’s about to get rocky.”

His tone makes me wary. Sleep is not in my forecast that night. English wonders if something happened. She’s so perceptive I have to be careful around her.

We pick Beck up the next evening to his warm eyes and happy smile. English is all arms and ringlets as she flies into his embrace, but one glance at me and he instantly knows something’s amiss.

Raised brows question me, but I answer him with a slight shake of my head. I refuse to ruin English’s reunion with her daddy. She’s done nothing but chatter incessantly all day about how excited she is to see him, and our discussion about Mr. Morgan can wait a little longer.

“So, Beck, since it’s your special night, where would you like to eat?”

“Yeah, Daddy. Your favorite restaurant?”

“Tell you what. How about we eat my favorite pizza at my favorite place? Home.”

“Yay!” English claps her hands as we head in that direction. Traffic isn’t too bad for six thirty in the evening in Atlanta, and in about forty-five minutes, we’re pulling into the garage. Five minutes after that, our pizza arrives. Beck calls his parents to let them know he’s home safe, and we sit around the coffee table, chowing down on our pepperoni pie.

“Oh, is this the best thing ever,” he moans.

“Says the man who usually eats healthy,” I say.

“I know, but it’s gluten-free at least. The food was awful on this trip. The dehydrated stuff got old, and we didn’t get into the village enough to eat. I think I starved. It was so bad, the first chance I got I ate fast food in an airport.”

It must have been terrible for him to do that. He’ll only eat that stuff in an emergency.

“Don’t worry. It won’t kill you if you eat it a few times.”

“It upset my stomach, though. It was like a giant greaseball sitting in there.”

English screws up her mouth and yells out, “Eww, Daddy. That’s icky.”

“I know. That’s why you shouldn’t eat it very much.”

I throw a napkin at him and say, “I can hear it next week already.” Since it’s Friday, I’m hoping English will forget it by then, but probably not.

After dinner, Beck goes to shower and then suggests we watch a movie in the “big bed”. He pulls out the original *Despicable Me*, and we settle in. English falls asleep halfway through, so he carries and tucks her into bed.

When he returns, I know he wants answers.

“Mr. Morgan called and said he needs you to call him. It’s urgent. He said things are about to get rocky.”

“Did he tell you anything?”

“Not a thing and I asked.”

Two deep creases develop between his eyes. “I wonder why.”

“Same here. But I didn’t press.”

“I’ll call him in the morning.” Then he gives me a sleepy smile. “I missed you, Cookie.” Two strong arms pull me on top of him. He has this way of sliding his hands into my hair and holding my head, guiding me so our lips mold together perfectly.

It makes me think about something Michelle said to me right before school started up again. I met her for lunch because I hadn’t seen her since Beck and I went to pick up my things at the house.

“You’ve fallen in love with him, Sher. I can see it written all over you. It’s even in the way you say his name. Beck,” she imitated me.

“Stop it.” I laughed.

“I’m serious. You have this, oh, I don’t know, dreamy way you say it. Softer than before. So spill.”

“I don’t know. The way I feel about him is unexpected. He’s very kind and caring. Not the asshole I first met. I can see how English is the way she is now. And sometimes I catch him staring at me with this sort of deep look in his eyes. Like there’s something more to what’s on the surface as far as his feelings go.”

“He’s in love with you. Or at least crazy about you. His eyes follow you everywhere. Granted I haven’t been around the two of you a whole lot, but the little I have, I’m telling you, you two are a perfect match.”

“Where’ve you disappeared to, Cookie?” Beck asks.

With a chuckle, I say, “Thinking about something.”

“Care to share?”

“Maybe someday. But not tonight.”

“Was it dirty? Because I want to get filthy with you. Like right now.” His hands pull my shirt up. “I’ve missed your pretty pink pussy, and I want to do all kinds of things to it.”

“Want to tell me about it?”

“No, I want to show you.” He flips me over and tugs off my yoga pants. When he gets to my feet, he asks, “What are these?”

“Socks.”

“Uh-huh. But Minions?”

“Hey, I’m a fan, too.”

“Then put those Minion covered feet flat on the bed and spread your pussy open for me. I am a starved man. I want to watch you finger yourself.”

“No! You do it.”

“Not tonight, baby. Or at least a few minutes.” He runs his fingers along the area where my thighs meet my pussy and stops, spreading my lips apart. “Touch. Now.”

I slowly put my fingers on myself, and I’m so wet, my fingers slip over my clit.

“Don’t stop until I tell you.”

The sound of him pulling off his sweats hits me, and I’m so ready for him to fuck me, I squirm.

“Hurry.”

“No, this is my time. And it’s gonna be slow.”

Then he flips me back over, and I feel like a pancake. I’m on all fours, and he widens the stance of my knees until I feel his mouth on me. Damn, this is good. He fucks me with his

mouth and fingers, as I arch my back and moan out my orgasm. He doesn't stop until my moans turn into tiny sighs.

"My birthday is next month, Cookie, and do you know what I want?"

"Huh uh," I answer all breathy.

"I want in here." He rubs a circle around my bud and rims it with his finger, or thumb, I have no idea, but I moan as he slowly pushes his cock and thumb into me at the same time. "I promise you'll like it."

"Yeah, good. I'm up for it." Hell, he could do me right now if he wanted. I'm senselessly horny for this guy, and I just came. "Just fuck me, Beck."

He leans over my back, and I feel his warm breath against my cheek. "How do you want it? Hard? Easy? But it's going to be slow either way."

"Hard." As soon as the word leaves my lips, he rams into me. Then he inches almost all the way out and repeats until I am in-fucking-sane with the need to come. I didn't realize I spoke the words aloud until he says, "Easy, baby. I've got you."

This fuck session goes on until I'm ragged and finally, he asks, "Ready?"

I think drool runs out of my mouth when I answer him. "Yesss."

And does he ever. It goes on and on, until I collapse like a heap of dirty laundry, a mound that needs to be picked up because I certainly can't possibly move on my own.

"Don't move."

"As if. I think my pussy's broken." Who does he think I am? Wonder Woman?

I hear water running in the bathroom, and he returns with a warm cloth to clean me. I'm still a limp and useless noodle.

When he gets back in bed, he pulls me into the crook of his side and cuddles with me.

“That was more than any man could ever ask for.”

That short little sentence makes me want to hop around the bed, flap my arms like a chicken, and sing out loud like a kid because I’ve never felt so loved since my dad died. And even if he didn’t say the words, my heart fills with immense joy as it pings against my breastbone. I clutch his arm, the one that’s holding me so close, and kiss his hand.

“Same here, Beck. And I’m so happy you’re home. I didn’t like being here without you.”

His lips kiss the back of my head, and he whispers, “Sleep tight, love.”

Nine

SHERIDAN

Beck is supposed to give Mr. Morgan a call in the morning, so I'm not surprised to get his text. Whenever his texts begin with a 911, I know they're serious.

Appointment with Morgan today at 4:30. Can you make it?

I respond with *Can Anna watch English?*

A few minutes later, his answer vibrates in.

Yes. Just drop her off there after school.

I look over the sea of bent heads as they draw pictures of their favorite thing to do. We're in art class right now, but I focus on one head in particular. English's tongue pokes out as she concentrates on making her picture perfect. She's a good artist. Her drawings are better than anything I can do, and she has a great eye for detail. My heart bottoms out as I worry about what will happen in the near future.

See you soon. <3

The last thing I need to do is let her see how frightened I am for her. And it's damn difficult because the day drags on and on. When I tell her after school that she's going to Banana's, she claps her hands.

"I wonder if Boonior has gotten any bigger."

"Since you just saw him two days ago, probably not."

"Mommy, when do you think Boonior can move in with us?"

Oh boy, I was wondering when this was coming. "I think Daddy said when he was potty-trained with no more inside accidents."

“Geepa said he only pooped once inside last week.”

“Yeah, but it was in Banana’s shoe. Do you want him to poop in your shoes?”

She giggles like crazy. “Noooo! That would be icky.”

“I know, so we’ll wait until all his shoe pooping is over. That and his slipper eating,” I say.

“Yeah, so he won’t throw up everywhere.”

“Good idea.”

Anna opens the door for us, and we share a look. She must know more than I do about the upcoming appointment because her eyes are haunted with the same inner dread that I feel. She clasps my arm, and I want to ask her what she knows, but she gives a slight shake of her head, which tells me I need to leave. Beck must be crazy with fear, too. My heart hammers as though a fist is closing over it in rapid sequence. Talking myself through this anxiousness, I know Beck needs me, so I force it down and be as strong as I can. What the hell could have possibly gone south?

When I walk in the house, he’s a wreck. He pulls me close, and he’s trembling.

“Talk to me. What’s happened?”

“We go to court tomorrow. Morgan believes the judge is going to rule in her favor. And that she will be given visitation rights. At least one night every other week. That’s what she’s shooting for.”

“Jesus. Oh, fuck. Fuck fuck fuck. How?”

“Don’t know. I thought he had it all under control. Let’s go.”

Our hands are locked together, and I say, “I’m driving.” He’s in no condition to be behind the wheel of a car. And he doesn’t argue. Traffic is already bad, but we make it in time. Mr. Morgan’s admin ushers us right in.

“Mr. and Mrs. Bridges, sorry for the late notice. Court is set for tomorrow morning at ten. It’s just a hearing, you see. We present our side. They present theirs. The judge will make his preliminary ruling. It will be temporary.”

“Has your PI found anything on her?”

“She’s clean as far as we know, or she’s very good at hiding a dirty drug habit.”

This is incredible. I won’t believe she’s clean. I can’t. Maybe she’s learned how to play a good game because of the way she was raised. Okay, so I’m really digging deep here, but whatever.

“I will never accept that,” I say.

“Mrs. Bridges, it doesn’t matter what you accept. What matters is what the judge hands down. My suggestion is that you prepare your daughter for the worst-case scenario because there’s a ninety percent chance that she will be spending the night, and very soon, with her biological mother.”

“And we can’t buy her off?” Beck asks.

“I’m fairly positive we could, though that would make you look extremely bad if she wouldn’t take it. Bribery doesn’t sit too well in a court of law.”

Beck slams his hand down on Mr. Morgan’s desk. “Then what the hell are we supposed to do now?”

Mr. Morgan leans over his desk and says, “What you’re supposed to do is this. Go home and prepare English for the worst. Tell her that her biological mother wants to have a relationship with her. Don’t wait until it actually happens because it will traumatize your daughter even more than it might already. And then let me do my job. I am trying everything I know within my powers, but you must understand something, Mr. Bridges. The courts always seem to favor the mother. It’s the way it is and always has been, no matter what. I’m sorry.”

Beck's head drops down in defeat, but I'm not willing to give up just yet. There has to be a way. And maybe it will take English going there a time or two, but I know we'll find something out.

My mind churns with ways to help, but Beck is so down I want to give him my focus, too. We enter the elevator, and I pull him against me. "I promise we'll figure something out. I don't know what it is, but we will."

His face is buried in that place where my neck meets my shoulder, and he says, "I don't know how in the world I can tell her."

"I'll tell her. I can do it."

"Oh, Cookie, it's going to kill her."

"No, she'll be afraid, but it won't kill her. And we'll arm her."

"What do you mean?"

The elevator doors open, and I say, "Come on. I have an idea."

We drive to the cell phone store and buy her a phone. On the way home, I explain my idea. "This may be our way to get her out of there forever."

Beck looks skeptical. "Voice recordings?"

"Yes! If she records things while she's there, when people come over or whatever, maybe we can get what we need. All we need is a mention of illegal drugs."

Beck agrees, and after we bring English home, we break the terrible news to her. Sitting her down with us, I explain what's going on.

"You know how your real mom went away after you were born?"

Her head bobs up and down. I try to sound happy when I go on. "Well, she's come back and wants to meet you. We don't know exactly when, but it may be real soon."

Her lovely eyes turn into saucers as she looks between the two of us. “But I already have a mommy now, so I don’t need another one.”

“That’s true, but sometimes kids have two, and she would love to see you again. I know you may not want to go, but it might be the best thing. And it would only be for a little bit. This is your home and will always be your home.”

“Is it that lady from the playground?”

“Yes, it is.” This is the part I hate the most.

English’s face pales. “But she said she was taking me away from Daddy.”

Beck’s jaw muscles twitch. He’s so tense he looks like a tightly wound coil about to spring loose.

“We would never let that happen, honey. But she’s your mother and wants to get to know you.”

“So, I don’t have to go there for long?” She looks at the two of us with skepticism.

“No, just for a little bit.”

Her lip pokes out as she thinks. “Why did she leave me?”

Beck starts to say something, but I hold out my hand. “Honey, I think that’s only something she can answer. But always remember this. Your daddy and I love you more than anything in the whole world. Now, get over here so we can hug you.”

She runs and flies into our arms, and I say, “This here is the best sugar in the whole wide world.”

“I’m not sugar. I’m English.”

“Yeah, but you sure are sweet.” I blow a raspberry on her neck, and she giggles out bubbles of laughter. Beck is silent as he absorbs the scene. I know he’s thinking about how he’ll handle her going, but he has to be more cheerful than this. His morose attitude will clue her into the fact that something’s not right with all of this.

“So, how was Boonior? Any accidents?” I ask.

“Not today. Banana won’t keep any shoes out anymore, though. She’s afraid of putting her feet into poop.”

“Ew, I can’t blame her.” But then I laugh because it really is funny.

“Geepa says Boonior might have to go to school. You know, doggie school.”

“Like obedience training?”

“I think. Where they teach him how to stay and stuff?”

“Yes, that would be good. So, did you and Banana get your homework done?”

Her head bounces up and down so vigorously I’m shocked she doesn’t get dizzy.

“Awesomesauce, baby. So, we have a surprise for you. Daddy and I wanted to get you something so you could take pictures and other things. We got you a phone.”

“A phone? A real one?”

“Yep. See?” I hold it out to her. She touches it like it’s a pet or something. “You can’t carry it with you all the time, only sometimes, but we’re going to teach you how to do some things on it.”

Her brow crunches up as she says, “But I already know how to take pictures.”

“I know, but do you know how to take videos? Maybe when no one is watching?”

“Like on TV?”

“Yes!”

Her arms shake as she says, “Show me. Show me, please.”

“Okay, you slide this over and see this?” I show her. “It says video. Put it right there and then press the red button. Can you remember that?”

English is very bright, so I don't worry about her forgetting. She snaps lots of pictures of Beck and me and then takes some videos. My other goal is to teach her how to use the voice memo app. If there's a chance something is going on, I want her to record it.

“English, it's very important you don't talk about having a phone to anyone, you understand?”

“Why?”

Beck situates her in front of him so he can look her in the eye. “Not many kids your age have phones, Munch. It's best if we keep it a secret only among the three of us for now, okay?”

“Not even tell Banana or Geepa?”

“Well, I think you can show it to them, but no one else. And I really mean that. Okay? When we allow you to have it with you, you must keep it in a very safe place. Promise?”

“Promise.” She wears a very serious expression.

“And no taking it to school. Ever.”

Her curls bounce around as she nods her head up and down.

The next morning, I take English to school, but then I leave around eight. We're meeting Mr. Morgan in his office and then going to court together. Beck and I clutch sweaty hands, nervous and scared.

“This shouldn't take long,” Mr. Morgan says.

The family court area is crowded, but we breeze right through to Judge Clarion's courtroom. It's not like a court I thought it would be. It's small, and there isn't room for a jury, just an area for our attorney, us, and their team.

I look over, and she sits there acting smug. She has light brown curly hair, like English's, and she's small in stature. She's quite pretty, as I examine her objectively, but that's on the surface. I can't conceive how she can put her child through this. There has to be another way.

“All rise,” the bailiff says as the judge enters the chambers.
One look and I know we’re screwed. The judge is a woman.

Ten

SHERIDAN

“Beck, you can’t give up hope. If you do, then we have nothing. English will know.”

“But there’s nothing more for us to do. She’s won, Cookie.”

“Like hell. Do you honestly believe that?”

“Yeah, I do. We have to allow English to spend the day with her this Saturday. And if the judge deems it goes well, then it may go on to an overnight visit.”

“Okay, fine, but what? Are you just going to lie down and accept it? Well, I’m not. I’m going to find a way to fight. I’ll find that chink in her armor and figure out what it is that she really wants. I know there’s something, and I’ll not stop until it’s uncovered.”

“I admire your spunk, but I think you’re setting yourself up for failure.”

Since I’m driving I can’t give him the full attention that I’d like to. But I do say, “That’s cool if you think that. But in the end when I win, I’m going to flaunt my victory so badly in your face and say ‘I told you so’ that you’re going to want to choke me.”

He shrugs and says, “I don’t know how you can be so up about this.”

“I’m not, but I’m not going to let them walk over us either. This is only begun. I get she wants a part of English. Think about it, Beck. What if you had given her up because of a foolish decision? And then you came to your senses and realized what you’d done. But I don’t think that’s what she’s doing. If it was, I think I’d be open to her a little.”

“Yeah, maybe.”

“Now put on a better face so we can tell English and she won’t think the world is ending.”

Kids are amazing. When we tell her, it’s as if we said she is going to the zoo or something. We explain there will be someone else there so she won’t be alone, and she only shrugs.

On Saturday, we take her to the community room of the local branch of the library, and there’s a court appointed Guardian ad Litem waiting. She introduces herself as Millie Schafer and says she will be present throughout the two-hour visit. She will stay and observe, and if anything threatening toward English happens, English will be removed immediately. We are allowed to remain present until bio-mom arrives, and then we have to leave for the duration of the designated time set by the court.

English skips around the room as though she hasn’t a care in the world ... until Abby walks in. One look at her and she runs into my arms. “I don’t want to go with her, Mommy. That’s the mean lady from school.”

The Guardian ad Litem’s eyes pop out, and Abby starts crying. Except zero tears flow.

English doesn’t stop. “Please don’t make me go. She said all those mean things to me on the playground that day. You said she wouldn’t hurt me.” Her arms cling to me, and I’m doing all I can to hold it together. One glance at Beck and I realize he’s about to come unglued. Ms. Schafer hasn’t spoken a word yet. The woman must be in shock.

Then Abby says, “I’m so sorry, English. I wanted to see you so bad I did something stupid.”

“You were mean to me,” English says. “You said you were going to take me away from my daddy forever.”

Abby’s faces pinches up, and she knows she made a huge error. “I was in a bad place that day.”

“The playground?” English asks.

“No, not there,” Abby snaps. Her anger mounts. This is the side of her I suspected she’s been hiding from everyone. “What I mean is, I’ve been lonely without you, and I want you to come home with me.”

“I have my bedroom at Daddy’s and Geepa’s and Banana’s. And I have a mommy already.”

Abby scowls, and in a nasty tone says, “She’s not your mother.”

“Yes, she is.”

“Everyone please calm down.” Ms. Schafer finally finds her voice. “How about we all take a seat over there?”

English still has her arms wrapped around me in a death grip, so I doubt there’ll be any letting go soon. We shuffle to the table, and I plop in a chair, holding her on my lap.

Ms. Schafer begins. “Ms. LaMont, why did you go to English’s school?”

“I wanted to see my daughter.”

“But you frightened her.”

“I know that now, and it was a mistake,” Abby admits.

“She said you told her some pretty serious things.”

Abby glances at me first and then Beck. “She’s making that up. You know how kids are.”

English nearly flies off my lap. “I am not. That’s what you told me. Daddy says never to lie.”

“Ms. Schafer,” I interrupt, “the day it occurred, I happened to be there since I teach at English’s school. In fact, I actually teach her class, and she was completely freaked by the incident. English doesn’t lie nor does she make things up. This woman showed up at the playground and confronted English. It was a highly unusual circumstance, so much so that we even reported it to the police.”

Ms. Schafer is clearly uncomfortable with this information. “This is an unexpected circumstance. I must call off the visit for today and report this to Judge Clarion. I will let each of you know what she decides. In the meantime, I would suggest, Ms. LaMont, that you stay away from English until a decision is made.”

“But—” Abby starts to protest.

“Ms. LaMont, as I said, English is obviously upset by your presence, and this must be further evaluated. You will be contacted about this as soon as Judge Clarion reaches a decision.”

“My attorney will be notified about this, and he will contact Judge Clarion directly.” Abby leaves in a huff, and Beck shakes his head in disgust. I know exactly what he’s thinking. Her motives are not pure.

Ms. Schafer prepares to leave, so I tell her, “Thank you, but I’m sorry for what happened.”

“I’m not. Better to find these things out now than when it’s too late.” She offers us a sympathetic look.

Beck picks up English, and we leave. Abby is standing outside of the library.

“You think you’ve won, but this is only the beginning, Beck. I’ll have my way sooner or later.” Then she stomps off to her car.

“Why is she so mean?” English asks.

“I’m not sure,” Beck answers.

“I don’t want to go to her house ever. Please don’t make me, Daddy,” English begs.

“I’m going to do my very best, sweetheart. I promise.”

Jesus. I’m not sure my heart can take this. What kind of woman would do that to her own flesh and blood? She doesn’t care about English. If she did, she would back away and do little things to allow English to warm up to her, and then

establish some kind of a relationship. Not go all in and say awful things to her.

When we get home, Beck disappears to call the attorney and then his parents. Mr. Morgan wants to file some sort of legal action to block Abby from seeing English due to the traumatizing effect the visit had on her. We're all in one hundred percent. Beck also wants the private investigator to step up his efforts. Maybe increase his nighttime activities. She has a live-in boyfriend, but that's not illegal. The guy is employed and so is Abby. She seems to have an answer for everything, but her nasty side leaves a bitter taste in my mouth and a disturbed feeling in my body. Everything screams *wrong* to me about her.

Sunday night, I'm trying to pull my lesson plans together for the week, but my concentration is off. Abby's face looms in my mind, and I wish I could figure out the game she's playing. I've no doubt there is one. The way she avoided looking us in the eye was my biggest clue. I'm sitting on our bed, papers scattered around me and a pencil in my mouth, when Beck walks in. My iPad, which we use for school, is open, and I'm entering my plans.

He sits and touches my thigh with his finger.

"You okay?" I ask.

"Nah, but I'll get there. This waiting is ridiculous. I was thinking. Maybe we need a psych evaluation for English to prove she shouldn't be around Abby."

"If it works, I'm all in."

He looks like shit, as though he's been on a drinking binge, when he hasn't had a drop in days. I rest my palm over his hand. "It's going to work out. We have to have faith, Beck."

"I know." He stands, drops his head back, and twists his neck from side to side. Then he drags his feet back out of the room.

On Monday afternoon, Beck gets a call from Mr. Morgan. Judge Clarion wants us back in her court. It's scheduled for

Friday at ten. I almost wish it would be tomorrow instead of having to wait the five days. It makes for one nerve-wracking week. And having to act happy and normal around English isn't easy. She's way too perceptive for that.

By the time Friday comes, the two of us look like we've been through a hurricane. My hair looks like a bird's nest, and Beck's looks as though he stuck his finger in an electric outlet. Neither of us has slept a wink in days.

"Shit, Cookie, I don't think I can take much more of this."

"I know. Look at us. We look like two homeless people. Let's pull ourselves together."

His hands run through his hair. They pretty much stay there now.

"Stop doing that. That's why we look so awful. I'm doing it now, too."

"Guess we need to hold hands then," he suggests.

"Good idea."

Mr. Morgan meets us, and by his stare he must think we look awful, too. "Can you two straighten yourselves out? If the judge sees you like that, you'll never get custody. Mrs. Bridges, go brush your hair. Mr. Bridges, you do the same."

We head for the restrooms, and I grab an elastic out of my purse and twist my hair into a messy bun, hoping it does the trick. Mr. Morgan seems pleased when he sees me. Beck looks better, too. He must've splashed water on his face because he actually looks fresher.

Judge Clarion isn't what I'd call a happy looking woman. She doesn't smile much. Today is no different. When we're all settled in, she gets right to the heart of the matter. She doesn't sugarcoat a thing and blasts Abby for showing up at the playground. She reminds me of Judge Judy in this regard. But that's where the resemblance ends. She's all about kids being with their mothers and makes no bones about it.

Mr. Morgan tries to point out how damaging this could potentially be for English, stating how she had to go to counseling after the playground incident.

“I hardly think this would be comparable, Mr. Morgan,” Judge Clarion states.

He argues that the psychologist feels it wouldn’t be wise for English to spend time alone with Abby.

“At this point, we’re not discussing that. We’re discussing supervised visits,” she counters. This goes on and on for several minutes until Judge Clarion says, “It’s been my experience that many children often overreact to things they don’t often want to do. For instance, when you tell them to go to bed, sometimes they cry and fuss. I’m not that worried that this isn’t a similar scenario.”

I’m certain my jaw hits the floor.

My chair scoots back as I stand, and I’m talking before I give it a thought. “Judge Clarion, I was there. I saw English’s reaction, and it wasn’t her usual response to things. She was clearly shaken by whatever Ms. LaMont said. Even the other teachers made remarks about it. Then her personality changed to the point I suggested she visit a psychologist. It was traumatic for her.”

“Yes, Mrs. Bridges, I already heard that argument. And how long have you known English?”

“Since last August.”

“And I suppose that makes you an expert on her behavior. You’ve known her since August as her teacher and since November as her stepmother. This is March. It’s less than a year. That’s not much time by my standards, Mrs. Bridges.” Judge Clarion’s tone is heavily laced with disdain.

“No, Your Honor, but it does show that I’ve had experience in this matter.”

She’s not pleased with my response. Mr. Morgan passes me a note telling me to cease my arguments. Beck squeezes my

knee, but I'm pissed as hell. It appears this woman is so against us, and I don't know why.

Closing my eyes, I try focusing on a greener side, where the sun is shining and the sky is blue, because in this dim courtroom, there are only dark clouds hanging over us. I barely hear the rest of what the crazy judge says, except for the fact that next Saturday, English will have to go back and be exposed to that woman again. Thank God she will still be supervised by the Guardian ad Litem.

As soon as we're done, Mr. Morgan pulls us into some sort of room. He points his finger at me and fires off like a cannon. "What the hell was that? You can't go spouting your mouth off to a judge like that. I'm surprised she didn't kick you out of there or charge you with contempt. If you can't control your emotions, I'm going to strongly suggest you refrain from attending these sessions."

Whoa. I didn't think I was that bad. When I open my mouth to say something, he says, "I'm not looking for a response from you, Mrs. Bridges. If you can't follow my direction, do not attend. We are in a tenuous situation as it is, and you just made it worse."

His words are a slap in the face. Here I thought I was helping English and I was only damaging the case. "Shit."

"Precisely. Now I have to return to the office and try to come up with some sort of plan to fix this shit, as you called it. And, to be honest, I'm not sure if I can."

My palm covers my mouth as I process his words. I've bungled this good. What if it's irreparable? What if I've destroyed any hope for English? I don't think I could live with that.

I'm suddenly in Beck's embrace, pulled into the wall of his chest. "Mr. Morgan, I know you're doing your best for English, but let's be clear about something. Don't ever speak to my wife that way again. Yes, she made a mistake, but she loves English every bit as much as I do. Keep that in mind the

next time you think about lashing out at her. And let's not forget something. *We're* your clients. We're not paying you to treat us like shit."

"Fine, Mr. Bridges, but if you can find the time, I'd like to see you in my office sometime tomorrow. We need to come up with a strategy to fight and win this case. That is, if you still want that."

As upset Beck is with all this, he sticks up for me. He actually defends me, and I'm pretty fucking sure I just fell in love with my husband a little more because of it.

When we get to the car, I grab his hand and beg him to forgive me.

"There's nothing to forgive. Cookie, you're forgetting something. I'm with you when you spend time with English. I see how the two of you are together. I notice the way you look at her, and love pretty much oozes out of every pore in your body. You would never do anything in the world to harm her, so there's no need to apologize because what you did back there was try to protect her. In my eyes, it was Morgan's fault. He should've warned you about saying anything. And I won't stand for anyone speaking to you that way. Ever." His hand wraps around my neck, and he makes circles with his thumb over the line of my jaw. For some odd reason, it makes my heart ache even more. I feel like I've let him down.

Eleven

SHERIDAN

“I’ve failed you, Beck. But worse, I failed English.”

“Never. The system failed us.”

“Yeah, at least that judge is making the visit supervised again.” Laying my hand over his, I say, “I wish I could help you more. I feel so damn useless.”

“You’re not. You’ve done far more than I ever hoped.”

It hits me full force. Beck is calmer than I’ve seen him in days. I don’t get it. It’s almost like a veil has descended over him, and he’s a different person.

“Hey, what gives?” My gaze narrows as I eye him suspiciously.

“What do you mean?” He’s the face of innocence.

“An hour ago you were freaking out, and now you’re Mister Calm.”

He slowly blinks and doesn’t speak for a long moment. But then he says, “I listened to you passionately fight for English against that judge and then I heard that prick try to tear you to pieces, and I guess I realized exactly how important you are to me. Don’t get me wrong, babe. I will fight tooth and nail for our daughter, but if we lose, I know beyond a shadow of a doubt, we did everything we could. And it’s because you had my back and hers. So I thought to myself, I can be upset, I can stomp my feet, but what will it accomplish? It will only upset English more than necessary. And that’s the last thing I want. So I’ve adopted a new attitude. If Abby is going to win, then the best thing we can do for English is to cooperate.”

“My head is swimming.”

“I’m not saying I like it because I don’t. I’m also not saying I trust her because I don’t. But maybe, just maybe, if we act compliant, she’ll slip up and her true colors will come out faster. You know?”

What he says makes sense, and I’m beginning to follow his logic. But it’s easier said than done.

I decide that going back to school isn’t happening, so Beck drives us home. All I really want is for him to hold me, so he takes me to bed, and that’s what he does. This is a side of Beck that is new to me, but I’m finding that softness in his heart is making mine grow more attached to his.

“So, what next?”

“I’ll go and see Morgan tomorrow and find out what our strategy is. I’m pretty sure he’ll try to chastise you and me again, but I won’t stand for it. The judge isn’t going for us. That’s clear, and Morgan needs to come up with something to help us win this case.”

Saturday morning, Beck calls the attorney, and I make plans to take English to the aquarium. Then Beck tells me to drop her off at his parents’ house afterward so we can discuss what Mr. Morgan has to say.

Late that afternoon, I pace, waiting for Beck to return. When he does, I know it’s bad by the tense line of his lips.

“What happened?”

“We need to sit.” His curt reply surprises me a bit, but I put it off as him being upset.

Taking seats on the couch, he doesn’t waste time. “Why didn’t you tell me about your father? That he killed someone in an accident while driving drunk?” His question is accusatory.

“What? My father?” His line of questioning confuses me.

“I need answers, Sheridan.” His harsh tone shocks me, but the burning anger in his eyes is even worse.

I stammer out my reply. “B-because I never talk about it. Ever. He went crazy after my mom died. I was fourteen at the time. I didn’t really know what was going on with him. He was the superintendent of—”

“I know. The school district. Get to the point.”

Stunned. Shocked. Hurt. Blinking furiously so the stinging tears that burn my eyes don’t actually appear, I tell the horrid tale. “He became an alcoholic. A week before my high school graduation, he got drunk, was driving home, and got in an accident. He was killed along with the other people. A woman and her child died.” And boom, the explosion of tears I try to hold back erupts. I’m always lousy at this because it hurts. Terribly. Knowing my father did something like this. But in my heart, I still believe he wasn’t a bad man. He just couldn’t get past my mom’s death. Yet when it happened, I was treated like the town pariah.

“And what else?”

“Wh-what else? Isn’t that enough?” I scrub at my face with my shirt.

“What about the money?” he clips.

“The money?”

“Yes! The money, Sheridan?”

“There wasn’t any after the woman’s family sued the estate. They got everything, and then some. My mother was an only child, and both her parents were deceased. My dad had a brother and a sister, but they stayed away like I had some dreaded contagious disease. My lawyer had to liquidate everything, and every penny went to the family. But I would’ve given it to them anyway.” I rub my eyes with the bottoms of my palms.

“Didn’t you stop to consider any of this?” He stands and paces.

“What do you mean?”

“How this looks, Sheridan?”

He's so angry, his words cutting, and I honestly don't understand why. "I don't know what you mean, Beck."

"What I mean, *Sheridan*, is her attorney is saying I bought and paid for a wife. To get you out of debt, and in return you'd help me with my fucking fiasco. Quid pro quo. Are you following me? And now Abby has proposed something. She wants to reconcile. If we do, she says she'll drop all custody charges."

"Reconcile? But we're married."

"She doesn't care. She wants to lay claim to me. In her words, *exactly like you did*. To bail her out of debt, I'm sure. They've done their research, Sheridan."

His eyes knife me, right through my heart, slicing it open, and leaving it there a bloody mess. He believes I'm a shitty person. That I withheld this information from him on purpose.

"I never wanted anything from you. You came to me, remember?"

"Yeah. And look how it worked out for me."

Swallowing his hateful words, I'm too hurt to speak for a moment. Another tear slips down my cheek, but I don't bother to wipe it away. "Can I ask what you did with my old car?"

"I traded it in. Why?"

"How much did you get for it?"

"A thousand. Why?"

Jesus. I am so fucked. Another loan, I guess, if I can even qualify for one.

"May I have the money, please?"

He scowls and says, "You have it. In the other car."

"I don't want the other car." Swallowing the lump of cotton, I continue, "In fact, I don't want a single thing from you." When I say the words, my hand covers my aching chest, as if I can rub the hurt away. It's then the rock I'm wearing

catches my eye. Slipping it off, I gently set it on the table. With hazy vision, I walk directly to the bedroom. It doesn't take long for me to pack a bag. Dumping a bunch of things inside the biggest suitcase I own, I fill it until it's about to pop. Then I grab all my stuff out of the bathroom and put it in a duffle bag. My briefcase is still packed with my school things. I'll have to come back and pick up my other things later. Maybe Michelle will help. But getting out of here is my first priority. The idea of staying in this house with the man I trusted, but who thinks I'm some despicable person, sickens me.

As I lug all my shit to the living room, he stands and watches. "Where are you going?"

"Somewhere to make your life easier. File for divorce. I won't contest. But fuck you, Beck Bridges. I am NOT nor have I ever been the vile person you're making me out to be. The last four years I've done nothing but work my ass off to earn my degree and pay off loans. *You* came to me. I never asked for this. So go and live your life. I wish English all the happiness in the world. Right now, I'm too angry and hurt to say the same for you."

The Uber I ordered arrives, and I drag my shit to the car. By the time I get to my old house, I'm a total wreck. The poor driver has to lug my bags to the porch for me because I'm barely able to walk. Michelle comes out and can't figure out what's going on.

It takes me an hour to calm down enough to tell her, and she's nearly as shocked as I am.

"I can't understand how he goes from being all lovey-dovey to you fucked up my life in a few hours."

"Same here. It was like a stranger in the house. And if you could've seen the way he looked at me."

"Who is this woman, Abby, anyway? I mean, who would suggest that to someone, knowing he's married to someone else?" Michelle asks.

“She must be desperate. And maybe there’s a small part of me that doesn’t blame her. English is this amazing kid. It’s going to kill me not to be with her every day.”

“How will you handle the teaching part?”

“As professionally as I can.”

“I know it’s going to be so hard on you.” Her arms come around me in a big, warm hug. “I’m sorry, Sher. Here I thought he was your one.”

“Me, too. Guess we’re roomies again.” I sniff. “Oliver coming over tonight?”

“No,” she pouts. “It’s his dad’s birthday, and he has some family thing.”

“Still haven’t met his family yet?” This surprises me because it’s plain weird, only I don’t let on.

“No, we talked a little about it at Christmas, but then it didn’t work out because I went home.”

“Hmm. Well, maybe he’s just sparing you.”

“Or he’s ashamed of me.”

“Really? How can he possibly be ashamed of someone as beautiful as you?”

“Oh, you’re just saying that because you’re my bestie.”

“No, I am not, and stop begging for compliments. Besides, tonight is all about me,” I say.

“True.”

My phone buzzes, and I think it may be Beck, but when I check, I see that it’s Mark. “It’s Beck’s dad,” I say to Michelle.

“You gonna answer it?”

“I don’t know.”

“I think you should hear what he has to say.”

So I answer. “Hi, Mark.”

“Sheridan, can I come over? I know this is a terrible time for you, but I’d like to talk if you’ll allow it.”

“Okay.”

Dropping the phone onto my lap, I say, “He’s coming over. He’s such a nice man I couldn’t say no.”

“I’ll go hang out in my room.”

Mark must’ve been in my neighborhood or very close because the doorbell rings not five minutes after he calls. When I open the door, he takes one look at me, and his posture sags. “Oh, Sheridan.” Then I’m wrapped in his arms, but I want to push him away because they remind me too much of Beck’s. And the whole thing comes roaring back to me—the angry words, the tone of his voice, how plain old crummy he made me feel—and my heart just collapses inside of my chest as tears choke me. It’s so horrible this time; it’s as though I can’t get my breath.

“Come on, sweetheart. Breathe for me. It’s going to work out. Just take a nice, easy breath.” Unsure of how much time passes, I notice we’re inside, and I don’t recall walking here.

“I never wanted anything from him, Mark. I didn’t. I swear. After my dad died, I couldn’t talk about it to anyone. Only Michelle and her family. I ... it was like part of me died with my parents. I don’t know. I was penniless and trying to make a go of things. You know. Going to school and working nonstop. Barely functioning outside of that and just trying to live. That’s all.”

“I know, honey. Beck’s just trying to figure everything out, and he’s not thinking right. He’s so afraid of losing English he’s striking out at the one person he truly cares about.”

That can’t be. “He can’t care about me. If you could’ve heard him. He was hateful.”

“I know. He can be like that sometimes. He takes after his old man. Please don’t give up on him. English loves you. She talks about you constantly. And Beck—I’ve never seen him

look or act the way he does with you toward another woman. This is all a mess, I know, but we'll get it ironed out."

"I don't think I can. I'm sorry. If he's more worried about people thinking I married him to get out of debt, then it'll never work. Not to mention, Beck is a grown man. I think it's childish that you have to come here and run interference for him, quite frankly. My respect for him has bottomed out."

Mark scrubs at his face, something Beck does a lot when he's frustrated and thinking. It's strange how I never noticed the stark resemblance between these two before.

"Can I just say this? Beck is going to wake up and realize what he did. It probably won't be today because his head is a block of cement. But when he does, maybe tomorrow or the next day, he is going to be a complete mess because his heart is like his mother's—soft and kind. Believe me, Sheridan. I know my son. When English was delivered to our porch in that cardboard box, from the first moment he held her, there was no going back. It was never a question of *can I do this?* It was—I am going to be the best father I can, even though I'm only a kid myself. And he was and still is, in my opinion, the best dad around. He sacrificed everything and did it all. We only stepped in when he had school or work. Other than that, it was Beck who got up at night to feed and change her, Beck who held her when she was sick with fevers and vomiting, Beck who did everything. He wouldn't let us, Sheridan. It was his responsibility, and that's how he saw it."

That's the side of Beck I know, but the man who was so rude and insulting to me, has left my heart crushed until I can't think of him that way anymore.

"I understand he's your son and you believe the best of him. I can't think that way right now. Maybe someday I'll get over this, but right now ..." Even thinking about him brings on another round of damn tears. His words razored me so deep, it was as though he knew exactly where and how hard to hit.

"Very well. But Anna and I are committed to helping you, either way. She's outside in your car. We're leaving it here

because it's yours. Beck bought it for you, and the title is in your name."

"I don't want it. I can't afford a car such as that. I couldn't even afford to get it serviced."

"We'll take care of that for you."

"No, I won't do that."

"Well, if things don't get ironed out between you two, then you can sell it for something more to your liking. We'll even help you, Sheridan. Anna and I consider you a part of our family, and no matter what happens we always will."

A sad, sloppy smile appears on my face. "Thank you. I appreciate what you're trying to do. Really."

He embraces me again, and it's times like these I wish my father were still alive. And that thought unleashes another round of weeping. Jeez, will this ever end?

When my sobs turn to sniffles, he gets up and says he'll be right back with the key fob. When he comes back, Anna is with him, and her face is red and swollen. She immediately hugs me, and we both start crying.

"Oh, Sheridan, I wish I could give him a good solid kick in the ass."

A small giggle escapes, and I add, "Me, too."

She pulls away and holds my shoulders. "Please, please call us if you need anything. We love you, dear."

I only nod in response.

When they're both gone, Michelle creeps back into the room. "You okay?"

"I don't even know anymore."

"I do know one thing. Those parents of his sure think a hell of a lot of you. And they know their son. They may be right about this. He's just freaking out, Sher."

“Fine. But if life with him will be filled with these kinds of freak-outs, I’m not sure I can live that way. What if when English is a teenager he catches her having sex with some boy? Is he going to kill the boy or something?”

Michelle starts laughing.

“I’m not joking.”

“I know, but that’s like one of those commercials on TV. I would hope he wouldn’t do anything that drastic. But if you were there, you wouldn’t let him.”

“But I can’t bear the brunt of those freak-outs, either. Look, I don’t want to talk about this anymore. It’s making my brain hurt.”

“How about popcorn and a movie?”

“It has to be here because my face is too swollen to leave the house.”

“Cool. You pick.”

I give her my evil grin, and she yells, “Oh no, not *The Minions!*”

As it turns out, I don’t last very long before falling asleep. The whole thing with Beck drained me, and I wake up on the couch, covered with a quilt, on Sunday morning. There’s one thing I know. Life goes on. It did after Mom died, and it did after Dad. And it sure as hell is going to after this. I won’t let this ruin me forever. I’ll have my pity party, but then I’ll pull up my bootstraps, pick up the pieces, and move the hell on. One more thing to add to Sheridan’s list of fucked-up life’s lessons.

Twelve

SHERIDAN

Seeing English at school rips my guts out. When she comes into the room, she barrels into me and nearly knocks me over.

“I missed you, Mommy.”

Oh, fuck. I didn’t think about how I would handle this. Well, I did, but I thought I could be stronger than I am.

“Not nearly as much as I missed you, princess.” I nuzzle her neck and don’t want to release her. Her sweet strawberry scent floods my nose and brings tears to my eyes, and I want to damn Beck for his idiocy again. “Let me look at you.” I pull back and grin. “Love the outfit and I believe you’ve grown. Did you drive today?”

“Mommy, get real. Banana brought me. I spent the night, and Boonior ate my slippers again.”

“He didn’t.”

“Uh-huh and then he threw them up all over his crate. It was yucky.”

Her little mouth twists up and makes me giggle. “Well, maybe that’ll teach him slippers taste bad.”

“I hope so. Anyway, when are you coming home? Is your friend feeling better?”

“Um, not yet.” So that’s what they told her. I was kind of wondering. “She’s still under the weather, but maybe soon.”

The rest of the week is much the same, English coming each day and asking about Michelle. Each day her face looks a bit sadder, as though she’s starting to suspect something isn’t quite right.

On Friday, Susan pulls me aside during lunch and wants to know what's going on.

"You've been down all week. And don't deny it, Sheridan."

"Yeah, well, things aren't going so smoothly."

"Care to talk about it?" she asks.

"Not really."

"Okay, if you change your mind, my door's open," she says.

After I thank her, I realize I need to get my act together. My week of mourning is up.

That night when I get home, I ask Michelle, "What are you doing tonight?"

"No plans."

"How about we drink some wine, cook some dinner, and hang out?"

"Yeah! Life's too fucking short to be sad about shit like this, you know?" Michelle says.

"Yeah, but how do I get over him?"

"Attitude, my friend. Well, that and wine." She holds up her glass and clinks it against mine. "Now listen up. This is a mere bump in the road for you. Chalk it up to some hot sex with a fucked-up dude and move on. Every relationship is a learning experience. Now you know you don't want a man who can't think outside of his own realm. You should always come first. Even the Bible says it. When a man marries a woman, she comes before everything, and that includes children. I get that he adores his daughter, and I applaud him for that, but he put you not only in the backseat, but in the fucking backyard."

"I love English, though, and that's a problem for me."

She waves her wine glass. "No, no, no. You're not thinking this through. That's not the problem. It never was. The

problem was that when he asked you to do this, he omitted to think about feelings—his and yours—and how they would affect decisions he made. He can't just randomly blame you for shit. If he had done his due diligence on you and had investigated you, he would've known that bit about your father. You didn't try to hide anything from him. You just didn't talk about it. So you can love English all you want, but Beck is the true fuck up here and only has himself to blame for this mess."

"I like how you're thinking, Michelle. But that still doesn't solve my English problem. I want to see her outside of the classroom."

"So go see her. March up to his door and tell him you want her for the day. Just like that. Do you really think he'd refuse you?"

"Probably not."

"Do it, girl. And I want to be sitting in your car and watching his face when you do."

We both laugh as we plot my way back into English's life. But then I say, "You don't think I'm doing something detrimental to English, do you?"

"Sheridan, you love that kid as if she were your own. I only see good coming out of this. For Pete's sake, she calls you *Mommy!*"

"Yeah, true. I just don't want to hurt her in any way. That's the last thing I'd ever want."

She gives me a hug. "Sheridan, you couldn't hurt a flea if it bit you in the ass all night long."

The next day, I gather my courage and drive over to Beck's. When he answers the door, there is no disguising his jolt at seeing me standing on his porch.

"Hi, is English home?" I ask nonchalantly, though my insides are shaking like a leaf in the wind.

"Um, yeah."

“I’d like to take her for the day. To LEGOLAND.”

He slants his head and says, “Um, okay.” But he doesn’t move. He only stands there, and those fucking blue-green eyes puncture me. *Stand strong, Sheridan. Don’t let him see your weakness.*

“Well?” I ask. I’m not trying to be nice here. I only want the kid for the day.

“Yeah.” He blinks twice, slowly, then says, in that scratchy voice of his, “You look good, Cook—”

I cut him off, “Don’t call me that ever again. You lost your right to any cute little names the day you verbally struck me down in there.” I point over his shoulder. “My name is Sheridan. Remember it. Now, can English go or not? If she can’t, I’ll be on my way.” My tone is not friendly at all, only clipped and snappy.

“I ... I—”

“You what?”

“Nothing. I’ll get her.”

“Thank you.”

“You can come in.” He opens the door wider for me to enter.

“I’d rather not. Bring her out to the car, if you will.” I march down the steps, his eyes burning through the sweater I’m wearing. Mission accomplished and I have to say I’m proud of myself.

A few minutes later, English runs out to the car, and I hug the pieces out of her. I don’t have to look to know that Beck is watching from the porch. But I don’t really care. I buckle her into her seat and off we go. I’m excited and know she is because neither of us has ever been to LEGOLAND.

The day is a blast. We ride the rides, watch the 4D movie three times because English loves it so much, build towers and watch them fall in an earthquake, and do all sorts of other

things. By the time we leave, she's falling asleep on the way home. My heart aches at the thought of dropping her off, but I'm also filled with joy at how much fun we had together. If she is sad about me not being there, she doesn't let on. When I pull into the driveway, Beck comes out to the car.

"Would you like to come in for dinner?"

"No."

English is sound asleep, so he has to pick her up out of the seat. Then he looks at me over her head. "I really fucked it all up, didn't I?"

"Yes." I put the car in reverse and drive away as he stands with a blank expression on his face. It's not that I don't give a fuck. I do, but I won't let it show. Ever. I'll have a slight breakdown when I get home, but I keep remembering what Michelle said, and I feel stronger than ever.

It shouldn't come as a surprise, but the next morning, it does. The bell ringing has me dragging my tired feet to the door, and when I open it, Beck stands there, looking sheepish.

"Can we talk?"

There's no point in shutting him out forever, so I extend my arm, allowing him entrance. He shuffles in and stops when he hits the living room. He notices the balled up tissues I forgot to throw away, along with the box, indicating my little crying jag from last night. His lids squeeze shut, maybe because he feels bad, but it's a little too late in my book.

"I was an ass to you, and I'm sorry."

"Seems to me you would've figured this out a week ago."

He pinches the bridge of his nose and goes on. "I deserve your hate, your snide remarks, but please let me finish."

I shrug.

"When I was sitting in Morgan's office, he kept droning on and on about how bad this all looked, and that we never should've married. It was coming at me from all angles, not to

mention I was freaked. It was completely wrong of me, and I accept that. I should never have spoken those words.”

“No, you shouldn’t have. You know nothing about my life, Beck. About how I lived and what it was like, other than what that fuckhead attorney told you. But let me fill you in. My mom woke up one morning and thought she had the flu. She was dead two weeks later of an aggressive form of leukemia. I was fourteen. At that point, everything went to hell. My dad stopped talking and started drinking. I was left maintaining a house, cooking, cleaning, buying groceries, while he drowned his sorrows in a bottle. I don’t blame him, because they had this kind of relationship that you don’t often find. He simply couldn’t deal with her death. But it left me ... alone. At the age of fourteen. Then he gets killed, and I have to pick up the pieces again. This time without the benefit of any kind of money at all. You’ve never had to worry about that, so you don’t know what it’s like to go without food for a day. Well, I do. And then *you*,” I take my index finger and jab him with it, “have the fucking nerve to accuse me of shit that shreds me to pieces without even giving me the benefit of the doubt. You took me and tossed me away like a piece of crumpled up useless trash before you had all the facts.”

“Wow. When you put it like that, I guess I did.”

“And you know what else? You know what’s even worse? You’re the one who came to me for help. You should’ve checked me out, done your research and due diligence before you even asked me to marry you. You could’ve saved me all this trouble.”

“You’re absolutely right,” he admits.

“I’d like you to leave now.”

“But, Sheridan, I want—”

“You don’t seem to understand something here. This doesn’t have anything to do with what *you want* anymore. This is what *Sheridan* wants.”

“Okay. But English—”

“I’ll see English at school. And get her on weekends like yesterday. But I’d suggest you tell her the truth and not that my roommate is ill.” When I get to the door, I open it and wait for him. He stands there for a minute, staring. Finally, he walks out, but turns toward me when he gets to the porch.

“We had something so great, can’t you even consider giving it another chance?”

“If it was so great, why were you able to destroy it in the span of a few minutes? Must not have been that high on your list of priorities, Beck.” I shut the door and find my face wet once again. Damn him.

Thirteen

SHERIDAN

Monday at school, I get an urgent text from Beck.

I need to talk to you. PLEASE. It's about English.

If this is some kind of ploy, I'll totally disown him forever. When I can break away, I call.

“What’s up, and this had better be real.”

“It is.” There’s a desperate edge to his voice I haven’t heard before. “Abby’s attorney has suggested a home visit to ensure that English is living in a safe and healthy environment. They want to do it tomorrow night. Can you please be here? Sheridan, I’ll do anything you want. Anything at all. I’ll grovel if that’s what it takes. This has to go well for English’s sake.”

“Of course, I will.”

“Thank you.” His relief is palpable. “There is no way I can ever repay you.”

“I’m not doing this for you, Beck. I’m doing it for your daughter. What time do I need to be there?”

“Can you just bring her straight from school? And is there any way you can bring clothes tonight, so it looks like you actually live here?”

That makes sense, so I agree. The next day, I’m fairly nervous about pulling this off. It’s not that the home isn’t a great place for her. It’s the way I have to act toward Beck. This will be the first time I’ve been around him for any length of time since that horrible day I left. My stomach is one jittery mess, making me feel like I’m on a constant carnival ride.

English and I arrive home around three thirty to find Beck pacing the living room.

“Daddy, what’s cooking?” English walks around like there’s not a thing wrong in the world.

“We’re having company in a little while. Someone is going to come and ask you some questions, okay?”

“About what?”

“Stuff. Normal things. Like maybe Boonior.”

She grins. “Can I tell them how he ate my shoe?”

“If you want.” Beck laughs out his answer. “But you might want to leave the diarrhea part out.”

“Why?”

“It’s pretty gross.”

“Ew, and Geepa had to clean it up.” She giggles up a storm. I can’t help but join her. Her laugh is super contagious. It reminds me of water rippling over rocks.

“Why don’t you take your backpack in your room, honey?” I say.

She follows orders like a trooper.

“Is everything okay?” I ask.

“Yeah, I’m just nervous.”

“Beck, it’s going to be fine.”

When the visitor arrives, she’s a middle-aged woman with kind brown eyes. Her name is Margaret Pearson, and she seems to be very friendly and considerate. She smiles a lot as English talks about Boonior and school, her trip to Disney, LEGOLAND, and how she loves to draw. Then she asks English to see her room.

They disappear for a while, and Beck is up and pacing again. His forehead is even shiny, so I grab his arms and say, “Calm down. You don’t want her to see how freaked you are.” When I look at my hands on his arms, I realize I don’t have my ring on. *Crap*. I don’t dare tell him because it will freak him out even more. So I shove my hand in my pocket.

“Right. Right.” He inhales long and slowly a few times. I know it’s easier said than done.

Soon, Mrs. Pearson and English reappear. English skips over to me and crawls right up onto my lap. I make sure my left hand is sort of hidden.

“Mommy, I told the lady about our trip to LEGOLAND and how under the rainbow I was. Then I showed her our pictures we drew.”

“How nice of you, honey. What else did you do?”

“Told her about school and how you said I would like it, and I do. And that I like doing my homework.”

“Good girl.”

Beck takes a seat next to me on the couch and throws his arm around me, pulling me off balance. Dammit, I have to catch myself with my left hand, but I immediately slip it back under my leg. He pulls me close against him and kisses my cheek. I want to pull away in protest, but I don’t. The jerk. I’ll get him for this.

“You have a lovely home here. Mrs. Bridges, what about your family?” she asks.

“Unfortunately, I don’t have any. They’re all deceased.”

Her brow furrows as her eyes take on a pained look. “I’m so sorry, dear, and so young.”

“Yes, well, it was difficult, for sure.”

“Mr. Bridges?”

“My parents live very close to here, and English spends quite a bit of time with them.”

English pipes in, “That’s where Boonior lives. Where he ate my slippers and shoe and threw up and got diarrhea everywhere.”

“Oh, dear.” She looks horrified.

“Boonior has a habit of eating things he shouldn’t, I’m afraid,” Beck says, “which is why he lives with my parents.”

“Well, I think that’s a marvelous idea,” Mrs. Pearson says with a wink. “Who takes care of English after school?”

I answer this one. “It’s sort of a joint effort between Anna, who is Beck’s mother, Beck, and me. Since I teach at her school, it makes it easy to bring her home with me. And take her as well.”

By this time, English is tired of sitting still, so she hops off my lap and says, “Anyone want to draw a picture?”

“Not now, honey. Why don’t you go to your room and draw?” Beck suggests, but then turns to Mrs. Pearson with raised brows to see if it’s okay. She gives a slight nod, and the little mite is off and running.

“Thank you. She is high energy, and I hate to stifle her when she needs activity.”

“I understand.”

“Now that we’re alone, I’d like to say I’m impressed. You’ve done a fine job with her. She seems very well adjusted. So, how long have you two been married?”

Beck answers, and while he speaks, he pulls me closer to his side, and with his other hand, takes mine. We sit there as if we’re the loviest-doviest couple on the Earth. He strokes tiny circles on my hand with his thumb and leans in to kiss my temple when he’s close enough. I want to elbow him in the damn ribs, but I don’t dare. It could be too costly for English, and I would never do anything to compromise her situation. He’s certainly taking advantage of this situation, something I will make him pay for later. Rat bastard.

Shit. Now he’s running his nose across my cheek while Mrs. Pearson is talking. This is ridiculous. He’s making it extremely difficult to concentrate. I’m not gonna lie. It’s turning my sex engines on, and I want it to stop. But what can I do, short of blowing this whole ruse?

“So, I’ll turn my final report in by the end of the week, and your attorney will be furnished a copy shortly thereafter.” She leans in a bit toward us. “I’m not supposed to mention this, but it’s clear to me how much English loves you, Mrs. Bridges, and you, too, of course, Mr. Bridges.”

We all stand and walk her to the door as we say good-bye. When I know she’s out of earshot, I turn on him. “What the hell was that?” I whisper-yell, not wanting English to hear.

“What do you mean?”

“All that cuddling shit.”

“You mean this?”

He pulls me into his arms as I slap his hands away.

“Stop it, Beck. That was uncalled for back there.”

“Come on, Cookie. You liked it a little. I could tell.”

I push him away with both hands against his chest. “You took advantage of the situation, and that isn’t fair.”

A wicked smile turns up the corners of his mouth. “I know. And I should say I’m sorry, but I can’t. I miss you. I miss us all being together, and so does English.” Then sincerity turns his eyes bright. “Please come home.”

“I can’t. My heart still hurts, Beck.”

The brightness in his eyes instantly dims. He starts to speak, but English runs in the room, interrupting him. “Daddy, I’m hungry. Mommy, are you eating with us?”

The expectant look on her face almost makes me want to give in, but I can’t. If I do, it’ll be for the wrong reasons, and as much as I love her, I have to do what’s right for me this time.

“No, sweets, I have to go. Maybe next time.”

She looks between Beck and me, and it’s easy to see how crushed she is. “Okay.” Then she hugs me, and I leave. My regret grows with each minute I’m away, but I stand firm.

Michelle asks me about it later that night, and it's almost too brutal to talk about. My heart feels so divided. I want to be with him, but can I forgive him for the way he spoke to me? And if something else happens again similar to this, will he go postal on me? Michelle seems to think he's learned his lesson, though I'm still dealing with the raw flesh from my healing wounds.

With the home visit behind, I manage to scrape through the week, thoughts of Beck and English occupying most of my time. On Saturday morning, the doorbell rings. I'm still in bed, reading, and Michelle is at Oliver's. I decide to ignore it, but whoever it is, is persistent and keeps holding the buzzer down. So I throw on my robe and open the door with a scowl.

Beck stands there with a sheepish smile, holding a Lego scene in one hand and a balloon bouquet in the other.

"Hi, I've come with a peace offering."

"It appears to be an interesting one," I say as I inspect the Lego scene.

"Do you mind if I come in?" He leans toward me and begs in a mumble, "Please don't send me away. English is watching from the car."

Peering over his shoulder, I see her in the front seat, taking note of everything.

"Okay, come in."

He steps across the threshold and hands me the Lego scene. It sits on a piece of corrugated cardboard that's been spray-painted lavender. Biting my lips, I hold back my smile.

"What is it?" I ask.

"Can you not tell?"

After a few minutes of trying to figure it out, I say, "No. Sorry."

"It's supposed to be from *Frozen*."

That makes sense. If English had a hand in this, it's one of her favorite movies.

“Okay, I'm getting it now. That's the ice castle, and is that supposed to be a square version of Olaf?”

“Yeah.” He laughs.

“Nice.” I can't stop the smile from spreading across my face.

He holds out the balloon bouquet and says, “These are for you, too.” Again, they are covered in characters from *Frozen*: Elsa, Anna, Kristoff, Hans, Olaf, and Sven.

“So, is there any significance to this?”

He rubs his chin. “Actually, there is. I'm hoping I can convince you to come home today, because without you in my life, in *our lives*, my heart is frozen, Cookie. Nothing has been the same since you left. I was the biggest ass and a bigger fool and so very wrong. I'm not sure if you'll ever forgive me, but I hope you'll find a way to try. Please come back and thaw the ice that has taken up residence inside of me. You see, I... I love you, and the day you went away, you took my heart, too. I know I broke yours, but I'll do everything I know to unbreak it if you'll only give me the chance.”

He reaches for one of the balloons and tied to the end of the ribbon is my ring. He takes it off and reaches for my hand. But before he does, his brows lift as he waits for my answer.

“Beck, I—”

“I won't make the same mistake twice, if that's what you're worried about.”

He slides the ring back onto my finger and pulls me into his arms, and suddenly I'm crying my eyes out—crying for everything all over again, I suppose.

“You're the most important thing to me now. Do you hear what I'm saying? English is going to grow up and leave, but I want you with me forever.”

His breath blows over my ear, and I do hear him, but I can barely breathe, much less answer him.

“I’ll never hurt you like that again, but I’ll protect you instead. I’m going to do everything I can to make it up to you. I swear I will.”

Everything he says is all I ever wanted to hear. My hands grip his shirt, and I cling to him like a lifeline.

“I hated being away from you,” I admit.

“You don’t have to be away any longer.”

“English? Is she okay in the car?”

“The doors are locked. The *Frozen* thing was her idea. She wants you home as much as I do. She told me I needed to do something special like a Lego scene.”

The idea of the two of them constructing it makes me giggle. “She’s a very bright kid.”

“Come on. Let’s go home.”

“One thing first.”

“What?”

“I just wanted to say that I love you, too.”

He blasts me with one doozy of a smile.

Fourteen

SHERIDAN

“Did you like it? Did you like it?” English asks, bouncing inside the car.

“I loved it. And how did you get to be so smart?”

“I don’t know. I learn a lot in school sometimes. I wanted Olaf to be round, but he couldn’t.”

Turning in my seat, I say, “He was perfect, English. I couldn’t have loved him any better, and I’m going to keep that scene forever.”

“I told Daddy that he had to be nice to you because you’re our rainbow.”

“I’m your rainbow?”

Her head bobs up and down as her eyes, exactly like her father’s, gaze back at me. Oh, my heart!

“Wanna know something?” I ask her.

“Uh-huh.”

“You’re my rainbow, too.” My reward is the greatest smile in the world.

“Now, Daddy, can we go get pancakes?”

Beck glances at me, and I nod. “Sure thing, Munchkindoodle. You deserve a treat since your plan went off so well.”

Then she starts singing “Let it Go” at the top of her lungs, and Beck and I can’t help but join in. The lyrics never captured me in any way before, but as we sing, I find the song is empowering, and when we hit the lines—*I’m never going back, the past is in the past*—I know I’m Beck’s forever.

“Hey, we’re pretty good, aren’t we?” Beck asks.

“Yep,” English answers. Then she starts singing “Try Everything” from *Zootopia*, and I want to giggle because she’s trying so hard to do it in a Shakira imitation, but a six-year-old just can’t pull it off. I take a look at Beck. He’s biting down on his lip, so I grab his hand and squeeze, and we’re so glad when she’s done.

Taking a deep breath, I ask, “What else you got for us, kiddo?” My voice cracks a little.

She has an obsession with One Direction and starts singing several of their songs. When we pull into the parking lot of our favorite pancake joint, she’s still singing. The kid has a set of pipes on her, for sure.

But when I open the back door, she flies out and wraps around me like a blanket. “I’m so glad you’re home, Mommy.”

“Me, too, sweets.”

“Promise you won’t leave again.”

“I promise,” I say with a sigh.

She pokes Beck in the stomach, saying, “And, Daddy, don’t do anything to make her leave.”

My eyes bug out like a frog’s because I had no idea he’d been that honest with her.

“I won’t, Munch. I promise. I love her, and I’m going to show her in as many ways as I can.”

“Let’s draw her another picture when we get home,” English says.

“Good idea,” Beck says as he grabs my hand and English’s.

As we chow down on our pancakes, English informs me that we’re going to the park with Boonior after breakfast, and then she’s going to Banana and Geepa’s so Beck and I can have some alone time—in her words.

When we drop her off, Mark and Anna are glowing. The hugs they give me are almost as warm as the one I got from Beck.

“Oh, Sheridan, we can’t tell you how happy this makes us,” Anna says. “Mark and I have been so worried about you, and Beck, of course. But more angry with him than worried. I’m so happy you two worked it out.”

“English had a hand in it, but we’re good. He has a bit of work to do, though.”

“Don’t you let him act like he owns the world. He has a tendency to be that way with that brick of a head of his. This was a good lesson for him, I believe. But I’m sorry you had to suffer for it.”

“Same here. It wasn’t fun, I’ll grant you, but if it makes our marriage stronger, then I’ll deal with it. I know he has a good heart, but he won’t be doing that to me again.”

She smiles. “You can say that again. I’ve never seen him so miserable before. Ever. And English either.”

We chat a bit about Boonior and his chewing, and she says it’s all Mark’s deal. “I warned him, but he wouldn’t listen about how hard a puppy would be.”

“I have to say I’m happy you all are keeping him. Never raising a puppy before, it would be a disaster for me.”

“You two need to get out of here. It’s time for you to be alone and have some make-up time,” she says with a wink.

Beck overhears her and grabs my hand. “We’ll pick Munchkin up tomorrow.” He hurries me out of the house.

“What was that?”

“That was me getting you away from them so I could be alone with you. I am starved for some Cookie time.”

“Oh, I see how this is.”

“No, I don’t think you do.”

His tires squeal as he drives off. “I think you lost a few thousand miles off your tires back there.”

“Think I care?”

We pull into the garage, and before we can make it inside, he’s already kissing me. He tastes of blueberry pancakes and a hint of mocha, his favorite beverage. It makes me even hungrier for him. Before Beck, I used to wonder what the big deal about kissing was. To me, it was nothing but a mishmash of sloppy tongues and mouths coming together. But not with Beck. There is no sloppy to his kisses. They are well-orchestrated, seamless mouth fucks, designed to curl every single one of my toes. Not only do they accomplish that, they tingle my spine, make my uterus quiver, and we won’t even mention what they do to my vag. We crash into the house and nearly fall, but Beck lifts me by the back of my thighs and carries me the rest of the way to the bedroom.

His stubble scrapes my chin as he nips at my lower lip and then down further toward my neck. “Damn, Cookie, I need to feel your sweet cunt wrapped around my cock. My balls have been aching since you left.”

My body hums with desire and need at his words. Pants, shirts, and underwear go flying. We never even make it to the bed before I’m back in his arms again, legs around his hips, and his cock buried inside of me.

“Talk to me, babe. I need to hear you call out my name. Beg for me.”

“Please fuck me hard, Beck. I need this so much.”

“This?” He plunges all the way to his balls inside of me.

“Again. More.”

He pulls out and does it again. My back is jammed against the wall, and his pelvis is bruising with each thrust, but I couldn’t care less. It makes me want it even more.

“You’re so fucking tight around me, Sheridan. I missed you so much.” He pounds into me again, and we slap against each

other, all slick with sweat and the wetness of my desire.

“I need for you to come because I’m not gonna last.” He thrusts into me again, grinding his hips around me, touching on every place imaginable that sets me on my way to an explosive orgasm. His cock starts to pulsate, cluing me into the fact that he’s getting his, and with a final push, he groans out his orgasm as he finds my mouth.

When he finally stops kissing me, the corner of his mouth turns up in a cocky grin. “I’d say I’m sorry for fucking you like that, but it’d be a damn lie. I’ve dreamed about doing this for days, no nights, until I’ve jacked my dick raw. Nothing would do but the real thing. You’ve ruined me, babe.”

“Good. Because it’s fair play.”

He walks me to the bed, and I don’t know how his legs can work. My own feel like the bones have melted into goo. When he slips out of me, his cum drips out, so I take my hand and rub it around.

“Oh, fucking hell, that’s hot.” He adds a finger to the mix, and I’m ready for some more action. “Move your hand, Cookie.”

“No, I need—”

“I know exactly what you need. Move your hand.”

Doing as he says, I watch with eager eyes. His hand presses down on my mound, applying pressure and rubbing it in a circular motion. When I’m writhing, he moves it away and surprises me by doing a full-on slap to my clit.

“Jesus!”

“Shh.” He repeats this a few more times until I finally arch my back into one hell of a climax.

“Fuck! You just slapped me silly.”

“Now I’m going to fuck you silly. On your knees.” He flips me, and when I think he’s going to slide inside of me, I’m mistaken. He plays around with me, teasing me.

“Beck,” I whine. “I want you inside me.”

“Hush.”

He rubs his cock all around my pussy, going up and down, over and over, and then when he does push it in, he simultaneously pushes in his thumb into my backside. My eyes virtually roll back in my head. The sensations of the two rubbing against each other are insane.

“Jesus, Cookie.”

His balls slap me each time he thrusts, touching me deep inside. My hands fist the sheets as I say his name over and over again when I climax. Are everyone’s orgasms like this? Mine never were when I masturbated. I didn’t think they could be so powerful. Even when I used that stupid rabbit, they never came this close.

“What are you thinking, babe? You’re awfully quiet.”

“Yeah. Um, these orgasms are crazy, right?”

He chuckles. “Yeah.”

“I thought the ones I had with my rabbit were good, but these blow them away.”

“Your rabbit?”

“Yeah. My vibrator.”

“I see. Does your rabbit take a trip up your ass?”

“Of course not.” Then I giggle. The thought of it.

“What’s so funny?”

“Me sticking a vibrator up my butt.”

We’re lying on our sides facing each other, and he asks, “Why is that so funny? I think it would be sexy and fun to put a butt plug up your ass.”

“A butt plug?”

“Uh-huh.” He pinches my nipple. “It’s for the butt, hence the term.”

“I’ll do it if you will.”

“Is that a challenge?” he asks, grinning.

“Maybe.”

“Okay, but only if you let me fuck your ass.”

“You and your ass fetish.”

“What can I say? But all guys do. They’re just not honest enough to admit it.”

My experience with men is so limited I can’t respond to that. “Okay, you know I’m game for it. But it won’t ruin me, will it? Like, give me giant hemorrhoids or anything?”

A giant laugh comes out of him. “Not if we do it right, but I’ll research it for you if you want.”

“They have research for butt fucking?” I’m shocked.

“They have research for everything. I’m sure I can come up with some superior data and the proper statistics to satisfy your butt.”

A giggle escapes me. “Only mine?”

“Mine, too, though yours is the one that will be genuinely fucked.”

“In more ways than one if your research is flawed.”

We both laugh, and he says, “Oh, this subject cracks me up.”

“Oh, and how much, funny man?” I try to tickle him, but he grabs my hands before I can get a good dig into his ribs.

He pulls them over my head and says, “Now what?”

“I’m your prisoner to do what you will.”

The playfulness vanishes and is replaced by heat and intensity. “You have it all wrong, Sheridan. It’s me who is the prisoner. I’ve never thought myself to be a particularly cruel sort of guy. An ass at times, yes, but not a ruthless prick who was out to crush people. I did that to you. I tossed you to the

floor and ground you into it with the heel of my shoe as though you were nothing more than a speck of dirt. I don't know if I'll ever be able to make it up to you, but goddammit, I'm gonna try."

"Oh, Beck." I push him on his back and straddle him. Then our mouths crash together in a flurry of heated lips and tongues. It's as though neither of us can get enough. "This is the last either of us will ever speak of it," I tell him.

"I love you, Sheridan. With all I have. I hope you understand how flawed I am and that you can live with that."

"We all have flaws, Beck. But as long as you recognize your mistakes, that's what's important."

"Don't worry, babe. I recognize so much more than that, and I'll never take what we have for granted again."

Fifteen

SHERIDAN

On Monday, Mr. Morgan calls and says we're due in court again the following afternoon. He's not hopeful. Neither are we. We walk in, prepared for at least some pushback, but nothing he says or does seems to persuade the judge in the least, and Abby wins again. Now we're faced with breaking the news to English.

Anna brings English home from school, and we explain to her what's going on. At first, she cries. The fear breaks through, but then she throws a tantrum, something she's never done to my knowledge. It doesn't last long before she quiets. She reverts to fear again.

"I'm scared of her."

"The nice lady will be there. You won't be alone," I promise her.

"But what if she's mean again?"

Beck says, "She won't be. Listen, you know people make mistakes? They sometimes do things they don't mean?"

English looks at Beck, then me. "I think so."

"Maybe that's what your mother did," he says.

She sticks her arm out with her index finger extended and points at me. "That's my mommy right there."

Beck grins. "It sure is. But sometimes kids have two mommies. And maybe that's the way it will be for you."

English thinks about this for a while and says, "Sydney in school has two mommies."

"See, you won't be the only one. And you could be very lucky to have two mommies."

Her brows draw tightly together, and I seriously doubt she's buying Beck's words for even a skinny second.

Maybe I need to step in. "Look, honey. Your mother wants a chance, and you're an awfully special girl. I, for one, can't imagine what my life would be like if you weren't a part of it. So I can see why she wants to get to know you."

English sticks her finger in her hair and twirls it around. "Do you think she has a dog?"

"You need to ask her."

"I'm scared."

"I know, honey, but nothing will happen. Promise," I tell her. I pray it doesn't change to an unsupervised visit.

The following Saturday, we dutifully take English to the library again, and I hope it doesn't instill a hatred of books in her. The Guardian ad Litem, Ms. Schafer, is waiting for us, and her eyes look hopeful. Beck acts that way, but I think it's a show for English. My gut is screaming that this is all kinds of wrong.

A few minutes later, Abby prances in, acting very pleased with herself. There isn't a humble bone in that woman's body. She doesn't give a shit about English. I feel it down to my soul. Sitting back, I observe the interaction between Ms. Schafer and her. Abby wears a plastic smile, the kind that people pasted on their faces after my dad died, and I want to shout that she's nothing but an imitation, a fake, but I don't. I keep silent. Then Abby pulls a coloring book and a box of crayons out of her giant purse and offers them to English.

"Here. Take them." She pushes them toward her.

English stands there, stone still.

"Don't you want them?"

In a tiny voice, English answers, "I don't like coloring books. I'd rather draw my own pictures."

Beck explains, "Art is her thing, and she's quite good."

“Oh, well, next time I’ll bring a canvas and some oil paints,” Abby says in a snarly tone.

English, in her naivety, doesn’t pick up on it and only smiles and says, “I’d love that. I love to paint and draw.”

Abby’s mouth flops open, and she doesn’t know how to respond. Ms. Schafer steps in and says, “English, can you draw us a picture with crayons?”

“I can try.”

It’s funny because most kids only know how to draw with them. Not English. She’s way past those.

Ms. Schafer thumbs through the coloring book to a blank page and hands it to English. English sits and starts drawing. That’s our cue to leave. Ms. Schafer holds up two fingers, and we nod, knowing we can come back in two hours. But those are the longest two hours in our lives. Even Beck, who has been all cheery and upbeat, is going a bit crazy by the time we get back to the library.

But when we get to the doorway, English and Abby sit at the table, heads bent over the coloring book as they work on a drawing. My heart clenches at the sight. On the one hand, I’m happy it’s peaceful. On the other, I know Abby’s hiding something. I’m a great judge of character. My first impressions usually bear out to be correct. This woman is out for something, and it’s not a heartfelt relationship with her daughter.

Ms. Schafer spies us and motions us inside.

English hears us and looks up. Immediately, she’s on her feet, talking a mile a minute. “Look. I taught the lady how to draw a circle dog. See?”

English points to the paper and shows us. She’s very good at drawing cartoon-like characters, and Beck has no idea where she picked this up. He thought maybe it was from her mother, but when we look at the paper, she clearly doesn’t have an artistic bone in her body. At least she has a good sense of humor about it.

“This kid can really draw,” Abby says.

“Yes, she can. She’s been to several art camps and takes her drawing pretty seriously. She wasn’t trying to be a pain when she said she didn’t do coloring books,” Beck says.

For the first time, Abby looks slightly interested. Maybe this is an icebreaker.

English grabs my hand and says, “Come on, Mommy. Let’s go. I want to see Boonior.”

“Who’s Boonior?” Abby asks.

“Her puppy,” Beck answers.

“I see. Well then, in two weeks?” Abby looks at Ms. Schafer.

She smiles, saying, “Yes. If here works for both of you, we can keep this arrangement.”

“It’s fine.” Abby looks at Beck as she answers, and he nods.

On the way to the car, English talks about how that lady couldn’t draw. I want to laugh because she’s going to have to come up with something other than ‘that lady’ to call her.

“Was she nice to you?”

“Kind of. Well, yes. At first, she only wanted me to color. But after I drew the first dog, she kept looking at it and asked me how did I know how to do that. So I taught her. Like you teach me in school.”

“You *taught*,” I correct her.

“Huh?”

“You said ‘tached.’ The correct word is taught.”

“Okay.”

We both keep a close eye on her for the next couple of weeks to see if she exhibits any behavior abnormalities. But she acts fine and doesn’t even mention the visit. The attorney says since it went fine, he expects they will continue and even

possibly escalate to once a week. Great. Fabulous. But then I think about Abby in the most objective way possible. If I were her, I would want to see English, too.

Beck. I have to hand it to him. I never would have expected him to pull this off. He's as strong as ever. But I know he's falling to pieces inside. I don't know how he's doing it. All I know to do is encourage him whenever I can. He has an upcoming trip, but it will only be for a week. He's decided until we know what's happening, all his trips will only be a week to ten days. And he'll be here when English is with Abby. That relieves me because what if he were in Africa or somewhere far away and something happened? I wouldn't know what to do.

Beck takes English for her next visit. I decide to stay home. When he leaves, I start mixing up a batch of my famous chocolate chip cookies. When he returns, the house smells so yummy that he comments from the front door.

“Cookie, are you making what I think you're making?”

“Sure am.”

His large frame gracefully enters the kitchen. “Mmm,” he says as he grabs a cookie and takes a bite. “Warm, too.”

“They just came out of the oven.” I slide another tray in.

“How many more batches do you have to go?”

“This is my last. Look over there.” I point to the other counter, which is covered in cookies.

“You did all that while I was gone?”

“Uh-huh. It's a simple recipe.”

Then a twinkle lights up his eyes. He grabs my hips and lifts me onto the island. “It's occurred to me that we haven't done this in a while.”

His hands are on either side of my thighs, and he leans in to kiss me. Placing a hand on his chest, I stop him. “I thought we

did this last night, remember? You called me your dirty little wife.”

He sticks his tongue inside his cheek and pokes it out, smirking a bit. “Yeah, but we haven’t done it *here*. On the *island*. I want you to be my *island girl*.”

“You do, huh? I would think a trip to the Caribbean would be more in line.” I’m only joking, but he gets this serious expression on his face.

“Is that what you want? Because we can totally do that. I’m all in, Cookie.”

“Beck, it was a joke.”

“No, let’s go. Mom and Dad can keep Munch. Let’s go.”

“I can’t. I have school.”

“Spring break!” he practically yells. “They gave us the mountain house, remember? We can use it later and go to the Caribbean instead. They can take English up to the mountains.”

“Holy shit, you’re serious.”

“Yes, I am. You’ve never been, and I’d love to see you on a private nude beach somewhere.”

“Are you fucking crazy? I’m not going to a nude beach!” I exclaim.

“Um, I think you missed the private part. I wouldn’t take a chance on anyone seeing you but me, babe.”

“Oh. Maybe in that case.”

“Now shut that sexy mouth because I want to get filthy with you. We don’t have all that much time,” he says.

The oven timer beeps, and I start laughing.

“Aw, fuck. See?” Beck says.

“Just pull the trays out, and I’ll stay right here,” I say.

“You bet that sweet ass you will.”

He runs and grabs the oven mitts and pulls the trays out so fast I giggle.

When he gets back, he puts my feet on the counter and says, "Lift up your ass." He tugs off my stretchy pants. They end up in a heap on the floor, along with my panties, shirt, and bra. "Now, this, I love. You, naked in the kitchen. Legs spread for days on the counter. Fuck, Sheridan, you look good enough to eat. But not yet." He unbuttons and unzips his jeans, and they drop to his ankles. He's commando, so his cock springs out, long, hard, and ready. He takes it in his hand and strokes it. Up and down the entire length, and my eyes are glued to it. My mouth waters every bit as much as my sex does. I move to touch myself, but his voice stops me.

"It's all mine today, Cookie. No touching."

What? No fair.

The pressure is almost too much to bear, so I move my legs together, but his hand stops them. "You are so impatient. I want to look at you, and if you close your legs, I can't do that, can I?"

My head shakes, and the hand on my thigh moves to my lips and opens them wide. His fingers dip inside and then back out as they spread my wetness around my clit. I squirm, wanting more. His hand still strokes his engorged cock, but I want it inside me, so I blurt, "I need you to fuck me. Now." I try to grab him, but he only chuckles.

"Greedy, aren't you?"

If my heart races any faster, it will pop out of my chest and run right through the door. He lets his cock go and spreads my thighs further apart. He takes one foot and puts it on his shoulder, flat against it. Pulling my ass to the edge of the counter, he runs his dick up and down my slit.

"Watch. Don't take your eyes off this."

He coats his dick until he's slick enough to enter and then says, "I'm going to have your pussy stretched tight around me

until you scream my name when you come. Do you want that?"

"Yes."

He pushes in slowly, so achingly slow I want to grab him and pull, but I can't reach. I squirm, trying to get closer. But he presses a hand on my stomach, stopping me.

"Just watch." When he's finally seated all the way, I wriggle around, but he pulls out fast. Then he starts the process over again. Slow, slow, slow. I try to add my finger, but he slaps it away.

"This is all mine, remember?"

I'm panting like a running dog. Sweat drips off my forehead, and I'm not doing a thing but sitting here.

"Watch, Cookie. It's so goddamn sexy."

And I do and start to get caught up in the scene. It builds and builds and builds and is so good. The pleasure is overwhelming, like nothing we've had before and holy fucking shitballs, a monumental orgasm slams into me and goes on and on. I hear someone whimpering, and it takes a while to figure out that someone is me.

"I think someone needs to lie down." He picks me up and carries me to the bed.

"What the hell, Beck. I think you broke my pussy again." He lays me down and presses soft kisses all over my face, neck, breasts, stomach.

"You were magnificent. And the way you felt around my dick. Amazing."

We're lying in bed kissing and snuggling like two teenagers when he asks, "Cookie, did you ever talk to anyone about what happened after your dad died?"

His question shocks me so much that every muscle in my body stiffens.

“Um, no. Only Michelle at first and not very much.”

“Not even her mom?”

“Maybe a little,” I mumble. “It was mostly about getting ready for college, though. Michelle and I were roommates, so her mom took care of getting everything. She even bought my bedding and things I’d need like storage bins and stuff because I didn’t have any money. She was so kind to me.” She treated me like a second daughter. I half-laugh. “I probably would’ve gone to school with nothing but my clothes if it hadn’t been for her.”

“But did you talk to her about how you were feeling?”

I crane my neck to look into his blue-green eyes. “What are you getting at?”

“You went through something very traumatic at a young age, not once but twice. Your father wasn’t there to help you because he was lost in his grief. I’m wondering if you’re still grieving yourself.”

“Probably. There was so much for me to do that there wasn’t time to focus on his death. For both of my parents.” I think back when Dad came home from the hospital after Mom died, and he didn’t even tell me for hours that she was gone.

“What are you thinking, Cookie?” I tell him, and his arms pull me closer to him. “I can’t imagine how you must’ve felt.”

“I think I buried some of those feelings.” The funeral was a blur as I remember my dad basically ignoring me. He barely spoke a word to me for weeks. I would stay in my room and cry. And then the drinking started. “He was a nice person, but it was so embarrassing because all my friends deserted me. They didn’t know what to say after my mom died. All of them except Michelle. But I was too ashamed to ask her over because Dad was drunk all the time. And then the accident. When the police showed up that night, I wasn’t surprised. What was awful was that he killed those other people.”

“He put you in a terrible situation.”

“Yeah, but he was so lost without Mom. I’m just glad it didn’t happen the year before. I would’ve gone into foster care because of my age. At least I was eighteen and headed to college by then. When I lost everything, including the house, it didn’t really matter because I was already gone anyway.”

“Hmm. I guess you’re right. So, they liquidated all your assets?”

“Uh-huh. Not that they amounted to much. And the family of the accident victims got everything. I don’t blame them. He should not have been driving. I would’ve sued, too.”

“But did they take into consideration your circumstances?”

“I can’t say. It doesn’t matter anyway. It was only money, and it wouldn’t bring the mother and her daughter back. I would’ve given that man everything I had for compensation.”

“But you had it so rough. All that debt you were in.” He tries to argue.

“Beck, it didn’t matter to me. I figured I would work hard. I needed to anyway.”

“Why?”

“Because idle time made me think too much about what happened.”

“But you were in college. It was a time when you should’ve been having fun.”

Placing my palm on his cheek, I say, “Some of us have different experiences in college. Like you, for instance. Besides, I lived vicariously through Michelle. That was plenty for me.”

His fingers slide into my hair, and he strokes the tresses between his fingers. He doesn’t speak, which isn’t unusual for Beck. It’s when he does and what he says that stun me. “Sheridan, I know our wedding in Vegas was pretty damn cheesy, even if it wasn’t in the Elvis Chapel. Had I known I’d fall so hard and fast for you, I would’ve gone all out for the big church wedding. You deserve more than I gave you. I

really short-changed you in so many ways. But when all this shit with English is over, whether we win or lose, I would love for us to renew our vows, in a church, or in front of the people we care about, the right way. I can't say I'm a particularly religious man, though I do believe, and you know we take English to church, but I want you to choose how we do it, if it's something you're interested in."

This man! My heart opens up, and an ocean full of love pours out. Throwing myself at him, though we're already in each other's arms, I still manage to push him over. Then I scrabble on top of him, and without a thought, my mouth is on his as though we've never kissed before. My body covers his, well, sort of because he's so much bigger than me, and I kiss him until he gets the message behind it.

Chuckling, he says, "I take that as a yes."

"No, I just had to show you what I was feeling. I thought I'd pour my heart out in a kiss. Your dad was so right about you."

"What do you mean?"

"That day I left you. After ... you know. He came over and told me your head was like cement, but that you had the softest heart. He said you were exactly like your mother."

"Hmm. I didn't know that."

"Of course, you didn't. But you do. Have the softest heart, that is. And, no, I don't want a repeat of our vows. I liked Vegas. I had a blast. It was my first trip ever on a plane, you bought me a fabulous ring, our wedding ceremony was sweet, we stayed in the fanciest hotel imaginable, and had the hottest sex in the world, which was completely unexpected. I wouldn't change a thing about that trip other than the phone call we received coming home."

Beck raises one of his brows. "Hottest sex in the world, huh?"

"Well, yeah. At least it was for me. So, what? It wasn't for you?"

“It was the hottest sex in the universe. I think there were reports from NASA saying something about temperature recordings on Earth could be read as far away as Andromeda.”

“Hardy har har.”

“So, you’re sure about this?” he asks.

“What, a vow renewal?”

“Has my kiss distracted you to the point your memory is already failing? Yes, the renewing of our vows.” He lets out a throaty laugh.

“I’m sure. But maybe we could have a celebration of some kind,” I suggest.

“I’m in for that. And we know English would be. Can you see her? She’d wear that crazy tiara and those heart-shaped sunglasses.”

The idea of her wearing those things gets me laughing, and I have this vivid picture of her in my mind. “Oh my God, but who will photograph everything?”

“Cookie, don’t you think I have friends in the business?”

Slapping myself on the head, I say, “Duh, I’m an idiot.”

He tilts his hips into mine and palms my ass. “You’re one sexy idiot, though.”

“Ugh! You can’t be agreeing with me when I say things like that. You’re supposed to say, ‘No, honey, you are nothing close to an idiot, so stop.’”

“No, I’m never going to do that when what you say is true, and you should know me better than that already.” His hands dig into my butt cheeks and he presses his dick against me, which has grown considerably hard again.

“Beck.”

“Hmm?”

I sit firmly on him, his stiff cock wedged between my thighs. “Are we going to do this again?”

“Why? Did you want to pull out Bugs Bunny?” He snickers.

His half-lidded stare and slightly parted lips cause me to swallow the thickness in my throat. Pausing for a second, I absorb the scene of Beck, as I suppose he’s doing the same to me. Then I lift up and slowly sink down. Ah, hell, he feels so good.

“I don’t need Bugs Bunny when I have you.”

“You have the prettiest nipples I’ve ever seen. I am a lucky man indeed.”

Leaning back, I tilt my pelvis and rock it back and forth to find that perfect friction. He meets my rhythm, but I am in the moment, lost in sensations. My head drops back as the pressure builds in my core. Beck talks, saying things, but I don’t have any idea what they are. I’m lost in him, in this, in everything that’s Beck.

Suddenly, he sits up, and his arm winds around my waist. “Open your eyes, Sheridan. Share your climax with me. You’re so beautiful when you come all over me.”

His mouth is so close to mine our breath mingles. His eyes are more blue than green, a deep blue now, like the sea. They’re mesmerizing as I find tiny striations of greens and blues, but then he shutters them with a lazy blink. Soft lips brush over mine, first one corner, then the next, and he dusts a trail of light kisses all the way down my neck. All this time neither of us has stopped moving. His mouth floats back to my ear, and he mutters, “Come for me, my sexy wife.”

Rotating his hips around a bit and then rocking into mine, his fingers find my clit. This is a fine lazy fuck, and when he softly presses against me, the pressure finally expands to the breaking point. As my orgasm hits, he takes my lips in a kiss and swallows his name as I moan it. My body sags among the strength of his arms as he holds me against his chest, and I feel him pour himself into me.

When I finally catch my breath, I say, “Someone stole my bones again.” I’m like a rubber band.

“And you stole my heart, Cookie. But I wouldn’t have it any other way.”

“You didn’t steal mine. I think I gave it to you on a silver platter.”

We lie together until the very last minute when he has to go pick up English. He brings my clothes from the kitchen and stares at me a second, a fist pressed over his mouth. “I never thought I’d feel about anyone the way I do you.” Before I have a chance to respond, his long strides carry him away from the bed, and I hear the front door open and close. My stomach clenches as my heart squeezes a little. No, make that a lot. A whole lot. Beck Bridges is a complicated man, but he’s managed to completely wrap my heart around his, and if I could stay in bed all day and do nothing but fuck him, I would figure out a way to make it happen.

The next month is amazingly smooth. But, as everything in life, that’s how things are just before the bottom drops out.

Part Three

MR. & MRS. BRIDGES

One

BECK

“So, how did you ever strike up the nerve to ask me out?” Sheridan asks. English is at my parents’ house, and we’re sitting around, enjoying a glass of wine together.

“The whole idea of marriage was Dad’s idea. We were talking with John one day, and he mentioned how I needed a wife. I scoffed at the idea at the time. But he insisted it would be great for English and that I was lonely.”

Sheridan punches my arm. “I can’t believe you never told me this story.”

I lift a shoulder. “Honestly, it sort of has that mail-order bride feel to it. And then Dad kept insisting I was lonely. Looking back, I was. Only I thought I was so busy with English, I didn’t see it at the time.”

She leans forward and rests her head in the palm of her hand, elbow on her thigh. I can’t resist grabbing a piece of her hair and twisting it around my fingers. “I can see why you’d think that. Having a six-year-old keeps you busy.”

“True. But they saw something was missing. They kept encouraging me to date, to go out. They even wanted me to try one of those online dating sites.” I can’t stop the shudder that rips through me. Sheridan laughs.

“Hey, I know several teachers who met their husbands there. Those aren’t as bad as you may think.”

“Whatever. Anyway, John was the one who said it would help with the court case, but you know that. And then Mom started mentioning you. But after our first meeting, I figured I was doomed.” The first time my eyes landed on Miss Sheridan Monroe, I was toast. A blend of innocence and fire, her aqua

gaze blazed through me like a forest fire fueled by a Santa Ana wind.

“Yeah, you weren’t exactly nice.”

Grimacing, I add, “Not to mention I was so late for that appointment, it was a surprise you were still there.” Her Southern sass put me in my place a couple of times, although I ended up being a gargantuan ass. “But what reeled me in was you genuinely cared about English. It was laced in your tone and edged in your condemnation of me.” And even though I treated her like shit, I liked her. One helluva a lot.

“There was no denying she was my favorite student. But you—I went home and growled at Michelle about you. And the way I talked, she thought you were some old man. The night I ran into you at the club, she wondered what some old geezer was doing there.”

We both laugh at that.

“I couldn’t help but stalk you. The way you swayed on the dance floor. And then that sweet ass of yours wrapped up in those tight jeans.”

“Why didn’t you talk to me?” She wants to know.

“Because I was afraid I would bring you home and fuck the daylights out of you. And then look what happened. You got hammered and that trashy mouth of yours—talking about boners, dicks, and dildos took everything I had not to laugh out loud in your face.”

Her mouth hangs open. “Why did you act so stern?”

“Because I didn’t want to give myself away. I didn’t want you to see how damn smitten I was. Opening myself up was not in the cards, particularly since you were English’s teacher.”

She flashes me a saucy grin. “So, what? You had a crush on me?”

“Oh, Cookie, you became my fantasy. I can’t begin to count the number of times I jacked off thinking about you—your eyes, your mouth, and that ass. And that’s when I

presented my plan to Mom and Dad. As you can imagine, they were on board all the way.”

Right now she beams, but I’m going to tell her the whole, honest to God truth.

Grabbing her hand, I say, “Hang on a minute. You have to hear the whole story. So at first I wanted a wife to complete the family, but I also wanted to fuck you. And here’s the shitty part. I wasn’t the most honorable of guys, but living with a hard-on whenever I thought of you wasn’t easy. Being married to you without the benefit of fucking would kill me. Death by blue balls. So I set out to win you over. It wouldn’t be easy. I would have to get you to marry me when you didn’t even like me. But I had a weapon. And her name was English. I know, it was an asshole move all around.”

She rolls her lower lip into her mouth and sucks on it. “Yeah, you sound like a super creep now.”

“I thought that’s what you’d say. Let me finish. Something else took place during all of this. I changed. You blew into my life like a cyclone and recreated Beckley Bridges. When it came to English, I was golden, but it was you who made me want to be a better man, who made me be the best husband possible. You’re the one who made me into the man I am today.”

“How did I do that?” She wants to know.

“You pulled the nice and kindness out of me. It was something I didn’t know I had until you. You made me want to have your back in every way, made me want to protect you at all costs, and you showed me what loving another person truly means. Because I fell head over heels in love with you when I wasn’t looking, when I least expected it. I used to think English was the best thing that ever happened to me, but she wasn’t. You are. I had to love English. It was the natural thing to do, and I didn’t have a choice. But with you, my heart opened, and you filled it with so much love. I know without you I would be less than half a man.”

She doesn't say a word, only leans against me and presses her sweet lips to my cheek.

"I'm not finished."

"There's more?" she asks.

"Only a little." I grin. "You have been my life, my joy, my rudder in this whole mess we're facing. How did I ever function without you?"

"I don't know. You were grumpy, I suppose."

"To say the least. You think I'm calm, but the truth is, you're the reason I'm able to maintain my sanity. All it takes is one solitary thought of you, and it's as though I'm looking at a glassy pond. Even though our marriage began as a farce, it's now deeply rooted in my soul. I only hope you feel half the way I do."

Her smile tells me more than I need to know, and her kiss lets me know even more than that.

"Oh, Beck, thank you for telling all this to me. It means so much. And I hope you know you're a part of my soul, too."

Spring break is in a month, and as promised, I present Sheridan with tickets to Anguilla. Never having been anywhere in the Caribbean, she has no idea where it is. So I do the only thing I know and pull out a map to show her. This is the best part. Her eyes look like two golf balls as they bulge.

"It's way out there, isn't it?"

"Yep, and wait'll you see the turquoise water. It's so perfect. Exactly like your eyes."

My reward is a light kiss because we have an audience, but she'll pay me later. And I can't wait.

English claps her hands because Geepa and Banana are taking her to the mountains for the week. Boonior is going with them. That cute little fucker. God, I knew my life would be a mess with him. Always chewing and pooping everywhere he shouldn't be. My dad—I could wring his neck. Until I look

at my daughter and then I'm all in. That fucking dog wins every time.

"Beck, can I talk to you a minute? In private."

"Sure." I follow my wife into the bedroom, watching her ass sway. Hmm. What I'd like to do—

"Did you know this place is wide open?" she asks.

"Huh?" I'm lost.

"This place we're staying. In Anguilla."

"Wide open?"

"Yeah, our bathroom is open to the outdoors. Our bedroom is open to the ocean. Beck, people will see us naked. Our shower, Beck! How will we shower? Look!"

By this time I can't bite my lips hard enough to stop from howling. "Babe, our villa is private. Our beach is private. No one will be there but us."

"Come on, Beck. Someone will be there. You can't keep everyone off the beach."

"Yeah, you can. There are gates and stuff."

"Gates? What kind of gates?"

"Giant ones." Wrapping my arms around her, I say, "Hey, even if we get caught naked, what's the big deal? We don't know anyone."

"Quit! They could have a camera."

"Okay, I checked into it. I mean, really checked the fine print. The only people who have access to this villa will be the two of us and our private butler."

"Private butler?"

"Yeah, he will deliver our food and drinks and take care of cleaning the place for us."

I hold her head steady so she's forced to look at me. "Sheridan, I'm not going to take us somewhere that's sketchy."

This is a top-of-the-line place with excellent security. No one will see us. I promise. Besides, there's another bathtub inside if you're not comfortable with showering outdoors. You'll see when we get there. Now kiss me, my little worrywart wife."

We're walking back to the living room when there's a knock on the door. Sheridan opens it, and it's Mr. Morgan. What the fuck is he doing here?

"Hey."

"Mr. Bridges, Mrs. Bridges, can we talk?"

"Sure," I say.

Glancing around for English, I see her in the kitchen and say, "Hey, Munchkindoodle, why don't you go in your room for a little bit? Mommy and Daddy need to have a grown-up talk with Mr. Morgan."

She climbs off her chair, saying, "Okay, but I'm getting hungry."

"All righty. Grab an apple, and as soon as we're finished here, we'll go out to Pizza Palacio. How does that sound?"

"It sounds righteous, dude." She fist bumps me.

Shaking my head at Sheridan, I say, "We have to stop watching so much of *Diners, Drive-Ins and Dives*."

When she's in her room, Mr. Morgan says, "Judge Clarion has granted Ms. LaMont unsupervised visits."

"Fuck," Beck moans.

"I'm sorry to bring you this news. The Guardian ad Litem's report stated the visits have been going so well, she saw no reason not to move forward."

"I don't like it one bit, but I can't say I'm surprised," Beck says.

"Listen, I feel obligated to warn you. If this continues to go well, it will turn into an overnight visit. If we don't turn

anything up on the mother, I'm afraid you'll have no choice, Mr. Bridges."

The ache between my eyes intensifies. "I believe you, but I doubt we will. If they haven't found anything yet, I'm sure they won't soon. She must be a pro at hiding things."

With a curt dip of his head, Morgan walks out the door, leaving me to fret about English.

Sheridan interrupts my thoughts. "How can you be so calm about this? I want to go and rip out that woman's hair."

"And what would that solve?"

"Nothing. But that's not the point."

Placing my hands on her shoulders, I say, "We have to be strong and show a solid front to English. She has to believe that we think this is a good thing for her, Cookie. If we run around, angry and ready to rip Abby's head off, how will English feel when she has to go there?"

She sags, and I feel the tension drain out of her. "Oh, Beck, do you think it will come to that?"

"To be honest, yeah. I hate it with all I have, but Judge Clarion seems to be on Team Abby. And I don't believe there is anything we can do about it unless we find something on her."

"They've stepped up their game, right?"

"Yeah. A while back. Come on. Let's take the starving kiddo out to dinner."

English is a chatterbox at dinner, not aware of what went on with Morgan's visit. Kids can be so oblivious. And that's a good thing. Sheridan, on the other hand, is too introspective. I massage her knee, and her wan smile lets me know her sinking spirits need a lift.

"So, English, tell me what Mommy's been teaching you in school. We've been so busy this week, I haven't had a chance to ask you."

She puts a finger up to her cheek and says, “Let me think. Oh, we’re learning about the dinosaurs. Did you know that a brachiosaurus had such a long neck, sort of like a giraffe, but wayyyyy longer, that it would eat stuff that was wayyyyy high off the ground? Like as high as a skyscraper.” And she throws her arms up in the air to demonstrate. I bite down on my lips to keep from laughing.

“English, remember what I said? How they ate vegetation that grew high in the air, sometimes as high as buildings that were thirty feet tall? That would be sort of like a two-story building.”

“Uh-huh.”

I explain to English, “Munchkin, thirty feet is like how high our house is. A skyscraper is like one of the tall buildings downtown.”

Her lips pucker up as she digests this. “Oh, okay.” She stuffs some more pizza into her mouth.

“So, did you think the dinosaurs were cool?” I ask her.

“Maybe, but not as cool as puppies.”

I wink at Sheridan. “No, definitely not as cool as those. What else have you learned?”

“*I before E.*”

My gaze shifts to the teacher in the group. “They learn that in the first grade?”

“They sure do. You wouldn’t believe the math.”

“Seriously? I’m the parent, remember? I do go over her homework.”

Sheridan looks contrite at my comment. “Sorry about that. Guess I wasn’t thinking. Anyway, the technology era has changed everything. Kids grasp stuff and are exposed to stuff earlier than before. So think of kindergarten as first grade the way it was when you and I were in school.”

Here all this time, I thought English was this super advanced kid, and now I find out that they all are.

“Most kids are reading by the time they start first grade. They learn in kindergarten and preschool even, depending on if and where they go,” Sheridan goes on.

I scratch my head.

“Beck, kids are sponges for knowledge. Teach them something they love, and all they want is to learn more.”

“Yeah, Daddy, like when you taught me about what idiot drivers are, and how you want to bump them right off the road.”

Fuck. The brutal honesty of kids.

Sheridan scowls, saying, “You and I need to have a little chat, dear.”

“I’m sure we do,” I say with a sweet smile on my face. Anything to keep her happy, but she’s right. Calling drivers idiots isn’t setting a good example for my daughter.

After we get home and tuck English into bed, Sheridan crooks her index finger at me. I follow her into our bedroom. She launches herself onto the bed and curls a leg underneath her.

“So, honey, what’s all this about idiot drivers?”

I should’ve known this was coming. Scratching my head, I offer her my best sheepish grin. “Um, yeah, about that. I have a little road rage.”

“Road rage. With our daughter in the car.” She’s not even asking, but stating this and frowning. This isn’t good.

“It’s only a slight case where I yell a little. Like when the traffic is bad and people drive stupid.”

Her gorgeous head slants as she pins me with those clear aqua eyes of hers. And I feel like I’m eight years old and stole the cookies she told me not to take.

“You yell a little. And that’s when I take it you call them idiot drivers?”

Jesus. I feel like shit. She has this way of doing that. Sometimes it’s only the way she looks at me. The way her eyes tug down a little at the corners, and it’s like she just threw an uppercut to my soul.

“I’m sorry. English shouldn’t be hearing that.”

“Beck, it’s not only that. She sees your reaction and thinks that it’s okay to get angry at other drivers.”

“Well, sometimes it is.”

“Yeah, sometimes. But not all the time.”

“I don’t do it all the time.”

She’s silent. I drop to my knees and put my head on her lap. “You have this way of making me feel like shit.”

“I don’t want to make you feel like shit.”

“But you do.”

“Beck, look at me.”

When I do, all I see is love staring back. Then she says, “You are the best father in the world. The things you do, the way you are, how you act, and how English responds to you, well, I am so proud of you that it makes my heart clench with happiness. I don’t ever want to make you feel bad. All I want to do is help you set a better example for her.”

“You think I’m doing an okay job, though, right?”

She graces me with one of her brilliant smiles, and I know it’s all good. “No, you’re not doing okay. You’re doing great. That little girl is under the rainbow with you every single day, so much so that she glows.”

“Thank you, Cookie. For supporting me. If I haven’t told you, I am most fortunate to have you in my life.”

Two

BECK

As Mr. Morgan promised, Abby is granted the unsupervised visits once a week, and English, much to our surprise, is okay with them. She comes to the house to pick her up, and they are to last four hours. The first one is horrific for Sheridan and me. We pretty much pace the house for the entire time. But when English arrives home, smiling and unscathed, we nearly collapse with relief.

She babbles on about what they did. First, they went to an art store where Abby bought English things she would need to sketch and paint. Then, they went back to her house, and Abby set her things up in a room so she could draw. Abby watched as English drew her a picture of Boonior. They ate cookies and milk, and Abby brought her home.

Sheridan whispers to me, “Sounds harmless enough.”

“Yeah.” I breathe a sigh of relief.

“She doesn’t have a Boonior. I left my picture there so she could look at him.”

Curious about her boyfriend, I ask, “Was anyone else there?”

English’s curls swing back and forth as she says, “Nope. Just her and me. Do you think I can take Boonior with me when I go again?”

“Hmm, I’m not sure. Maybe sometime.” We probably should’ve gotten a Rottweiler so English could take him there as a bodyguard.

English bounces off to her room to play, and Sheridan frowns. “What is it?” I ask.

“Something’s off. I can feel it, Beck.”

Taking her hands in mine, I say, “We have to look at it in a different light. There’s nothing we can do. Abby is going to have visitation, and there’s not a damn thing we can do about it.”

“What about hiring a different PI?”

“Morgan says these guys are top-notch. Maybe she’s not doing anything wrong. Maybe I wanted to believe the worst because I was left with English all by myself, doing all the dirty work. And now she shows up wanting to be a part of her life, like it’s all fine and good. Maybe I made her out to be a monster, and she really isn’t.”

“No, I don’t believe that for a minute. What kind of woman goes to the school where her child is, and then lures them to the fence when they’re on the playground, telling them scary things? That’s not something a loving mother does.”

“She was desperate.”

“Who are you, and what have you done with my husband?”

Cupping her shoulders with my hands, I say, “Cookie, I want to get dirt on her more than anything, but they’ve been trying for weeks and weeks. If she’s bad, she has to slip up, and so far she hasn’t. It’s pretty hard to walk the straight and narrow when you’re crooked as hell. But right now, I need your support. English needs your support. You can’t walk around here constantly acting suspicious because sooner or later, English is going to figure that out.”

She rests her hands on my arms and squeezes.

“Can I count on you? Are we a team?” I ask.

“Yeah. No more bad mouthing her.”

The following week, I’m supposed to go to New Mexico for a shoot, but I decide to postpone it. With everything going on, spring break around the corner, I rethink my schedule and pick up some local shoots. There are several architecture firms that have been trying to get me on their books, so I make it

happen the following week with one of them. One of the shoots is at sunset, so the golden rays of the sun hit the glass wall of one of their prized buildings. It's slanted with peaks at the top and has a water feature on it, as it's supposed to represent a stream tumbling down the side of a mountain. The building is the headquarters for one of those fancy high-end bottled water companies, so the wall is a great representation. It's quite extraordinary when you look at it from a distance. As a photographer, my challenge will be to bring it in close and still get the feel of the faraway look. The setting sun will add another element to it, with the various shades of gold hitting the glass, creating the prism effect. Some things simply can't be recreated using Photoshop.

As soon as I'm finished, I pack it up and head to my car. My phone vibrates, and I grab it.

"Hey." It's Sheridan. "I'm just finishing up."

"Don't come home. Mr. Morgan called and wants you to stop by."

"Did he say why?"

She sighs into the phone, and it whistles in my ear. "No, he never tells me a thing. I think he hates me."

"No, he doesn't. But it's okay. I'll stop on my way home then." An ominous premonition rattles my bones, but I don't tell Sheridan.

It's going on seven when I arrive at his office. The receptionist is already gone, and so is his admin. He meets me at the door.

"Bad news, I'm afraid."

"What?"

"It looks like Ms. LaMont has been granted her overnight visits."

"What? When did this happen, and why wasn't I present for that hearing?" This crawls right up my ass. Everything about this case crawls up my ass. "I thought since I'm the

father in this custody battle I should at least be notified of these hearings. What the fuck, Morgan?”

“Calm down, Mr. Bridges.”

“There is no calming down. My calm has left the building. This is completely unacceptable and out of the ordinary. How many custody hearings do you have where the father, who has total custody, isn’t made aware of it?”

He blows out his breath. “We weren’t notified of this until this afternoon, right when I called your wife. And it wasn’t an actual hearing. It was only something that was sent over by her attorney. It’s what he believes is going to happen based on all the reports. Both you and I know Judge Clarion’s favoritism toward women. I’m sorry, but it’s true.”

“Is this normal? For a judge to be so blatantly biased.”

“Oh, do I have stories for you, but I’m sure Judge Clarion will have some legal response as to why she’s leaning this way. I’m sure it’s about the mother-daughter bond and all that. Which is fine, under normal circumstances. But for now, all we know is in all likelihood there is no reason to withhold the biological mother from overnight visitation with her daughter.” He reads it from a letter off his computer, apparently from Abby’s attorney, before glancing back at me.

We have a staring contest before I throw this question out to him. “I’m only asking you this due to lawyer-client confidentiality, but do I need to take English to Canada?”

“I would highly advise against that. An Amber Alert would be issued, and you could never return to this country.”

“After the way the courts have treated me, I’m not so sure that would be a bad thing.”

“Mr. Bridges, maybe not for you, but what about English? And your wife? How would you support them?”

He’s right. It wouldn’t be the right thing to do. Money wouldn’t be an issue, but I wouldn’t want to lock English and Sheridan down to one country. “Did you ever receive her

parenting plan? She was supposed to submit one to the court. I would like a copy of that. If she keeps English overnight, I would like to see what will take place in those hours. What kind of environment my daughter will be exposed to. What she plans to do. And I want to know who is going to be present. Will her boyfriend be there? Does he even like kids? Did they do a home visit with him present?"

"Lots of questions for her, I see."

"But no answers for me."

"I'll try my best. But I can give you no guarantees."

"When is the actual hearing?"

"Probably next week sometime."

My hand grips a chunk of my hair. "Isn't that just perfect. We have plans to go to Anguilla. My parents are taking English to the mountains."

"Cancel them," Morgan says. "Judge Clarion won't give a rat's ass about your vacation."

"This is every kind of fucked up that it can possibly be."

"Welcome to the war of the exes, Mr. Bridges. This is my world, and I deal with this shit all the time. I'm sorry your luck is running out in getting Clarion. She's the worst judge on the bench as far as custody cases go."

"Great. Just what I need."

Driving home, I press the gas down and think about how I'm going to tell Sheridan. Pissed doesn't come close to how she's going to react. I feel like a teenager who just got suspended from high school and have to tell my parents.

She's waiting when I walk in the door, but we can't talk about it because English is here. My reprieve is short-lived when she asks English to go to her room to finish her homework.

"She's all but won. The overnight visit looks like a sure thing. But the worst news is, we have to cancel our trip. Looks

like we're going to court next week."

The reaction I expected doesn't occur. Instead, she puts her arms around me and only says that she's sorry. "The trip isn't the worst news. We can always go to Anguilla."

Tipping her chin up with my finger, I ask, "What's this? I was expecting an angry outburst."

"That's what I want to do, but we're a team, remember? When I made you that promise, I didn't make it for a day. I made it forever. Doesn't mean I like it, but I'm keeping my word."

Threading my fingers through her hair, I tilt her head and kiss her. As we're going at it, English runs in the room and yells, "I see you. Mommy and Daddy are kissing." There goes our little moment.

Even though we cancel our trip, Mom and Dad still take English to the mountains with Boonior. There's really no reason why they shouldn't go. It's actually better for us because when we get the terrible news, we don't have to act happy about it. We have time to prepare ourselves and tell English after she gets home.

The court date is a joke. I don't know why we are even present. Sheridan is so tense, it takes everything in her not to stand up and scream at the circus we both witness. Abby's attorney makes her out to be this poor woman who couldn't afford to care for her baby and was forced to leave the child with the father, whom she didn't know anything about. She prayed every night that her baby was in safe hands and cried herself to sleep for years. When Morgan tries to interject that in all those years, not once did she attempt to contact me, that bitch of a judge waves him off. When Morgan brings up Abby's history of repeated drug abuse and failed rehab, Clarion points her finger at him and tells him never to bring it up again. Abby has been rehabilitated and has proven herself to be a functioning member of society. Everything Morgan tries to do fails, and he goes down like a plane in flames, crashing in his final attempt to save us. It is the most

ridiculous “court hearing” I could ever have dreamed up. In fact, my imagination isn’t that creative. There needs to be a book written about this judge and her blatant incompetence and favoritism toward women. Not that I don’t think women deserve what is rightfully theirs, but in this case, we are completely ignored. I leave the courtroom completely numb.

Morgan pulls us aside and says, “I’ll not stop here. It’s become the principle for me, Mr. Bridges. Clarion is wrong, and this court is supposed to be about what’s right.” His eyes are full of fury as he leaves us standing there.

Sheridan and I walk to the car, hand in hand, and a nearly suffocating shroud of silence cloaks us. But there’s nothing either one of us can say that will make it any better.

“I feel drugged. No, it’s more like I got bashed over the head,” Sheridan says, as she stares out the window.

“I agree. My head is pounding.”

As I navigate through traffic, my stomach twists with pain. I hope I can make it home before I get sick. I’m not that lucky. We do, however, make it off the freeway before I have to pull the car over.

As I stagger out of the vehicle, my guts on fire, Sheridan calls out my name in alarm. I can’t respond. When she comes to my aid, I’m on my hands and knees, and she’s the angel I always knew her to be—caring and considerate—as she murmurs soothing things to me. At last, I sit back on my heels, and she hands me some tissues so I can wipe my face and mouth. This is so humiliating. I’m the one who’s supposed to be strong, yet here she is taking care of me.

“I’m sorry for that,” I say in a shaky breath.

“Why? You’re upset about English. You’ve no reason to apologize.”

My weakness passes, and I stand, though I still feel like crap. She takes my arm and says, “Let me help you.” Her nonsense approach steers me to the car, and she guides me to the passenger’s side. No sense in arguing. I’m too out of it to

drive. My head rests against the window, and I stare at her profile as she drives. She straightened her hair today, but I love it when it's a tangled mess. It reminds me of when we've just made love. I pause at that, because it's funny how I used to think of it as fucking, and even though that's what we do, and damn, if we don't do it well, but it's not without emotion each time I thrust inside her. Her nostrils flare every once in a while, especially when a driver swerves in front of her, but she doesn't utter a word. I love her nose, from its cute little tip up to the bridge where she sometimes gets a mark from wearing her glasses. She bites her lip for a second, as she's probably thinking about something. No doubt, English. The long column of her pale neck begs for my mouth to suck and nibble on it, and dammit, I've already got a chubby. If I don't stop, I'll have a full-blown stiffie, and she'll think I'm an uncaring asshole if we get home and I start ripping her clothes off.

“You okay?” she asks.

“Uh-huh.”

“That sigh you just let out had me worried.”

“No, babe, I'm fine. Thanks for having my back. Cookie?”

“Yeah?”

“I love the hell out of you.” I cover her thigh with my hand.

Her eyes flick to me for a brief moment and then back to the road. Her soft mouth curves up a bit. “I love you, too, Beck.”

Three

BECK

Sheridan disappears when we get home, and I flop on the couch, too sick and frustrated over what took place. Something inside me broke when that crazy ass judge refused to listen to Morgan and handed down her decision. The thought of my daughter spending the night in an unsafe place is so abhorrent to me, my brain is on fire with how to handle this.

I'm not sure how long I've been lying here agonizing over this when Sheridan runs into the room.

"Beck, I may have an idea, but you've got to check this out."

"Hmm." My forearm covers my eyes, and the piercing pain splitting my head won't leave.

"Look."

"Babe, can I do it later? I have a headache."

She doesn't respond, so I assume she's dropped it. But a few minutes later, she's back.

"Here." She taps my arm with her finger.

I peek out from under my sleeve, and she's holding out her cupped palm.

"What is it?"

"Some ibuprofen. Take them."

Whatever she's up to must be important, so I grab the pills and guzzle down the glass of water she offers. They hit my stomach like a lead ball. "Ugh."

"That bad?"

"Yeah." I half-groan.

She sits next to me and puts her cool hand on my forehead, massaging it lightly. “Maybe what I have to show you will help.”

“Can you tell me instead?”

“Okayyyy.” She drags the word out, like she really doesn’t want to but will because I’m in need. “So that judge. Clarion? Apparently, there’s a group on Facebook that was formed by people who have had similar experiences to ours.”

“Really? So, how’s that going to help us?”

“Well, that’s not, but I thought it was interesting. She has a terrible reputation. This group is trying to petition to have her removed from the bench because of her unfair decisions. I’m not clear on how all that works, but this group has over four hundred members. And not all of them are men. According to some of the things I’ve read, her decisions are so biased, and a couple of them ended up harming the children involved. It’s really bad, Beck.”

“Sheridan, this is not making me feel any better.” In fact, my anxiety meter has just rocketed off the scales.

“Shit. That’s not my intention. What I want to do is maybe get involved here and try to do something about her. Someone like Clarion shouldn’t have that kind of power.”

“Fine, but that isn’t helping us now.”

She leans down and presses her lips to mine. “Right. So this is what I found. Two of the dads in the group had their kids use bugs.”

“Bugs?”

“Yeah, you know, listening devices. Like they use in the movies.”

“So, you want us to make English wear a wire? That’s nuts.”

She waves her hand like she’s swatting gnats. “No. What we need to do is get those PI’s to put them in her suitcase and

maybe her backpack. Maybe put a couple in her jacket and her shoes. Things she would leave lying around the house. You know, like she does here. A stuffed animal or something.”

“I don’t know, Cookie. What if they find it?”

“Come on, Beck. These things are tiny. They’re sophisticated and expensive. They could pick up conversations Abby and her boyfriend would have when English wasn’t around. And don’t forget, she has a phone in case of emergencies, too.”

“Cost isn’t and never has been an issue. You know that.”

“This could work. I know it could.”

She may be on to something. I scratch my chin as I think about this. “So what? Do the PI’s hang around outside?”

She scoots in closer to me, and I slide over, making a little more room for her. “See, that’s the beauty of this. They don’t have to. One guy said he bought video recorders that looked like stuffed animals. So no suspicious cars in the street or whatever. Or the PI’s could tell us more. Another guy said he bought voice recording devices that looked like quarters and stuck them everywhere.”

“I wonder how admissible in court this would be.”

“Not very. But the guy said he took all the recordings to his ex-wife and told her he’d report her to child protective services if she didn’t give up her custodial rights. The other one did the same thing, and they were both successful. If we had all this stuff on a recording and it had to do with drugs, we could threaten to call law enforcement on the drug issue.”

“We need to talk to Morgan about this. I don’t want to jump into a hornet’s nest and make things worse than they are. But, Cookie, for the first time, I feel a tiny ray of hope.” I pull her down to my chest and hug her. “Where would I be without you in my life?”

“Oh, I don’t know. Wandering around aimlessly like some lost soul, I suppose.”

She says it as a joke, but it's the honest truth.

I call Morgan in the morning and tell him what we've found. He's lukewarm about it all. He's concerned it may backfire.

"How?"

His legalese explanation has my head swimming, but I ask the simple question, "If it were a fight for your daughter, would you do it?"

"Hell yeah, I would."

That's all I needed to hear to make my final decision. "Let's get in touch with our PI team and set this thing up."

"Mr. Bridges, as your attorney, I would prefer to remain out of this. I think it best if you contact them directly."

"Fine. And thanks."

That evening I meet with the PI team. Sheridan stays with English, and I use a photo shoot as an excuse. I hate to lie, but sometimes you have to. When I come home, I'm bearing gifts for English in the form of a teddy bear and a Snoopy. I also have a handful of quarters. The stuffed animals ingeniously contain video cameras, where the tiny lenses are in the eyes. I was skeptical at first, but they gave me a demo, and the things are unreal. The quarters have listening devices inserted inside, and unless you look closely, you can't tell at all. The plan is to put the stuffed animals inside her bags and drop a couple of quarters into her backpack. If we place one of the stuffed animals in the backpack, and hopefully she'll leave it laying out in the living room, it may pick up all sorts of things. English has a tendency to leave her things scattered around, so this may work to our advantage. The only way they would find her out is if they cut the toy apart.

The next night, we explain to English that she'll be spending the night with Abby the following Friday.

"Why?"

“Because she likes you so much she wants to have a spend the night party with you.” It makes me nearly sick to say it, but what else can I tell her? That her bitch of a mother won’t drop this ridiculous crap?

“Oh, but I don’t really want to.” She skips off into her room.

“Now what do I say?”

Sheridan calls out, “Hey, pumpkin, can you come back out here, please?”

English runs back into the living room and jumps up and down like a pogo stick. She has a hula-hoop in her hand.

“Sweets, you remember how your other mom bought you art stuff and you taught her how to make a circle dog?”

“Uh-huh,” she answers as she hops.

“Well, she likes you so much she wants to spend more than just a couple of hours with you. And you know what? I don’t blame her because I want to spend lots and lots of time with you.”

“Yeah, but, I can go over there and not have a sleepover. Can she have a slumber party here?”

Sheridan is so patient. I want to yell and stomp my feet like a spoiled ass. Not at English, but at her piece of shit bio-mom.

“So, this is how it works. Since she’s your other mom, she doesn’t really want to come here. She wants to have you to herself. And because we get to see you every day, it’s not really fair for her to have to come over here and share you with us. Do you understand?”

“Does she have movies?”

“We can ask. And if she doesn’t, you can take an iPad. Then you can watch whatever you want.”

Her little shoulders lift, and she says, “Okay. Only one night.”

When Friday arrives, we pack her things up and drive her over to Abby's at the specified time. Her stuffed friends are packed in her bags with her. Sheridan has instructed her on how to use her phone, and we've been through every precaution we can think of. I sneak peeks at her in the rearview mirror, and my heart keeps cracking wide open. Every one of my ribs is breaking as what lies behind them is bursting wide open, leaving a jagged wound, open and exposed.

I breathe in a ragged breath, and Sheridan puts her hand on my thigh and squeezes. I take ahold of it and grip it, acting as if it's my lifeline. How in the hell will I be able to leave English there? The thought of it makes me insane with worry.

We pull in the driveway, and Abby comes to the door. I turn in the seat and say, "Munch, behave and we'll pick you up in the morning. You have your phone in case you need to call. And you know something?"

"What, Daddy?"

"I love you more than Mommy's chocolate chip cookies, and I want you to have the very best time. Maybe paint your other mom another picture."

"Okay." She unbuckles her seatbelt, and Sheridan gets out to help her. We decided this ahead of time because I was afraid I'd lose it if I walked her to the door. Sheridan kneels down and tells her to be under the biggest rainbow and to call for anything if she needs us. Then she hugs her big and strong.

They walk hand in hand to the porch, and Abby greets English with a smile. She turns and waves right before she enters the house, and I nearly lose it.

Neither of us sleeps a wink all night. But, the greatest news is that we don't get any phone calls either. In the morning we dress, and at nine o'clock drive to pick up English. She runs out to the car all smiles.

I get out and grab her like I haven't seen her in a year. "Oh, God, I missed you, Munch."

“I missed you, too.”

But it’s easy to see I’m the one that pined away more than she did. Kids. She has no idea the turmoil and torment this has caused. She climbs in the backseat and chirps like a bird all the way to her favorite pancake place, telling us about the picture she drew for her new mom.

Sheridan’s eyes droop when she says that. I feel the sadness, too. Is that petty of us? Maybe. But I can’t help but think of all we’ve been through over this. She’s still oblivious, jabbering on and on about what they did last night.

And then she drops the bomb. “But I don’t like Ray. He’s not a nice man.”

Trying my best to act nonchalantly, I ask, “Who’s Ray?”

“He’s that other mom’s friend. Her man friend. That’s how she calls him.”

In a calm voice, Sheridan asks, “And how is he not nice?”

“I dunno.” She takes a bite of her chocolate chip pancakes and makes swirls in the whipped cream.

“Did he not like your picture you drew?” Sheridan asks.

Still swirling her whipped cream, she says, “I dunno. That other mom didn’t show him. He’s not nice to her. She told me to go in my room, and then he yelled at her about stuff. She came in my room, and I was watching Elsa, Anna, and Olaf.”

Sheridan and I glance at each other, and I want to dig in deeper, but Sheridan shakes her head. I let her take the lead. She has this way with English, so maybe she’ll uncover some things without sounding too blatant about it. “So, did Abby like *Frozen*?” she asks.

English swallows her bite and says, “Um, I dunno. She didn’t stay and watch. She came in some, but left because that Ray man kept yelling at her.”

“Oh?” is all Sheridan says.

“Yeah, I don’t think he was under the rainbow.”

“It doesn’t sound like it. So tell me about your room over there.”

Her lower lip covers her upper. “It’s sorta little. There’s a little bed and a window. That other mom said I can put my clothes in the closet, but why would I want to do that?”

“Maybe if you took too many with you?”

She changes topics. “They don’t play games over there. They didn’t even have a ball. That other mom said she’d get me one for next time.”

I finally get up the gumption to ask a question, “So, what did you have for dinner?”

“Chicken fingers and French fries. I said you didn’t like for me to eat that kind of stuff, but that other mom said it was okay when I was at her house.”

I can hear English scolding her for the terrible food choice. I catch myself before the chuckle escapes. “What else did you have?”

“Candy. M&M’s. I liked those. And she had potato chips.”

“Hmm. Very nutritious. Did you have a tummy ache after you ate all that junk?”

“Only a little one, but I was afraid to tell that other mom because I didn’t want the man friend to yell at her.”

I tap her hand and say, “That was very thoughtful of you, Munchkindoodle.” My heart expands to the size of a damn house when she says that. Sheridan looks at her and smiles, and it’s clear she’s thinking the same thing.

“English, that was very kind of you. Not many people would think of doing something like that. Have I told you how much I love you?”

English’s grin is answer enough. Her eyes about jump out of her face with happiness, and I thank God everything went well last night.

As soon as we get home, I make a call to the PI's. It's time to see what really went on behind the scenes of the LaMont home.

Four

BECK

“Mr. Bridges, he yelled at her a lot about money and the kid. How much longer would it be before their cash cow would pay off?” The PI is giving me an accounting of what went on during English’s overnight stay.

My head is splitting. “So we have confirmation that all they want is money.”

“Yes, but we don’t know what for. It could just be for the sake of buying crap, which isn’t illegal.”

I relay how English said Ray was mean to Abby.

“Oh, there is definite hostility there. I wouldn’t be surprised if there isn’t a case of abuse going on as well. It didn’t happen that night, though.”

“So, what’s next?”

“We do a repeat of this when she goes back for another overnight visit.”

That thought makes me ill. I was seriously hoping it would be a one-time deal. And I tell him.

He leans back and says, “I can tell you this. In all the years I’ve been doing this work, and it’s been over twenty-five, we never get what we need in one visit. I’m sorry. I would like to tell you otherwise, but let me add that this is true progress.”

Progress. What the hell kind of progress is this when your child could be in danger?

Sheridan and I are edgy as hell. We’ve both been walking on eggshells ever since and don’t know what to do about it. English’s next visit is coming up this weekend, and I’m sick in

telling her she has to go. She doesn't want to. I know it. And if I have to force her, it will absolutely kill me.

Miraculously, she doesn't put up a fight. She puts her clothes and things inside her little bag and takes her iPad and a few of her books in her backpack. We're careful to send along her special stuffed toys, too. We load her up and drive her to Abby's. This time, I escort her to the door. When I hug her good-bye, it's so hard to tear myself away, but I do. And then we go home for our torture session. Christ, this sucks.

We're watching TV when my phone rings. It's odd for someone to be calling this late. I check the caller ID, and it's English.

I put it on speaker and answer, "What is it, Munch?" I try to conceal the worry.

"Daddy, I'm scared."

"Why?"

"The mean man is yelling, and that other mom is crying."

I have her on speaker, and Sheridan's fingers grasp my arm, digging into my flesh. It should hurt somewhat, but I don't feel a thing except the panic exploding in my chest.

"Where are you? In your room?"

"Yes, I'm hiding in the closet."

I fly to my feet and tug on my hair. I don't know what the fuck to tell her. Sheridan grabs my phone. "Sweetheart, it's me. Listen up, ninja. Remember what we talked about? How if there ever came a time when you didn't feel safe, that you were to stay on the phone with Daddy or me?"

"Uh-huh."

"That time is now, so you keep talking to me, okay?"

Sheridan whispers to me that I need to call the PI's. I do it from her phone. They tell me they're on the way to Abby's.

“We’re coming over, sweetie pie, but don’t say anything. Just stay in the closet.”

I’m barely holding it together, and I’m not sure how Sheridan is. When I heard English’s tiny voice come to us over the phone, scared as hell, it freaked the shit out of me. Sheridan pushes me toward the garage, and she runs into the kitchen.

“What are you doing?”

“Never mind. Just go to the car,” she whispers to me.

I head that way, but turn back in time to see her grab a utility knife. What in the hell is she doing? There’s no time to ask questions because she tells me to get in the car.

When I get to the car, I reach for the driver’s door, but she says, “No, I’m driving.”

No sense in arguing. I can barely sit in the car in an upright position. How the hell can I drive? I move to the other side and get in the passenger’s seat. The phone transfers to Bluetooth, and Sheridan calls out English’s name.

“Munchkin, we’re on the way, but stay in the closet until I say otherwise. You’re a tough ninja, so I know you’ve got this, right?”

“Uh-huh. I’m scared. They’re yelling at that other mom now, and she’s yelling back.”

“Who’s there, honey?”

“I don’t know. Other mean men.” Her voice trembles.

I say, “It’s going to be fine, Munch. Just stay where you are. There are people coming to help, but we want you to stay put. Got that?”

“Yeah.”

“We’re not far now. Should be there in a few minutes,” I reassure her.

I swear, it's the longest drive I can ever remember, and it seems like we hit every red light in town. But we finally pull into Abby's neighborhood, and when we get to her street, I don't want to park out front to alert anyone in the house. I call the PI's to see where they are.

Sheridan calms English. "Hey, sweets, listen to me. We're here, but you have to stay put for a couple more minutes. We're waiting on the other help to see what we should do next. Okay?"

"I want you to come get me." She's crying now, and it takes everything I have not to jump out of the car and break down their door.

Sheridan says, "I know, honey. I know. But I promise you, we'll be in there in a minute or two."

I get out of the car, and Sheridan jumps out, too. When she does, she grabs the utility knife. As I'm talking to one of the PI's, I'm getting pissed that it's taking them so long to get here. Then out of the corner of my eye, I see Sheridan take off running. I can't let her go on her own, so I follow. When I catch up to her, she's close to the house.

"What are you doing? You could get us all caught," I whisper-yell.

"No, I'm getting her out of there. Come on." She stops and then says into the phone, "Listen, honey. You know how I taught you where the flashlight on your phone is?"

I hear English answer, "Uh-huh."

"I need you to be a tough ninja for just a little longer. Are there any lights on in your bedroom?"

"Just one by the bed." I can hear her whimpering, and it's a knife to my heart. It's a good thing I don't have a gun, because if I did, there would be a house full of dead people right now.

Sheridan tells her, "This is what I need for you to do. When I say the word, I want you to go and turn off that light and then stand by your window and shine your flashlight through it.

This will tell me which window is yours. Can you do that for me?"

"I think so," English says, her tiny voice shaking.

"That's a good ninja. I know you can because you're tough." Sheridan glances at me and takes off running again toward the house. I follow her. When she gets close, she tells English to move. "Go. Turn off the light now and shine your light in the window. If you can, I want you to try to get your window open. If you can't reach it, find a chair to stand on. Okay? Can you do that?" She's talking as we're running, so her words come out in a pant.

"Yeah, the window is over my bed."

"Good girl. Stand on your bed and push your window open. Can you do it, sweets?"

"I don't know."

"Why not?"

"I'm afraid to come out of the closet."

Fuck, shit, damn.

Sheridan gets stern with her. "Okay, ninja, it's time to get tough. We need to know where you are, and we can't get you out unless you get out of your closet and shine your light in the window. Do it now, English. On the count of three. One. Two. Three."

We hear a creak and then some movement.

"Did you turn the light off in your room?"

"Uh-huh," she whispers.

"Okay, super ninja, now shine your light in the window so we can see what room you're in." Thank God Abby lives in a small one-story house.

We get to the window, and I say into the phone, "Super ninja, can you open the window?"

She doesn't answer, but we hear the creaky window slide open. Her little tear-streaked face pokes out.

"Hang on a sec." Sheridan whips out the utility knife and cuts through the screen. "Beck, pull her out of there."

Reaching up, I lift her right through, and she sobs as we run back to the car. That's when the PI's finally arrive with the police on their tails.

I'm so pissed off, I want to take a jab at anyone who comes near me. "What the hell took you goons so long?"

"We had to convince the police she was in danger." I tear my hand over my face. "But the videos should do that once we take a look at them."

The police wait for a search warrant, though in this case, they consider it exigent circumstances to remove English. When they get English's belongings, the recordings provide enough information to nix any chance of Abby getting custody.

"Apparently, they owed the dealer money for drugs and were trying to work out a plan to set up a meth lab to pay it off. We think they wanted her," the PI explains as he circles his finger toward English, "to extort money out of you to either help pay off the debt or to fund the lab. Either way, we don't think she'll be going back there. Looks like someone may even get some prison time. And you can get a lot of mileage out of that. Not to mention child endangerment."

I say sourly, "That's debatable with Judge Clarion."

"Oh, I don't think so, especially after what happened here." The PI is convinced as the cops come out with everyone in cuffs, including Abby. When they find meth and heroin inside the house, it's another nail in her custody coffin.

English clings to me like a wet blanket. I grab her hand and say, "Hey, you were totally awesome in there. I'm talking a true super ninja. The kind that gets a medal, Munchkindoodle. You were all kinds of brave. I hope you know that."

Her bottom lip quivers, and she's trying her best not to cry.

Sheridan steps over and says, "You want to know something? Even the bravest and strongest of ninjas cry sometimes because they get scared, too. And you want to know something else? That's okay. It only means that you're even more special than ever."

She sticks her arms out to Sheridan who takes her from me. They sit on the ground together as English cries out her fears through her tears. They eventually ease up, and she puts her head on Sheridan's chest, hugging her as though she never wants to let her go.

"Thanks for saving me, Mommy. Can we go home and watch *The Lion King*?"

"Sure. But why not *Frozen*?"

"I was watching that when the bad men came in, and in *The Lion King*, Simba had bad men like I did. I want to watch Simba win. Just like I won."

That's a damn good analogy for such a little kid.

Sheridan says, "Sure thing. *The Lion King* it is. With lots of popcorn in the big bed. How's that?"

"Good."

"How about we get out of here?" I ask. Holding out my hand, Sheridan grabs it, but I find there's much more significance in her taking my hand. This is an entirely new step for us as a family. It's a fresh start into a brand new life.

Five

BECK

“Let me do that for you.” I grab the bottle of shampoo and squeeze out a dollop, then work up a lather into my wife’s hair. The rain shower gently rinses the suds away as I watch them glide down her sun-kissed skin. “I didn’t think you’d be a fan of the outdoor shower,” I tease.

“You were right. It’s private. And I love it.” She turns in my arms and kisses me. “In fact, I wish we had one at home.”

“Hmm. I’ll have to see about that.”

“Beck, we’d have to move. Our yard isn’t private enough.”

“We can do that. I’m not opposed to moving at all. You, naked in the backyard, is one hell of an enticement.”

She runs her hands down my wet body and says, “You’re not so bad yourself. And to think I used to hate you.”

“Fess up. You never hated me. You only thought you did.”

She rises to her tiptoes and says against my mouth, “That’s where you’re wrong. You were the most arrogant ass I’d ever met. But, hey, look where it got us. Naked in an outdoor shower on a beach in the Caribbean. What more could I ask for?”

“When you put it like that, I can’t be pissed that you hated me.”

Her hand slides down my abs, then even further until it wraps around my cock—and I’m not gonna lie, I’m sporting a boner around naked Sheridan—as she glides her soapy hand up and down my length.

“Not at all. Even if you were, I’m getting ready to do things to you that would make a livid man happy as fuck.”

My hands move to her ass, and I grip a cheek with each one. “Is that a fact, Mrs. Bridges?”

“A very definite fact.” The water sloshes over us, and she drops to her knees. I watch in awe as her perfect lips encase my dick, and she commences to suck me to the point where I almost lose my mind and maybe even my religion. Right before I spew myself down her lovely throat, I stop her and pull her to her feet.

“So, are you ready?”

“I’m always ready.”

“Not for what you think.” I give her a few minutes to sort out what I want.

When the recognition hits, a knowing grin spreads across her face. “I ... I think I am.”

“You positive?”

“Well, you can be my Captain Kirk.”

“Oh, so I’ll be the man where no man has gone before then?”

She lets out a gusty laugh. “Yeah.”

Pulling her into the wall of my chest, I tell her, “I hate to be the bearer of this news, sweetheart, but I will be the *only* man to go where no man has gone before.”

She slaps my bicep. “Duh. That’s a given.”

I turn off the shower and tug her toward the bed.

“We’re wet, Beck,” she protests.

“And you’ll only be wetter in a minute.” I push her backward and dive between her legs for my afternoon feast. I haven’t had her since this morning, and I’m a bit starved. I bring her to the point of orgasm, and she whines when I stop. “You’ll get yours. Give me a sec.” I grab the lube bottle I stashed in the nightstand with my secret hope for this moment,

along with a condom. Then I flip her on her knees and slide a finger inside her. She's so wet, she glistens.

"You have the most gorgeous ass. I know I've told you countless times, but this view is spectacular."

"Stop it and fuck me."

"I will. Be patient."

Moving my fingers from her pussy, I add some lube and slowly slide one into her puckered opening. She squirms a little, and I ask her if it's okay.

"Yeah, it feels a little strange, but good."

My other hand works her clit, but I don't want her to come yet. I want to save that for later. When I feel her relax, I slide my finger in and out, stretching her gently. She tightens against me, but I kiss her lower back, and soon she relaxes again. When she's stretched enough, I pull out and push my tip in. Just a little. She tenses.

"Relax. Push against me a little."

She does, and I pop through her opening.

"Oh, fuck, Cookie."

She pants, hard.

"You okay?"

"It feels heavy. Full. Not pain exactly. Just a burn."

"I'll go real slow. Promise." I can barely speak. I slowly, slowly, inch in, then retreat, only to move back in. It takes a while, and much more control than I thought it would, but when I'm seated all the way, sweat pours down my face from my restraint. I want to pull all the way out and slam back in, but I can't.

"Cookie, talk to me."

"I'm good."

"I'm going to move now. Very slow, though. But first, I want you to stretch out on the bed, and I'm going to lie on top

of you.”

She walks her arms out, and I follow. I slide a hand around her, cupping her mound. Then I gently, gently, rock my pelvis in and out, at first only sliding in and out a little. Then it's more and more until I hear her moans of pleasure. But I check to be sure. “Pleasure or pain?”

“It's good.”

“How's this?” I add a finger to her clit, pressing down on it and massaging it in a circular motion.

Her moans get louder. “Fuck.” She shudders beneath me.

“Good?”

“Yeah. Good.”

I kiss her neck and shoulder and ask how close she is.

“Close.”

“Faster or is this good?” I want to make sure this is how she needs it. But, damn, I'm about to bust one, with her tight ass squeezing me off. Then it hits, and it's weird because I feel the muscles in her contracting all over the place, and I shoot off like the fireworks on the Fourth of fucking July.

“Jesus, Cookie, oh, God.” I think I say that over and over a few times. I hear her moaning over my litany, so I'm not the only one. When it passes, I tell her to be still, and I get up and bring a cloth to wipe her clean.

She doesn't move a muscle. “Why didn't you tell me?” she asks.

“Tell you what?” I'm confused by her question.

“It would be this good. I didn't think I'd like it.”

“Does that mean we can do it again?”

“If I had the strength, I'd laugh. Maybe not today, but yeah.”

“I guess all my butt fucking research paid off.” I lightly smack her ass. Then she giggles.

“It sure did.”

“But, hey, I got to fuck the hottest ass known to man.”

I’m awarded with one of her *shut the fuck up* grins. That’s what I love about this woman. She doesn’t take any shit off me.

For weeks after the hearing, Sheridan and I worried about English, wondering if she’d show any signs of posttraumatic stress disorder. We even had her talk to the psychologist she’d seen before, but no signs or symptoms ever emerged. She only asked a few times about that other mom, as she called her, and that was it.

We finally went to court for the last time and ended up with a different judge. This time we got Judge Wilton, and she, yes *she*, ruled in our favor, and we received total custody. The judge recommended that Abby stay away from English.

Sheridan and I decided that if and when Abby is released from prison, if she wants to see English, she could do so at our home, with us present. It was never my goal to keep her away from English. What I didn’t like was the underhanded and deceitful way she went about it. She never wanted to see her daughter other than for monetary purposes, which is what I suspected all along. Had she truly wanted a relationship with her for honest reasons, I would’ve been willing to work with her.

The school year ended, and it’s hard to believe my daughter will be headed to second grade. Where has the time gone? That’s how Sheridan and I ended up in the Caribbean for the vacation we had to cancel.

Epilogue

BECK

Only our closest friends are here, and there aren't many. I've invited a couple of photography colleagues, my parents have a few friends present, Sheridan has Michelle and Oliver here, along with some of her school associates, but other than that, it's a small gathering.

Even after we spoke to my parents, Sheridan still thinks our Vegas wedding was special, so she didn't want a vow renewal. She and Mom stuck their heads together and came up with a plan—a summer party at my parents' house. But one thing Sheridan did insist on was the best wedding cake she could find. She claims wedding cakes are the best things ever, and that was always something she wanted. I told her to go for it.

The cake is simple looking, but she keeps saying, "Just wait until you taste the little fucker." My trashy-mouthed wife. How something as sweet and innocent looking as her can have a mouth like that, I'll never know. But I wouldn't trade it for the world.

Glancing across my parents' terrace, I glimpse her chatting with Michelle, who still dates Oliver. Who knows what's going on with those two? Michelle still complains about not meeting his family, and it is strange, if you ask me. But when we're around them, they seem as happy as can be. I stay out of it and let Sheridan deal with it if she wants.

Sheridan laughs at something Michelle says, and I feel the corners of my mouth turn up in response. English skips around and runs over to the two women, bumping into Sheridan. She bends down and hugs English. English is wearing that crazy tiara and her heart-shaped sunglasses, along with an adorable sundress that my mom bought for her. Every time I look at

Sheridan and English together, it's hard to believe they aren't biologically related. They really do look so much alike.

The photographer and videographer, who are friends of mine, stroll up to me, and one of them says, "Such a thoughtful expression. Hold it there, Beck."

I absolutely hate having my picture taken. "Thanks. You know how much I love this."

"You'll be happy we're here a year from now. Especially when that half-pint of yours gets married. Then you can look back and say—*why don't you wear that tiara to your wedding?*"

That does get a rowdy laugh out of me. "Yeah, I can't wait for that day."

A waiter comes by with a tray laden with scrumptious appetizers, so I snatch one up. It's a bacon wrapped scallop, and it's delicious. "Make sure my wife gets one of these. They're her favorites," I tell the server. He heads off in her direction.

Dad walks over, and the photographer says, "Hold it." He snaps a series of pictures. Then he says, "You two look so much alike."

Dad laughs. "Yeah, we look like twins."

"In your dreams, old man." I slap him on the back. My dad isn't all that old. Forty-eight to be exact. He and Mom were only a couple of years older than I was when I had English. Only they were married. They ran off when they were twenty, much to their parents' shock and horror. Two wealthy Southern families and it was an absolute disaster for a while. Not for them, but for their families. But they were so happy they didn't give a shit what everyone else thought. They wanted to be together, and that was that. It worked for them, and it still does. They adore each other, and I hope Sheridan and I still do after twenty-eight years of marriage.

"Hanging back, I see." It's Oliver. He's caught me.

“Yeah, let’s say I’m observing.”

“I’d say you don’t like to be the center of attention.”

“And you’d be correct.” I chuckle. “Not my thing. I do better photographing, though weddings are the worst. I stay as far away from those as I can.”

“Why’s that?” he asks.

“They’re hard to please everyone. It’s difficult to use my creativity and give the couple what they want. Besides, it’s not my thing. My thing is outdoors, wildlife, or weird as this may sound, buildings. Inanimate things.”

“I get it.”

I feel like I’m holding court, because when Oliver leaves, some friends of my parents cruise on over. They chat with me for a while, and then someone else comes in and edges them out of the way. Now I’m cornered and need a drink. But not to fear. Here comes my beautiful wife to the rescue, and with her is a glass of my favorite beverage.

Sweeping her into my arms, I don’t care about the onlookers. I kiss her sweet lips and not just a light peck either. I open my mouth and slide my tongue past her surprised O and lose myself in the honeyed taste of her. At first, she’s stiff and wants to push me away, but when she figures out that I’m in for the duration, her body gets slack in my arms, and she’s mine for the taking. Her hand finds its way around my neck, and her fingers work into my hair, messing it up. I don’t care a bit; this kiss is worth every disarrayed strand. I’d do the same to her if she didn’t have one of those fancy updos, as she calls them. When we finally tear our mouths off each other’s, her puffy lips remind me of ripe strawberries, plump, sweet, and juicy. They only make me want to kiss them some more.

“Beck,” she says into my ear, embarrassment tingeing her voice. “People are staring.”

“I hope so. I want to give them something to talk about. Let them know exactly how much I am head over heels in love with my wife.”

Her eyes flick down and then back up. "Well, they're going to know you're a horny bastard. That's for sure."

"I glance down and see my erection clearly outlined on the front of my pants. "Yeah, maybe commando wasn't a good idea in these pants. Too lightweight."

"But, damn, it's sexy as fuck."

"Think we can slip away for a few?" I ask.

"Not after this spectacle. We need to wait a little."

I love how she thinks.

About thirty minutes later, she catches my eye from across the yard, and I wink. She walks inside, and I follow. I see her motion me toward the stairs. There's a bathroom I figure she's going to, and I'm right. I quickly shut the door, but she places a palm on my chest.

"Do you have a condom? So I don't get too messy in this dress?"

"Oh, yeah, I was thinking ahead, too." Having my wife parade about this reception with my cum running down her legs would not be too cool.

"Hike it up, babe." She shimmies up her tight dress. I spin her around and bend her over the counter. "I'd love nothing more than to bury my face in that pussy of yours, but we don't have time, so I'm going to bury my cock in it instead." I roll on a condom as fast as I can and spread her cheeks apart. "Fuck, you look hot like this." I push inside her, and she lets out a long, slow moan.

"More."

I pull all the way out and thrust back in, hard and fast. Then pull out real slow, so slow she squirms, then slam it hard all the way in. I repeat this several times until she's begging me to make her come.

"How bad do you want it?"

"So bad."

“Real bad?”

“Yes.”

I go all in, hard and fast, and her stretched pussy quivers around my dick, forcing me to come right along with her.

“I love you, wife.” I pull out and spin her around.

“I love you, husband. Do you think we’re missed?”

“Probably. We better get back, but hang on.” I grab some tissue and wipe her, then dispose of the condom in the toilet, flushing, making sure it goes down. “Ready?”

“Yep,” she says, grinning. “This is a great reception.” We both laugh.

“When does the DJ crank it up?”

“Any time now. Come on.”

When we get outside, more food is served, and I grab a macaroni pie appetizer. I need to remind Sheridan to eat because I don’t want her to get completely hammered. We eat and dance, and soon the caterer comes to get us to cut the cake.

We get first dibs, and Sheridan is right. This is the best ever wedding cake.

“Oh. My. God. This is better than the sample I tried,” she says, moaning as she swallows. “A cake-gasm for sure.”

“You sound like you’re coming.”

“Well, it’s not that good, but for cake it’s stupendous.”

There’s a vanilla, banana, and chocolate layer. It is delicious. English is running around, serving cake to everyone, calling it birthday cake. She finally took her sunglasses off because it got too dark to see.

“Can I let Boonior out of his pen?” English wants to know.

“Munchkindoods, I don’t think that would be such a good idea. See how happy he is over there? If we let him out, he

might end up eating something he shouldn't, and then he'd be sick. Or what if he pooped on someone's foot?"

"Eww, that wouldn't be so good, would it?"

Boonior doesn't poop on people's feet, but a dog at an elegant party wouldn't be appropriate. She seems satisfied with that and skips off again in search of something else to do.

Soon the DJ calls for the special couple to come out and dance, so Sheridan and I head out to the dance floor that was brought in, and we start to sway to the music. And what are we dancing to? What else other than "Let It Go" from *Frozen*? We let English pick our song, and as we guessed she would, she runs out and joins us. I pick her up, and it's the three of us dancing and singing. You gotta laugh at this kid when she belts out a tune. There's not a person at the party who doesn't stop what they're doing to listen to her.

As soon as this song ends, the next one she's chosen, "Unforgettable," from her latest favorite movie, *Finding Dory*, starts playing. Now Sheridan and I have a tough time keeping a straight face because she tries to mimic the sultry tones of Sia and can't quite get it down. I scan the crowd and see the other faces with grins to match ours. When the song ends, English asks, "How was that?"

"You were awesomesauce, kiddo," Sheridan says. Then she makes a fist, and they bump them.

But then English tugs on my arm and asks, "You ready, Daddy?"

"I sure am."

She squiggles down out of my arms and leads Sheridan over to the side. I see her giving her some kind of instructions. This is either going to be hilarious or a complete bust. I'm counting on the kid to steal and save the show.

She runs back next to me, and we give the DJ his cue. Then English clicks her fingers as One Direction's "What Makes You Beautiful" begins playing. English has this all choreographed, and admittedly, I feel mighty silly swinging

my arms around, making air hearts with my fingers, and acting all girly, but the look on Sheridan's face is worth every bit of humiliation I'm suffering through. English is giddy as she dances around. I look like a lunatic, and I know this to be true because Sheridan is covering her mouth, bent over at the waist, and dying laughing. Good thing I had a few stiff drinks beforehand. I thank God the song finally ends, and English high and low fives me. Then Sheridan runs out, and all three of us do the cluster hug.

When we all stop laughing enough so we can breathe, Sheridan whispers, "That kid and her singing."

"Cookie, I wish you could've seen our rehearsals. I can't tell you how many times I got scolded."

She busts out another huge laugh, but then her expression quickly becomes serious.

"Think of this for a minute, Beck. If it weren't for the love of English, I wouldn't be standing here."

"Thank God for that beautiful little kid."

Suddenly, a toast to the special couple erupts around us, and glasses are raised in our honor. I stare at the beauty of my wife, who is still in my arms, and say, "To my beautiful wife. I'm the luckiest man alive." My lips gently touch hers to a round of applause.

The End

Thank you for taking the time out of your busy life to read my novel. Above all, I hope you loved it. If you did, I would love it back if you could spare just a minute or two to leave a review from wherever you purchased this. Thanks so much! If you want to stay up to date on the latest from me, please consider subscribing to my [newsletter](#).

If you want to listen to some of English's favorite songs, you can check out *For The Love of English's* playlist [here](#).

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Sidelined: A Wilde Players Dirty Romance

Fastball: A Wilde Players Dirty Romance (9/22/2016)

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And now here's a Sneak Peek at **SIDELINED: A Wilde Players Dirty Romance**

Fletcher

Gray skies and snow flurries greet me as I reach for the handle to exit my old truck. “Boomer, Brady, you fellas stay. You hear me?” Two sets of sad eyes and two wet black noses crowd me by the door. It’s a miracle we all fit in the front seat. I can’t figure out how my dad does it. When I was getting ready to drive into town, no sooner had I opened the truck door and they jumped inside. No amount of coaxing would get them out.

After I park and open the door, Boomer tries to nudge his way out. “Boomer, stay. I’m running across the street to buy you some food, you doofus. You eat like a horse.” Brady, Boomer’s best friend, doesn’t like that, so he lets out a yap, and then both of them are making such a ruckus, everyone on the street stares at us.

“Would you guys keep it down? I’ll be right back.” Pushing Boomer’s large furry face back inside, I close the door and lean on the truck for a second. You’d have thought my dad would have stocked the house with at least more than one day’s worth of food for his ravenous pups. But no. Here I am, six thirty at night, running out to buy them more chow.

I navigate the slippery streets while taking a glance or two back at the yipping dogs in my truck. *This should be a quick trip*, I think to myself.

Twenty-five seconds. That's all it should've taken me to cross the street and get inside. Maybe not even that. In the time it takes to huddle, get set up, and snap a ball, squealing tires and the roar of an engine change everything. Glancing in the direction of the sound, I see headlights barreling down on me a second too late. I feel like I'm stuck in the mud, my feet cemented to concrete slabs, as I'm blinded by the beams.

Pain explodes in my leg before gravity is no longer a factor, and I'm flying like fucking Superman. Instead of being straight, I'm flipping end over end, before I slam back down to earth—or rather a car—as my shoulder, or as my agent would say, *my million-dollar-throwing arm*, connects with the windshield. Something cracks. And then for seconds, minutes, hours—there's nothing. I have no idea until I blink because the sound of people yelling from somewhere off in the distance pulls me back. Apparently, after that last hit, I tumbled off the car and slammed into the street.

No one has to tell me this is bad or that my right arm is completely fucked. In twenty-five seconds, my entire life is altered, ripped away, and reconstructed into something I'd never expected, didn't plan for, and certainly didn't want. And worse, the shouts increase as the motherfucker that hit me reverses with spinning tires before he peels off like Dale Earnhardt, Jr. And how I remain conscious and can recall this with brutal clarity, I have no damn idea.

Lightning strikes every nerve ending in my body, igniting it with fire. I know pain more than I care to admit. As the starting quarterback for the Oklahoma Rockets, I deal with it nearly every day. But this is an entirely new level. I can't begin to pinpoint its origination because it's coming from every-fucking-where. I feel like the guy at the bottom of the pile holding the ball everyone's scrambling to get.

In the distance, there are shouts to call 911. Not much later, I can hear sirens in the distance. But not for long.

Everything dims, and the next thing I recall is waking up in the hospital with my Aunt Shelly staring at me.

“What’s ...?” I try to say, but my throat scratches like sandpaper.

“Fletcher, honey, you’re awake. Do you know what happened?” When I only groan, she adds, “You got hit by a car and are in the hospital. But you’re going to be fine. The doctor will be here shortly.”

Fine. That’s easy for her to say because I don’t feel *fine* at all.

“Did you drive here all the way from Raleigh?” Which was a dumb question because, of course, she did.

“Yes, and I should call your parents.”

“Don’t,” I grumble.

“They should know,” she protests.

“I’m not a child. I’m here to watch their house while they’re on a much needed long vacation. Besides, they need to spend time with my brother, which they rarely have the opportunity to do. No need to worry them.”

She sighs and opens her mouth to gripe at me some more. But as if she’s conjured him, the doctor strides in, and then I wish he hadn’t. He’s not exactly smiling when he enters.

“Mr. Wilde, I’m Dr. Logan, and I have good news and bad. The best is that you are alive.” I huff because I don’t exactly believe him, not if he says what I’m expecting to hear. “And you’re lucky that your head, neck, and spine were spared. You’ll have no lasting effects from the accident. You’re going to feel pretty sore for a while, though, because you took a definite beating. However ...”

And I know the shit ain’t good, like the view of a three hundred fifty pound lineman barreling down on me just as I’m

about to throw the ball. The way the doctor's eyes pull down tells me more than what I'm prepared to hear.

"You sustained a very severe shoulder separation that will require surgery, along with an ACL tear that we'll have to repair. We need to wait for the swelling to subside before we do anything, though. We can do that here, or you can elect to have it done by a surgeon of your choice. But I wouldn't suggest waiting. It can be done here in a week or so. We'll send you home tomorrow, and you can come back for the other procedure. It'll be outpatient. And because I know who you are... I'm afraid it's probable that you will be out for most, if not all, of the coming season."

Fuck me. Football is my life, my reason for being. I can't imagine sitting on the sidelines just as my career is really taking off. And what the hell am I going to tell my agent, coach, manager, the president, and owner of my team? *Hey, guess what? Your QB got hit by a car while buying dog food.* Then I start laughing. Of all the things in my contract that I can't do, such as snow skiing, riding a scooter, a dirt bike, or mountain biking, one of the things they forgot to add was crossing the street to buy fucking dog food.

"Fletcher, are you okay?"

I want to say *what in the fucking hell do you think?* Instead, I shake my head and say, "I'll survive."

Aunt Shelly pats my good arm and says, "Don't worry, kiddo. It's only one season, and you'll be back better than ever."

"Yeah," I say, swallowing my bitterness. What they don't know is this is my contract year. If I sit out, I'll get royally screwed right up the ol' ass. And all because of a bag of fucking dog food.

"Mr. Wilde, now that you're awake, the police are here to ask you a few questions. They've been waiting."

“Police?”

“Yes,” the doctor answers. “Since you were hit by a car, and the driver left the scene, it’s considered a felony.”

“I see.”

The doctor stands there and stares. Then it registers that he’s waiting for me to give my permission. “Yeah, fine. They can come in.”

He opens the door, and a couple of guys in uniform shuffle in. They tell me how sorry they are about the accident and then ask me what I remember. Closing my eyes, I give them my twenty-five second replay of the ugly scene. All of the important facts, such as the make of the car, the color, and the license plate number are nonexistent in my mind. Basically, I’m no help whatsoever. After shaking my left hand, they leave.

As time passes, it doesn’t take long for everyone to see that I’m a dick—a fucking assface and a terrible overall patient. After Aunt Shelly gets me back home, it only takes a day for her not to want to put up with my sorry ass anymore and ends up firing herself as my nurse. She hightails it back to Raleigh and her family once she hires someone to take over for her.

Now I have Rita, a tiny woman who could fit inside a shoebox, taking care of me. And I’m six and a half feet tall. Not to mention that woman is a saint. I don’t know how she puts up with my jackhole moods, but she does. I’m cranky and foul-tempered as I struggle with needing someone else’s help.

“No, Mr. Fletcher, you mustn’t—” she wags a finger at me when I try to get out of bed the day after my surgery.

She must be deaf, because she never flinches when my foul mouth runs off as I get back in bed hating life. I think it’s the dogs she stays for. She probably feels sorry for Boomer

and Brady. And weeks later, during my recovery, it's easy to see the bond the three have formed. Won't they be sad tomorrow when she's gone? It's her last day since I'll be cleared to drive. After my ACL repair and recovery, I'm finally ready to begin physical therapy.

Rita scares me. One afternoon she threatened if I threw any more plates on the floor she would beat me with the broom she was holding. That shut me up real fast. Now she's driving me to my PT session, and that frightens me even more. Her speedy turns that feel like we are tipping on two-wheels have me pressing my imaginary brake, wondering if we'll make it there alive.

"Where'd you learn to drive again?" I ask for the millionth time.

"Why?" She looks innocent.

"You're scary. You'd make a fighter pilot sweat bullets."

"Good. I hope you sweat a lot."

That was the extent of our conversation. I'm sure she's had more than her fill of me already, too.

Now I just keep my mouth shut and eyes closed, praying we'll make it to my destination in one piece.

Sitting in the waiting room, I've finally finished filling out all the crazy paperwork for my appointment when a voice with a familiar ring to it calls my name.

"Mr. Wilde."

Struggling to stand, I hobble toward the back, taking great care on my newly repaired ACL, ready to be put through the ringer. No one has to tell me how grueling this is going to be. My focus is on my feet, so I don't pay much attention to the blonde-haired therapist until she stops and spins around.

"Hello, Fletcher."

What the fuck! My head snaps up in disbelief. Almond-shaped hazel eyes, the very same ones I used to get lost in for hours at a time, peer at me beneath a feathering of thick lashes. Her gaze takes a lazy trip up and down the length of me, scrutinizing me as though I were an insect, or some other undesirable life form. I get the distinct feeling if she were taller than her five foot seven inches, she would be staring down her cute little nose at me in a haughty manner. Even still, she is every bit as gorgeous as she was the first day I saw her in high school. Scratch that. She's better—more mature in a refined way. But as usual, it's her pouty-lipped mouth that holds my attention the longest. Images of what that mouth can do—wait! What the hell am I thinking? “No. This isn't going to work.”

A smirk appears on that gorgeous face of hers. The one I used to be so in love with. The one I thought I was going to spend the rest of my life with.

“Fine. Feel free to see someone else. Let me warn you, though. We only have one other therapist in this office, and he only works half-days every other Thursday. So good luck with that. Unless you want to drive all the way to and from Asheville every day.”

Then she has the nerve to wink at me. And all I can think about is her dumping me. *Bitch.*

Cassidy

He did not just call me a bitch. I stomp into the private office we use for consultations, only Jenny is there with her lunch.

“Tell me that's not Fletcher Wilde.”

“It is.” Though I’m not sure how the word escaped my mouth, considering I was grinding my teeth.

“Oh my God, oh my God. I have to meet him,” she says while waving her hands wildly in the air.

“Yeah, you should run along. He’s probably at the front waiting to reschedule his appointment with Cory.” She stares at me, waiting for me to say more. I throw a thumb over my shoulder in the direction of the door. “Hurry or he’ll just leave.”

She runs from the room with a confused but wide smile on her face. I sit in the chair to catch my breath. When I saw the name on the schedule, I’d assumed it was his father who needed help. I had no idea he’d come back to town.

Why now after all this time? He made his choice when he left, and I’d made mine. We’d tried the long distance thing, and it failed epically.

“Cass.” I glance up to see Jenny in the doorway. “He hasn’t left. He’s still waiting for you in room two.”

Her eyes don’t meet mine, and I know she’s got a crush. Who wouldn’t? He’s fucking beautiful, but a total fucking asswipe. I don’t have time to kill her hero worship for him. Maybe he’s into eighteen-year-old girls these days.

“I’ll be there in a minute.”

She gets her food and leaves for the breakroom, which is where she should have eaten in the first place.

Before I go back, I text my friend Gina, *The prick has arrived.*

I take in a deep breath and walk into the room. Fletcher is sitting in the chair, which makes him look so goddamn helpless, and I half-forgive him in my head.

“So, Mr. Wilde, I hear you approve of my services,” I say, as I take in his thick brown hair and golden brown eyes. The sheer size of him makes me feel small when I’m this close to him. But I remember how those arms of his would wrap me up and make me feel safe.

“Cass,” he says, breaking me out of the spell he’s cast. “Don’t give me shit, okay? I just got a call from my agent that I might be cut from the team if my prognosis isn’t good.”

Cass. Only he called me that. More memories of stolen kisses and hot nights in a confined car bombard me. Then in college, when we had to sneak around to get naked, risking a roommate showing up at any time. That only makes my chest hurt as I remember watching him walk away from me that last time.

“Let’s keep this professional, Mr. Wilde. You can call me Mrs. Miller from now on.”

“Married, huh? No wonder I didn’t recognize the name.”

I don’t bother to respond to his comment.

“Look, I’m booked today. We’ve already lost time. Either you play by the rules, something you know all too well, or you can make an appointment with my colleague. I’m sure he can see you in a couple of weeks.”

Shocked, his mouth opens before he closes it. His jaw works a few seconds before he grits out, “Fine.”

For a second, I’m gripped again with pain that he’d rather wait and see someone else before I pull myself together. *Remember professional.* “Okay, I’ll have Jenny set you up with another appointment.”

“Cass—” When I glare at him, he amends his word. “Mrs. Miller, what I meant was, let’s get this show on the road, because I have to be on the field for the season opener.”

It's Ms. Miller, but I don't correct him. Instead, I contemplate telling him his odds of making it on the field won't be good unless he works his ass off. But, I decide we've had enough confrontation.

"If you'll take off all your clothes except your underwear and cover with this." I reach inside a drawer and hand him the paper gown. "We'll get started on electro stimulation."

"What? Fuck, Cass, you know I don't wear underwear."

"Mr. Wilde, I'm not sure what you do these days, but if you aren't wearing any undergarments, we can work on your shoulder and lower back. Leave your pants on. But remember this for next time."

"How is this going to get me on the field?"

Sighing, I try to remain calm and patient. He isn't the first to question our methods.

"Although I have some leeway, this is what your doctor has prescribed for you. The type of injuries you suffered need time to heal. We are working on pain and muscle stimulation. There would have been a massage if you hadn't wasted most of our allotted time."

I see his smirk and ignore it.

"I'll be back in a few minutes," I add before leaving the room.

Pacing in the office, I try to cool down because, dammit, I remember he goes commando. Heat licks up my spine with the memory. The guy was good with his hands, not to mention everything else.

Thankfully, he kept his pants on, and I apply all the tabs that will send the twenty second electric burst in certain areas with a five second pause in between. I'm not sure who's getting more electrical stimulation—him or me.

Because I only have to work on his upper body, I give him a massage. And, damn, if touching his shoulder doesn't make me wet. What the hell am I going to do in a couple of days when he returns for the full deal?

By the time he leaves, I'm more relieved than I care to admit. I have to cool off, so I stand outside in the crisp air to help clear my mind. He'd been my heart and soul. When he made the decision to leave the university a year early for the NFL draft, that started the slow spiral to our relationship unraveling. He'd asked me to leave with him. Transferring would have been easy, but my dad had been ill and I couldn't move halfway across the country and leave him alone. When Fletcher went to spring training, I'd been supportive and trusted him with my heart and soul. However, the media game they made him play was hard to watch and swallow, especially when he was too busy to talk and explain about the women and groupies that were always near or on his arm. It left us arguing until our relationship finally broke because of it.

Seeing him now makes me rub at the ache where my heart still hurts from him walking away. Unfortunately, I'm also reminded of how a look from him gets my blood boiling for more carnal things like no other man has. Why Fletcher Wilde still has that damn effect on me, I don't know. And I wish he didn't.

And now for a Sneak Peek at Fastball: A Wilde Players Dirty Romance

Gina

Air clings to my lungs like sludge, and the need to get out of here if I want to breathe becomes urgent. Without thinking, I make my way to the elevator in the skybox and am grateful when the doors whoosh open immediately after I press the button. I step inside, face forward, and press a lower floor button at random. That is when my eyes connect with his just as the doors silently shut between us. Exhaling a long breath, I'm grateful for the solitude. There is no reason on earth I should want the man. He's dangerous to my free-spirited lifestyle. Not to mention, he's too vanilla for my liking.

After the doors reopen, I don't recognize my location. When they start to shut, I leap out into the wide corridor, which is big enough for large vehicles to maneuver through. An underground tunnel of drab gray greets me. As I begin to walk, I realize I'm probably in a restricted area of the football stadium.

Fletcher Wilde, the star quarterback of the Oklahoma Rockets and my best friend, Cassidy's husband, is going to murder me if I get caught and they learn I'm a guest of his in the owner's box.

Feeling mischievous, my hesitant steps turn confident, figuring my bestie will talk her man off a rampage if he gets in trouble because of me. I pass several people but hold my head high and steady, acting as though I belong, and the people pass without a second glance. I cover my belly as if my stomach hurts, hiding the area where a badge might hang, which I suspect I need in order to be here.

The roar of the crowd funnels through a wide opening in the tunnel, and I can see the green of the field. I quickly dart past and stand near an open door. Just as I'm about to continue my exploration, a giant of a man steps in my path. He wears a sports coat that looks like the size of a tablecloth. But it's a walkie-talkie clipped to his shoulder with an attached coiled wire leading to his ear that explains his profession.

"Miss, do you have an ID?"

Busted. Fletcher's so going to kill me.

"Um-"

"There you are." I turn to see Ryder striding in my direction.

"Hey, my cousin-"

"I know you," the guard says, with his index finger raised and pointing. His eyes are large. "You're Ryder Wilde. You play for the Charlotte Cougars. I watched you the other night. That triple saved the fucking game."

The security guy sees NFL players all the time, and yet he seems genuinely excited to meet Ryder. Just goes to show me what a big deal he is. Still, I'm surprised the guard is talking about Ryder's hitting skills, when normally it's all about his pitching capabilities.

Ryder grins, and they trade a secret male handshake all men seemed to know.

"Do you mind if I show her my cousin's locker?"

Ryder's and Fletcher's dads are brothers.

A wink and a nod, not to mention a trade of greenbacks, and the guard lets us by.

"We don't normally allow people into the locker room, especially during games. But for you, I'll give you ten minutes. Any more and someone is sure to come around and catch you," he calls over his shoulder.

"Thanks," Ryder says.

Then he's half-dragging me into what appears to be a fancy locker room. Two foot wide open lockers line the walls with benches in front of them. A wide-open space is in the middle, and several TVs grace the walls. The game is on in stereo. Two large empty dumpsters are nearby. I can only imagine them filled with sweaty uniforms to be laundered by unfortunate employees of their laundry service.

"So, are you going to tell me why I had to chase you?"
Ryder begins.

The puff of air I release isn't filled with the heat of the dragon I'd felt minutes before. The man is too beautiful to be angry at. Damn Wilde men.

"I didn't ask you to follow," I say.

"No, but your jealousy is obvious."

I roll my eyes in self-defense of his smirk. "Jealousy requires that I care and I don't." Which is such a lie. I'm surprised my nose doesn't grow two inches.

"Of course, you don't. I've called you for the past two months and nothing. I see you and you do everything possible to avoid me."

Wrapping an armor of nonchalance around me, I try to sound convincing when I speak again. "We had sex. It was good. I'm not interested in more. Isn't that a guy's wet dream to fuck and not worry about commitment?"

"I'm not most guys," he snaps, sounding offended I've lumped him in a category of cavemen. And maybe I have, because that I can handle.

"No, you are a guy on a date. One who should be upstairs with her and not with me."

He licks lips made for kissing as I watch him... them.
Damn me.

"You know what I think?"

"Not really," I say, feigning boredom. "But you're going to tell me, right?"

“I think you want me to fuck you again because you can’t get enough. I think you’re afraid you might get addicted to my dick.”

“A-DICK-ted... I don’t think so.”

“Maybe you already are.” His smug laugh is sexy as hell. Double damn.

“Try me. Fuck me right now and see if you can get me off and have me begging for more.”

Challenge issued. Will he take me up on it? Truth be told, the idea of fucking right out here in the open and potentially getting caught already has me wet.

“But what if we-” He glances around as if he hopes someone will appear.

“What are you, twelve and afraid we’ll get caught by Mommy and Daddy?”

His head whips back in my direction, and his eyes grow stormy. Hot damn, he looks like a predator about to eat his prey, and I want him to do just that.

“Take your fucking jeans off, Gina,” he commands.

The bass in his voice vibrates from his chest, sending shivers through me. I so want him that bad I easily comply. Although the denim peels off, they hook at my ankles, and I manage to only kick one leg off. He doesn’t wait. I’m instantly lifted and set on the edge of the counter that’s the perfect height for me to wrap my legs around him. He doesn’t bother with my thong.

A dip of his hand into his front pocket, and he pulls out a condom.

“Expecting to get laid,” I chide.

“Knowing,” he says. Confidence exudes from him like cologne. “I put it in there on the ride down.”

Fucking cocky bastard.

I watch as he sheathes the thick length of himself in the rubber wrapper. He’s rough when he pokes a finger through

my slit to test my readiness.

“What happened to Mr. Nice Guy?” I egg him on, liking him crossing over to the dark side.

“You don’t want nice. You want hard, fast, and meaningless. And I’m going to give it to you.”

There’s no time to gasp. He quickly removes his finger, shoves my thong to the side, and positions his tip at my entrance. He’s inside me before I can blink. Damn, if I don’t remember every inch of him. No man has fit me like a glove the way he does and ain’t that a bitch. I’ve been waiting for him to strike out, and he’s hit a goddamn homerun.

“Fuck,” I cry out, not caring about the security guy at the door.

In fact, the idea that he may come in and watch has me tipping toward an edge sooner than I thought possible.

Ryder is relentless. He rides me so hard the back of my legs sting from the impact against the sharp edge they hang over. My eyes remain open and focused between us. I watch his cock slide in and out of me as the evidence of my pleasure coats each of his strokes. It’s another shove closer to the cliff I desperately want to tumble over.

“I want you to swallow my dick and let my cum mark your throat.”

Damn, if I don’t scream from the impact of his hips as he rolls them so his dick hits that secret spot. Somehow knowing what I’m about to do, Ryder is there covering my mouth with his as he shoves his tongue to stop my sharp cries. Damn, if the fucker doesn’t have to even touch my clit to set me off like a rocket launcher. I’m so confused as to how he managed it. Then again, I’m lost to the feeling of ecstasy as he grunts. His thrusts becoming bruising as he follows me into oblivion.

“So much for me deep-throating you,” I tease once I’m able to catch my breath.

“There’ll be a next time.”

“That’s what you think.”

“Hey, you?” another voice declares.

I look over Ryder’s shoulder and see a different guy, one not wearing a sports coat. So not security, but he’s got on a polo shirt with Fletcher’s team logo emblazoned on the breast pocket.

“Oh, are we in the wrong place?” Ryder says assuredly, not looking back.

He probably doesn’t want the guy to recognize him.

“Yes, you are.”

“Give me a minute for my girl to get decent.”

Hearing him label me as his sends a thrill I don’t want to run through me. I push down the feeling, knowing disappointment when he moves on will only leave me lonely. And everyone leaves me, even Cassidy. She’s Fletcher’s now, and I have no one left.

The man turns, giving us his back. “You have twenty seconds.”

The threat is clear, and Ryder doesn’t waste time. He helps me down, and he pulls up his jeans as I race to get mine on. And then we are running. We leave out a door closer to us and furthest from the guy who caught us. Ryder reaches into his pocket and hands the security guy out front more money.

“Thanks,” Ryder says. “Can you buy us some more time?”

He’s got a fucking innocent face that makes everyone a believer. Then he adds a wink. Security guy smiles and nods, and then we are running.

Breathless from laughing so hard, we are in the elevator headed back up to the owner’s box. When our laughter dies, Ryder crowds me in a corner. I don’t fight when he kisses me. In fact, I rake my nails through his hair trying to pull him closer.

The elevator dings to signal we’ve made it to our floor. We break apart before the doors totally open, and a blond-not just anyone-is standing there looking at us.

“I was just looking for you,” she says. And her saccharin sweet voice grates on my nerves. “I didn’t know you had a girlfriend.” Her pout belongs on the face of a five-year-old not a woman.

“Lynsey,” he begins.

Meeting her eyes, I say, “Don’t worry, honey. We aren’t anything. In fact, he’s all yours.”

I stride away with my head held high. The prickle of guilt I feel is a useless emotion. I don’t owe her anything. It was his choice to screw me. They aren’t married, so what? But I know what it’s like to be her, so that guilt still holds. But I’ve gotten my dose of Ryder. I hope that’s enough for me to move on this time.

—

Ryder

Why the fuck did I have to bring Lynsey? If I could punch myself in the face for doing so, I probably would have right then. But instead, I paste on a paper-thin smile and drag my leaden feet out of the elevator.

“Where’ve you been? I’ve been looking all over for you.”

Her voice, which at one point I thought sounded cute and sexy, now reminds me of fingernails on a blackboard. And that bleached out hair. What the fuck was I ever thinking? All I want right now is that hot black-haired wild thing wrapped around me again.

“Ryder? I asked you a question.” Her bony arms wind around my neck as she shimmies her body close to mine. This used to be something that was a turn-on, but all I want to do is push her away from me.

Then she sounds like a damn Beagle as she starts to sniff. Rising to her tippy toes, she puts her nose on my neck and sniffs some more. All of a sudden that cute little pout turns into a nasty sneer. “You were with her, and I’m talking with

her with her, weren't you? That's why you were gone so long." Her voice has a high-pitched squeaky quality to it that is totally grating on my nerves. I need to calm her down before we walk back inside and she makes a scene, completely embarrassing Gina.

"Come on, Lynsey. Do you really think I'd do such a thing?"

She taps the toe of one of her stiletto boots as she assesses me. Who the hell wears these kinds of boots to a football game anyway? They look like they belong more on a stripper's pole. Then she crosses her arms, one of the little moves she loves because it squishes her manmade boobs together, giving her cleavage an extra oomph. The tight V-neck sweater she wears emphasizes them even more. The first time she did this I wanted to grab her tits and squeeze them, but this time I only want to tell her to stop it. It's not a very attractive move. It makes me think of Gina in her Oklahoma Rockets jersey and tight jeans. Now that's what I call sexy.

"I don't know, Ryder. Why do you smell like perfume? And Angel at that? It's one of my favorite scents, and I'm not wearing it today."

"I have been hugging a lot of women since I got here." I feel like a shit, even though there is no emotional attachment to this woman. The fact is, I should never have brought her. We've never been anything to each other but a date, even though she's wanted more. It's awkward and uncomfortable, but I didn't know Gina was going to be here. What is it with me? Can I not go anywhere alone?

She glares at me.

"Look, I want to catch the game, and I can't do it standing out here. You coming inside or not?"

"Maybe I should just go."

"Suit yourself."

A huff rushes out of her. "You mean you're gonna let me leave by myself?"

"Of course not. I'll order an Uber for you."

Her mouth flaps open and closed a couple of times, and then she says, “Fine. Why don’t you do that?”

I yank out my phone and tap on the Uber app, praying they come to the correct entrance of the stadium. It says they’ll be here in five minutes. I imagine they are circling the place like buzzards. They probably make a killing on game day.

“Let’s go. Your ride will be here in five.”

The walk down is in complete silence. I believe Lynsey is as done with me as I am with her. By the time we get to the doors, her ride is waiting. Now for the awkward part.

“Take care, Lynsey.”

“Like you care, Ryder.”

“What? It’s not like that.”

But isn’t it?

“I may look it, but I’m not stupid. See ya.” She holds up her hand over her shoulder as she sashays to the car, flicking her fingers, telling me goodbye.

I jog back to the box, hoping to see Fletcher in at least one play before halftime. But as I burst into the room, I see all the players moving off the field. Dammit!

Everyone ambles toward the buffet or bar to refresh their food and drink. Cassidy and my twin sister, Riley, approach, so I know I’ll be on trial.

Riley’s eyes range up and down my body. I hate it when she does this. It always makes me want to squirm.

“What?” I ask her.

“Where’s Lynsey?”

“She left.”

“Left?” Riley asks.

“Yeah, she didn’t want to watch the game after all.”

It’s funny seeing both sets of brows shoot straight up in synchronized timing. I’d like to ask if they planned it, but I’m damn sure they’d punch me. Or something equally as painful.

Leave it to Riley to keep digging in. “So what? Did she like decide after she’d been here a while, and mind you this wasn’t her first game, that she didn’t like football after all?”

“Something like that,” I mumble.

“Ryder, what did you do?”

“Nothing.” If only they knew.

They share a look, and those damn brows of theirs arch again. I wonder if they’re on some kind of team. Synchronized brow raising team. Maybe it’s some club only women are allowed in.

“Whatever,” Riley finally answers.

They both turn and leave. Funny. Cassidy never said a word. Only listened to our exchange. Too bad I can’t pull her aside and drill her with questions about Gina. That wouldn’t work though because it would only get back to that dark-haired vixen who’s gotten under my skin.

Speaking of, where the hell is she? I do a once-over in the room, and there are so many people in here it’s difficult to see who’s who. Looks like I’m going to have to mingle to find her.

People stop to congratulate me on the win yesterday, which was why I didn’t get here until late today. And I have to ask myself again. Why the hell did I ask Lynsey to meet me? What a huge mistake. My hand swipes through my hair as I continue my search for Gina.

“Ryder? There you are. I was wondering where you went.”

“Hey, Mom.”

“Where’s Lynsey?”

“She left. She decided she wanted to go home.”

“Well, I’m glad. I don’t really like that woman. Seems to me she only wants what you can buy her. Did you eat, honey?”

“Not yet.”

She grabs my hand and pulls me over to the food table, like I’m eight years old. I love my mother. She’s the most adorable

woman in the world. She's kind and loving, but right now I want to find that fiery little piece that nearly blew my mind a few minutes ago.

"Let me fix you a plate." She starts piling food on so there's no way I'm getting out of this. She stuffs it in my hands and says, "I'll grab you a beer, sweetie."

"Thanks, Mom. But you know I am twenty-six and I can fix my own plate."

"I know, honey but you know how I love to take care of you."

I scan the place for an empty seat and find one toward the corner. I turn back and say, "Mom, I'll be over there."

"Okay, honey, I'll find you."

As I walk, I check out the goodies Mom placed on my plate, and my stomach rumbles. It smells delicious, and I'm starving. Sitting down, I dig in and Mom hands me my beer and leaves with an I'll be back with dessert. As I inhale my food, a sexy voice filled with sarcasm comes from over my shoulder.

"By the looks of it, someone needs to make sure you, um, eat more." My beer spills on my lap as I nearly choke.

"Jesus, are you okay?"

After I cough and sputter a bit, I say, "Yeah, I think I'll live. Don't you know it's not safe to sneak up on people while they're eating?"

Gina gives me an eat shit look and shakes her head. Black shiny waves swing back and forth, and her scent drifts over me. My cock instantly strains against my jeans. I want to pull her down on top of me and push myself into her until she moans. What the fuck, Ryder?

"You okay there?" she asks.

"Yeah, why?"

"You were licking your lips like you tasted something out of this world."

“Well, I was just eating,” I say, adding, “until you about choked me.”

“Right.” She drags the word out, making it sound as though she believes me as much as she believes cows can fly.

To take my mind off of sex, I shove a huge forkful of food into my mouth. And chew. And chew. And chew. I don't think I'm ever going to work that mouthful down, but I do. And the entire time I feel Gina's heat behind me.

“So, where's the blond?” she finally asks. I knew it was coming, but now it's out in the open.

After swallowing my food, I say, “She left. Why don't you come over here and sit next to me so I don't have to strain my neck to talk and I won't be concerned about choking again?”

She shrugs a shoulder and moves next to me. “Did I get you in trouble?”

“No, Gina, I got myself in trouble. I should never have brought her. It was a huge error.”

She sips on her drink. “Because of me?”

“Yes, because of you. I bring her and disappear with you.”

“Well, she didn't have to leave because of me. I meant what I said to her. You and I aren't anything, so it isn't a big deal.”

This is weird. She acts like a guy. Women don't act like this. She's supposed to be more clingy since we just fucked a few minutes or so ago.

“Why are you acting like this?” I ask.

“Acting like what?”

Setting the food to the side, I turn to look her square in the face. “Like this. We just had sex.”

“Will you keep it down, for Christ's sake? You want to tell the world?”

Damn, this woman is so hot when she's angry. Two spots of color appear high on her cheekbones as her nostrils flare. Eyes like coffee make me want to dive right into them and drink

them up. She's as perfect as I've ever seen a woman be with her waist long shiny hair, and she's tall-my guess is about five feet nine or ten-and that's a huge turn-on for me alone. But the best thing is, she's not bone thin like so many women are. She's got curves in all the right places and knows what to do with them.

"No one is paying us a bit of attention."

She licks her full lips-the very same ones I want wrapped around my dick-and says, "Well, they will be if you keep shouting about us having sex."

I laugh at this. Is this the same woman who challenged me in the locker room? Now she's afraid someone will hear about it when a few minutes ago, she didn't give a fuck if someone caught us doing it.

"What?" she asks.

"You're impossible."

"How so?"

I tell her what a contradiction she is, and she actually has the courtesy to blush before she speaks again. "Well, that was different."

"No, it wasn't. What if I slipped my hand down your pants right here, in this room, and got you off?"

Her eyes dart around as she checks out the room. An impish look takes over her face, and she says, "Okay."

Jesus, I was only joking, and here she is taking me seriously.

"Okay, but here's the deal. You have to return the favor."

She holds out her hand and says, "Deal."

After we shake on it, she undoes her pants and covers her fly with her jersey.

"How quiet can you be?" I ask.

"Very."

"Hmm. We'll see about that."

The bad thing about this is Gina has a gorgeous pussy, and I want to look at it, but unfortunately, I'm left with my imagination. Instead, I focus on her eyes. Using one hand for obvious reasons, my fingers spread her lips, and I begin a slow rub until she warms to me. It doesn't take her long I'm happy to say. One finger in and she's wiggling around in her seat.

"Be still," I warn.

"Trying here," she breathes heavily.

Using two fingers and my thumb, I massage her, pressing down on her pubic bone with the heel of my palm.

"Shit, that's good," she whispers.

"Ryder, here's your dessert, honey."

Fuck! My mom would have to come right now.

"Gina, honey, would you like me to get you some?"

"No, ma'am, I'm fine." Her voice breaks as she speaks, and I have to hold back a laugh.

"Oh, dear, you're a bit sweaty. Are you okay? You're not getting sick, are you?"

"No, ma'am, I'm fine. These games always get me a little worked up."

"Ryder, aren't you going to eat your dessert?"

I'm holding the plate with one hand, and the other is in Gina's vag.

"Yeah, I will, Mom."

"Here," Gina says, coming to my rescue. "I think I'll have one bite if you don't mind."

She takes a bite and gives me one.

"Ryder, you let these women spoil you too much. I'm going to find your dad."

When her back is to us, I resume my ministrations on Gina's privates. But I go in for the money without mercy. In no time flat she's clenching my fingers as she comes all around my hand. And she was wrong. She moans. Loud

enough so she puts the plate down and clamps a hand over her mouth.

Then we laugh as I remove my hand and lick my fingers. “I believe this is my dessert.”

“Oh yeah?”

“Uh-huh,” I mumble.

“My turn.”

“God, I hope Mom doesn’t come back. Where’s that dessert? If I don’t eat it, she’ll think I’m sick.”

Gina hands me the plate, and I eat the cake or whatever it is that’s there. I feel her hands trying to unbutton my pants.

“You can’t do this,” I scold her.

“Why not?”

“Because we’re in the box with people around.”

“So?” She looks as though it’s an everyday occurrence.

“How many times have you done this?” I ask.

Her lip pokes out, and she says, “You’re not supposed to ask those kinds of questions, Ryder.”

“I don’t have a shirt on like you do to cover myself. I don’t want my dick exposed to the world while you give me a hand job.”

She smirks. “You’re a chicken.”

“Yeah, I am.”

She points a finger at the plate and says, “Finish up there, my little chicken.”

Who am I to disobey an adventurous woman? When I’m done, I set the plate aside, and she takes my hand, pulling me into the bathroom in the back of the room.

“Ahh, good idea,” I say as she locks the door.

By this time, my dick is about to tear through the zipper. She undoes it and pulls it free of the jail it’s been in. Then I

watch in wonder as she drops to her knees and puts her lips around the tip, sucking me into the warmth of her mouth.

It's about now that I want to moan my pleasure, but I stay quiet. Watching Gina with my cock in her mouth is quite the picture. She takes me in a little deeper each time, and she watches me-she fucking watches me. It makes me want to fuck her hard, like I did earlier. But I also want to come on her tongue, down her throat. I want to feel her swallow what I pump into her, squeezing me until I'm dry. The way she swirls her tongue around my head and then slides it along my shaft almost has me unglued. But then she takes me in deeper than I think is possible, squeezing my balls until I tell her, letting her know I'm close. And that's when she really goes at it until I shoot everything I have into her. And I, exactly like she did, have to hold a hand over my mouth to stop the groan from escaping.

As soon as possible, I tuck my dick back in my jeans and zip up.

"Let's go," I say.

And when I open the door, Cassidy and Riley stand there staring at us.