

BADGER CREEK DUET SERIES

forget me

MAX AND HARPER BOOK ONE

CLAIRE RAYE

FORGET ME

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FREE BOOKS

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Thank you so much for purchasing our book, we really appreciate it. And guess what, we want to offer you even more! This FREE Rockport Beach series prequel gives you a glimpse into the early lives of Beck & Kelsey, our OG couple from our first ever series, Rockport Beach and takes place before the events of Coming Home to You (Book One).

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And, because one freebie is never enough, we are also excited to offer you a FREE prequel of our Hawthorn Hills Duet Series!! This takes us back to the early lives of Sienna, Caleb and Reid and takes place before the events of Complicate Me (Book One).

Grab your FREE copy of Confuse Me right [here!](#)

Happy reading and thank you!

HARPER

The bus pulls into the station, the brakes letting out a high-pitched wail, waking the child sleeping on my lap. She's slept the entire ride which is good because I don't think I can bring myself to talk to her about what's happening.

I look out the window, catching glimpses of a motel about a hundred feet from the station. It looks like the kind of place you'd pass right by, no one interested in staying. But it's where we'll be staying.

I don't have enough money to take an Uber or a cab, let alone another bus or train ride. We've already taken four. Four seems to be our number. Four train rides, four hours on the bus, four days to cross the country. Maybe room four at that sketchy motel will be available.

"Sammie," I whisper, pushing her hair back. "We're here."

She springs up, her eyes wide, her head whipping around to look out the window. "Where are we, Mommy?" she asks, the hoarseness of sleep still present in her voice.

"Lake Tahoe, California," I tell her like that means anything to a four-year-old. Again, with the number four. "Our new home," I add in the hopes of quelling the tears I feel sting my eyes. I can't cry in front of her, not anymore.

I take her hand in mine, slinging the backpack over my shoulder as she clings to the stuffed doll she got last Christmas. It's the only piece of home I allowed her to bring with us. It sounds cruel; it even feels a little cruel when I let my memories flash to us leaving.

But then I remind myself, I had no other choice.

We exit the bus, grabbing our suitcase and bag from under it, I tip my head to the driver, thanking him and he watches me like he knows. I look back over my shoulder as I take Sammie by the hand and the driver waves now.

I smile, trying to act like every other person climbing off this bus, like we're here for a vacation and not to start over. Although most of the clientele on the bus didn't look like the kind of people who are here to ski, not like there's snow on the ground anyway. I don't even know how to ski. I feel like I'm giving off that vibe for sure.

I drag the suitcase through the gravel lot where the bus stopped, taking it through and over to the little motel I saw on the way in. It's not the kind of place I would normally consider staying in, but it looks like it's in my price range. That price range is basically zero. I need something that costs nothing, but that's never going to happen.

I pull open the door to the motel to find an older man sitting behind a counter and it pretty much looks exactly as I expected. It hasn't been renovated since the 1970s and it smells of cigarettes and cough drops. I look down at Sammie who wrinkles up her nose but knows better than to comment on the state of this place. I hate that this is where I have to take her and I swallow hard, forcing back the tears I feel burn my eyes.

"You lost?" the man grumbles from behind the desk, not bothering to stand up.

"No. I was hoping to get a room," I tell him, approaching the counter.

He looks me over, taking in Sammie standing at my side and our suitcase. He shakes his head, and I don't know if he's telling me I can't get a room or if I don't want to stay here.

"It's cash only," he spits out, shoving back from the desk and walking over to the counter. "No credit cards, no drugs, no guns. We call the police."

“That’s not going to be an issue,” I tell him, giving Sammie’s hand a squeeze at the mention of guns. I pull an envelope from my purse and ask him the total for a week’s stay.

That feels really optimistic. A week is longer than I want to stay, but I know we’re going to be here longer than that.

“It’s three-fifty a week, and you gotta be out by ten on check-out,” he barks, his words harsh and I get it. He runs a sketchy motel near a bus station. The people who come in here are anything but upstanding. “There’s no smoking in the room either,” he adds, and it’s hard not to laugh out loud at all of this. I’ve never smoked a cigarette in my life. I’ve never touched drugs and I certainly have never seen a gun.

I nod in response to all his rules, not needing to piss him off on day one as I pull the amount from the envelope, reminding myself how much I have left now.

It’s not much, only two thousand dollars and if I have to stay here another week, I’ll be down another few hundred bucks. This money is supposed to last us till I can get a job, but it’s also supposed to be the money I use to get us an apartment.

The trouble is, no one is going to rent an apartment to someone without a job.

“Room three,” the man now says, sliding a key attached to an oversized plastic tag across the counter.

“Could I get room four?” Not sure why I’ve decided this is my lucky number. Something about it feels better, feels like I can control this one tiny aspect of all this.

“They’re all the same,” the man deadpans, switching out the keys with an eye roll.

“Thank you.”

“This isn’t one of them fancy resorts,” he now says, motioning toward the door, knowing the higher end places are down the road. “No free breakfast and I’ll remind you again, I will call the police.”

“We won’t give you any trouble,” I reply, trying on a soft smile as we leave.

With Sammie’s hand still in mine, we make our way to room four, in desperate need of a shower. We’ve been on the train and the bus without taking a shower for the last four days. I can’t even imagine what I look like, let alone smell like.

I push the key into the lock, needing to jiggle it a little to get the door open, but when it does, Sammie once again hits me with that wrinkled up nose look.

“It’s fine,” I tell her, dragging the suitcase in, but also commanding her not to take her shoes off. “Let’s start by getting you into the tub,” I add, winking at her and shooing her toward the bathroom.

AN HOUR LATER, we’re both clean and while I know she’s hungry, I need to start my job search. I hand her a bag of Cheerios and a clementine, telling her to eat as we walk.

“Where are we going?” she asks, skipping along the sidewalk outside the motel.

“We’re going to find me a job. A good job. One that pays lots of money so we don’t have to stay at that motel.”

“I kinda like the motel,” she says, and she’s always been the kind of kid who knows how to make someone feel better. She’s far more aware than most kids her age.

“Really? What do you like about it?” I ask, wondering what she’s going to say. We left a beachfront condo in Florida for this dump.

“I liked that grumpy man. Do you think he’s always like that?” she asks, skipping over to take my hand as we reach the street.

“I do think he’s always like that,” I reply, trying not to laugh.

“I also like that it has flowered blankets on the bed,” she now adds, and I really must commend her for her ability to

find the good. There really isn't anything good about it. "It feels like a vacation."

"I'm glad you like it. It's going to be our home until we can find a place," I tell her, wondering if she's going to ask me about her dad or when we're going home.

"It's okay that it's not nice," Sammie says, and I swear my heart shatters into a million pieces. "I like it."

We walk in silence with Sammie eating the Cheerios and me peeling the clementine until we come to what looks to be the ski village. There's a cute little sign welcoming us to the Badger Creek resort with a few shops and restaurants along with a gorgeous lodge that stands in the center of it all.

"Look at the mountains," I say to Sammie, pointing to the peaks that jut out above the lodge in front of us.

"I think we should live here, Mommy," Sammie says, her eyes moving around the vast area, falling onto some villas and condos toward the back of the property.

It really is stunning, but I'm not certain there will ever be a time I'll be able to afford to stay at a place like this or even rent here.

"I'd love to live here too, but let's start by seeing if they have any job openings," I say, holding the door to the lodge open for Sammie to enter.

I follow her in, taking her hand in mine, I approach the desk, a girl about my age smiling as we walk up.

"Checking in?" she asks, and I feel my face grow hot. I've never done anything like this before. I've always applied for jobs and waited for someone to call me. I've never just walked in somewhere, basically begging for a job.

I have two years of college under my belt and that pretty much amounts to nothing in the grand scheme of things. I have waitressing experience and I've run a cash register, but I don't have any skills that fit with a ski resort.

"Hi, no we're not checking in. I was wondering if you have any job openings?" I ask, hoping this well put together

woman doesn't laugh in my face.

"Oh, you're here to meet with Elissa," she says, holding up one finger. "I'll go grab her. I thought she usually asked her interviews to meet her in the ski lodge, but whatever," she adds, flitting a hand as if it's of no consequence.

I don't even have a second to tell her that I have no idea who Elissa is and that I'm not here for an interview, before she has disappeared behind a door.

A few minutes later, the woman returns, but this time with another woman, both of them whispering a little as the first woman points to me.

The one I assume is Elissa walks over to where Sammie and I are waiting. Sammie is sitting in an oversized brown leather chair, her legs swinging as she sings to herself. Looking up, she notices the woman and smiles.

"You look like Rapunzel," Sammie calls out, beaming as she jumps up from the chair. "You have long hair like her."

"Thank you," Elissa replies. "I think that's the nicest compliment I've received in a long time." She extends a hand to Sammie and Sammie takes it. "I'm Elissa Green and you are?"

"I'm Sammie Neely. I'm four and this is my first time in the mountains," she announces, before sitting back down.

"Nice to meet you Sammie and this must be your mom," Elissa motions to me and Sammie nods.

"Hi, I'm Harper Neely. I know this is probably not how you do this, but I was wondering if you have any job openings."

My heart has been racing since the moment this woman walked up. She's strikingly beautiful and I have to say that Sammie is not wrong in thinking she looks like a Disney Princess. But it's not just that, I'm so scared she's going to see my desperation and mistake it for something else.

"Well, I just finished hiring for the off season and I'll be conducting interviews for the ski season at the end of August

if you're still interested then," she says, and my entire body sags with the words of defeat.

I know this is the first place I came to, but I need to find something ASAP and I can't be fumbling around looking for a job, especially with a four-year-old in tow and only two grand to my name.

"But I can check in with Zoey. She runs the lodge here. I run the ski area, so if you're still interested in August, I'd love to have you come back for an interview," Elissa says, and it feels like she's just being nice or maybe she really would hire me. "Hang on. Let me see if Zoey is available."

I squeeze in next to Sammie in the chair, my heart still slamming against my chest, my forehead beginning to sweat, and I like to think it's from the giant brick fireplace that's pumping out heat a few feet away.

Again, Elissa appears, this time with a woman who is equally as pretty and I know Sammie is going to be enamored.

"She looks like Elsa," Sammie whispers, her eyes wide as she watches the two women talk. Elissa motions to where we are sitting, and they continue talking.

The whole conversation plays out in my head with Elissa telling Zoey that there's a crazy woman with a kid who just showed up here looking for a job. I might as well carry a sign saying I've run away from home and I'm desperate. Maybe that will work better.

"Shhh," I tell Sammie, but I know that will only egg her on.

The blonde woman makes her way over to us, smiling as she approaches.

"Hi, I'm Zoey Holden. Elissa tells me you're looking for a job," she says, holding out her hand to me.

"I am. I'm Harper Neely and this is my daughter Sammie."

"Nice to meet you. Would you like to come back to my office and sit down? We can talk back there," Zoey offers, and I nod, following her through the door and down a hallway.

“Do you live here because it’s cold a lot?” Sammie asks as we come to an office and go inside.

“The cold never bothered me anyway,” Zoey responds, winking, and Sammie’s mouth drops open. She scampers up to me, squeezing my hand.

“She’s not Elsa, Sammie,” I whisper, shaking my head as I point to a chair in the corner of the office.

“Okay, so Elissa tells me you’re looking for a job,” Zoey says, her fingers typing on the keyboard in front of her.

I sit down across from her, nodding, but still filled with feelings of fear and anxiety. I hate that this is what my life has come to. I should have left years ago.

It’s never too late to start over.

“Are you local?” she asks.

“I’m staying at the Mountain View Motel,” I say, embarrassed that I’ve just admitted this out loud to someone.

“I’ve heard nice things about it,” she says, and I chuckle.

“Really? Nice as in they have polyester bedspreads from the seventies and I wouldn’t want to run a blacklight over the carpet,” I hit back, trying to break the nervousness I feel with humor.

“You’ve got a solid sense of humor,” Zoey comments back. “So I have an opening for a housekeeper and with that comes lodging. Would that work?” she now says, and I’ve promised myself I won’t cry anymore, but it feels like this woman knows I need a break and she’s about to give it to me.

MAX

I head into the lodge and down the corridor toward Zoey's office to ask if she wants to have lunch together. With her now living with Ethan and me not working at the lodge during the summer, we don't see as much of each other as we used to. We've always been close, even when I was away at college, and I miss hanging out with her.

The door to her office is ajar and just as I'm about to step inside, I hear Zo's voice.

"We actually have bungalow four available. It's a two bedroom so you and Sammie will have a bit more space, if that works?"

I don't catch a reply as I loiter by the half open door listening as Zoey continues.

"Alright, so here is your welcome pack, which contains all the info on the lodge, including staff amenities. We have a great staff childcare center you might want to check out for Sammie. Also in there are all your employment conditions, forms etcetera. If you want to have a read through and then maybe return them to me in the next day or so, we can get you set up to move in and start work. Sound good?"

Again, I don't hear the reply and I'm not sure if that's because there isn't one or it's so quiet, I just can't hear it.

"Okay, thanks for coming in, Harper and welcome to Badger Creek!"

The door opens all of a sudden and before I can step back and not give away the fact I was just totally eavesdropping, I find myself face to face with my sister and a woman I have never seen before. An incredibly beautiful woman who for some reason looks like she's trying really hard not to cry.

"Max!" Zoey says, her eye's widening in surprise when she sees me.

"Bye, Elsa!" comes a small voice.

Zoey laughs and it takes me a second to realize there is a third person with them, a little girl, who's smiling up at my sister as she waves at her, her whole arm moving side to side in that cute way kids have.

"Bye, Sammie," Zoey says, giving her a wave as she turns toward me and smiles. "Harper, this is my brother, Max. He's a medic here during ski season, EMT during off-season. Max, this is our newest employee, Harper."

"Hi," I croak out, still staring at this woman who looks like she's on the verge of bolting, like whatever this is right now, it's far too overwhelming for her.

"You have a brother, Elsa?" the kid asks, making Zoey laugh again as she nods at her.

The kid turns to look up at me and I can see she is the spitting image of Harper, which means she's either her much younger sister or her daughter. If I had to guess, I'd say Harper is around my age, which probably means this kid is her daughter.

"Hi, I'm Sammie," the kid says, giving me the same overly enthusiastic wave she gave Zoey.

"Hey, I'm Max," I say, smiling back at her, before turning back to Harper who's watching us. "When do you start work?" I ask.

Harper swallows hard, running a hand through her long sandy brown hair. "Um, next week," she says.

Zoey smiles, reaching over to squeeze Harper's arm as she says, "Let me know if you have any questions. My contact

details are in there if you need to reach me, otherwise, see you in a day or so?"

Harper nods, reaching for Sammie's hand as she says, "Thank you, Zoey, I really appreciate this opportunity."

"All good," Zoey says, smiling. "See you soon."

"Bye, Elsa! Bye, Max," Sammie says again, and I can't help but smile as I watch her and Harper walk away.

"Why's the kid calling you Elsa?" I ask, my eyes lingering on Harper as she walks down the corridor, finally disappearing through the double doors at the end that lead back to the lobby. When I turn back to my sister, she's smirking at me like she knows I was just totally checking this woman out.

"The kid, what's with the Elsa thing?" I repeat, before she has a chance to call me out on it.

Zoey laughs, shaking her head a little, just as Ethan and Brandon walk down the hall from where their offices are and make their way toward us. "She thinks I look like Elsa from *Frozen*."

"Never heard of it," I say, just Brandon says, "What's an Elsa from *Frozen*?"

Ethan doesn't say anything, going straight to Zoey as he wraps an arm around her waist and pulls her in for a kiss. It's still kind of weird watching my boss and my sister make out like this, but at the same time, I do really like the guy. Now anyway. We didn't get off to a great start when I found out he and my sister had been in a secret relationship that basically led to her getting kidnapped.

I mean, yeah I work for him and he is pretty much the coolest boss on the planet. But, when the rumors had started and I'd heard all sorts of things where people were talking shit about my sister and saying things like she was being taken advantage of, or sleeping her way to the top, it had pissed me off. When she'd then been kidnapped, I reacted by taking it all out on Ethan.

It was a low blow and I pretty quickly realized how Ethan really felt and more so, that Zoey felt the same way. The guy

adores her, literally worships the ground she walks on, and I know Zoey is equally as crazy about him. Plus, after everything he did to find her, to protect her and make sure that guy paid for what he did to her, it's hard not to both like and respect him. I'm glad the two of us managed to get past our initial animosity and become friends. The dude's going to be my brother-in-law soon.

"No idea," I reply as Brandon glances at Ethan and Zoey and rolls his eyes.

Zoey laughs, pulling back from the kiss as she takes the phone from Ethan's hand and starts tapping at the screen. "This is Elsa," she says, holding it up to show us a blonde cartoon character. "She's from the kid's movie *Frozen*."

The three of us glance at the screen, Ethan chuckling as he says, "No way that looks like you, babe."

"Oh, I don't know," Brandon says teasingly. "It kinda does."

I let out a laugh, as Ethan punches his friend in the arm and Zoey shakes her head. "She's like four years old," Zoey says. "Every tall, blonde woman looks like Elsa to kids that age."

"Who was the kid anyway?" I ask. "Her sister?"

Zoey hits me with another smirk, shaking her head a little. "Why are you asking, Max?"

I lift a shoulder, shrugging. "No reason."

"Pfft," Zoey scoffs. "As if, I saw the way you were looking at Harper. I think you like her."

"No," I reply, shaking my head as Ethan asks, "Who's Harper?"

Zoey smiles as she turns toward him. "A new employee. Just hired her. Sammie, the one who thinks I look like Elsa, is her daughter."

Daughter. Fuck. Does that mean she's got a boyfriend? Partner? Husband?

“And no, Max,” Zoey continues, seemingly reading my mind. “I think Harper is single. I kind of got the impression coming here was a fresh start for her.”

I roll my eyes at my sister. “I wasn’t asking or interested,” I lie. “I actually came here to see if you wanted to grab lunch?”

Now it’s Zoey rolling her eyes at me because she thinks I’m full of shit. And yeah, of course she’s right, but I’m not about to admit that to her. “Sure, let’s grab lunch,” she says, grinning.

“You guys wanna join us?” I ask, figuring if Ethan and Brandon come along, at least I won’t have to put up with getting the third degree from my sister about Harper.

“Yes,” Ethan says, pulling Zoey closer as he kisses her temple.

Brandon just laughs, shaking his head at the two of them. “Sure thing, sounds good.”

AFTER LUNCH, I say goodbye to my sister, reminding her of the breakfast we have organized at Mom and Dad’s this weekend before heading into town to grab some stuff. It’s a rare day off from my work as an EMT and while I love my job, I also like having a break.

Normally working as a medic on the slopes, it’s a nine-to-five type day and the worst thing I’ll see is broken bones, which is bad, but not the same as working in an ambulance. Now, I’m faced with car accidents and overdoses and all kinds of depressing shit.

It’s draining and can hit hard at times, especially when there’s kids involved. Plus, being a relatively small city and having grown up here, the chances of me somehow knowing or at least having heard of someone is high. Although to be fair, the tourists tend to do a lot of dumb shit too.

Just as I’m walking into the supermarket on main street to grab some food, my phone starts ringing. Glancing down I see

Alex's name lighting up the screen and with a grin I answer.

"Hey, dude, what's up?"

"Hey!" Alex says. "Just calling to see if you wanna hang out tonight?"

Chuckling, I grab a basket by the entrance and start making my way down the aisles. "What, Del out or something and you got nothing better going on?"

"Fuck off," Alex says with a laugh. "Just thought it would be cool to hang out. Maybe have some beers, watch a movie or something?"

I smile, knowing he means it, just like he knows I'm only giving him shit. He might have moved out not long after we got back to Tahoe from Colorado, shacking up with his girlfriend in the condo two down from mine, but he's always made a point of us regularly catching up. We spent four years living together in Colorado and it had been weird to suddenly start living by myself when we came back here, so I appreciate the effort he makes.

"Yeah, sounds good," I reply, grabbing a couple of frozen pizzas. "I'm at the store now, I'll grab us some stuff?"

"Cool," Alex says. "I'm finishing up around five, so I'll head over after that?"

I round the corner into the next aisle and stop in my tracks.

Harper is here.

Harper and her daughter are standing in the aisle apparently debating the merits of Twizzlers versus Swedish fish as TV snacks.

"Max?"

I blink, swallowing hard as I once again stare at this woman who's apparently just moved to Tahoe for a fresh start and is about to start working at Badger Creek.

"Max, dude, you there?"

"Shit, sorry, still here," I say, as I stand at the end of the aisle watching them.

Alex chuckles. “You good?”

“Yeah,” I say, just as Harper turns and sees me standing here, watching her and her daughter. I offer her a smile that I hope conveys I am not some sort of weirdo as I continue my conversation with Alex. “Yeah, come over whenever, I’m at the store so I’ll get food and shit.”

Alex laughs again. “Yeah, you already said that,” he says. “And when I come over you can tell what it is that’s distracting you right now.”

“Whatever,” I say just as Harper’s daughter notices me and starts waving. “See you later.”

“Later, dude.”

I hang up, sliding my phone into my pocket as Sammie shouts, “Hi, Max!”

“Sammie,” Harper whisper-shouts at her, even as I chuckle at how excited this kid is. She’s actually pretty cute, like a mini version of Harper and knowing now she’s her daughter, I can’t help but wonder who the kid’s father is.

Or where he is.

“Hey,” I say, walking toward them. “Max. Zoey’s brother,” I add, jerking a thumb at my chest.

Harper offers me a small smile, tipping her head in acknowledgement. “I remember.”

“So you guys just moved to town, huh?” I ask, glancing at the shopping basket Harper holds. It’s got a loaf of bread, a jar of jelly and a bag of Swedish fish.

“Yes,” she says, her voice quiet.

I smile, glancing at Sammie who is staring up at me. “I’d have gone with the Twizzlers personally,” I say, giving her a wink.

Sammie throws up her arms in exaggerated fashion as she says, “That’s what I said.”

Laughing, I turn back to Harper, who’s shaking her head at her daughter. “Not a Twizzlers fan?”

Harper bites her bottom lip, glancing down at Sammie before she moves so she's standing behind her and gently covers her ears. "I love them, we both do. But if I get Swedish fish she won't eat many because we both think they're disgusting."

I let out a laugh as Harper removes her hands and Sammie gives her what could very well be described as a *what the fuck* look. "I see, tactics then huh?"

"Yeah," Harper breathes out. "Trust me, a sugar-hyped four year old at bedtime is not good."

"No, I can't imagine it is," I say, chuckling. "Where are you guys staying at the moment?"

Harper takes a deep breath, letting it out slowly as she says, "The Mountain View Motel."

I can tell by the look on her face that she's both embarrassed and horrified that this is where they're staying and I kind of don't blame her. The place doesn't have a good rep, god knows we've had a few calls to the place to deal with some of the clientele. The sooner Zoey and Ethan refurbish it, the better. Things got delayed when everything happened with Zo, but I'm sure they're still pushing ahead with their plans for it.

"Well it's good you've got accommodation with your job," I offer, not wanting to make her feel any worse about it. She's obviously staying there for a reason and my guess is that it's financial. "You should tell Zoey you want to move as soon as possible. She'll be able to make it happen, trust me."

"Oh no," Harper says, shaking her head. "We're good. It's only a week and I don't want any special treatment."

I want to tell her that I'll talk to Zoey if she wants me too, but I don't, not wanting to embarrass her anymore that she already is. It's only a week and hopefully with it being the change over between seasons, there isn't too much sketchy shit going on at the motel.

"Well, how about a quick tour of the town," I blurt out instead. "I can show you the best place to get your morning

coffee or hot chocolate and maybe a cinnamon roll on your way to work.”

“Oh, can we, Mommy?” Sammie says, jumping up and down as she claps her hands together.

It’s probably kind of a dick move saying all this in front of her kid, knowing they are a sucker for any kind of treat. Harper looks at me, an unreadable expression on her face. I smile, hoping she says yes because for some reason, I don’t want to say goodbye to her just yet.

“What do you think? My treat?”

HARPER

Sammie's big brown eyes are looking up at me, waiting for me to give Max an answer. I can tell by the look on her face that she wants me to say yes. Being here makes it feel like we're on a vacation and we should be up for adventure. She doesn't understand or see that we need to keep things quiet until we know we're safe. And I also can't be bringing strange men in and out of my daughter's life. She needs stability. It's not just my feelings that are at risk here, it's hers too.

"Thank you for the offer. It's really sweet of you, but we just arrived today, and it would be nice if we had some time to get settled first," I say, noticing that both Sammie and Max seem to deflate with disappointment. "Another time though," I quickly add, trying on a kind smile, hoping to let him down easily. He has no idea what we've left and how it might affect him should he get involved with us.

"Can I get your number?" Max asks, but he must see the look on my face, and adds, "Or I can give you my number." I watch him let out a slow exhale, and it's kind of cute how nervous he seems.

"No number for me," I say, "but I'm sure I'll see you around Badger Creek."

"And you're staying at the Mountain View. You sure you don't want me to see if Zoey can move your housing along?" Max presses, but there's something about him that feels calming. He isn't prying or being creepy. There's a kindness

about him that makes me feel like he's interested in helping me get acclimated to what could possibly be mine and Sammie's new home.

"Thanks, Max, but we'll be okay at the Mountain View till I can get moved in at Badger Creek. I've already paid for the week too." I shrug, knowing that Max has no idea that the money I used to pay for the week is pretty much half of what I came with that I allotted for lodging. I have to stay there because I can't afford to go anywhere else.

"Sounds good," Max now replies, holding a hand out and offering to take the basket I have linked over my wrist. "I can take that for you or do you..." He doesn't finish his thought, just adding, "I'm sure you're good. I'll see you around, okay?"

"Yeah, I'll be there next week, maybe I'll see you there," I say, my words a little quieter now, not wanting to make things too comfortable. I have to be guarded for a while, at least until I can build things up for Sammie and me.

"Yeah, maybe," Max says, and I swear I catch a hint of disappointment in his voice. But I can't let that sway my decision. I left so I could live on my own, make my own decisions and not worry about the effect it was all having on Sammie.

He gives Sammie and I a wave as he turns to walk away, stopping a second later, he looks back at us. "I'm not around as much in the off season, but I'm sure we'll run into each other."

"I remember Zoey saying you work as an EMT in the off season. That sounds like a really interesting job."

"It is, but my first love is definitely being on the mountain as a medic there," Max admits, and I love his honesty. The way he talks about his job gives off a dedication that most people don't have. I hope to someday find that.

"I've never skied before," I find myself admitting, which feels like I'm baiting this guy. I just told him I didn't want him to show me around, but now I'm telling him I've never skied

before. This is only going to lead to him telling me he can teach me or whatever.

“I want to go skiing,” Sammie squeals, looking up at me, a huge smile on her face. I love that she’s down for everything, including this unprompted move across the country.

Her gaze instantly shifts to Max, and she has a face that is very hard to say no to. She has these big brown eyes and this sweet little smile, and then there’s her precocious nature.

“I’m sure we can work something out when the snow comes back,” Max says, really only acknowledging Sammie’s comment. This guy is good. He knows the way in is through Sammie.

“That sounds good,” I say, knowing that is a long way off. We have a few months to get acclimated, to start to feel comfortable, before then.

“I’ll see you around, Harper,” Max now says, giving me a wave. “Enjoy your movie night, Sammie,” he adds. “Are you watching *Frozen*?”

“How’d you guess?” I say, waving goodbye to Max as he walks away.

AN HOUR LATER, Sammie and I are curled up in the musty bed at the Mountain View Motel, snacking on Swedish Fish, but first I made her eat some applesauce and a turkey sandwich.

I already miss having a kitchen and spending a week here is going to be tough. There’s a tiny mini fridge that lets out a high-pitched hum every time it turns on and it feels like maybe it’s keeping things cold, but I can’t really tell.

Luckily, it’s only filled with a jar of jelly, some deli turkey and cheese slices. I didn’t buy too much, not wanting to go through our money too quickly and wanting to wait since I know we have to fill an actual fridge in a week.

I let out a hard sigh as I look over at Sammie, her eyes growing heavy. It’s a strange feeling to be in this old, rundown motel, yet feeling the safest and most relaxed I’ve felt in years.

I can see it in Sammie's face too, as her eyes close and she snuggles into my side. Despite the smell and the fact that we're the only ones here, my eyes close too.

I HEAR him call my name. It's loud and booming and I look around for Sammie, but I can't seem to find her. I should be panicking that I can't find her, but I'm not. I'm glad she's not here, not here to witness this again.

He reaches for me, grabbing my wrist, his fingers tightening around it in a way that makes my heart begin to race, scared and nervous. I have no idea what I've done this time, but I know he's done something wrong. This is the way it always goes. He takes his behavior out on me, makes me feel guilty like I'm to blame.

"Don't you want me to be happy, Harper?" he asks, his words said with a tinge of poison. It's something he asks me regularly, but every time he asks it, it's after something has gone wrong, after he's done something horrible.

I nod, not letting out the words I really want to say.

"I never told you we would do something tonight. You must have dreamed that. I told you I had plans with a friend from work."

Again, my head bobs in response, hating that I've become this person.

"You don't believe me, do you?" he hisses, his grip on my wrist now sliding up my arm, holding tighter just above my elbow. "What the fuck were you doing?" he shouts, startling me. "You're questioning me? What about you?"

I take in a hard breath, the sound of someone knocking jarring me awake, and suddenly I'm covered in a cold sweat. No one knows where I am. He can't possibly know where I am, but I still rush to the door panicked and fearful, my entire body trembling with fear.

It's a simple knock on the door, but why? Why would anyone be knocking? The guy working the desk at the motel

seems too aloof and old to be worried about me. It's not like he'd go out of his way to check on us.

Zoey and Max know that Sammie and I are staying here, but again, I didn't give them a room number. And why would they come out here? This doesn't seem like the kind of place either of them frequent.

I push up on my toes, my heart hammering in my chest, my palms covered in a sheen of sweat while Sammie sleeps silently in the bed.

My eyes are closed and I shove my body against the door, prepared to keep whoever is out there from entering, but the knocking stops. As quickly as it woke me, scaring me out of my sleep, it's gone.

I look out the peephole, catching a glimpse of someone walking back to their car. It's the only car in the small gravel lot of the motel and when the person turns to get in their car, I recognize them.

I yank the door open, angry and worked up over the situation.

"What are you doing here?" I call out, the tone of my voice lost in the emptiness of the wind and the trees of this idyllic place.

"Hey, you are up," Max says. "I was worried I was going to wake you up." He's smiling as he walks back toward me, unaware of how much panic he just caused me. "Good news," he now says, coming to a stop a few steps away from me. The look on his face changes as his eyes scan my face, his smile dropping almost immediately. "You okay?"

"You never answered me," I spit out, a ragged breath leaving my lips as I wrap my arms around myself. The shaking hasn't subsided, I begin to wonder if Max can see it.

"Answered what?"

"Why you're here."

"Oh, um, Zoey said you could move in today. I came by to help you. I'm sure you want to get out of this—"

I cut him off, shaking my head, my lips curled up, as I blink back the tears. “I don’t need any help. I don’t want to owe anyone anything.”

“You won’t owe me, Harper,” Max says, confusion in his words as he narrows his eyes. “I just thought you might need a car to take your things...” He stops short, and I watch him swallow hard.

“I’m good,” I reply, my words clipped, and I try to remind myself that it’s not Max’s fault that I’m a fucked up mess, but I can’t bring myself to let anyone in, not yet.

“Okay, well, Zoey has a place for you. It’s ready. I told her I would come by and let you know since you don’t have a number she could reach you at.”

The longer I stand here, the calmer I find myself becoming, replaying the situation in my head. I’m sure Max thinks I’m overreacting, but that doesn’t matter. I’m allowed to feel how I feel and I’m allowed to decline help.

“You know, Harper, most people would just say no thank you,” Max now says. “I’m sorry that I thought you might need some help moving.”

He catches me off guard, but I probably deserve to have him snap back at me. I need to learn that most people don’t have a hidden agenda and maybe I did overreact to this whole thing.

“I didn’t ask you to come,” I reply, clearly not listening to the little voice in my head that’s telling me to take it down a notch.

“Got it, loud and clear,” Max now says, his brows going up. “Check in with Zoey today to get your keys. She’s at the lodge.”

He tosses a hand up as he walks back to his SUV, climbing in the driver’s side. I watch him go, driving out of the parking lot, leaving both of us in a bad mood.

“Fuck,” I mutter, just as Sammie pulls open the door, finding me standing outside shoeless and still wearing my pajamas.

“Mommy, what’s going on?” she asks, rubbing her eyes, squinting when she looks up at me, her eyes still adjusting to the sunlight after leaving the darkened motel room.

“Nothing, baby. I’ve got good news though,” I say, scooping her up and carrying her back into the room.

“What’s that?”

“We’re moving into our new house today!” I squeal, trying to build things up, trying to get her excited for this new chapter in our life.

But even as I say it, forcing the happiness into my voice, it’s masked with guilt for the way I talked to Max just now. He didn’t deserve that.

I have no reason not to trust him or his sister. If anything, Zoey took a chance on me, giving me a job and a place to live. She doesn’t know me or anything about me, and out of sheer kindness, is helping me.

I need to be less guarded.

And maybe a little kinder.

MAX

I t's been a little over a week since I met Harper and even though I haven't seen her since the morning I showed up at the shitty motel she was staying at, offering to help her move, it doesn't mean I haven't thought about her.

I'm embarrassed to admit I've thought about her a lot. Probably way more than I should, especially considering our last interaction. She made it pretty clear she wasn't interested in me or my help, so I've deliberately kept my distance, avoiding going to the lodge even though I know she's been working and living over there for a week now.

"Dude, you ready?" Alex calls, opening my front door and walking in.

"Yeah, in here," I call back as he wanders into the kitchen, throwing his backpack onto the counter. "You know, as much as you're always welcome here, you might see more than you bargain for one day if you keep just walking in like this," I say, throwing him a bottle of water.

Alex grins as he catches it. "What, like you jerking off to porn on the couch?" he says, tossing a thumb over his shoulder at the living room. I roll my eyes and he only laughs. "We've all done it, Max," he says. "No need to be embarrassed about it."

"Yeah, I was thinking more along the lines of when I have some female company."

Alex's brows go up. "Oh, do tell, Max. Have you been partaking in some female company of late?"

I take a sip of water, shrugging. “I’m just saying if and when, that’s all. Don’t come crying to me when you walk in here and cop an eyeful.”

“Whatever,” he replies, laughing. “I might actually be cheering that my best friend is finally getting some action.”

“Fuck off, I get as much action as I need,” I say, screwing the cap on and shoving the bottle in my pack. “Speaking of, what’s Del up to today?”

Alex shrugs. “Dunno, girly shit with Zoey and Elissa, I think.”

“It’s a pity Nick isn’t here,” I say, knowing during our first year at college, the three of us did this almost every weekend in the spring and fall when there wasn’t enough snow around to ski. All three of us have always loved being outdoors and even my summers back here during college were always spent on the mountains.

“Where is he?” Alex asks. “I thought with summer he might come back to town?”

I grab my phone and open the group chat the three of us have going. “Didn’t you see the message last night, he’s heading to New Zealand.”

“Last night?” Alex says, looking at his phone. “Oh no,” he adds, a huge grin on his face. “I was busy partaking in some female company.”

“Fuck me,” I say, rolling my eyes. “Come on, we gonna go hiking or what?”

“Sure thing,” Alex says, grabbing his pack. “Although, for the record, you seem a little on edge, Max. You sure you’re really getting enough action?”

I punch him in the arm as I walk around to the other side of the kitchen island where he stands. “Let’s go, jackass.”

ALEX and I spend the next few hours hiking one of the mountains we spend the winter months skiing on. It’s a beautiful day, the sun is shining, but the temperatures are mild

enough that it's not too hot. Still by the time we're done and walking back down to the lake, I'm hot and sweaty and a dip in the water looks pretty good right now.

"Wanna jump in?" I ask Alex, gesturing to the lake.

He grins, throwing his pack on the ground. "Hell yeah."

"You know it's going to be freezing, right?" I ask as he kicks off his shoes before yanking his t-shirt over his head. While Alex did come to Tahoe during our summer breaks from college, I don't think we were ever here this early in the season. We certainly didn't go swimming in the lake this early.

"Pfft, I can handle it," he says, before running straight to the water, not even hesitating as he dives in. "Fuck, it's cold!" he yelps as he surfaces.

"Told you," I say, laughing.

"Don't tell me you're chickening out?" Alex yells as he stands waist deep in the water.

"Well," I tease, hands on my hips as I stand at the water's edge.

Alex starts walking closer, splashing the water as he yells, "Get in here, you pussy!"

Laughing, I drop my pack and kick off my shoes before pulling off my t-shirt. "Alright, settle down!" I shout, before running into the lake. The cold hits me like a brick wall, almost knocking the wind out of me as I dive under the water. I knew it would be cold, but shit, it's a shock. "Jesus," I mutter as I come back up, my whole body feeling numb.

Alex is laughing as he splashes me again. "Colder than you thought, huh?"

I shiver, pushing my hair back with my hands. "Yeah, it's way too early to be swimming in here," I say. "Fuck it, I'm getting out."

Alex and I splash our way back to the shore, goosebumps dotting our skin as we finally get out and collapse onto the sand, desperate for the sun to warm us up and dry us out. Neither of us has a towel, so we're stuck here for a bit anyway.

“You got any more food left?” I ask him as my stomach rumbles.

Alex pulls his pack over, rummaging inside before he pulls out an apple and throws it to me.

“Thanks,” I say as he falls onto his back and closes his eyes.

Standing, I wander back down to the water, enjoying the feel of the sun on my skin, taking the edge off. I walk along the water line, stopping every now and then to pick up a rock and skim it across the surface. There are handfuls of people around, enjoying the start of summer, although none of them are swimming and as I wander along, I can't help but think about Harper and what she's doing right now.

Has she settled in at the lodge okay? Is she finding her way around town and making friends? This place isn't huge and if I know my sister, Zoey will be making sure Harper is settling in.

“Max!”

I startle at the sound of a kid's voice and when I turn, I see Sammie and Harper, sitting at a picnic table in the shade of a huge pine tree.

I swallow the bite of the apple I just took before lifting my hand in a wave. “Hi.”

Harper smiles at me, pushing her sunglasses onto her head. “Hi.”

“Do you want a cookie?” Sammie now yells, standing on the wooden bench seat. “We have cookies, come have a cookie!”

Harper laughs, wrapping an arm around Sammie's waist to steady her. “You should feel honored, she doesn't share her cookies easily,” she says, smiling up at her daughter.

I swallow again, not sure what to do. On the one hand, Harper is smiling at me, not rescinding her daughter's invitation for me to join them. On the other hand, the last time I saw her, she made it pretty clear she wasn't interested in me being anywhere near them.

“Here, have a cookie,” Sammie now says, bending down to grab one before holding it out to me.

I can see it’s a carrot cake cookie from that bakery in town I was going to take them to when I ran into them in the supermarket. “Wow, my favorite,” I finally say, smiling as I walk over to join them. “Thanks Sammie.”

“Sit, sit,” she now says, jumping up and down a little, Harper’s arm still wrapped around her waist.

“You should sit down before you fall down,” she says, turning to Sammie and tickling her side, before encouraging her daughter to sit down beside her. When she turns back to me, I’m still standing on the other side of the table and I watch as her gaze drops from my face to my bare chest, reminding me that I’m half-dressed and still wet.

“I went for a quick dip,” I explain, jerking a thumb over my shoulder.

“Isn’t the water cold?” Harper asks.

“Freezing,” I reply with a nod.

“But you went in anyway?”

“Um, yeah, we were hot and sweaty after our hike.”

“Oh?” Harper looks around, a confused look on her face as though she’s trying to figure out who I’m talking about.

“My buddy, Alex,” I say, turning and pointing to where he lies on the sand a little further down the lake. He’s probably fast asleep at this point. “We went for a hike,” I say again as I point to the mountain, wondering if I could look any more stupid at this moment.

“Cookie?” Sammie chimes in, thrusting her little hand that still holds the cookie at me, potentially saving me from saying something even more dumb.

I finish off my apple before tossing the core into the trees. “Thanks, Sammie, that’s very nice of you,” I say, taking a bite. “Mmmm, these are my favorite. I see you found the bakery in town?”

“We did,” Sammie replies, clapping her hands together even as she still stands on the bench beside Harper. “Will you come and build a sandcastle with me?” she now asks.

Harper lifts her off the bench and onto the ground. “How about you get started, Sammie and let Mommy talk to Max for a minute, okay?” She holds out another cookie in what I’m guessing is bribery as she grins down at the mini-me that is her daughter.

Not for the first time do I wonder where the father is. Is he even in the picture anymore and if not, why not? Zoey said when she first hired Harper that she thought she was starting over, looking for a fresh start, but if that’s the case, why?

Is she running from something? Maybe that’s why she reacted the way she did when I showed up to her motel last week. Maybe she has run away and whatever she ran from is enough to keep her on edge and everyone else at arm’s length.

“Okay, Mommy,” Sammie says, taking the cookie. “But don’t eat anymore cookies till I come back, k?”

Harper laughs, ruffling her daughter’s hair and I can’t help but smile, finally taking a seat on the bench opposite her. Sammie runs down to the sand by the water, where I notice a bucket already waiting for her. She waves at both of us, before cramming the cookie in her mouth and getting to work.

“Max?”

I turn from the cute kid back to Harper. She’s watching me, an unreadable expression on her face. “Yeah?”

I watch as she takes a deep breath, letting it out slowly, shuffling in her seat a little as she links her hands together on the wooden table. “I’m sorry about last week,” she eventually says.

“Last week?” I ask, head tilted in question.

She smirks at me and it’s so unexpected and at the same time, so fucking adorable, I suddenly have an overwhelming urge to try and make her do it again. “Yes, last week,” she repeats. “When you came to the motel and offered to help us move. I’m sorry I was so…” She trails off, letting out a hard

breath before continuing. “Well, you caught me in a bad moment and I shouldn’t have reacted the way I did, so yeah. I’m sorry.”

I finish the rest of the cookie Sammie gifted me, trying to resist grabbing another one because they really are my favorite and once I start, I can’t stop. “It’s all good,” I eventually say. “I’m sorry if I freaked you out showing up unannounced,” I say, wondering if that was part of the problem. If Zoey is right and Harper is here for a fresh start, maybe having someone she’s literally met for five minutes show up like I did is enough to freak her out.

“No, it’s not...” She trails off again, shaking her head. “This is a big step for Sammie and me and well...we’re not, not used to people offering to help us out. Your sister, Zoey and then—”

I hold a hand up, sensing how uncomfortable she is. “It’s okay, Harper, seriously. You don’t need to explain. You guys are new to town and you don’t know me, it’s totally cool, I promise. Like I said, I’m sorry if I freaked you out.”

She smiles at me again, nodding in acknowledgement as she glances at her daughter who is busy talking to herself as she builds something in the sand.

“Are you enjoying your job at least?” I now ask.

She lets out another laugh, the sound so adorable, that I can’t help but laugh with her. “I mean yeah, I’m cleaning rooms, so you know.” She pauses, shrugging. “But yeah, it’s a really great place to work.”

“It is,” I say. “I’ve worked there for as long as I can remember. And how’s your new accommodation?”

“Oh my god,” she says, letting out a combination groan and laugh. “Sooooo much better than the motel.”

Now it’s me laughing. “Yeah that place is sketchy as hell,” I say. “Zoey and Ethan are actually re-doing the place and incorporating it into the Badger Creek brand.”

“What?”

“Oh,” I say, chuckling. “So Zoey, my sister and Ethan, the guy that owns the whole of Badger Creek, they’re like,” I pause, holding up my crossed fingers as though to signify how they are a couple. “They own the sketchy motel you were staying in and are gonna revamp it into some lower cost, but less shitty accommodation.”

“Wow,” Harper breathes out, just as Sammie comes running back to the table.

“Mommy, Max, will you come build a sandcastle with me?” she says, her sandy little hands, reaching for Harper.

“Okay, okay, we’re...” Harper trails off as she glances behind me.

Turning, I see Alex wandering over, our packs in his hand and a huge grin on his face as he takes in the three of us.

“Hey,” he says, grabbing the t-shirt that’s draped over his shoulder and throwing it at me.

I grab it, ignoring the look he’s giving me as I turn back to Harper and say, “Alex, this is Harper and her daughter, Sammie. Guys, this is my good friend, Alex.”

HARPER

I spent most of the night and this morning thinking about Max. Max shirtless. Apologizing to Max. Wondering if Max is kind of into me. He's consumed my thoughts, and it's been so long since I've had any type of relationship with a guy that I'm feeling like an awkward mess. And mostly, I've been coming back to seeing him without a shirt on.

Holy shit, it was like a damn dream. His muscled body all covered in water droplets, a slight tan and the perfect way the sun glistened off his body. He was definitely a fantasy of mine while trying to fall asleep last night.

"Think we'll see Max today?" Sammie asks as we cross the parking lot of the Badger Creek Lodge, making our way to the childcare center that is settled behind it.

Guess I'm not the only one thinking about him.

"I don't know. Why are you asking?" I reply, taking her hand in mine, while doing a little skip as she walks.

"I like him," she admits with absolutely zero hesitation and there's something about it that I find so damn cute.

Sammie doesn't like men. She wasn't raised around men and has always gravitated toward women, finding them to be more comforting. All of this decided entirely on her own as I tried hard to get her to build a relationship with her father. But being the smart little kid she is, she recognized immediately that I was forcing something that wasn't there.

“Really? What do you like about him?” I press, wondering what her response will be. She’s not much of a secret-keeper, and she loves to talk, so this should be insightful.

“I like the way he talks to me,” she says, looking up at me with huge brown eyes, a smile on her face and it only takes me a second to realize what she means. I have to look away from her when she continues to talk, worried she’ll see the tears shining in my eyes.

“He always says hi to me and never acts like I’m not there. He also has really nice hair and he kind of looks like a prince and he likes Twizzlers and... You know what?” she now says, shifting gears like she always does.

“What’s that?”

“Can we buy stuff for my bedroom today?” And just like that she’s off the subject of Max and onto something she’s been nagging me about since we moved into our place just a couple of weeks ago.

The place came furnished, but it’s definitely more for the short-term rental crowd. Not that I’m complaining. It’s a low-cost place to live, when I was certain Sammie and I would be living in some sketchy place, it can’t get much better.

I haven’t had the courage to ask Zoey why she’s allowing us to live here and have the minute amount of rent deducted from my paycheck, but something tells me she knew I needed her help. I will forever be grateful to her for not only the place but also for the job. It’s not much, but it’s something and it’s bringing in money.

“I’m off work tomorrow so how about we plan for that instead. It’s going to be dinner time when I get off work today,” I tell her and while Sammie lets out a hard sigh, she nods her head.

I want her to love it here. I want this to be her home, a place we both feel safe. It’s not like I’m hiding, but I did move across the country. I can’t hide from him and I know that, but my hope is that we’re settled and I’ve put enough distance between us that he gives up.

That's bullshit and I know it.

We reach the front door of the childcare center and Sammie pushes up on her tiptoes to press the buzzer, letting them know we're here.

"Good morning," a cheerful voice comes over the speaker, and we hear the click of the door unlocking to let us in.

Sammie skips through the door and every day that we come in here, I send up a silent plea that she will continue to love being here. Nothing would be worse than having her cry her eyes out every morning when I drop her off.

Today is not that day.

She throws her arms around my waist, "Love you, Mommy," she says, taking her backpack from me as she joins the other kids at the table for breakfast.

"Bye, baby, love you," I call back and she looks over her shoulder, waving at me.

"She's adjusting really well," Mary, the woman working at the sign in desk says. "It's like she's been here the whole time."

"Yeah, she's always been pretty chill. I got lucky," I say, thinking about becoming a mom at eighteen. It wasn't planned, but I really did get lucky with Sammie. I couldn't even imagine having a difficult baby and doing it all on my own.

"Oh, I forgot," Mary says, just as I'm about to walk out the door. "You didn't put down any emergency contacts on your paperwork or anyone who is able to pick Sammie up."

She hands the packet of papers back to me. I filled these out the day I registered Sammie here, right before my first day at Badger Creek. I left it blank on purpose. I don't have anyone to write down, but I don't want to admit this, making people wonder even more about me.

I flip through to the page she has tabbed for me, looking down at where it says emergency contact, but it's what's right below it that catches my eye.

It asks if there's anyone who is not allowed to pick Sammie up and when I filled this out originally, I glossed over this too.

"I'm sorry, but what should I do if I don't have an emergency contact?" I ask, swallowing hard, once again worried what people will think. Worried there will be whispers behind my back about what kind of mother doesn't have an emergency contact or what kind of parent just shows up randomly with a kid in tow.

"Leave it blank, dear," she replies, sweetly. "We know where to reach you. And that might change the longer you're here. As you meet people."

I look down again, the words screaming at me from the page, telling me to write his name down, but not in the emergency contact section.

And I do.

I can't stop looking at it. His name there emblazoned on the paper, like putting it on here makes Sammie somehow safer, like it makes us both safer. But I know it doesn't.

It's a daycare center and they have no legal authority to tell someone they can't pick their kid up, but something about writing his name down feels like I'm putting it out there to the universe, telling him to stay away.

I close the packet, returning it to the first page, letting out a hard sigh.

"All good?" Mary asks and I smile.

"Yep, all good."

"Don't worry," she says quietly. "She's safe here and so are you." She tilts her head toward the door, motioning to the locking system they have in place.

I swear it's like I have it written on my forehead that I've run away and everyone here can read it. But they all want to help me and I need to start accepting that.

"Thank you," I whisper back, blinking back the tears. "I'll see you later."

Leaving out the door, I make my way to the back entrance of the Badger Creek Lodge to clock in and gather my cart to start cleaning the rooms. I need to check in with my manager and get the list of rooms that have checked out and the list that includes which rooms need housekeeping amenities.

I have to admit that I actually like my job. I've never done anything like this before and while there are some disgusting rooms to clean, it's pretty mindless work. I get to come to work, do my job and go home and turn my brain off in the evenings.

I gather everything I need to get started, picking up a few extra rooms today since one of the other housekeeping staff is out sick, and I get started.

I'm literally only about five minutes into my day when the fire alarm goes off. The sound of the high-pitched peep is deafening, and the place begins to clear out almost immediately.

Leaving my cart in the hall, I tuck my work-issued cell phone into the pocket of my uniform and make my way outside.

I don't think the building is on fire, but I don't want to get in trouble for acting like nothing is happening. I hold the door open for a few of the people coming down the stairwell with me, exiting the building, we all move away from where we just came from.

People begin to buzz with questions, asking me what is happening and of course I can't give them an answer, but I tell them to wait.

Walking around to the front of the building, I hope to find Zoey or my boss to ask them what's happening, but instead I find Max.

His ambulance has just pulled up and he's jumping out of the passenger side, stopping when he sees me. He gives me a wave and a smile, and I return it.

I don't want to get in his way if there really is an issue so I hang back, thinking about what Sammie asked this morning.

She wondered if we would see Max and I kind of wish she were here to see him in action. I think she'd like all the trucks and the lights.

I look over my shoulder at the building that houses the childcare center. It's far enough away from the lodge that they aren't affected by what is happening, but that also makes me think it's not a real fire.

"Hey," I hear Max's deep voice say, and I hate that I recognize it already. I'd be lying to myself if I said I haven't thought about him a lot since we met. And Sammie's mild infatuation isn't helping.

"Shouldn't you be running into that burning building to save people?" I tease when he walks up and stands next to me.

"I don't do fire," he says, winking at me and hitting me with a soft elbow. "We have to show up whenever the fire department does. We're kinda a package deal."

"So no fire then?"

"Nope, just a false alarm. Think someone might have pulled it. You know, drunk bachelor party or some shit," Max says, rolling his eyes.

"And you've never?" I ask, smirking at him. I have no idea why I'm doing this, but I find myself flirting with him. Maybe it's because I'm finally without the prying eyes of my four year old or maybe it's because I really do find Max attractive.

I'd have to be blind not to. He's gorgeous with his dirty blonde hair and blue eyes, and it's obvious he has a great body with the way his uniform seems to conform perfectly to every sculpted muscle. And there was that amazing eye candy of him shirtless by the lake, something that I've saved away in my memory for nights alone.

I bite down on my bottom lip, keeping myself from taking things too far. I think I'm just lonely and it's been a while since I've had sex, like good sex. Actually, I'm not sure I've ever had good sex, to be honest. It feels like Max would be good at sex.

What the fuck is wrong with me?

Good at sex? Who the hell thinks like that? Is that even something people say? I don't think so. I need to get myself together.

I'm here to start over, to make a life for Sammie and me. I'm not here to flirt with the paramedic while he's supposed to be working.

"I've never pulled a fire alarm," Max now says, pulling me out of this mess that is swirling in my head. "But I've been drunk. That I'll admit to."

"That doesn't feel like that big of an admittance," I say, laughing a little. "I'm pretty sure everyone standing in this parking lot can say they've been drunk before."

"If that's you trying to get me to spill some secrets, it's going to take more than that, Harper," Max plays back.

Fuck my life, if him just saying my name doesn't have me wondering more about him. I know I should keep my distance, keep things light and relaxed. Opening up to someone this soon is not a good idea, but there's something about Max that has me curious. He keeps showing up, and I can't help but think there's a reason it keeps happening.

"Who says I want to know all your secrets?" I joke, now it's me jabbing him with an elbow.

"No one, but I can tell you, I'd like to know a little more about you," he replies and that's where it comes to a screeching halt.

He doesn't mean that.

He won't mean that once he figures out why I left home and ended up here. He doesn't want to get involved in the mess that is mine and Sammie's life and we are a package deal. You want me, you get the kid too. But there has not been one second where Max has made Sammie feel unwelcome.

Fuck, this is complicated already.

Or maybe I'm just making it complicated.

I fall silent and Max stands awkwardly next to me, shifting his weight around, almost like he's nervous now.

“I’m sorry,” he now says, shaking his head. “That was...I don’t know...that was kinda rude of me. You made it clear that...” He can’t seem to gather his thoughts and I know how he’s feeling.

“No, Max, you don’t have to apologize. It’s been a while since I’ve done this,” I say, motioning between us, and I let out a soft laugh, embarrassed by my cluelessness.

“Since you’ve done what?”

“Since I’ve flirted,” I say, clenching my teeth and covering my face with my hands. “I’m pretty bad at it.”

Max lets out a deep, throaty laugh, again shaking his head. “Nah, you aren’t bad at it. I think it’s always awkward when you first meet someone. You make me a little nervous, Harper.”

My head whips around to look at him, my brows furrowed with confusion. “I make you nervous?” I say, trying not to let out a hearty laugh. How can I make a guy, who looks like he could have any girl he wants, nervous?

“Yeah, you do,” he replies, his cheeks flushing this adorable shade of pink, making him even more attractive than I already thought he was.

All I can hope is this is sincere because that’s always my biggest fear. It’s there in the back of my mind, that little voice telling me to put my guard up.

“You make me nervous too.”

So much for being guarded.

MAX

“Okay. So I guess that makes us even, then,” I say, chuckling a little.

Harper stays silent beside me, but when I risk a glance at her, she’s staring straight ahead, watching the firemen as they walk out of the lodge, a small smile on her face. Jesus christ, she really is beautiful. No wonder I can’t stop thinking about her.

“So, are you all settled in now, finding your way around town?” I ask, turning back to the drama in front of us. I can see my sister and Ethan now talking to the fire chief. Ethan is laughing at something as Zoey shakes her head, the fire chief shrugging. I’m going to guess I was right about some drunken idiot pulling the fire alarm.

“I think so,” Harper replies. “We’ve tried a few different places to eat and of course, I now have a proper place to cook and stuff.”

“You should check out Tony’s Tacos, they make the best Mexican food in town. If you like Mexican, of course.”

Harper lets out a soft laugh. “Yeah, I like Mexican, and Sammie, well she could eat her weight in queso and guacamole given half a chance.”

“Ah, my favorites, kid’s got good taste,” I tease, hand on my chest as I glance at Harper.

She smiles up at me, her bottom lip pulled between her teeth as she watches me. I have no idea what she’s thinking

right now and when she suddenly blurts out, “Maybe you could come with us?” I cannot hide the shocked look on my face. Or my reaction.

“What?” I blurt out.

“To Tony’s,” she says, her cheeks flushing. “With Sammie and me,” she adds, as though to clarify this isn’t anything more than me joining her and her daughter for dinner. That it’s certainly not a date or anything.

“You sure?” I ask, remembering how just me offering to take her out for coffee got shot down. Not to mention the reaction I got when I offered to help her move, although to be fair, even I can see how showing up like that might have been a bit much.

“Uh huh,” she says with a nod. I watch her for a second, wondering if she really means what she’s saying or if she’s just throwing it out there because I make her nervous and she didn’t mean to say it.

“Okay,” I eventually reply. “Sounds good. Let me know when it suits,” I add, wanting to give her an out if she needs it.

“We could go tonight,” she says, that flush on her cheeks getting darker. “I mean, we eat dinner pretty early because of Sammie, so maybe that doesn’t—”

“I can do tonight,” I quickly say, grateful my three day shift is over because I do not want to miss my opportunity. I’m not sure what’s inspired this change of heart with Harper, but fuck me, if I’m not going to roll with it.

Ever since I ran into her and Sammie by the lake a week or so ago, she’s been invading my thoughts. Even more than she already was. It doesn’t help that Alex also met her that day and figured out pretty quickly that I kind of like her. He’s been giving me an insane amount of shit about it, even as he keeps telling me to just go for it. But I know now that I have to tread carefully with her. That whatever it is that’s brought her to Tahoe, it’s something big. Probably something very messy too.

“Okay,” she now says, smiling. “I finish work at five and then I pick Sammie up. We usually go home first but if you

want—”

“I can come get you guys,” I quickly say. “You’re in the staff bungalows at the back of the property, right?”

“Yeah,” she says, nodding. “Number four.”

“Cool. Is six okay to go for dinner?”

“Six is good.”

I smile. “I’ll pick you up at six then,” I say, before glancing quickly at my sister who gives me a wave and a knowing look that I ignore before I turn and head back to the ambulance.

This whole false alarm thing is basically over now, and as much as they’re annoying as hell, getting called out for nothing more than some drunken idiot thinking it’s funny to pull the fire alarm, I can’t deny that today it has been totally worth it.

AFTER WORK, I head home for a quick shower before making my way over to Harper’s new place. I’m glad she’s out of that sketchy motel. From what Zoey has told me, the place is pretty much closed for renovations now, Ethan having bought the old guy who knew our great grandfather, out of his lease.

At least with her and Sammie living in the staff bungalows on the property, she’s somewhere safe and clean, an easy walk to work for her. It makes me feel better knowing this, even though I know it’s really got nothing to do with me.

When I reach her place, I pause, taking a deep breath before letting it out slowly and knocking on the wooden door. From the front porch, I hear the sound of feet thumping on wooden floors and then the door opens.

“Max!” Sammie yells, smiling up at me.

“Hey, Sammie,” I reply, just as I hear Harper from somewhere inside shout, “Sammie, what did I tell you about answering the door?”

Sammie narrows her brow in the cutest little *what the hell* expression before looking over her shoulder and shouting, “But, Mommy, you said Max was here when he knocked on the door, so it’s not a stranger.”

I chuckle at her explanation, even as I hear Harper let out a low groan, before she suddenly appears behind her daughter. “It doesn’t matter, baby,” she says, ruffling her daughter’s hair. “You didn’t know who was at the door because you can’t see out the peephole, so no answering it, got it?”

Sammie gives her mom the cutest little salute now as she says, “Got it!”

I can’t stop the laugh and when Harper looks up at me, she rolls her eyes, even as she bites her bottom lip, almost as though she’s trying not to laugh too.

“Go put your shoes on, missy,” she now says to Sammie, giving her a gentle smack on the bum as she pushes her back into the house.

I watch her skip away to grab her shoes before turning back to Harper. “Quite the little spitfire, huh?”

Harper finally laughs, shaking her head a little. “Nah, she’s normally really good. She was just excited when I said we were going for Mexican with you.”

“Oh?” I tease, a brow raised.

Harper blushes, her smile cute as she says, “It was the Mexican.”

“Right,” I say, chuckling. “You guys okay if we walk? Nothing’s that far here and it’s a nice night so I figured...”

“Walking is fine,” Harper replies, just as Sammie comes running back, throwing her arms around her mom’s legs.

“Shoes on!” she shouts, sticking first one foot and then the other out as if to confirm.

“Alright then,” I say, clapping my hands together. “Should we go get Mexican?”

“YES!” Sammie shouts, unwrapping her arms as she claps her hands together and jumps up and down beside Harper.

“Just so you know,” Harper says, smirking at me, “you created this monster.”

With a laugh, I reach down and grab Sammie, throwing her over my shoulder as she squeals and I say, “I don’t know, she doesn’t seem too bad.” Sammie’s little hands are smacking my back and beside me Harper laughs. And as surreal as all this suddenly feels, I can’t resist tickling Sammie a little before spinning her over my shoulder in a somersault and putting her down in front of us. “You good?”

“Good,” Sammie says, giggling up at me as somewhere inside my chest, something unexpectedly flips.

Harper takes her daughter’s hand, avoiding my gaze as she pulls the door shut behind her. Then together we walk down the path from her place through the small collection of bungalows and back toward town.

Harper and I don’t talk, the silence instead filled with Sammie’s non-stop chatter about everything we walk past. It’s easy and fun and when she switches so she’s walking between us, taking her mom’s hand again before reaching up with her other one to grab mine, I don’t hesitate in taking it. I risk a quick glance at Harper, who still isn’t looking at me, but I don’t miss the small smile on her face. Not wanting to jinx any of this, I don’t say anything, just give Sammie’s hand a gentle squeeze as we make our way toward the main street.

Once we’re in town, I head past my family’s store, glancing quickly inside to see who’s working before I make a left down the side street at the end of the block.

“I never would’ve known this was here,” Harper says as we reach the rustic brick exterior that has a giant taco stuck to it, with a wooden sign over the door advertising it as Tony’s Tacos.

“Yeah, it’s kind of a local haunt,” I say, opening the door for them. “Tourists don’t usually find it.”

Harper gives me a smile as she walks past me and inside the cozy restaurant. I catch a waft of whatever perfume she wears, something that's like honey and sugar and Jesus, if it doesn't make my heart pound.

"Well thank you for bringing us here," she says.

"You're locals now, remember," I say, my hand moving to her lower back as I steer us toward a small booth on the side. Harper flinches a little, but she doesn't pull away, even as I drop my hand, mentally reminding myself to tread carefully. "You need to know all the good places to eat," I add, as we slide into the booth, Sammie and Harper on one side and me on the other.

"You'll have to give me a list," Harper says, smiling at me from the other side of the table.

I return the smile. "Well, you did find my favorite bakery and those carrot cake cookies, and now you know this place," I say, wishing I could also suggest that she find all the other places with me. Before I have a chance to though, we're interrupted by our server.

"Hey, Max, long time no see," he says, hand out, grinning down at me, even if we both know I was in here last week.

I clap hands with him, smiling up at Tony, who's worked here for as long as I've been alive. "Hey, old-timer," I tease. "You still here?"

Tony chuckles, letting go of my hand to ruffle my hair, just like he did when I was a kid. "You know it, always have been, always will be. What can I get for you guys?"

I smile, turning back to Harper and Sammie. "Well, this one has a thing for queso and guacamole," I start, winking as I point a finger at Sammie. "So you'd better bring us the jumbo size of both, plenty of tortilla chips too. I'll also take a Corona and the triple taco combo."

"And you pretty lady?" Tony asks, turning to Harper.

She blinks, looking around for a menu that isn't here. I smile, pointing up at the chalkboards that line the walls, listing every single menu item they have. It's far too many for her to

read through and I watch as she scans the room before turning back to Tony.

“Um, I’ll have the same?”

Tony chuckles, nodding at Harper before he turns to Sammie. “And what about you little lady, you good with queso and guac or you want a taco too?”

Sammie glances at her mom who nods before she turns back to Tony and shouts, “Taco!”

“Alright,” George says, grinning as he turns back to Harper. “You want me to get her water or juice?”

“Water’s good, thank you,” Harper says.

Tony gives her a wink before he turns and walks back to the kitchen, calling out the order to his two sons who work back there. I can’t ever remember a time that I’ve come in here and Tony hasn’t been working and as I look over at the open window that separates the kitchen from the restaurant, I lift a hand in a wave to his youngest son, Peter, who was in Zoey’s year at school.

“Seems like you might be a regular here?” Harper says.

“Nah,” I say with a laugh. “Well okay, yeah. But I also grew up here, so you know, I kinda know most of the town.”

“So you’ve never left Tahoe?” Harper now asks as Tony returns with some coloring pencils and a couple of paper coloring sheets they keep for kids.

“Yeah, I went to college in Colorado,” I say as I get Sammie set up with the pencils and drawing. “And I guess I’ve traveled a bit and all, but this is home. Always has been.”

Harper nods, taking a sip of the water Tony also dropped off. “And your family is here, right? I mean, Zoey works at the lodge.”

“Uh huh. It’s my parents and me and Zoey, but yeah, we’re all in town,” I add, wondering if she’s figured out who I am and what my family does yet. “What about you, where are you from?”

Harper shifts in her seat a little, glancing at Sammie who is oblivious as she colors in her drawing. Before she has a chance to respond though, Tony returns with our Coronas and three huge bowls of queso, guacamole and tortilla chips. I look up at him, knowing this is way more than what's normally in the jumbo size serving and he just winks before he turns and walks away.

When I turn back to Harper, she's dipping a chip in guacamole, a look on her face that's telling me she isn't sure if she should answer my question or not.

Grabbing my beer, I hold it up in a cheers to her, waiting as she clinks her bottle against mine. Then as we both take a sip, Sammie puts down her pencil, reaches over to scoop up a huge blob of queso as she says, "We're from Florida!"

HARPER

Not that it's a secret, but the way Sammie shouts it out, makes it seem like I've been keeping it to myself. Maybe I have been though, trying to forget that we're attempting to start over. Not that anyone here would believe I'm a local. Sammie and I stand out like a sore thumb with our tans and lack of winter gear. Luckily summer is beginning to take over, but we're going to eventually need to get ourselves some winter clothes.

That is, if we decide to stay.

"Yes, we're from Florida," I say, echoing Sammie's comment, wondering if Max is going to ask more questions. He should. If I were him, I would. I just showed up here randomly with a four-year-old in tow and seeking a job.

"How'd you end up in Tahoe?" Max asks, reaching over to join Sammie in the quest to set the world record for queso eating.

I pause, taking in his question and processing my own words carefully. I'm not sure how much I want to say and how much he really needs to know. We might be spending time together, but that doesn't mean it's going to go anywhere.

"The train," Sammie chirps, a huge smile on her face and a massive dollop of queso on the front of her t-shirt. Her very literal answer makes both Max and I let out a laugh.

I sling an arm around her, pulling her close, I drop a kiss on the top of her head. She couldn't be any cuter, but I'm sure I'm biased. She seems to be winning Max over too.

“How was the train ride?” Max asks Sammie, handing her a napkin which she swipes across her mouth, only smearing a stripe of queso along her cheek. I reach over, assisting her in cleaning up her face as she tells Max all about our train ride.

“I got to eat M&Ms and I saw some cows and there was this man who was snoring really loud,” Sammie says, imitating the snoring, she lets out this nasally snort.

Max is watching her, taking in her every word and for a second, I can't look at Max. The way he's dotting on her has my heart feeling like it's going to burst in my chest. And if Sammie were an emoji, she'd definitely be the heart eyes right now.

“What is your favorite color M&M?” Max questions, asking it like it's the most important thing in the world and honestly, to a four-year-old, it is.

“Red, but I love pink, but there's no pink M&Ms unless it's Valentine's Day,” Sammie answers, and I have to cover my mouth so she doesn't see me laugh at her mispronunciation of Valentine.

And when I look over at Max, he doesn't even miss a beat, asking her about her favorite animal and her favorite book and her favorite movie.

“Oh, wait, I know your favorite movie. It's that one. Cold or Freeze, right?” Max says, and the most adorable giggle falls from Sammie's mouth.

“*Frozen*,” she yells, laughing hysterically at Max's badly naming of the movie.

“I've never seen it,” Max admits and Sammie's mouth falls open, her eyes wide with shock.

“Mommy, can Max come over and watch *Frozen*?” she asks, a huge smile on her face that has my heart doing flip flops in my chest.

“Not tonight, baby. Another time,” I tell her, hoping she takes my answer and doesn't start whining. She is four after all.

“How about we make a date for next week?” Max says, appeasing her almost instantly. “I’ll bring the M&Ms.” He winks at Sammie and she has the biggest smile on her face.

“That works,” I say, pushing a bowl of orange slices toward Sammie. “Why don’t you finish these and then it’s time to head home. It’s almost bedtime.”

She leans her head against my arm as she picks up an orange and begins to suck the juice out of it. Letting out a yawn, I can tell she’s getting tired. She’s a creature of habit and her bedtime is seven-thirty and we’re nearing that.

“Besides the train, what brings you to Tahoe?” Max asks and I was hoping he’d forgotten that he didn’t get an answer to that question.

“It’s kinda like when all the snow melts here in Tahoe and everything looks different and new,” I say, sounding a little cryptic, but also not wanting to say exactly what is happening in front of Sammie.

“A fresh start,” he says, his words quiet. “Or it’s like when the snow falls for the first time and everything is clean and white.”

“A blank canvas.”

Our conversation falls quiet as Sammie finishes her oranges, letting out another yawn and I can tell she’s on the verge of falling asleep here at the table.

“I need to get her home. When she doesn’t get to bed on time, she’s brutal,” I say, glancing over at her, making sure she didn’t fully hear me.

“No, I’m not,” Sammie whines, rubbing her eyes.

“You don’t even know what brutal means,” I tease her, poking her side and making her giggle.

Max tosses a hand up and gets the check, talking for a few minutes with the older gentleman that waited on us. He begins to pull out his credit card and I shake my head, reaching over to rest my hand over his. The second our skin touches, I feel

this sudden rush of warmth move through me, causing my stomach to fill with butterflies.

I pull my hand away quickly, swallowing hard, I try to recover from the feeling that has my head spinning from just a simple touch.

“Let me get mine and Sammie’s meals, please,” I say, my voice shaking a little with a strange nervousness and excitement that courses through me.

“My treat,” Max says, handing the credit card over. “I ate just as much guac and queso as that peanut did.” he motions to Sammie, who has now stood up and is dancing to the music that is playing.

“Fine, but next time, it’s on me,” I concede, admitting there will probably be another time. That is if Max wants there to be another time. I hope I’m not the only one who felt that connection when we touched.

“Sounds good,” he says. “And don’t forget,” he pauses, laughing a little at Sammie and her dance moves, “the Dancing Queen and I have a date to watch *Frozen*.”

“She’s going to hold you to that so there’s no way I’m going to forget,” I joke, walking over to scoop Sammie up into my arms, knowing I’ve got to get her home and she’s not going to be up for walking now. It’s too late for that.

“And pink M&Ms,” Sammie says, her voice growing hoarse as she rests her head against my shoulder.

Max holds the door for us as we leave the restaurant and head back to my house. My head swirls with a million thoughts of how this night should end. I shouldn’t invite him inside. It’s too soon, too much after just meeting him, but he’s been amazing. I wonder if he’s thinking the same thing.

Does he want to come in?

Does he want more with me?

He has no idea what he’s in for. I’m a lot. I’m probably too much for him and once he finds out, he’s going to disappear. But that’s okay. A relationship complicates things. He doesn’t

want complicated. He seems way too lowkey for complicated. I'm making assumptions.

"You okay?" Max asks and I have no idea how long I've been silent for. Long enough that we're almost back to my place.

I shift Sammie, my arms growing tired from carrying her, but I can tell she's tired given she hasn't said anything either. I look to check that she's still awake, and while she is, it's only a matter of time before she's out like a light.

"You want me to take her?" Max now asks, noticing my struggle.

"Nah, I'm okay," I reply, but then I shake my head, clearing it of my constant need to not accept help. He's not giving me a kidney, he just offered to carry this kid who is getting heavier by the minute. "That would be great," I add, handing Sammie over to him and she goes willingly. "I'm good, Max," I say, answering his question from before. "I'm just..."

"Nervous?" he asks, hitting me with this smile that makes my knees go weak. He has these perfect dimples that could make me do whatever he asks. It feels like it's going to be trouble.

"Yeah, maybe a little," I admit, letting out a giggle. "Okay, a lot. I haven't dated anyone in a really long time."

"Who said this was a date?" Max says, moving Sammie to his other hip.

I swallow hard, his comment has me thinking that maybe I've misread everything. Now not only am I nervous, but I'm also completely embarrassed.

"I don't know. I'm sorry. That was—"

"I'm just messing with you, Harper. I was hoping it was a date, but I wasn't sure how that worked since we had a mini supervisor with us," Max says, holding Sammie with one arm as he takes my hand in his.

“I always have a mini supervisor with me,” I say, shrugging. “She’s like my shadow.”

“She’s a pretty entertaining shadow,” Max replies, hoisting Sammie up a little higher.

We make our way over to my house, and I realize I didn’t leave any lights on, the place is dark and something about it makes me nervous to go in alone.

I need to get over it. He couldn’t have found us already. We’re secluded back here on the edge of Badger Creek, and while that seclusion makes me a little uneasy, it also gives me a sense of security too.

“Not many other people live out here, huh?” I say, trying to make conversation, but also stalling a little so Max can walk us up to the door and maybe even bring Sammie inside.

“Not right now, but once we’re back in season, you’ll have neighbors,” Max says. “The bungalows are usually used by seasonal ski staff. We have people who come here from all over to work the slopes.”

“How’d I end up here? I’m just working housekeeping.”

“Gotta take that up with Zoey. It’s not unusual though. There are always people living here temporarily.”

Not that I’m complaining because it was going to be tough to find a place for us to live when I had hardly any money. Things are good now. I pay for the bungalow out of my paycheck, and the rent is basically a quarter of what I would be paying if I found a place on my own.

I’m pretty sure Zoey took pity on me, living in that seedy motel with my kid, but I can’t argue with that. I was clearly in need and she saw that.

“Looks like we’re here,” Max says, stopping at the front door, setting Sammie down.

I push the key into the lock, opening the door to the dark house and my breath catches in my throat, that fear of the unknown returning.

“You want to come in for a minute?” I ask, letting Max walk through the door before me. He hits the light switch by the door, lighting up the room, and I nearly breathe a sigh of relief when I find it exactly as I left it.

I close the door behind me and make my way over to the bedrooms, reaching in and turning the lights on. I look in my room and then into Sammie’s, again, finding nothing out of place.

“Mommy, the three B’s,” Sammie says, yawning and rubbing her eyes.

“Yes, missy, you’re right. Why don’t you say good night to Max and then we’re on it.”

“Good night, Max,” Sammie says, throwing her arms around his legs in a hug. He reaches down patting her on the back.

“Good night, Sammie,” he says, looking over at me, a nervousness crossing his face. He doesn’t know how to end this evening either and something about it makes me laugh.

“Go on into the bathroom, Sammie, and I’ll be there in a minute. I’m going to walk Max to the door.”

“Okay, Mommy,” Sammie says, waving goodbye to Max as she scampers off into the bathroom.

Max follows me to the door, letting out a laugh that mirrors mine and soon the two of us are laughing like something is hilarious.

“I guess neither of us know what to do, huh?” he says, addressing the elephant in the room.

“Yeah, I guess so. Now that I know it was a date, they usually end with a kiss,” I say, but I shake my head. “I’m not there yet, Max.”

“That’s okay, Harper. I expect nothing.”

“Are you free on Friday?” I ask, loving his relaxed nature.

“I work until three,” he says. “But after that I’m free.”

“*Frozen?*”

“You bet,” Max says, smiling at me. “Have a good night, Harper. I’ll see you Friday.”

“Thanks for dinner, Max. I had a wonderful time.”

I watch Max walk away, my heart fluttering in my chest, reminding me what it’s like to get all excited about a guy. It feels like forever since I felt this way, and there was a time that I worried I would never feel this way again. But here I am.

I close the door, locking it and checking it again before I head into the bathroom to give Sammie a bath.

“You ready?” I ask her, stripping off her clothes and starting the water. “A quick one tonight. It’s late.”

She nods, climbing in the tub and dunking her head under the running water of the faucet.

“I like Max,” Sammie suddenly says, unprompted.

“So do I.”

I wait a few seconds, thinking about what is going through her little head. All of this is so new. A new house, a new town. Everything she’s ever known is gone, but she doesn’t seem to be worried about that.

“Do you miss your dad?” I ask her, and she sits up, looking right at me.

“No,” she replies instantly, not even bothering to elaborate. “Do you miss him?” And it’s a question that is wise beyond her years.

“My dad? No because I didn’t even know my dad,” I tell her. I’ve never kept it a secret from her that I was raised by a single mother.

“No, Mommy,” she says, laughing. “My daddy, do you miss him?”

“No, baby, I don’t.”

MAX

I t's almost one in the morning when my phone rings. I'm not asleep, but I still reach for the phone quickly, too many memories of Zoey getting abducted are still fresh in my mind that I don't ever ignore a phone call, but especially when it's late at night.

"Hey, dude," I say smiling as I see the name on the screen when I answer.

"I didn't wake you, right?" Nick says, not bothering with a greeting.

"No, you know me, night owl," I reply, with a laugh. "Plus with this EMT gig, the hours fuck with my sleep anyway. But what are you doing and more importantly, where are you?"

Nick lets out a long, exhausted sigh. "Man, Queenstown, New Zealand and for real, this place is amazing. The town, the people, the mountains, fuck, you gotta come down here someday."

"You know we've got pretty good mountains here too," I say, trying to keep it light so he knows I'm only teasing. Sort of.

"Yeah, yeah I know," he says, letting out another exhale.

"So, you ever planning on coming back?" I ask, knowing it's been forever since I saw him. "I thought with summer, maybe we'd see you."

"I know, I know," he replies. "I thought I was coming back for summer too, but this came up and shit, Max, you know I

can't turn it down."

"I know," I agree. "It's just been ages since you were back here."

Not just ages, over a year. The last time I saw Nick, I was still in college at Colorado and he'd come back to hang out with me and Alex. I can't even remember the last time he was back in Tahoe when I was here, at least for any decent amount of time. Even Christmas and New Year's passed without him coming back because his parents went to see him, wherever he was at the time.

"It has," he admits, sounding both exhausted and frustrated.

"You okay?" I ask, suddenly worried. It's not like Nick to be this way. He's always been laid back and chill. The happy-go-lucky guy.

"Yeah."

I let out another laugh. "Okay and now try saying that like you mean it."

"Fuck, I don't know, Max," he says, his voice muffled for a moment, like he's scrubbing a hand down his face. "I love this, I really do, it's everything I've been working toward. It's just...the traveling, you know, it's..."

"Exhausting?"

Nick chuckles. "Yeah, that's one way of putting it."

I smile. "The other way being you miss home. And by home, I mean one person in particular." Nick doesn't respond to my comment, but I know him well enough to know that he's probably sitting with his head hanging, eyes closed as one very specific person crosses his mind. "You speak to her lately?" I ask, giving him an option to talk about it.

"Not really," he says, cryptically.

"Not really," I repeat, letting out a laugh. "Okay, that was vague."

"How is she?"

“Elissa, you mean?” I say, trying again to get him to open up about her.

Nick sighs. “Of course, Elissa, who else would I mean?”

I know he means Elissa, because there has only ever been one woman Nick cares about enough to ask about and it’s the same woman he’s had a laser-focus on from the time we like thirteen right up until now. It doesn’t matter that they’ve broken up or that Nick and Elissa have both tried to move on with other people in the past year or so. I know she is the only person who matters to him, the only person he truly cares about. The only person he would give this all up for. If she ever asked him to anyway, which we both know she is never going to do.

“She’s good,” I eventually say. “Working at the lodge, hanging with Zoey and Delaney, the usual.”

“She, um...she seeing anyone?”

It’s a question he asks me a lot and it breaks my heart the few times I’ve had to answer yes to him. I still don’t know the exact reasons for why they eventually broke up or even when it technically happened. Elissa was always planning to join us at college, even if she had to delay it a year after her mom got sick and she insisted Nick go without her.

Then even when her mom got better and Nick had been scouted and picked for the US ski team, she pushed him to do it, knowing that it would take him even further away from her. I’m pretty sure they tried to make it work for a while. But then one day it seemed like it was over and when I saw Elissa hanging out with some guy a few months later in a way that didn’t look like just friends, Nick confirmed to me that yeah, they weren’t together anymore.

“No, not that I know of,” I say, and I don’t miss the audible sigh of relief he lets out.

“And you?” he now prompts. “You got yourself a woman yet?”

I know he’s changing the subject because he rarely talks about Elissa in any great detail anymore. I assume it’s because

it hurts too much and maybe he has regrets about how it all played out. I wish he would talk though, because it's obvious the two of them are still crazy hung up on each other. Even though Elissa has hung out with a few guys over the past year, none of it has been serious, rarely going beyond a couple of weeks. Just like I know Nick has never had anything more than a casual hook up either.

I laugh at his question, shaking my head even as my mind flashes to Harper. I have no idea what this thing is that's sort of starting between us, but I do know that I can't seem to stop thinking about her. I don't even care that she's obviously running from something and is nervous about letting anyone in, much less starting something like dating or a relationship.

"Okay, so that sounds like a yes," Nick says, and I can practically hear the smile in his voice. "Spill, dude!"

"There's not much to say," I admit. "She's new in town and I get the feeling she's not exactly looking to start anything with someone."

"Doesn't have to be a something," he says. "Nothing wrong with hook-ups, you know."

"Yeah, pretty sure she's not a hook-up kinda girl either."

"Oh?" Nick asks, curious.

I scrub a hand down my face, exhaling as I glance at the time on my phone, knowing I have to be up early tomorrow, well today now. "She's got a kid," I finally say. "Four years old."

"Wow, okay," Nick breathes out. "And you're cool with that?"

"Yeah, I am actually," I quickly reply, knowing that Harper having a kid doesn't bother me in the slightest. "She's cute, funny too."

Nick lets out a whistle as he says, "Look at you, already step-dad vibing and everything!"

"Fuck off," I say laughing.

We chat for a bit longer, Nick promising once again to try and make it back home to Tahoe so he can catch up with us all. When I eventually hang up it's after two in the morning and considering I have to be up for work in four and half hours, I throw my phone on the nightstand and force myself to try and get some sleep, especially considering tonight is my *Frozen* date with Harper and Sammie.

I'M late home from work, a last minute call out to a car accident that took longer than expected. Luckily everyone was okay, but I'm still scrambling by the time I get home, especially as I had to stop off at the store on the way home.

I jump in the shower first, scrubbing the smell of the day off me, before pulling on a pair of worn jeans and a t-shirt, grabbing a sweater because even though summer is on the way, it's still a little cool at night.

Before I head over to Harper's, I grab the bags of M&Ms I bought and start sorting through them, making two piles, one of red and one of every other color. I hadn't been able to find any of the pink ones because Valentine's Day was ages ago, but hopefully Sammie is okay with just red.

When I'm done, I grab a six-pack of beer from the fridge, the candy and my keys, driving the short distance to the bungalow at the back of the Badger Creek property.

"Hey," Harper says, smiling nervously as she opens the door to my knock.

My hello is cut off by the sound of running feet on the hardwood floor before Sammie throws herself at me, her little arms wrapping around my legs as she yells, "Hi, Max!"

I laugh, handing my bag of things to Harper before I bend down and pick Sammie up, flipping her over so she lands on my shoulder on her stomach, her arms already out like she's flying. "Hey, Sammie," I eventually reply, the same level of excitement in my hello as was in hers. "I have something for you."

"Oooooo!" she screams, clapping her hands. "What?"

“Sammie,” Harper warns, but when I glance over, she’s smiling and I can’t resist giving her a wink as I lower her daughter back to the ground before taking the bag from her.

“For you,” I say, handing Sammie a bag of nothing but red M&Ms.

Sammie squeals so loudly, I swear every dog in Tahoe hears her, before she looks up at Harper and says, “Mommy, look! Can I eat them?”

Harper laughs, her eyes sparkling as she ruffles Sammie’s hair and says, “Some, yes, but you’re not eating the whole bag tonight. And not until after dinner either.”

Sammie pouts a little, but she’s still smiling as she disappears into the house, clutching the bag.

“To be fair, yours is bigger,” I now say, pulling out the bag of all the other colored M&Ms and handing them over.

Harper’s eyes widen as she takes in the bag of multi-colored candy. “Shit, how many packets did you buy?”

Chuckling, I shrug. “No idea, a lot. But I also brought this,” I add, holding up the six-pack.

She shakes her head at me, but she’s smiling as she says, “Alcohol and candy, the perfect combination.”

“Right?”

Harper jerks her thumb over her shoulder as though suggesting we head into the house before she turns and walks down the short hall to the combination living kitchen area. I follow behind, trying not to stare at her ass, even though it looks fucking amazing in the jeans she’s wearing.

“I have at least made us some dinner,” she says, glancing over her shoulder at me.

“Oh?” I ask, my eyes snapping back to hers.

“Uh huh,” she replies, smirking a little in a way that suggests she probably did catch me checking her out just now. “Hope you’re okay with spaghetti, it’s Sammie’s favorite,” she adds as we walk into the kitchen area, where Sammie is now

perched on a chair at the small dining table coloring something in, her bag of M&Ms right beside her.

“Spaghetti sounds great,” I say, winking at Sammie as she looks up at me, a hopeful look on her face. “It’s one of my favorites too.”

Sammie smiles, her whole face lighting up as she points a blue pencil at the chair next to her and says, “Sit, Max.”

“Sammie,” Harper warns again.

Sammie rolls her eyes a little and I have to bite the inside of my cheek so I don’t laugh as she adds, “Please.”

When I glance back at Harper, she also rolls her eyes and this time I do chuckle, because it’s such a perfect imitation of how her daughter does it, that it’s clear to see where she got it from. “Anything I can do to help?” I ask.

Harper shakes her head as her eyes drop to the six pack in my hand. “Well, maybe open one of those for us.”

I nod in response, grabbing two bottles before I put the rest in the fridge. Twisting off the cap, I hand one to Harper, before doing the same to mine. “Cheers,” I say, holding it out toward her. “And thank you for inviting me over.”

Harper clinks her bottle against mine. “Thank you for coming,” she says quietly, before taking a sip of beer.

“Wait, me too, me too!” Sammie cries as she jumps up from her chair, grabbing her plastic cup and holding it up to both of us.

With a smile, I gently tap my beer against it as I say, “Cheers, Sammie.”

“Cheers!” she says, before turning to Harper. “Cheers, Mommy!”

Harper does the same, smiling as she takes another sip of beer, before turning back to the stove, where a bubbling pot of bolognese sits.

Sammie wanders back to the table, my apparent invitation to sit having been forgotten as she goes back to her coloring.

Instead, I turn and walk into the small kitchen, leaning back against the counter as Harper busies herself getting ingredients together for a salad.

“So how was your day?” I ask.

She gives me a quick smile. “It was good, you?”

I take a sip of beer, lifting a shoulder in a quick shrug. “Was okay.”

She pauses, the knife hovering over the tomato she was slicing. “Did something happen?”

I glance over at Sammie who is oblivious to our conversation, her little tongue poking out of the corner of her mouth as she colors furiously. When I turn back to Harper, I say, “Yeah, a car...” I trail off, smashing my two fists together as though to signify what I mean.

“Shit,” she breathes out. “Was everyone okay?”

I nod. “Yes, thank god. Wasn’t too bad in the end, probably looked worse than it was.”

“And are you okay? It can’t be good seeing something like that.”

I give her a smile, nodding once as I say, “I’m good. I mean it’s shit...shit, I mean S. H. I. T.,” I quickly spell out, risking another glance at Sammie.

Harper just laughs as she says, “Don’t worry, she’s heard far worse from me.”

I chuckle. “Well, in any case, it was, you know...but it’s always better when everyone is okay, so that helped today.”

Harper offers me a sympathetic smile as she puts a hand on my arm, the touch instantly sending a jolt of electricity up it. “I’m glad,” she says quietly, before removing her hand, my body instantly missing her touch. “Okay, who’s hungry?”

“Me!” Sammie shouts.

Me too I can’t help but think, but not for food. Jesus, that touch, it was so innocent and simple, but fuck me, if my body reacts like that from just a touch, what the hell is going to

happen with more? A kiss, a... I shake my head, trying to clear those thoughts from my brain because as much as I'm realizing I really want to go there with Harper, I know I can't push things.

I have to take it slow, let her dictate what we do and when.

HARPER

“I don’t think I’ve ever seen someone so small put back so much spaghetti,” Max says, making Sammie laugh as she slurps up her last noodle.

He sits back in his chair, narrowing his eyes at her which only makes her giggle even louder. There’s one more piece of garlic bread on the table and the two of them are having a standoff over it. It’s honestly one of the cutest things I’ve ever seen. Seeing Sammie interact with Max like she’s known him her whole life has my heart swelling. She’s never really had a relationship or interacted with men, and I worried that she would be hesitant, but with Max it’s different. She’s taken to him right away, and I get it. He’s very charismatic and handsome and he has these beautiful blue eyes that seem to draw me in. I’m not the only one he’s affecting.

Sammie is still giggling like crazy when Max reaches for the garlic bread, snatching it out from under her as she reaches for it too.

“Where do you think you’re going to put this piece of bread?” he asks her, his brows furrowed.

“In my tummy,” she instantly replies, holding out her hand, and with a brief hesitation, Max hands it over.

“She can eat,” I say, shaking my head when I get a good look at her. She’s covered in spaghetti sauce, and I hand her a napkin, knowing it won’t do any good. I swear she even has spaghetti in her hair. She needs a bath more than she needs a napkin.

“She certainly can, but I have to say, her mom is a pretty good cook,” Max compliments and it takes everything in me not to roll my eyes.

“You know how to make a girl feel special,” I say, leaning over to run my hand down Max’s arm, my fingers trailing over the taut muscles of his bicep. I immediately regret it. I’m flirting with him and I have no idea if I intend to follow through with anything.

He has no idea what he’s getting himself into and that’s not fair to him. If we’re going to keep doing whatever this is, I need to tell him everything. But there in the back of my mind, a little voice is telling me to shut up and enjoy the normalcy that is right in front of me. That I shouldn’t scare him off with all my past drama. That’s why I’m here. I’m here to move on and start a life where Sammie and I feel safe, where we don’t focus on the past.

Max makes both of us feel safe.

It hasn’t even been that long since we met him, but there’s something between us. I can feel it every time I see him, every time he’s near me. And it’s something I want to keep happening.

“I think someone needs a bath,” I say, pointing at Sammie, and she shakes her head, trying to tell me no, like that’s going to work. “How about this? How about you take a bath, get some jammies on, then we have some chocolate milk and M&Ms on the couch while we watch *Frozen* before bed?”

“Deal!” Sammie calls out, hopping down from her chair and scrambling into the bathroom.

“Can you give me like ten minutes?” I ask Max, realizing that he doesn’t have to hang around here and wait for me. He probably has a life that includes going out with friends and not spending his time with a single mom.

“Of course. You go take care of the Spaghetti Queen. I can’t bail now. I haven’t even seen the movie yet,” Max says, and my heart feels like it’s going to burst. How in the hell did I get so damn lucky to find a guy like this? This town wasn’t

even on my radar and now here I am setting up a home and making friends and even possibly falling for a guy.

“Thanks,” I say, turning to head to the bathroom, stopping a second as that little voice returns. “You don’t have a girlfriend, do you?” I now ask, my cheeks warming up at my question, feeling far more bold than normal.

Max laughs a little before answering, “No, Harper, I don’t have a girlfriend. It would be a pretty shitty thing to do to you and Sammie if I did.”

He has no idea.

TEN MINUTES LATER, Sammie is running out of the bathroom wearing her Elsa pajamas and a massive smile on her face. She flings herself onto the couch and pats the spot next to her.

“Sit here, Max,” she says, waiting not so patiently.

“One second, Sammie,” he replies, and I find him in the kitchen, washing the dishes from dinner. I hate the way I’m surprised by this or the way I’m overcome with a sudden rush of guilt, wanting to apologize to him for having to clean up.

It’s stupid and I know that, but this is the way my life has been for so long. I’m not used to someone helping me, let alone me not having to ask. Not that I would have asked.

I pause a moment, letting my words play out in my head before I say them. Leaving wasn’t just about starting over, it’s also about setting a better example for Sammie, about teaching her to be strong. It’s about teaching her to never apologize for things that should just come naturally.

“Thank you for cleaning up the kitchen,” I say, walking over to Max and wanting to hug him or kiss him or something, but I hold back. He has no clue that this simple little gesture means so much to me. He did it willingly and without holding it over my head.

“No problem. I put the leftover spaghetti and the salad in the fridge. Sorry, I had to dig around for something to put them in. I hope you don’t mind.”

“Not at all. I really appreciate it,” I answer back, this whole interaction feeling so strangely normal that I almost want to shout out with joy. “Would you like some chocolate milk too? It’s kinda our nightly thing.”

“I mean, obviously I want to be included in this chocolate milk club, right, Sammie?” Max says, and Sammie nods.

“I want the blue cup, Mommy,” Sammie calls from the couch, and I grab the milk from the fridge. I check to see if she’s watching me, and I quickly fill half the blue cup with white milk before adding a little bit of chocolate milk.

“It’s a mom secret,” I whisper to Max, and he winks at me, sending my stomach flipping and my heart racing. I can’t even imagine what it would be like if he kissed me or...I can’t even think about it, clenching my thighs together tightly at the idea. It’s been a long ass time.

“Your secret is safe with me,” he teases, carrying his and Sammie’s cup over to the couch.

Setting Sammie’s cup down on the coffee table in front of the couch, he takes his with him and sits down next to Sammie. She jumps up, pointing to her pajama shirt, she says, “Look who it is, Max.”

I have to cover my mouth with my hand to keep from laughing because he’s going to fail this little quiz she has for him.

“It’s...” he starts, closing one eye as he looks at her, his lip quirked up in the corner. “It’s...I think it’s Anna, right?” he asks, that question lingering on the end of his answer.

Sammie covers her face with her hands, giggling like crazy. “No, it’s Elsa!” she squeals.

“I promise I’ll get it right after we watch the movie,” Max assures her, and she climbs back onto the couch next to him.

I set my cup of milk down on the side table and get up to put in the DVD. It’s something I bought before we left Florida, knowing we might not have access to the streaming services we grew used to. I knew Sammie would need her fix of *Frozen*

and we got lucky enough that there's a DVD player in our little bungalow.

"No streaming?" Max asks, and while it's a simple question and certainly not meant to call attention to how modestly we live, it still catches me off guard.

When I left with Sammie, I worried, actually I still worry, she won't have the life I want for her. I don't want her to be different than the friends that she will someday make. Being a single parent will bring those feelings every time.

"No, haven't gotten a chance to set that up yet," I lie, trying to avoid telling Max that I just can't afford it right now. I'm grateful for my job, but I still need to build up a savings and paying for streaming services isn't on my list of must-haves. "I get some basic channels with the antenna," I now add, trying to make it sound like I'm not missing being able to binge watch things after Sammie is in bed.

"It's a smart TV. I'll log you in to a few of mine," Max offers, and I have to pause, wondering how I should respond to him. I never want anything to come back on me. I never want to owe anyone anything, I've found myself there before and it ruined me.

But Max has given me no reason to believe he will do anything to hurt me or Sammie, and I have to start accepting help if I'm going to stay here in Tahoe. I have no family here and eventually I will need help.

"Sure, that would be great. I'm getting a little tired of watching local news every night," I joke. "I've heard about the Summer Solstice Festival so many times that they've convinced me it's the best festival in the world."

"Well, it's a pretty big deal," Max says, as I hit play on the movie, Sammie grabbing the blanket from the back of the couch, curling up with her head on my lap. "There's a parade and a carnival, but it's got nothing on the first snow of the season."

"Shhh," Sammie shushes, holding her finger up to her lips. "You can talk when I go to bed."

“Sorry,” Max says, reaching over to squeeze Sammie’s foot, making her giggle. “Tell me, who is that?” he now asks, pointing at the screen.

“That’s Kristoff and Sven,” Sammie answers quickly. “But you gotta be quiet now.”

“Got it, boss,” Max answers, looking over at me and hitting me with a gorgeous smile that seems to capture every nerve in my body. How does a guy who looks like a professional athlete mixed with a cover model remain single? I feel like he would be the kind of guy most girls would be after.

We sit in silence, the movie playing and Sammie singing along at times, but I can tell she’s getting tired. Glancing at my watch, I notice it’s nearing her bedtime, and when I watch her yawn several times in a row, I know it won’t be long until she’s asleep on this couch.

I don’t like to let her fall asleep on the couch, keeping our routine that we’ve had since she was a baby. And moving here isn’t going to change that. We aren’t on vacation, and I do have to be up early for work tomorrow, which means, she has to be up early too.

“About time for bed, missy,” I say, pushing her hair back and kissing her forehead.

“Okay, Mommy,” she says, and I can tell by the look on Max’s face that he has a few questions. “Night, Max,” she calls, moving over to him and giving him a quick hug.

“Head into the bathroom to brush your teeth and I’ll be in to read you a book in a few minutes,” I tell her, and Sammie heads off to the bathroom willingly.

“Is she always this easy?” Max asks, standing up and taking the remote for the TV. He begins adding his login information for Netflix and Disney+, something I’ll never be able to thank him enough for. Since we only have the *Frozen* DVD, I’ve gotten solidly sick of watching it over and over and over.

“Yeah, pretty much, but we have a good routine. We have to be up early tomorrow, so bedtime is early too,” I say,

shrugging. “She has her moments though. Just wait.” As I say it, I realize I’m offering up the idea that we’ll see each other again. I really hope we do.

“I think I can handle her at her worst if this is what she’s like at her best,” Max replies, including Sammie in our next possible get together. “I should get going now though. I know you have to work tomorrow, so I don’t want to keep you up late.”

I bite at my lip, wondering if I should ask him to stay longer, but I should take things slow. I need to build up to this, not jump in too quickly. Not just for Sammie but also myself.

“Maybe we can have lunch tomorrow?” I suggest, knowing Sammie will be at daycare while I’m working.

“I’m off for the next two days, so I can meet you over at Badger Creek,” Max says, telling me where to meet him after I give him a time. “I’ll see you tomorrow,” he adds, walking toward the door and I follow him.

We both stop, suspended in silence as I wet my lips, wanting to kiss him. I can feel my heart pulsing in my chest, my palms growing sweaty as I try to decide how to say goodbye.

“Thanks for dinner tonight, Harper,” Max says, his voice low and I wet my lips again, Max’s eyes falling to them.

“Thank you for coming over,” I now say, our conversation awkward, dancing around what we both want to do and I step closer to him. “I had a nice time.”

“Me too,” Max says, his words softer than before as his hand moves to rest on my hip, our eyes locking. I can see the want on his face, his eyes sparkling with desire, and they mirror everything I’m feeling too. “Shit, you’re gorgeous, Harper,” he murmurs, both of us breathing heavily, my lips parted, small puffs of air coming out in labored breaths of want.

“Max...” I start to say, my body nearly flush against his, ready to push up on my toes and press my lips against his.

“Mommy! Hurry up!” Sammie wails, cutting us off and it’s probably for the best. I’m not sure I could stop myself once we got started.

“I gotta go,” I say, tilting my head in the direction of Sammie’s bedroom, her pleas continuing. “See, here she is being a little needy.”

“She is only four,” Max replies. “Go on. I’ll see you tomorrow. Night, Harper.”

He looks back over his shoulder before he walks out the door, leaving me breathless and desperate to see him again.

MAX

I walk into the lobby just after noon, the lodge bustling even with the change in seasons. As much as Badger Creek is a ski resort, the nearby lake and mountains offer plenty of awesome things to do in summer too. So much so, that there isn't really an off-season here, especially now, with Ethan and Zo revamping the place. I swear the two of them are going to give Holden Winter Gear a run for most popular business in this town soon and I honestly could not be prouder of my sister for succeeding like this without the help of our family name.

“Max!”

I turn to find Elissa walking toward me, a huge smile on her face. “Hey, Elissa,” I reply, returning the smile as I pull her into a hug. “I feel like it's been forever since I've seen you.”

“I know right, how's things? You enjoying the new job?”

“Yeah,” I reply smiling. “It's hard work, but good too. How are things around here?”

Elissa shrugs, still smiling. “Good, busy, the usual.”

I nod, shoving a hand through my hair as I say, “Spoke to Nick the other night.”

I don't bring it up to be an asshole, quite the opposite, because after our last phone call, I'm actually a little worried about him. He definitely seemed different, flatter than he normally is, which is so unlike him. I have no idea if it's really

just related to all the travel he does or if it's something more and I can't help but wonder if maybe Elissa knows.

"Oh," she says, her smile disappearing.

"Yeah, have you spoken to him recently?" I ask, wondering if I'll get a straighter answer from her considering Nick's cagey response the other night. Elissa shrugs, shaking her head at the same time and I let out a small laugh. "I just wondered if you knew what was going on with him, that's all."

"Why, what's happened?" she now asks, her eyes wide.

"Nothing," I quickly reply, a hand up. "He just seemed, I don't know, a little lonely or something."

Elissa doesn't respond to this, dropping her gaze as she chews on her bottom lip.

"Maybe you should reach out to him?" I suggest, wishing I knew what was going on with these two. I know they're not together anymore and I get that it's because they don't see each other often and that Nick is always travelling, but fuck, it's so obvious they still care about each other. "Elissa?"

She lets out a long exhale, blinking as she looks up at me again. "Yeah, maybe," she says quietly. "Anyway, what are you here for, you having lunch with Zoey?"

I sigh, frustrated at how unhappy my two friends seem to be. "Nah, not Zoey, someone else."

"Who?" she asks, head tipped to the side.

A smile tugs at my lips as I let out a chuckle. "Um, Harper?" I say, my answer sounding more like a question.

"Oh really?" Elissa says, her eyes lighting up as she smiles again.

"We're just friends," I reply with a laugh, even if deep down, I want something more than that. "She's new to town, remember? She doesn't know anyone."

"Uh huh," she says, brow raised. "And you're just the person to show her around, right?"

“Shut up,” I say, pulling her into another hug as I change the subject. “Please think about calling him. I know he’d love to hear from you.”

Elissa exhales against my chest, not saying anything, even as she gives a small nod. When she pulls back, her eyes dart over my shoulder before returning to mine. “Looks like your date’s here,” she says, smiling. “Have fun!” She gives me a quick wink before turning and walking away.

When I turn around, Harper is standing by the unlit fireplace, clearly having seen me talking with Elissa. She holds up a hand to wave at me but doesn’t return the smile I give her as I walk over.

“Hey,” I say, standing in front of her. “You hungry?”

Harper nods, even as she says, “You know, Elissa?”

I glance over my shoulder, even knowing Elissa has gone before turning back to her. “Yeah, we went to school together. She used to date a buddy of mine.”

Harper stares up at me, her eyes unblinking. “But you and her, are you...”

A loud laugh falls from my mouth before I can stop it. “No,” I quickly say. “She and I are nothing more than good friends, I promise you. She and my buddy, Nick, fuck, those two are still crazy about each other, so even if I was interested, which I’m totally not, Elissa would never go there. Hell, I’d never go there,” I say. “I wouldn’t do that to my friend, and I wouldn’t do it to you, Harper.”

She licks her lips, nodding her head in acknowledgement. “Okay.”

“Hey,” I say softly, taking her hand in mine. Her eyes drop to our entwined fingers, but she doesn’t pull away. “I’m not that kinda guy, Harper. I meant what I said last night.”

“Okay,” she says again.

I squeeze her hand once before letting go. “Alright, I’m starving, let’s eat.”

I LEAD her over to the casual bistro that has a terrace overlooking the mountains at the back of the lodge. I know she probably only gets an hour for her break, but this morning I pre-ordered some food that we could grab on the go so we could take it to eat down by the lake.

“So, how’s your day been?” I ask, after we’ve found an empty table and sat down. The picnic area is busy because it’s the weekend, but luckily there’s still a spot for us.

“Not too bad,” she answers, watching as I pull out containers of food. She tried to pay when we picked it up, but I hadn’t let her, insisting I would get it because she cooked last night.

“How’d the Spaghetti Queen do last night? She go to sleep okay?”

Harper laughs. “Mostly yeah, she was talking non-stop about you though, so it took a bit longer.”

“Oh yeah?” I ask, chuckling. “I hope it was all good?”

Harper rolls her eyes, but it’s playful as she says, “Of course it was. You’re like her newest favorite thing at the moment.”

“Newest favorite?” I repeat. “That sounds like I could also become an old favorite?”

She smiles. “Yep, that’s definitely a possibility,” she replies. “She’s pretty much all in on whatever new shiny thing attracts her attention and then something else comes along and it’s like boom.” She pauses to mimic throwing something away. “You’re replaced.”

I scoff, a hand on my chest in mock hurt. “Ouch, that seems so harsh.”

“That’s the life of a four year old I’m afraid,” Harper says.

“Guess I better make the most of it while I can then, hadn’t I?” I say, giving her a wink.

“Yeah,” she replies, her cheeks flushing a light pink. “I guess you better.”

With a smile, I change the subject, waving my hand over the table as I now say, “Okay, I’ve got Greek salad, some quiche, chicken strips and a pasta salad. I hope there’s something here you’ll eat?”

Harper lets out a laugh, shaking her head at me as she takes the bottle of water I also hand her. “Oh my god, Max, I will literally eat all of this, thank you.”

“Good,” I reply with a smile as I now hand her a fork. “Beause I totally forgot plates, so I guess we’re just... sharing?”

She’s still smiling even as she pulls her bottom lip between her teeth. “I’m okay with that.”

I keep our conversation over lunch light, avoiding asking her anything about her past or why she came to be in Tahoe. It’s not that I don’t want to know these things, I do. But I also know after dinner at Tony’s Tacos that this is information I can’t force out of her.

Whatever Harper’s reasons are, they are clearly personal and something she finds hard to talk about. If I had to guess, I’d say she has trouble trusting people and that’s something I actually do get. Having grown up as a Holden, I know all too well how much people can fuck you over. How they can pretend to be one thing and in fact, be something else entirely.

It’s something that affected my friendships growing up and it’s why, besides Alex, who met me outside of Tahoe and was never aware of the whole money thing, I’ve still got the same close-knit group of friends I’ve had since I was a kid.

They are the people I trust and the ones I know are genuine too.

When we finish eating, Harper glances at her phone to check the time.

“When do you need to be back?” I ask, gathering up our empty containers.

“Fifteen minutes,” she replies.

“Quick walk?” I ask, gesturing to the lake.

“Sure,” she replies as we both stand.

I dump the trash in a bin, not missing the way Harper watches as I lift the flap that prevents bears from digging through them. With a laugh, I point to the nearby sign that warns of bears during the summer months.

“Have you ever seen one?” she asks.

“Yeah, a few times,” I reply, laughing when her eyes widen in surprise.

“Were you scared?”

“Nah,” I say, shrugging. “You just gotta be careful you know. Make sure you make plenty of noise and always carry bear spray.”

“Bear spray?” she asks.

Laughing, I gently nudge her with my shoulder. “I’ll get you some,” I tell her. “But don’t worry, around here, you should be fine. It’s only up there that you need to worry,” I say, pointing to the mountains and the forest.

Harper shudders. “Maybe I’ll just stay off the mountain then.”

“What? And miss all that beautiful scenery, no way,” I say.

She hits me with a look, her brow narrowed as she says, “There’s not a chance in hell I’m climbing that mountain if a bear’s gonna attack me, Max. No way.”

I burst out laughing, my head falling back as I sling a casual arm around her shoulders. I feel her tense for a second or two, before relaxing and I can’t help but smile at the fact that she doesn’t pull away. “Tell you what,” I say, squeezing her shoulder. “How about, *I* take you up into the mountains? And yes, I promise to protect you from any bears, scout’s honor,” I add, holding up two fingers.

She glances up at me. “Were you even in the Scouts?”

“Um, technically no, but you know what I mean,” I reply with a shrug, grinning down at her.

Harper smirks now, jabbing me softly in the side with her elbow as she mutters, “Smart ass.”

We walk along the edge of the lake in silence, my arm still draped around her shoulders as the sun shines down on us, the air filled with the sounds of people laughing and talking. It feels peaceful and nice and I realize aside from the fire alarm, that this is the first time I’ve hung out with Harper without Sammie by her side.

“Is Sammie enjoying living here?” I ask.

“She is, yeah,” Harper replies. “She loves the daycare, which is great and has fit in like she’s been there her whole life.”

“Good,” I murmur. “Feels kinda weird without her here, doesn’t it?”

Harper turns to me. “Does it?” she asks, surprised. “I figured you’d prefer it.”

“What, no way,” I say. “She’s a cool kid, very funny.”

Harper smiles. “She is yeah, but she’s also…”

“What?”

She shrugs now, as she says, “I don’t know.”

I stop walking and Harper does the same, turning to face me. “Yeah you do,” I say. “What were you about to say?” Harper takes a deep breath, letting it out slowly as she drops her gaze to the ground between us. I reach over, sliding my fingers under her chin as I slowly lift her face so she’s looking at me again. “Tell me what you’re thinking, Harper,” I whisper, not moving my fingers.

She swallows hard, licking her lips before she replies, her words so quiet, I almost miss them. “Most guys don’t really like the whole single mom thing,” she says. “Having a kid permanently in the picture.”

I search her eyes, wishing I knew what had happened to her. “Maybe I’m not most guys,” I reply.

She lets out a small scoff as she mutters, “Oh I know you’re not.”

I lean in, so my face is only inches from hers. “I like you, Harper. I like Sammie too.”

“You do?”

“Uh huh,” I murmur, closing the distance even more. I can feel the lightness of her breath as it brushes across my lips, pulling me closer because fuck my life, I want to kiss her. Just like I wanted to kiss her last night too.

“Max,” Harper whispers, her eyes wide and unblinking.

I smile, risking a quick kiss to the end of her nose. “I want to kiss you so bad, Harper,” I whisper.

“Yeah?”

“Yes,” I reply. “But I’m not going to, not yet anyway.”

She blinks now, a look of surprise and maybe disappointment flashing across her face as she says, “Why not?”

Chuckling, I move my mouth to beside her ear, my eyes closing as I inhale her scent. “Because,” I start, my nose brushing lightly against her cheek, “I’m going to wait until you want to kiss me so bad you can’t stop yourself from doing it. Okay?”

HARPER

I want to enjoy this moment with Max, but there's something about his words that are triggering. Something that is supposed to be turning me on is causing me to have flashbacks of my former life. I feel my heart begin to race, reminding myself that Max does not mean anything by what he says other than trying to get me excited for a kiss.

But I still feel the color drain from my face, taking me out of this moment with Max and I hate it. I hate that despite leaving it all behind, it still haunts my life. That it's ruining something that should be fun and exciting, and the anticipation should be something that builds. Only it's been stopped in its tracks.

I can't let Max see that his comment has had this effect on me, but hiding it is going to be nearly impossible when he looks at my face. Plus, faking it isn't in the cards for me anymore.

I look up at him, taking in a long slow breath, I let out my words with honesty that I hope Max understands, but if he doesn't, I get it. He knows nothing about my past, and even I'm only just learning what triggers me. I thought leaving would end these feelings, but I guess it's not that simple.

"I like you, Max, a lot," I say, my words soft. "But there will never be a time I beg you for anything." And with that, I push up on my toes, my lips connecting with his in a quick and simple kiss, but one that makes me feel in control. "And when we do that for real, it will be much better," I add, smiling at

him as I walk away. “Thanks for lunch, Max. I’ll see you later.”

I wait for him to chase after me and he doesn’t, which is perfect. No games, no back and forth. Just a goodbye that feels real to me.

“Later, Harper,” he calls and if he could see my face right now, he’d know I am absolutely beaming. It feels so good to be able to overcome that and see the positive side of it. I didn’t ruin things with Max and if he really likes me, he’ll give me time. He’ll understand that I’m worth the wait.

I head back to work, knowing I have a lot to finish up before my day ends. I’ve been put on cleaning the hallways that lead to the ski lodge and making sure the hallway bathrooms are clean too. It’s not an ideal job, and if I’m being honest, tourists are slobs, but I actually kind of enjoy the quietness of it all.

I can do my job without the constant interaction and micromanaging, and after everything I’ve dealt with, it feels good. I put an earbud in, silently thanking Zoey for the work-issued phone as I hit play on the music. The rooms are all done, so I grab my cart, wheeling it down one of the hallways that leads to the ski lodge. It’s currently under construction so vacuuming feels a little counterproductive, but there will still be guests meandering down this way. They can’t get into the ski lodge, but there’s a huge window that overlooks it all and they can get a good look at the progress.

I’m vacuuming when someone begins walking toward me. I look up, seeing the woman I met when I first came to Badger Creek looking for a job. She’s the one Sammie said looked like Rapunzel, and I have to say, I wouldn’t disagree. She’s gorgeous with this long ombre hair. She’s tall and lean, and with a body to die for. When I saw Max talking to her earlier, I did for a split-second worry that she’d be my competition, but I’m not doing that shit anymore.

Other women are not my competition. That was something I was made to believe and I’m scrubbing that idea from my head, along with all the other bullshit I was led to believe. I

need to learn to build relationships with women and teach Sammie the same thing.

I pull my earbud out, giving her a wave as she walks closer to me. She waves back, a smile on her face.

“Hey, Elissa, right?” I say, and she gives a quick nod.

“And you’re Harper, right?”

“Yep. How are things going over there?” I ask, motioning to the construction we can see out the window. You can hear the drilling and the pounding. I didn’t get a chance to see the ski lodge before construction started, but I find it hard to believe it needed any work. The entire property is stunning, but I get that it might have been hard to work on the lodge during the ski season.

“Oh, lots of dust and mess,” she comments back, rolling her eyes. “It needed it though. It was stuck in the eighties and did not fit the rest of Badger Creek. Kinda sad though. I grew up skiing here and have worked here since I was fifteen. Change can be hard.”

Holy shit, it feels like this girl is speaking to everything I’ve been feeling. Change is hard, but sometimes necessary.

“It can be hard but think about how great it’s going to be when it’s finished,” I say, trying not to sound like I’m being overly positive. I have no idea how a ski lodge is run or if things will be better for her. “Well, I mean, I hope it is,” I add, laughing a little. “I know nothing about ski lodges.”

Shrugging, Elissa laughs too. “You want to see it?” she now asks, not waiting for my answer as she tips her head in my direction and begins walking to the ski lodge.

Following her, we walk through a door that has a sign boldly stating that no one should enter without a hardhat. There is also a huge sheet of plastic dividing the hallway from the construction, and as soon as we walk through it, I’m hit with a cloud of dust that shows the plastic is working.

“Here, you gotta wear this,” Elissa says, handing me a hardhat and goggles. “I asked them if they could get me a pink

one, but I think they thought I was joking,” she adds, pointing to the hat.

“Pink would up the cool factor while wearing it,” I reply. “You’re already on my kid’s cool list, but a pink hardhat would cement that.”

“You can bring your kid around anytime you want. She thinks I look like a Disney Princess. I’ve been carrying that with me since I met her,” Elissa says, and Sammie is always an ego boost. She makes me feel like the best mom in the world even when things are tough.

“She’s at the daycare center here. I’m sure she’d love a visit from you,” I tell Elissa. “You and Zoey are like celebrities to her.”

“She’s a cool kid,” Elissa says, and I thank her. It’s easy for Sammie to fit in, easier than it is for me. “So Max, huh?” she now adds. “How’d you meet?”

“It just happened organically,” I reply, liking that my start with Max was simple and easy. It wasn’t someone setting us up. He didn’t pursue me. We would just happen upon each other here at Badger Creek and things just grew from there.

“He’s a great guy. I’ve known him for a long time. We went to high school together and were on the ski team, and we work here together.” She watches my face and as much as I don’t want to ask it because Max told me there’s never been anything between them, I’m sure my worry is showing on my face.

“His best friend is my ex,” Elissa suddenly says, like she can read my mind. “You landed Badger Creek’s most eligible bachelor,” she teases.

“I’m not sure I landed him. We’ve just spent some time together,” I admit, knowing that taking it slow with Max could cause him to get bored. And then there was the incident today. I don’t know how he feels about my comment or my sort of kiss. I could have sent him packing, but that’s for the better then. If he can’t handle my opinion on something, then he isn’t the guy for me.

“Max isn’t the kind of guy who spends time with girls,” she says, shaking her head, letting out a chuckle. “Or maybe you’ve made him realize he wants to be that kind of guy.”

“You’re making it sound like I have some magical powers,” I joke, laughing with her now. “You’ve lived here all your life?” I ask, changing the subject, needing to get off the topic of Max before I admit to Elissa that he makes my heart go crazy every time he’s near me. I sound like a fourteen-year-old girl with her first crush.

“Yep, born and raised here. How about you?” she asks, and it feels like the first time someone has asked about me. Max has been hesitant. I can tell he worries about my sudden appearance here in Tahoe. It’s almost like I have it written on my forehead that I’m not a local.

“Florida, born and raised,” I say, echoing Elissa’s terms.

“Must be nice,” she says. “The warm weather.”

“Yeah, it is, but it can get crazy hot. This is a nice change. And I’ve never been skiing. I can’t wait to learn when it snows.”

“Really? I know a great instructor who can teach you,” Elissa comments, and of course I think she’s talking about herself since she runs the ski lodge.

“You?”

“No, silly! Max. He’s an amazing skier and snowboarder. He skied in college and during the ski season he works as a medic.”

I remember Max saying that he worked here, and he also offered to teach Sammie and me to ski, but that was when we first met. I figured he’d be long gone by now, especially with me always having to have Sammie in tow.

“He did offer to teach Sammie and me to ski,” I tell Elissa, smiling as I think back to all the time I’ve spent with Max since we got here.

“Take him up on that offer,” Elissa suggests. “Obviously once we have snow again. He’ll make Sammie a pro in a week

and you'll get to use this beautiful new ski lodge they're building me here."

Elissa brings me to what I would guess is an old office, a group of blueprints and photographs are spread out on a desk.

"Here's what it looked like before they destroyed it," Elissa says, handing me a stack of pictures. "I know it will be better, but it's a bit of a struggle for me. Over here will be the new storage area for boots." She points to an area that is just a framed wall. "Ethan has the best sanitation being installed which will make my job a lot easier."

"I can't wait to see it when it's done."

"Yeah, come by and see it any time you want. We should get together and hang out. It can be tough moving to an area like this. Not being a local and all," Elissa says.

"I'd like that."

"Next week, Zoey and I are meeting for dinner on Friday. You should join us," Elissa says.

"Thanks for the invite, but I don't really have someone to watch Sammie." I shrug, not trying to make it sound like Sammie is holding me back. It's just the life of being a single mom.

"Bring her with you or I can give you the number of someone who can babysit her. A lot of the girls who work for me teaching lessons also babysit. You could even check with some of the teachers at the daycare. They tend to babysit in the evenings too."

"I'll think about it," I say. Leaving Sammie with someone I don't really know makes me a little uneasy. Not that Sammie wouldn't tell me if something went wrong, but still. Besides going to daycare here at Badger Creek, she's never spent time alone with anyone but me.

"Just let me know," Elissa says. "I gotta get back to work, but I hope you decide to join us."

"I'll let you know."

IT'S BEEN A LONG DAY, making dinner, getting Sammie in the bath and off to bed, it feels like I can finally relax when I sit down on the couch.

Just as I'm about to turn the TV on, a knock comes on the front door. Just the sound of a knock causes me to tense up with fear, and I wait a few seconds, hoping whoever it is goes away. But I can't keep living like this even if I am scared.

With my phone in my hand, I walk over to the door, pushing up on my toes to look through the peephole. When I do, I find Max nervously standing on the other side of the door, rocking on his heels, looking around.

"Max, what are you doing here?" I ask, as soon as I open the door, almost excited about the prospect of him showing up here.

"Is Sammie in bed?" Max asks, as I step aside so he can enter.

"She is."

"Harper, I'm sorry about today," he instantly says. "I thought I was being flirty or whatever, but I think I upset you and that was never my intention." His apology makes my heart swell. It's real and raw, and even better, he doesn't try to make me feel like it was my fault. There isn't a but anywhere in his apology.

We're standing in the tiny entryway of the bungalow, our words hushed knowing Sammie is sleeping, but between us there's a connection.

My racing heart hasn't slowed a bit since Max knocked on the door, pounding wildly in my chest at the idea of him being here, at the idea that his apology is real. Being this close to him has my mind swirling with all kinds of thoughts on what it might be like to kiss him for real.

Putting his fingers under my chin, he whispers, "Harper, tell me what happened."

The softness to his words nearly breaks me, wanting to unload everything on him, but I restrain myself, wanting to

remember this moment as something more than just my sad story.

I want to remember this as the first time I've felt heard.

MAX

She stares up at me, the silence of her house practically deafening. I am sure she can hear my heart pounding in my chest. Fuck, it feels like it's going to burst through my ribs any second as I stand here watching her, waiting for her to speak.

My fingers still rest under her chin, the only connection we share, but somehow it feels like enough. Like it's all that either of us can bear in this moment, even if my fingers are itching to pull her closer.

"Harper?" I whisper, her name falling like a question from my lips.

I watch as she opens her mouth as though to speak, but no words come out. Instead, she lets out a soft exhale as she steps toward me and puts her lips against mine. The shock of her kissing me is almost overwhelming, an embarrassingly loud groan falling from my lips as the fingers that were under her chin now curl around the back of her neck.

I feel Harper's hands land on my chest, not pushing me away, just resting there as she kisses me. There is only a sliver of space between us, the heat from her body radiating toward me as I gently tease her bottom lip with my tongue. Teasing her until she parts her lips and the tip of my tongue touches hers, pulling a soft whimper from her mouth.

I don't think I've ever kissed someone this slowly before, but it feels intoxicating.

Eventually though, she pulls back, blinking her eyes open as she looks up at me. I smile back at her, my hand still cradling the back of her neck.

“What was that for?” I breathe out, my heart still pounding in my chest although for entirely different reasons now.

Harper smiles, a slight blush coloring her cheeks as she says, “I don’t know.”

Chuckling, I slowly slide my hand from her neck, but don’t step back, our bodies still close and her hands still resting against my chest. I circle my fingers around one of her wrists, lifting her hand to my mouth as I press a kiss to her palm.

“I get you’re scared, Harper,” I say, my words careful but soft, my gaze locked with hers. “And I get that I need to earn your trust. I want to, okay? I want you to feel like you can talk to me.”

She nods, licking her lips. “I want that too.”

I smile now, threading our fingers together. “Are you working tomorrow?” I ask, silently hoping she isn’t.

“No,” she whispers, shaking her head as though to confirm it.

“Can we do something?” I ask, my eyes flicking briefly behind her as I add, “All of us?”

“Yes,” she says, nodding this time.

My smile widens. “I’ll come by around ten? Dress for the outdoors, okay?”

“Okay,” she confirms, her eyes never leaving mine.

Chuckling again, I lift our joined hands to my mouth again, kissing the back of her hand as I whisper, “Goodnight, Harper.”

“Night, Max,” she breathes out, the hand that’s still resting on my chest slowly dragging down until she reaches my stomach before it drops to her side. My whole body feels electrified from just that one movement, the heat of her fingers

through my t-shirt sending tiny little jolts of electricity all through me.

I give her hand one last kiss before reluctantly letting go of her and stepping back. The front door is still open and I stop on her front porch, the two of us watching each other for a few moments, before I give her one last smile and turn and head back to my car, thinking that of all the ways I thought this would go down, Harper kissing me was not one of them.

THE NEXT MORNING, I wake early, my whole body wired with memories of last night, with the knowledge that I am going to see Harper again today. I have no idea what to expect when I do though, but I don't care, I just want to be around her.

I'm not even sure I can pinpoint exactly what it is that attracts me to her. I mean yeah, obviously part of it is that she's fucking gorgeous, but it's also more than that.

I like the resilience and strength I can see she has, the way she can pack up her and her daughter's entire life and leave whatever was happening to them to come to a place where she knows no one. It takes guts to do something like that and I can't help but admire her for it, even if I have no idea what it is she's running from.

I could take a million guesses as to what it is, and if I had to put money on anything, I'd say it has something to do with Sammie's dad, but I know I have to wait. Wait until I can earn her trust and she tells me.

After I shower and dress, I head into town to grab some supplies, along with two coffees, a small hot chocolate for Sammie and a few pastries for us to share. I also hit up Holden, which doesn't just stock winter gear anymore, as I grab a couple of things for Harper.

It's just after ten when I knock on her door, strangely nervous after everything that took place last night. When she opens the door, I get the feeling Harper is also nervous, offering me a tiny smile as she invites me in, her cheeks that same shade of light pink as when she kissed me last night.

“Morning,” I say, holding out a coffee for her.

“Morning, and thank you,” she replies, taking the cup, our fingers brushing together.

“I got a hot chocolate for Sammie, I hope that’s okay?”

Harper smirks as we walk into the living area. “Still trying to stay in that favorites book, huh?” she teases.

Chuckling, I give her a soft nudge with my elbow. “Maybe, but I got you something too.” Harper raises an eyebrow as she lifts her coffee as if to ask if that’s her present. “Nope,” I say, shaking my head as Sammie comes running into the living room.

“Max!” she shouts, just like she does every time she sees me.

“Hey, kiddo,” I say, ruffling her hair as I hand her the hot chocolate.

“Ohhhh,” she replies, her eyes widening. “Thank you!”

“And also these,” I add, holding up the paper bag that’s already half see-through on account of the butter from the chocolate croissants. “You’ll need your energy for today,” I continue even as Harper gives me a look that I know tells me she knows what I’m doing here.

“What exactly are we doing today?” Harper now asks, giving me a quick once over.

I’m dressed in long pants and a t-shirt, hiking boots on my feet and a baseball cap on my head. With a grin, I pull the other gift from my back pocket and hand it to her. “Hiking.”

Harper’s eyes widen again when she takes the can of bear spray I bought her. “Seriously?”

I take a sip of my coffee, trying to hide the smile at her reaction. “Yep, seriously. I told you I’d take you right?”

Harper’s eyes flick to Sammie, who is completely distracted by the hot chocolate and chocolate croissant she’s practically inhaling, before flicking back to me. “Is it...will it be safe?”

Now I do smile, letting out a soft chuckle as I throw a casual arm around her shoulders, squeezing her briefly before letting go. “I promise you’ll be safe with me, Harper. Both of you.”

AFTER I’VE MADE sure they are both wearing shoes for walking and have the caps I bought from Holden on, we jump in my car and head over to the parking area near the hiking trails on the other side of the lake. We aren’t doing anything too hard considering we have a four-year-old with us and I can almost guarantee we won’t see any bears, but I can still sense the nerves radiating from Harper beside me.

As we park, I reach over and take her hand in mine. “Promise I’ve got you,” I say quietly.

She looks at me, a small smile on her face as she nods once and says, “Okay.”

Outside the car, I grab my backpack from the trunk, handing both Sammie and Harper a water bottle to carry. “You let me know if you want me to carry it,” I say to Sammie. “Or you, if you get tired.”

“Okay, Max!” she shouts, jumping up and down.

Harper laughs, shaking her head at her daughter as I lead them over to the start of the trail. It’s wide enough that Harper and I can walk side by side. Sammie is in front of us, curiously checking out everything as we walk along, throwing a million questions back at me, whose answers go mostly unacknowledged thanks to another distraction.

“She’s curious, huh?” I say, gesturing toward her.

Harper laughs. “Yeah, always has been.”

“That’s good though, right,” I say. “Makes everything seem like an adventure?”

“Hmmm,” Harper murmurs, nodding. “Sometimes I wonder if Sammie doesn’t think life is all one great big adventure. That or a vacation.”

We're both watching her, the two of us walking side by side, our hands occasionally brushing together. "I guess it made moving here with her a little easier," I say, as our hands brush again. This time I curl my fingers around hers, so we are almost holding hands, connected again by the barest of touches, even if it's enough to set my whole body on fire. Again.

Harper doesn't pull away and when I glance down at her, she's got a small smile on her face as she watches her daughter, chatting away to herself a few feet in front of us. "Yeah," she eventually says. "It did."

I squeeze her fingers gently, before changing the subject. "How was the rest of your day yesterday?" I ask, wondering if like me, she thought about that kiss we shared at lunch. Or the even better one we shared last night.

"Good," she says with a shrug. "I ran into Elissa actually, she invited me to go out with her and your sister."

I glance down at her, but she's watching Sammie in front of us. "Cool. You're going, right?"

Harper shrugs. "Maybe, I don't know if I will. I'll have to take Sammie with me."

"I can look after her," I immediately say.

She turns to look up at me, a brow raised in question. "On a Friday night? I can't ask you to do that, Max."

I squeeze her fingers in mine. "You aren't asking, I offered."

She lets out a long, slow breath, but doesn't say anything. I can see the reluctance though, the worry she has about leaving her daughter with someone she barely knows and honestly, I get that.

"Think about it, okay," I continue, not wanting to pressure her. "If it makes you feel better, I'll even ask my mom to come hang with us, you know, so there's one responsible adult with direct parenting experience."

She shoots me a sideways glance that makes me laugh before she turns away, smiling a little. "I'll think about it," she eventually says, squeezing my hand this time.

After about an hour, we come to a clearing on the trail that has a toilet block and some picnic tables. There's no one else around and I reluctantly let go of Harper's hand so she can take her Sammie to the bathroom.

While they are in there, I head over to one of the tables and unpack the food I grabbed, figuring Sammie will be hungry at this point. When they walk back out, Harper is smiling, but shaking her head at me. "What?" I ask.

"Are you ever going to let me get you a meal?"

"You made me spaghetti," I point out as they both take a seat. Harper rolls her eyes, but she's smiling at me. "I like doing this for you," I add, as I turn to Sammie to ask what she wants to eat.

After we've had lunch, Sammie jumps off the bench to wander around the clearing, picking flowers and generally just chatting to herself.

Getting up from my side of the table, I turn and walk around to where Harper sits, the two of us turning so we are facing Sammie as she entertains herself.

"Notice how we've seen no bears," I tease, bumping her shoulder with mine.

She laughs, shaking her head as she says, "We've still got to walk back, haven't we?"

Chuckling, I throw my arm around her shoulders again, pulling her into my side. "We do, but like I said, I've got you." I risk a quick kiss against her temple, my eyes on Sammie, who isn't looking at us.

I'm not sure how much I'm allowed to do in front of Harper's daughter and after last night, I don't want to risk pushing anything too far. She might have initiated the kiss, but she hasn't come close to doing it again and I'm pretty sure she's limiting how much she does in front of Sammie.

“You have to admit, it’s pretty nice out here, right?” I now ask, waving a hand in front of us.

“It is,” she confirms. “It’s beautiful, I can see why you like to come out here.”

“You can come with me anytime,” I say.

Harper turns to face me now, her beautiful brown eyes staring up at me, filled with a million different questions that I can’t begin to understand. I watch as she licks her lips, my gaze dropping to her mouth as a memory of last night’s kiss flashes through my brain. Her eyes flick to Sammie quickly before coming back to me.

“She watching?” I ask quietly.

“No,” Harper breathes out.

I can see her pulse quickening in her neck and I know I don’t have much time to do what I’ve been thinking about since I left her place last night. I risk a quick look in Sammie’s direction and can see she’s sitting with her back to us, chattering away to herself. Turning back to Harper, I lean closer as I whisper, “I’m gonna kiss you, okay?”

Harper gives me the tiniest nod and without waiting another second, I close the distance between us and gently press my lips against hers. I’m not sure which of us lets out the moan, but it happens the second our lips touch, that electricity coursing through me only getting stronger.

With my arm around her shoulder, I pull her closer as I risk deepening the kiss for just a second before reluctantly pulling back. We both turn to where Sammie sits, completely oblivious to the fact we were just kissing.

“Looks like we got away with it,” I murmur, my lips against her temple, pressing another quick kiss before pulling back.

Harper smiles, glancing up at me again as she mouths, “Thank you.”

I return the smile, taking her hand in both of mine. “Anytime,” I whisper, kissing her knuckles.

We both turn back to Sammie again who is now up and picking flowers again. I watch as she runs around the clearing, without a care in the world. Happy and at ease, even though this is a new town and she knows no one.

“My ex,” Harper starts, her words low. “Sammie’s dad, he wasn’t...he wasn’t a good man.”

I turn to her, but she’s watching her daughter, her bottom lip between her teeth now, almost as though she’s trying to stop herself from saying more. As if she didn’t mean to say what she did.

“I’m guessing he doesn’t know you two are here?” I ask, her hand still in both of mine.

Harper shakes her head, another little piece of her puzzle falling into place.

“You know,” I start, turning back to Sammie. “Bear spray is kinda like pepper spray.” From the corner of my eye I see Harper turn to me and when I look down and see the curious expression on her face, I let out a soft laugh. “I mean, I hope you don’t ever need to test it out, but you know, in case you’re ever worried, I hear it’s not just good for taking down bears.”

I watch as the slow smile spreads across Harper’s face before she finally bursts out laughing, shaking her head at me as though she can’t believe what I just told her.

HARPER

It's been a long week, and I've never looked forward to a weekend more. On Monday, one of the housekeeping managers took a leave of absence after having her baby, so things have been a little hectic here. I've been helping with not only cleaning rooms, but also doing the verification process to make sure the other housekeepers are performing their checklist correctly.

Zoey had called me into her office on Monday morning, asking me if I would mind filling in for Wendy while she is on leave. I couldn't say no. I need the money and I really need to work my way up here. I will always have Sammie to support on my own, and I will always work as hard as I can to show her that I can do it on my own.

She had told me she plans to hire someone to fill her spot for the next twelve weeks, but since she went into labor early, Zoey wasn't totally prepared. Since I know she's finding someone, I'm sure I can handle it for a week or two.

It's early, and most of the guests at the lodge are still asleep, but I begin going over the empty rooms, verifying that they're ready for any early check-ins.

I open the door to room 214, only to find that it hasn't been cleaned. It's listed as complete, but it certainly isn't. The beds are unmade, there are towels on the floor and nothing has been vacuumed or cleaned.

I look back at the checklist, reviewing who was responsible for the room and noting the name. With Wendy

going into labor early, I don't think I'll say anything to Zoey. It's possible that Wendy missed inspecting the room and I don't want anyone to think I'm on a power trip.

As I'm stripping the bed, a knock comes on the door, even though it isn't quite closed. Thinking it's a guest who is looking for extra towels or more shampoo or coffee, I walk over to the door.

"Hey," Max says, a huge smile on his face. "Brought you this." He holds out a cup of coffee and a little brown paper bag.

Taking them from him, I step backward into the room with Max following, the door swinging closed, but not latching. I set the coffee and the bag down on the dresser as we both walk fully into the room.

"Thank you, but shouldn't you be at work?" I ask him, noticing his uniform, and the stupid way I find him even hotter while wearing it. It's a simple pair of navy blue pants and a collared shirt, yet he makes it look damn good.

"I am at work. We just stepped out to grab some coffee and figured since I was out, I'd stop by and see you," he replies.

"Who's we?"

"My partner. He's down in the lobby flirting with one of the desk girls," Max says, rolling his eyes.

"And what are you doing?" I press, wondering what his response will be. We've had this sweet flirty thing going on for a while and it's been really fun. We'll steal a kiss here and there, but we've never gone past that, but a part of me is begging for us to take that leap.

"Flirting with the cute girl who works in housekeeping," he replies, coming closer to me, sending my heart racing the way he always does.

I know I have a ridiculously stupid smile on my face, my cheeks beginning to hurt, but I don't care. He makes me so fucking happy. Max is what I've always wanted to find in a guy and it's crazy to me that I've had to travel across the country to find it.

“I’m going to kiss you, Harper,” Max says, and I can’t help the giggle that spills from my lips, the flush that I feel creeping up my face.

“You don’t have to say that every time, you know that, right?” I tease, my hands now resting on his chest, his heart hammering under my touch.

I close my eyes, stepping closer to him, his smell is this intoxicating scent of fresh cut wood and leather, and I want to blanket myself in the way he smells, the way he makes me feel when he’s close to me.

I feel his hand grip the back of my neck as I take in a hard breath, my lips parting in a way that feels desperate and needy. Max’s lips connect with mine and I let out a soft moan, his tongue gently caressing mine. It’s like this guy knows exactly what to do to make me want more. And I want it. I want it all with Max.

“You kiss me like you mean it,” I whisper, Max’s forehead resting against mine. I don’t know why I say it. Impulsivity, desperation to feel something real, the need to be wanted. Whatever it is, it feels far too real and raw this early in the morning, not to mention this early in meeting him.

“I do mean it, Harper. I want more with you, but I know this is new for you, that it isn’t just you and your heart that you have to worry about. But everything between us is real. It’s very real for me and I hope it is for you too.”

“It is,” I say, but I instantly feel too vulnerable. Letting him in is hard, and my mind immediately goes back to everything that I left. Max has given me no reason not to trust him. He’s called when he said he would. He’s been there every time he’s offered to take Sammie and me out. He’s shown up when things got uncomfortable, but better yet, he’s apologized when he knew things weren’t right. All of this means something, and I keep reminding myself of that.

I step away, putting some distance between us as I take in his words. I want to tell Max why I left Florida. I want to tell him about all the terrible things that happened to me and how I’m still struggling to forget them. But I also don’t want him to

think I need saving because that's the last thing I need. If anything, I need someone who will stand by me and let me figure out my life on my own. I had a life that wasn't my own, and I don't ever want that again.

But instead, I step over to the dresser where I placed the bag, peeking inside, I see two peanut butter cookies from this perfect little bakery here in the ski village.

"Max," I croon, walking back over to him, I rest a hand on his cheek. It isn't his fault that I ended up in a relationship that nearly ruined me. He's trying so damn hard, and I need to recognize that. I come with a lot of baggage, but he doesn't seem to care. "Sammie is going to move you to the top of her favorites list for sure."

"I was hoping I'd make it to the top of yours," he says, a little hope slipping out in his words.

"You already are," I tell him, pushing up on my toes to kiss him. "Thank you for coming by every morning with something for me and for Sammie. It really means so much."

"Well, don't get too used to it. I've been on shift for the last three days and that's why I've been out and about. I'm going to crash this weekend," he jokes.

"I'm not saying that it's not the best part of my day when you stop by, but I really need to get this room ready. It was supposed to have been done already," I tell Max, kissing him quickly before I head back to making the bed.

He follows me, taking the other end of the sheet I have and stretching it across the bed. "I'll help," he says, shrugging casually. "Given any more thought to me watching Sammie and you going out with my sister and Elissa tonight?" he now asks, and it's like he read my mind.

I've been thinking about it since Elissa asked me. I really need a night out, but leaving Sammie is hard for me. She's never been away from me besides at daycare. But she adores Max and if I was going to leave her with anyone, he'd be the person I'd choose.

"I have," I reply.

“And?”

“And I think I’m going to go,” I say, quickly adding, “But that’s only if you’re okay with watching Sammie. It’s not a big deal if you can’t. I know you’ve been on shift for the past seventy-two hours and...”

“It’s not a big deal at all,” Max instantly replies. “I want you to make friends here. It has to be hard being away from your family. I remember what it was like when I first left for college. Not that it’s the same thing, but you know, the whole being away from family.”

“I don’t have any family in Florida,” I tell him, and I swear it’s like this guy can suck the honesty right out of me. “I don’t have any family left. Well, besides Sammie.” Fuck, that was probably too much for this early. He’s going to run for the hills.

“Then that’s the perfect reason to go out with the girls tonight,” he replies without a second’s hesitation.

“Max, are you always this perfect?” I ask him, smiling as he tucks the corner of the sheet under the mattress.

“Yep,” he says, laughing, and all I can do is shake my head. “There is something I have to tell you,” he now says, and I swear my heart skips a beat. I hate surprises and this feels like that. My mind races with all the things he could possibly tell me, and none of them are good. I hate that this is where my mind goes immediately, to the negative, to the place I don’t want it to go.

“What’s that?” I ask, my voice shaking with this nervous energy that races through me. Swallowing hard, I force myself to look at him.

“It’s nothing really. I just don’t want you to find out from someone else and be like what the fuck,” he says, picking the duvet up and covering the bed with it.

He has no idea that I’m already like what the fuck. I’m sure it’s written on my face, my heart slamming against my ribs.

“My family is a pretty big name in this town. They own Holden Winter Gear, so I grew up...”

“Wealthy?” I ask, filling it in for him when he stalls out. I’ve seen the name all over the gear in the gift shop here and in lots of the ski and snowboard shops, and there’s even an entire retail store dedicated to it.

I knew his last name and Zoey’s, but I guess I never put the two together. It’s actually a huge relief that this is what he had to tell me. It’s nothing. Thank fuck.

“Yep, and I didn’t want it to be something you heard through gossip or whatever, but it’s cool. I work and my parents are amazing, but Zoey and I didn’t want to work for Holden. Eventually we will, but for now...”

“It’s skiing and being an EMT,” I say, smiling at him, hoping he realizes that I really don’t care about his last name or how much money he has. None of that is important to me. Getting to know who he really is and how he feels about me is what’s important.

“Yeah,” he says, nodding. “So, is it cool if I watch Sammie tonight and you go out?”

“Changing the subject?”

“Not much more to say on the topic and like I said, I want you to go out and have fun. Meet people and enjoy all that Badger Creek has to offer,” Max says just as his radio goes off. “Shit, I gotta go. I’ll be at your place at six.”

He heads over to me, kissing me quickly, he swats me on the butt, making me laugh, before he leaves out the door.

I’M STILL GETTING ready when the knock comes on the door. I hear Sammie squeal with delight, scampering into the bathroom to tell me.

“Max is here, Mommy!” she shouts, the excitement in her voice has my heart bursting with happiness. I was so worried she’d be hesitant to stay with him and have me leave. She

hasn't spent any time alone with him, but when I told her, she was ecstatic.

"Can I answer the door?" she begs, and I shake my head, walking out of the bathroom and looking through the peephole.

"Yep, go for it," I say, when I see it is Max standing outside waiting.

Sammie whips open the door, throwing herself against Max's legs and he scoops her up, tossing her over his shoulder as she laughs, squealing and wiggling around.

"You ready for a great night, Sammie?" Max asks her and she nods her head, running around as soon as he sets her down.

"Doesn't Mommy look pretty?" she asks Max, and like always, I feel my cheeks heat up. I'm not sure I will ever get used to the feeling of freedom that Sammie and I now have. She would never have said something like this before. It makes me so happy that she's coming into her own and finding comfort in our new life.

"She looks beautiful," Max replies, walking over to me and giving me a kiss. "You do," he whispers in my ear, brushing my hair to the side, he places a soft kiss on my neck, sending goosebumps dotting my skin.

"Thank you," I say, looking over at Sammie who is watching us with a huge smile on her face. "She's all ready for bed. She ate dinner and took a bath. She has her pajamas on and when the clock strikes eight, she needs to hit the sack or she'll turn into a pumpkin." I wrinkle my nose at her and give her a wink.

Sammie lets out a giggle as she runs over and flops down on the couch. Patting the spot next to her, she calls for Max to come sit down.

"I've got this. You go have fun. I picked up some books from my parents' house that used to be Zoey's and a couple of games. We're going to have a great time."

“I know you will. Thank you, Max. I can’t thank you enough. I won’t be out late. I know you just got off work,” I tell him, but he shakes his head.

“Have fun. I’ll be here with her.”

“Thank you.” I walk over and kiss Sammie, telling her I love her and then, I give Max a kiss too. This all feels so natural. This is what our life was supposed to be like, and maybe it still will be.

I MEET Elissa at a place called The Matterhorn, finding her sitting in a booth with two other women. One of them is Zoey and the other I haven’t met yet. They’re laughing and each of them have a drink and there seems to be an extra drink on the table when I make my way over.

“Hey, Harper!” Elissa calls over the music and the voices of the crowd. “So glad you could come.”

“Thanks so much for inviting me,” I say, sliding into the booth next to Elissa.

“You know Zoey and this is Delaney,” Elissa says, and Delaney gives a wave. “This is for you.” Elissa slides the extra drink toward me, telling me it’s something they have on special. “I just ordered one for everyone. If it’s gross, we’ll get something else.”

“I’m sure it’s fine,” I reply, taking a sip of something that isn’t too sweet. I actually like it.

“So how are you liking it here so far?” Zoey asks, resting her elbows on the table as she seems genuinely interested in what I have to say.

“It’s been good. The job is great. I really like it, and I love the area here. It’s just beautiful.”

“And how are things with Max?” Elissa now asks, her voice going up at the end when she says Max’s name.

“They’re good too. He’s watching my daughter Sammie right now.” I clench my teeth in a silly way that suggests things might be getting a little crazy.

“I have to say, you must have a serious hold on Max because I have never known him to volunteer to watch someone’s kid,” Zoey jokes. “He even went to our parents’ house to get things to entertain her. It’s so cute.”

“Sammie just adores him. It was really amazing of him to offer to watch her. I don’t get to go out often. Actually, I never get to go out without her,” I add. “The life of a single mom.”

“Then we’re going to make sure you have a great time tonight,” Delaney says, tossing a hand up to signal for our waitress. “And have you back home by eleven and not hungover,” she adds, laughing. “I can’t imagine a hangover and a kid are fun.”

The girls start talking, filling me in on how they all know each other and what it’s like to live and work here at Badger Creek. Delaney’s boyfriend is Max’s best friend, Alex and Elissa used to date another friend of theirs who is off training for the Olympics. These people lead the coolest lives, and they don’t even realize it.

We order a bunch of appetizers and some beers, all of us talking and laughing. It feels so good to be out and making friends. I didn’t have any friends in Florida, most of them disappeared after things got complicated with Sammie’s dad. I miss it.

I’m a little tipsy when we decide to call it a night. It’s around eleven just like Delaney said, keeping things simple for me. It’s nice that none of them think it’s lame to be leaving this early or that I have a kid to get home to.

“I loved hanging out with you!” I call out over the music as we’re walking toward the exit. “I hope we can do it again.”

“Oh my god, yes!” Zoey shrieks, throwing her arms around me in a hug with Delaney and Elissa joining her.

“You know what you should do when you get home?” Elissa says, her words a little slurred with Delaney laughing like Elissa’s question is hilarious.

“What?” I ask, my brows going up with curiosity.

“You should have sex with Max!” she shouts, and Zoey gives her a hearty smack on the arm.

“Elissa!” she squeals, laughing. “You need to mind your own business. I know you haven’t had sex in a while but leave Harper alone.”

“Zoey, did you really have to call me out like that?” Elissa questions, pushing out her bottom lip in a mock pout.

“Go home, Harper,” Delaney tells me, shooing me along as they follow me toward my bungalow. “We’ll make sure you get home and then I’m making sure these two get home too.”

We are all laughing again as we reach my house, and Delaney tells Elissa and Zoey to quiet down, keeping them a short distance from my front door.

“Remember, her kid is in there sleeping and we don’t want to wake her up,” Delaney says, pointing at Zoey and Elissa, almost like she’s the mother of the group.

“Thank you again for a great night, girls. I had so much fun.” I let out a little hiccup that has all of us erupting with laughter.

“Bye, Harper,” the three of them call, and I watch as they walk away before I open the front door.

The house is dark, the only light is coming from the TV, the sound low and I listen to see if Max says anything when I close and lock the door.

Nothing comes and when I walk over to the couch, I find him asleep, his head on one of the pillows, his socks on the floor in front of him. He looks so damn cute. I know he was exhausted from work and I hate to wake him.

I take a blanket from the hall closet and cover him up. Pushing his hair back, I kiss his forehead before heading into Sammie’s room to check on her.

She’s sound asleep, but I swear, even in her sleep, it’s like she has a smile on her face. On her nightstand is a stack of books and there are a few in bed with her. I stand there and

watch her sleep for a few minutes, realizing that leaving was the best thing I've ever done.

I WAKE up the next morning to Sammie climbing into my bed and snuggling up under the covers. The light is streaming in through the slats in the blinds and when I look at my phone, I see it's Sammie's usual wake up time. Seven o'clock.

"Mommy, Max is asleep on the couch," she whispers, and with my eyes closed, I smile.

"I know. Should we get up and make him breakfast?"

"Yes!"

MAX

“M^ax.”

I hear my name being called just as a little hand lands on my shoulder, shaking me. “Max wake up!” It’s a tiny finger poking my cheek now, warm breath brushing across my skin as the voice gets louder. “Max!”

My eyes open to an up-close Sammie, who’s hovering over me, her eyes wide as she watches me sleep. It takes me a second to realize what’s going on, if maybe she’s woken up scared or something and come looking for me. But then I realize the room is light, sunlight streaming in through the windows, which means it must be daytime.

“I fell asleep,” I mumble, blinking my eyes awake, noticing the blanket that’s been draped over me at some point during the night.

Sammie giggles, poking my cheek again. “Yep, you slept on our couch.”

“I did?” I ask, my brain slowly waking up. It feels way too early to be awake.

Sammie laughs again, nodding her head as though to confirm. “Uh huh. You’re lucky because Mommy never lets me sleep on the couch.”

I scrub my hands down my face as Sammie leans against the couch now, her little elbows resting on the cushion beside me, her chin resting in her hands.

“Harper’s home?” I ask, knowing she must be if there’s a blanket over me.

“Yes silly, Mommy’s home!” Sammie says, poking my cheek once more before she stands and says, “Breakfast time! Come on,” before bounding away, filled with the early morning energy that only kids possess. Not that I’d know of course, having virtually no experience with how kids act first thing in the morning.

I sit up, glancing around the room as I shove a hand through my hair. When I turn my gaze to the kitchen, Harper looks over at me, a shy smile on her face. I throw the blanket off, swinging my feet to the floor as I quickly check to make sure nothing is out of place or kid inappropriate.

“Max, come on!” Sammie shouts.

I stand, walking through to the kitchen to where Harper stands at the stove, cooking pancakes. She’s dressed in these cute little boxer shorts with bumblebees on them and a black t-shirt that hangs off her shoulder in a way that clearly tells me she isn’t wearing a bra.

“Morning,” I whisper, my hands sliding onto her hips as I stand behind her, pressing a kiss to the spot where her shoulder meets her neck. Her skin is warm and smells like honey. “I like your pjs,” I add, nuzzling her ear, before kissing her temple. Harper blushes, turning to face me and I press a quick kiss to her lips as I say, “Just gonna use the bathroom.”

I give Sammie’s hair a playful ruffle as I walk past her sitting at the small kitchen table, smiling at the giggle she lets out. She’d been a lot of fun last night, which had surprised me a little. I’m not sure what I was expecting when I volunteered to babysit, but I don’t think I expected to have so much fun hanging out with a four-year-old. So much so that I actually missed her bedtime by fifteen minutes.

After I use the bathroom, quickly finger-brushing some toothpaste on my teeth, I head back to the kitchen, smiling at Sammie who points to the place at the table that’s apparently for me.

“How was your night?” I ask, as Harper walks over to the table with a huge plate of pancakes.

She sits down next to me, smiling at her daughter as she puts a pancake on her plate before offering them to me. “It was really good fun,” she says, as I take two pancakes. “I met Delaney and she’s great, same with Zoey and Elissa.”

“Good, I’m glad you had a good time. We did too, didn’t we, Sammie?” I ask, as I turn my pancake into a smiley face with blueberry eyes, a strawberry nose and a smile made of banana slices. Sammie’s face lights up and chuckling, I do the same to her pancake, before handing her the honey which she promptly drizzles all over it.

“We had loads of fun!” Sammie says enthusiastically. “I got to stay up late!”

I turn to Harper, offering her an apologetic smile. “Only fifteen minutes, my fault, I wasn’t paying attention to the time. Sorry.”

She smiles, shaking her head quickly as she says, “All good, Max. Thank you so much for looking after her, I really appreciate it.”

I reach for her knee under the table, giving it a gentle squeeze. “Anytime. Thanks for letting me crash here, sorry I fell asleep before you got back.”

“You’ve been on shift these last three days, it’s not surprising you crashed.”

“What time did you get in?”

Harper smiles. “It was just after eleven, but you were dead to the world. I didn’t have the heart to wake you,” she adds, biting her bottom lip as she takes a sip of orange juice.

I return the smile, wishing I had woken up when she got home, if only so I could’ve seen her. But I had been exhausted after my three day shift and I’m pretty sure I passed out the second Sammie went to bed. At least I have the weekend off now. I’m about to ask Harper what she’s doing this weekend, but she beats me to it.

“Are you doing anything today?” she asks.

I shake my head. “No, you?”

Harper forks a mouthful of pancake as she looks at her daughter before turning back to me. “I was thinking of taking Sammie to that Summer Festival thing that starts today. Would you like to join us?”

I can’t stop the smile that spreads across my face, my gaze locked with Harper’s as we watch each other. It feels like this thing between us is slowly starting to change, as though she’s finally starting to let me in. I know I have to be patient and I know I have to go slow, but I’m beginning to feel like it’s real and that it’s not just me who’s feeling this.

“Yeah,” I eventually say. “I’d love to.”

AFTER BREAKFAST, I head home to take a shower and change, telling Harper I’ll meet them in front of the lodge at ten so we can head into town.

The Summer Solstice Festival is the official start of summer here at Badger Creek and has been running for as long as I can remember. This whole weekend will be filled with events and activities, stalls, and all kinds of food trucks. And over the next three months, the festival will continue, with outdoor movies, plays, stand-up comedy and everything in between.

I’d been hoping to take Harper to a few things, maybe on an actual date with just the two of us, but I am more than okay with the three of us hanging out together today. I know that dating Harper means I’m also dating her daughter and I’m surprisingly okay with that.

It’s going to be interesting dating a woman with a kid though, which is not something I’ve ever done before. But the more time I spend with Harper, the more I know I want to do this. She’s so different to every other woman I’ve gone out with and I’m not sure if that’s because of everything she’s been through or the fact that neither of us know anything about each other.

One thing I do know is that I really love hanging out with her. And Sammie.

“Hey,” Harper says, as she and Sammie walk up to where I’m waiting. Harper is dressed in jeans and a sleeveless top, her hair pulled back in a ponytail. Sammie is dressed in jeans too and a cute t-shirt that has ‘boss-kid’ written on the front.

“Hi,” I reply, leaning in to kiss her cheek. “I’m just going to get some coffee, you want one?”

Harper laughs. “Are you still tired from work or is it the small child early morning wakeup call?”

I sling an arm around her shoulders, pulling her close. “I’ll admit I’m not really a morning person,” I whisper, kissing the end of her nose. “But it was so worth it to see you in those pjs.”

Harper laughs and we head into the coffee shop at the front of the lodge, my arm still around her shoulders as Sammie grabs my other hand. As we walk inside, I catch a glimpse of the three of us reflected back at me in the glass, and I can’t help but smile at what I see.

At the counter, I order Harper and I coffee and a small hot chocolate for Sammie, paying before Harper has a chance too. When she pouts in protest, I laugh, leaning in to steal a kiss as I whisper, “My treat.”

“Everything’s your treat,” Harper responds, hip bumping me.

“Yeah, but maybe I want to treat you,” I tell her. “I like doing it.” We move down to wait for our drinks, Sammie standing beside me, her little hand still in mine as her eyes take in the display case that’s filled with pastries and cakes.

“Seriously, how are you real?” Harper asks, a small smile on her face.

Grinning, I lean in and rest my cheek against hers, so my mouth is by her ear. “I promise you I am, Harper,” I whisper. “And so is this,” I add, squeezing her shoulder.

“I know,” she replies when I pull back. “But how? How has no one else snapped you up?”

I laugh. “I mean I have been away at college, but maybe I just wasn’t interested in anyone else.”

“Why?”

She looks up at me with genuine confusion, a million questions flashing across her face as though she cannot comprehend why I am interested in her. I lift a shoulder, even as my earlier thoughts come back to me. “I don’t know,” I say honestly. “It’s not like I haven’t dated anyone in this town before, but none of them were you,” I tell her, smiling. “And what I like about you is that we are both new to each other, so we’re both learning as we go along,” I add, meaning it.

When I’d told her about my family yesterday, I’d done it because I knew I’d eventually have to. But there was a part of me that loved the fact that she had no idea who I was or the history of my family in this town. It’s not that I’m ashamed of it, far from it, but being a Holden means something. Including the fact that everyone knows who you are and what you’re worth. And with that comes a whole list of problems that Zoey and I are all too familiar with.

It’s part of the reason why she and Ethan work so well, because he doesn’t give a single shit about Zoey’s trust fund because he has a bank balance that’s probably just as big. And while I know that isn’t something I necessarily look for in a girlfriend, I do like the idea of being with someone who doesn’t know or care about my trust fund.

Harper shakes her head a little, but she’s smiling. “There’s no way you’re real,” she whispers.

Chuckling, I pull her close, pressing a soft kiss to her lips, liking that she doesn’t seem to mind me doing this now. “Sure I am,” I murmur, just as our coffees are called.

Once we have our drinks, we head back outside to walk into town. Sammie walks in front of us, holding her hot chocolate with both hands, while we follow, my arm still around Harper’s shoulders. The streets get busier the closer we

get to town and by the time we reach the main square, there are people everywhere.

Harper calls for Sammie, taking her daughter's hand so she doesn't get lost as I spy my sister and Ethan over by the Holden store, watching the rock-climbing display that's been set up outside. A couple of years back, Mom and Dad started branching out, adding an outdoor range of equipment to the Holden brand to capitalize on summer activities here in Tahoe. As a result, they now stock all sorts of camping and hiking gear. And are once again killing it in sales.

I lead Harper and Sammie toward them, just as Zoey turns and sees us, a huge smile breaking out on her face. I watch as she leans back to say something to Ethan, who stands behind her, his arms wrapped around her shoulders, before he looks over and smiles, giving us a quick wave. When we are close, Zoey steps out of Ethan's embrace, giving Harper a hug before she turns to Sammie, who looks up at my sister and shouts, "Elsa!" making Zoey laugh.

As the three of them chat, I turn to Ethan, giving him a quick hand clap, handshake combo. "Hey, how's it going?" I ask.

He smiles, rocking on his heels a little as he glances at the three girls before turning back to me. "All good, how are things with *you*?" he asks, brow raised in question as he gives me a smirk.

Laughing, I roll my eyes because I have no doubt Zoey has told him all about me and Harper, probably including the fact I looked after her daughter while they all went out last night. "Good," I reply.

Ethan laughs as he says, "Clearly."

We both turn to the girls. Zoey is crouched down in front of Sammie, laughing at whatever she is saying to her. The kid's got a huge smile on her face, her eyes wide as she reaches over and gently runs her fingers through Zoey's hair, making her laugh again.

“You seeing this,” I say, elbowing Ethan as we both watch my sister with Harper’s daughter.

Ethan’s smile only gets wider as he watches Zoey who clearly has Sammie enraptured with whatever she’s saying. “Uh huh.”

“Not worried then?” I tease.

He turns back to me now, still smiling as he says, “What, of this? No fucking way. I’m ready whenever she is.”

Now it’s me raising a brow in question, not realizing my sister and he have had this conversation. I mean I know they are serious and everything, that’s obvious, but kids. Shit.

“Seriously? Is that like something that’s happening soon?” I ask, genuinely curious.

Ethan shrugs. “Nah, not anytime soon,” he says, still smiling. “But one day, yeah, for sure.”

“Wow,” I breathe out and Ethan just laughs.

“What, don’t tell me you didn’t realize that Zo and me are serious?” he asks, laughing. “You do realize I am completely in love with your sister, don’t you?”

“Fuck off,” I reply, smiling. “Yes, of course I know all of this.”

“Maybe the same can be said for you,” he says, flicking a quick sideways glance at Harper. “Your parents are here, maybe they need to meet her?”

He’s being a shithead now and we both know it. Still, I really like that he and I are friends and can give each other shit like this. After our rocky start, we’ve definitely grown close and now, I can’t imagine anyone better suited for my sister.

“Hmmm,” I reply, non-committal, just as Zoey stands and she and Harper join the conversation.

“Babe, I don’t think you’ve actually met Harper and her daughter, Sammie, have you?” Zoey asks, as Ethan throws an arm around her shoulders again.

“I haven’t, but it’s nice to meet you both,” he says, smiling at them. “How are you liking Badger Creek?”

“Ethan owns the resort,” Zoey clarifies, smiling at him.

“*We* own the resort,” he says, correcting her as he kisses her temple.

Zoey rolls her eyes, but it’s playful as she turns back to Harper. “Harper has been filling in as the housekeeping manager and doing an amazing job.”

I turn to Harper, who is blushing now, clearly not expecting the compliment. “That’s great, I didn’t know you were doing that,” I say, taking her hand and squeezing it.

Harper shrugs as though it’s no big deal. “It’s just temporary until Zoey hires a replacement.”

“Maybe you should be the replacement,” Ethan says, before turning to Zoey. “What do you think?”

Zoey beams up at him and I can’t tell if it’s because she likes his suggestion or because she’s just being her usual mushy self when it comes to this guy. “I think that’s an excellent idea,” she replies, turning back to Harper. “What do you think? Would you like to stay in the job?”

Harper’s blush deepens and I watch as she swallows hard, almost as though she’s nervous. I squeeze her hand again, trying to let her know that she’s got this, wanting her to believe it for herself. She glances at me and I give her a smile, lifting her hand to my lips to press a kiss to her knuckles.

“Okay,” she eventually says, exhaling. “That sounds great, thank you.”

Zoey’s smile widens just as my mom suddenly appears behind her and Ethan, she doesn’t miss the fact that I am holding Harper’s hand as she says, “Max, I wasn’t expecting to see you here?”

HARPER

“**M**om,” Max says, a smile on his face as his grip on my hand tightens. I expect him to let go or at least loosen his hold, but he doesn’t. “Yeah, I came with my girlfriend Harper and her daughter Sammie.”

He says this with such enthusiasm and conviction that I now think we are boyfriend and girlfriend. We haven’t talked about it at all, and we haven’t moved beyond kissing, but we do spend a lot of time together and he’s the first person I think about when something good happens.

“Oh,” Max’s mom responds, and it’s clear she has heard nothing about me. “It’s great to meet you, Harper and I’d love to say Max has said great things about you, but my son here has been pretty mum about having a girlfriend.” She’s laughing as she says it, hitting Max with a little bit of a side eye. “I’m Pam,” she now adds, holding out a hand to me and I take it, shaking it.

“In Max’s defense,” I start, looking over at him as Sammie throws her arms around his legs,” it’s all pretty new.”

“Pick me up, Max,” Sammie half whines, half giggles, and he reaches down, heaving her off the ground. He tosses her in the air before settling her on his hip.

“It seems that both of my children like to keep their relationships a secret,” his mom jokes, winking at Max as she reaches up and gives Sammie’s braid a little tug. “And how old are you?”

“I’m four,” Sammie replies, beaming like she’s just told her she won the lottery. Sammie loves any and all attention especially when it’s all focused solely on her.

“Mom, I didn’t keep my relationship a secret,” Zoey replies, letting out a hard sigh. “It was all new, just like Max and Harper.” Zoey looks over at me rolling her eyes and shaking her head. “She loves to think that we’re still at that age where we share everything with her.”

“Zoey, you will always be my baby,” Pam croons, patting Zoey on the cheek. “Sammie, you want some cotton candy?” Pam now asks, directing her attention to Sammie who is looking around at the people getting set up for the upcoming parade.

“Mommy?” Sammie says, saying my name with a question attached, a huge smile on her face as she waits for my answer.

“There’s a booth set up a little way down from the store. Is it okay if I take her over there and get her some?” Pam asks, looking to both Max and me for an answer. It’s really sweet how Max’s mom has just accepted us as part of her group, not even questioning who I am or how I met Max. It feels good to be trusted, and even better that Max’s mom isn’t at all weirded out by the fact that I’m a young mother.

“We’ll go with you, Mom,” Max replies, as we wave to Zoey and Ethan who are walking back toward the center of the village. Max lifts Sammie up so she’s sitting on his shoulders. Giggling wildly, she wraps her hands around Max’s head, and he pretends he can’t see where he’s going, pretending to stumble.

“Max!” Sammie squeals with delight. “You’re going to drop me!” Her little laughter fills the air, and every time I hear it, it makes me so damn happy that I decided to leave. She needed this. We both needed it.

“Never!” Max shouts in response, clutching her legs as they hang over his shoulders. “You’ll always be safe with me.”

Holy shit, I can’t even believe this is my life. Listening to Max interact with Sammie, telling her she’ll always be safe

with him, has my heart bursting, and I swipe away the tears that prick the corners of my eyes. I believe every word he says, and there's something about it that makes me feel like this is home. This is where Sammie and I were always meant to be.

"Are we going to get some cotton candy or what?" Pam now asks and Sammie screams out a resounding "yes", which makes all of us laugh.

"I guess she's in charge now," I respond back, and Max leans over, dropping a kiss along my temple as he follows his mom to the cotton candy booth.

Sammie picks a bag of mixed blue, pink and purple cotton candy, which is aptly named Unicorn Floss, something I wouldn't have been able to sway her from to begin with.

The town is buzzing with people, the streets filled with booths and vendors, all trying to promote their outdoor products and winter items despite the nice weather. I'm excited to see what it's like to live here when the weather does turn cold. I've heard of places around here getting tons of snow. Since Sammie has never seen snow, it will be wonderful to experience that with her.

I look over and Sammie's face is covered in pink, her fingers a sticky mess that she is currently resting on Max's head. He's definitely going to need a shower after this, and Sammie a bath.

"I've got to get back to the store," Max's mom says, motioning toward the crowd that seems to be growing outside the doors of the Holden store. "Your dad is going to kill me for running off like this." She pauses for a second, smiling at Sammie as she chows down on the cotton candy. "How about you guys come by the house tonight. We can watch the fireworks from the back deck. Your dad was planning to grill some burgers. What do you say?"

Pam is looking at me, waiting for my response, like she knows I'm the one who will say yes or no. If it were up to Max, we'd spend every minute together and I'm starting to feel the same way.

“Sure,” I almost instantly reply, hoping Max is okay with it. “Think you can stay awake for the fireworks?” I ask, directing my question at Sammie, tickling her side, making her giggle.

“Yes,” she answers. “I love staying up late. Remember when you watched me, Max and we stayed up late?”

“I remember, Sammie. You’re never going to let me live that down, are you?” Max answers, shaking his head. “We’ll meet you back at the house after the parade,” Max tells his mom and she bids us a goodbye, walking back to the store.

“Your mom is really nice,” I say, as we make our way back to the street where the parade will take place, the street already growing thick with people.

“You sure you’re okay with going to their house tonight?” Max asks, not acknowledging my comment about his mom.

“I am. Are you?”

“Yeah, it’s all good. I just wanted to make sure you didn’t feel like you were railroaded into it. She can be that way, but she means well,” Max admits.

It’s been so long since I’ve felt welcomed by someone’s parents that I will take Max’s mom’s invitation willingly.

“I didn’t feel that way at all. Although I was caught off guard by you saying I’m your girlfriend.” I look up at Max as he stops for a second, staking out an area on the curb. He lifts Sammie, all sticky and a mess, off his shoulders and sets her down.

“Was that too much?” I can hear the hesitation in his voice. “I didn’t want to call you my friend because I’m going to be honest with you, Harper, it feels like more than that to me.”

“Mommy, is Max your boyfriend?” Sammie chirps out, as I pull some baby wipes from my bag, swiping at her sticky pink cheeks. “If he’s not yours, I want him to be mine.”

We both laugh, Sammie’s eyes wide, taking in our faces. “What?” she asks, holding her messy hands up in surprise.

“Yes, Max is my boyfriend,” I answer her, not wanting to keep this a secret from her. It feels better to tell her the truth than to lie to her.

She likes Max and I want him to feel like he’s an important part of our lives. But I also worry she’s going to mention her dad, wondering if it’s okay for me to have a boyfriend or if Max could be her new dad. Kids are like that, no filter, but Sammie stays quiet, taking a wipe from me, she rubs it between her hands.

“I like the sound of that,” Max replies, leaning in and kissing me. “Think this looks like a good spot to catch the parade?”

“Why not.”

A COUPLE OF HOURS LATER, we’re walking back to my place, with Max carrying Sammie who pooped out about halfway through the parade, napping in my lap.

“I’m going to head home and get cleaned up,” Max whispers, following me inside and setting Sammie down on the couch.

She rubs at her eyes, rolling around a little bit, but unable to get comfortable again, she wakes up, a bit of a grumpy face on her.

“Mommy,” she says, her voice groggy and hoarse. “I still want to go to the fireworks. Don’t forget.”

“I didn’t forget. Max is going to go home and shower so he can get rid of his sticky hair and then we’ll go watch the fireworks.”

Sammie lays back down, her eyes still a little heavy and I push back her hair, bending down to kiss her forehead. She’s been having so much fun here that it feels like a vacation, and I have to agree with her. Back in Florida, we barely left our condo since I didn’t have a job and she wasn’t going to school or daycare. If we did go out, it was to the beach, everything else was too far to walk to.

Being here in Tahoe has been a dream come true. I haven't needed a car and with the discounted childcare and low rent, we have more than enough money to survive on. Even better, the library is close and we spend a lot of time there when I'm not working.

"I'll be back to pick you both up. We have to drive over to my parents' house," he tells me as we walk toward the front door. "I picked up a booster seat for Sammie since I figured you didn't have one."

"Max, you didn't have to do that, but you're right, I don't have one." I'm not sure why, but I'm suddenly overcome with a sense of guilt at Max buying a booster seat for Sammie. It's something I should have, but I don't. I don't even have a car, and it's things like this that make me realize that I wasn't fully prepared when we left Florida. I'm not sure how I could have been though.

"I know that, and get that look off your face," Max says, smiling as he lifts my chin to look at him. "I know what you're thinking, Harper."

"You do?"

"I've gotten pretty good at reading you, and no you should not feel bad that you don't have a booster seat for Sammie. You don't even have a car."

"Fine," I reply, blowing off the fact that he is totally right. It's crazy that we've only been together for a few weeks, but it feels like much longer.

I push up on my toes, kissing him with a smile on my face. "We'll see you in a bit."

MAX PULLS UP OUT FRONT, and Sammie has been waiting at the window for the last thirty minutes, impatient as hell.

"Mommy, Max is here!" she shouts, and I grab the bag I packed with a pair of pajamas for Sammie in case it's a late night, along with some snacks and a few things to keep her entertained should we need it.

Sammie flings open the front door before I can reach it, and as much as I don't want to scare her, I say it anyway. "Don't forget, we don't open the door unless I tell you to."

"But it's Max, Mommy," she replies, rushing out to greet him with a hug. He scoops her up, carrying her to the car. Opening the door, he puts her in the booster, buckling her in and making sure the straps are right before closing the door.

"Here, Harper, I'll get that," Max says, taking the bag from my shoulder and putting it in the trunk. "You sure you're ready for this?" he now says, a smirk on his face.

"Ready for what?" I question, my brows knitted together.

"For spending time with my family? It feels like that would be a big deal to you."

It probably should be a big deal, but everything with Max feels easy and right and perfect. There's nothing about this that has me nervous or worried, and that says something. My past relationship was red flag after red flag and I tried to ignore them. With Max there hasn't been one thing that has caught my attention, or Sammie's for that matter, and I'm starting to think she's a far better judge of character than me.

"I'm definitely ready," I reply, looking over my shoulder as I get in the car, buckling my seatbelt. "You ready, Sammie?"

"Fireworks! Fireworks!" Sammie chants from the backseat.

"The queen has spoken," Max jokes. "Fireworks it is!"

TEN MINUTES later we're pulling up to a gated entrance, and Max rolls down his window, greeting the security guard with a wave.

"Just heading to my parents'," he says, and the gate goes up, opening to some of the biggest houses I've ever seen. It's basically just one street with houses on either side and the lake surrounding them. It's a peninsula of wealth, and Max did

warn me that he came from money, but I guess even I didn't know what to expect.

He drives almost to the end of the street, coming to a driveway which is also gated, and Max pulls up, typing in a code, the gate swinging open.

"This is a big house!" Sammie exclaims from the backseat, her eyes wide as she takes it all in.

"It is," Max replies. "And you want to know the best part?"

"What?" she squeals, the excitement in her voice contagious.

"There's a private beach at my parents' house, where you can swim in the lake and watch the fireworks at the same time."

Holy shit, how did I land this guy?

MAX

I grab Sammie from the back seat, carrying her in my arms as we make our way to the front door, noticing the familiar black Range Rover parked over by the garage. Harper is beside me and despite her saying in the car that she was ready for this, I can still sense the nervousness radiating from her.

“You have nothing to worry about,” I say, reaching for her hand.

“I’m not worried,” Harper replies as we reach the front door.

I lean in so Sammie can push the doorbell as I put my mouth at Harper’s ear. “Yeah you are, but it’s kinda cute.”

“No, I’m—”

The rest of her sentence is cut off by the door opening to reveal my sister on the other side. “Zoey,” I say, not at all surprised she’s here, given it’s Ethan’s car over by the garage.

“Max,” Zoey replies, as Sammie throws up her arms and yells, “Elsa!” My sister gives me a sly grin before she turns to greet Sammie and Harper.

“I didn’t know you were gonna be here,” I say as we step inside.

Zoey sidles up beside me, pinching my side as she says, “I know, but not a chance in hell I was missing this.”

“What?” I ask, lowering Sammie to the floor as I take her hand in mine.

Zoey laughs, linking her arm through mine as she leans in close and whispers, “You bringing a girl home and Mom grilling you about it. I can’t wait!”

I give her a quick elbow in the side. “You are such a shit head.”

My sister sticks her tongue out at me before she lets go to switch to my other side and take Harper’s arm in hers. “I’m so glad you guys decided to come over tonight. It’s an amazing view of the fireworks from here,” she says, dragging Harper into the house. Sammie lets go of my hand and follows after them, taking Zoey’s other hand in hers now, as I watch them go.

I smile because I am grateful my sister is here. Yeah, she might be a pain in my ass at times, especially given she’s only come over to enjoy the grilling I know I’m in for from Mom. But I love how she’s also acting as a buffer for Harper, and how welcoming she’s been to her, inviting her out with Elissa and Delaney, giving her a job, hell giving her that promotion.

I might not know what happened to Harper in her past, but I can guess enough to know how much she needs all of this. And how much it means to her too.

I walk into the kitchen to find Harper and Zoey chatting with Mom as she gets drinks for everyone, Sammie already up on a stool at the island, a huge smile on her face. Through the open glass doors, I can see Ethan and my dad out on the back deck by the grill.

“Hey, Mom,” I say, leaning in to give her a kiss.

“Max,” she says, giving me a smile. “Your dad and Ethan are outside.”

I laugh, because of course we all know that given the huge glass doors that lead out to the back deck come directly off the kitchen. “Okay, thanks. So, I’ll just leave so you can quiz Harper about me and her, shall I?”

“Pfft,” Mom scoffs, smacking my arm. “I will do no such thing.”

“Riiiiight,” I reply, walking over to where Harper sits beside Sammie. “I’m just outside if you need me, okay?”

Zoey laughs as my mom scoffs again, muttering, “She’ll be fine.”

Rolling my eyes, I give Harper a quick kiss before I walk over to the doors leading out to the deck to join Dad and Ethan.

“Max,” my dad says as soon as I step outside.

“Hey, Dad,” I reply, greeting him and then Ethan with a quick hug. “Thanks,” I add when Ethan hands me a beer from the bar fridge.

“So,” Dad starts, rocking on his heels, a huge grin on his face. “I understand you have a new lady friend?” Ethan bursts out laughing at this, my dad grinning as he glances at him in a way that clearly says they’ve been discussing this, before turning back to me, waiting for my reaction.

“Lady friend? Really, Dad?” I say, shaking my head at him. “What are you, like eighty?”

“Stop deflecting,” Dad says, which only makes Ethan laugh harder. “Why is it we’re only learning about this now?”

I turn to my future brother-in-law, who’s leaning back against the counter smirking at me. “You know you’re not helping, right?” I say, pointing my beer bottle at him.

“I’m not doing anything,” Ethan says with a grin as he takes a sip of his beer.

“Bullshit,” I mutter. “But in any case, you didn’t know about it because it’s really new. I wasn’t hiding anything, unlike some people,” I add, giving Ethan a pointed look. “But yeah, Harper and I are dating.”

“Is it serious?” Dad asks and once again, Ethan chuckles, clearly enjoying this interrogation, knowing he was certainly on the receiving end of it from me when he and Zoey first hooked up.

I roll my eyes, taking a sip of my beer. “It’s new, Dad, that’s all. But I like her. A lot.”

“She has a kid,” he states.

“Yep.”

“And...”

“And what?” I ask, figuring this line of questioning was coming sooner or later. I’m just glad Harper isn’t outside to hear it, although god knows what questions she’s getting inside from my mom and sister.

“And do you know the story behind all of that?” he asks, glancing inside at the kitchen.

I let out an exhale. “No, not really,” I reply. “I know her ex isn’t a good guy and I know she’s moved to Tahoe to start fresh, but beyond that, I don’t know anything more.”

Dad nods, watching me for a second. I can almost guess what’s on his mind and the way he’s trying to decide if he should ask me or not. I don’t blame him either, but I am glad he’s doing it out here.

“I know what you’re thinking,” I eventually say, putting him out of his misery. “She didn’t know anything about me. She literally moved to town a few weeks ago and no, it was me pursuing her,” I add, as if to clarify.

“I wasn’t going to ask,” Dad responds, holding a hand up.

I take a sip of my beer. “Yeah, but you were thinking it,” I say. “And yes, I get it alright. I know what being a Holden means, just like I know some people try to take advantage of that. But Harper isn’t like that.”

“Okay, Max, I’m not saying she is, but if she has a past with a bad ex. An ex who’s also the father of her child and so might be looking for her, well, you never know what can happen when he finds out she’s moved on with you.”

I turn toward the kitchen, watching as Harper laughs at something my mom has just said, Sammie sitting beside her, a huge grin on her face as she watches the three women chat animatedly. “I don’t think he knows where she is,” I say quietly. “And I’m pretty sure she wants to keep it that way.”

A hand lands on my shoulder and when I turn back, Dad is looking at me, a serious expression on his face. “You really like her, huh?”

“Yeah,” I reply with a nod. “I really do.”

He smiles now, squeezing my shoulder. “That’s good, Max, I’m glad. Just be careful, that’s all I’m saying.”

I glance over at Ethan who’s watching us with a sympathetic expression because he also knows all too well what having a name and money can do to people. How people somehow think they are entitled to some of it, just because they know you. And how they will resort to all sorts of things just to get a piece of it.

“I will,” I eventually say as the girls all walk out to join us on the deck.

Ethan grins, reaching for Zoey as he pulls her into his arms, deflecting from the serious conversation that was taking place out here. Grateful, I also reach for Harper, slinging an arm around her shoulder as I introduce her and Sammie to my dad.

“Nice to meet you,” Harper says, shaking his extended hand. “And thank you so much for inviting us tonight.”

“You’re more than welcome, Harper,” he says, and I can tell it’s genuine. “And what about you, Little Miss, are you ready for a burger and some fireworks?” he asks, smiling down at Sammie.

“Yes!” she shouts, making us all laugh.

DINNER IS FUN AND EASY, my family all making sure Harper and Sammie feel welcome and have enough to eat. It’s really nice being here with them too and I love that nothing about tonight seems to be making them uncomfortable.

“You know Jeff only means well, don’t you?” I turn to my left, where Ethan sits beside me. “Before,” he adds, nodding toward the grill area where we were talking earlier. His voice is quiet enough that only the two of us are part of this

conversation. Zoey on his other side, distracted by some story Mom is telling.

“Yeah, I know,” I say, quickly glancing at Harper on my other side to make sure she also isn’t listening.

“Everyone thinks being rich makes life easier, but you and I both know that isn’t always true,” Ethan says. “Zo and I obviously got lucky because...well, for obvious reasons. But I also know from past experience how dollar signs change people.”

I nod, knowing that everything he’s saying to me is true. God, even I’ve seen people change when they find out who my family is. “I get it and I know Dad didn’t mean anything by it,” I say. “But I also know Harper isn’t that kind of person. She legit had no idea who I was when we first met, hell not even when we first kissed or when I made it clear I was interested in her.”

Ethan smiles now. “Yeah, I don’t get that vibe from her either,” he says, before adding, “You really like her huh?”

I smile, nodding slowly. “Yep, I do. I’m guessing you know exactly what that’s like.”

Ethan chuckles, reaching for Zoey’s hand as he lifts it to his lips and plants a kiss on her knuckles. My sister looks over and smiles at him, the two of them sharing a private moment, even sitting here at the table with all of us.

“You’re a total fucking sap, you know that right,” I say, nudging Ethan with my shoulder.

He lets out a loud laugh, shrugging as if to say he doesn’t care one single bit. Just as Zoey is about to ask something, the first of the fireworks explode in the night sky, making Sammie squeal in excitement.

“Should we head down to the beach?” Dad asks, standing from his chair.

“Yes,” Mom says, doing the same. “Sammie, come with me, we don’t want you getting lost,” she says as she reaches down to pick Harper’s daughter up.

I smile at Harper, squeezing her hand as we watch them go.

“Aww, would you look at that, here’s you giving them their first taste of being grandparents,” Ethan says, his words low and teasing.

I laugh, shaking my head as I mutter, “Fuck off. Like you won’t be doing that soon.”

BY THE TIME the fireworks are over, it’s late and Sammie is fast asleep in my mom’s arms. As we all make our way up the sandy path from the beach back to my parents’ place, Mom says, “Are you staying tonight? It’s very late for Sammie and she’s fast asleep.”

I glance at Harper as we walk hand in hand behind my mom. “You want to?” I ask her, leaning close as I add, “We don’t have to share a room, you can sleep with Sammie.”

Even in the darkness, I can see the blush that colors her cheeks. “Are you sure it’s okay if we do?”

Chuckling, I lift our joined hands toward my parents in front of us. “You kidding, she’s loving this.”

Harper smiles now, squeezing my hand as she whispers, “Okay, if you don’t mind, it might be a good idea. I should be able to get her in her pjs without waking her.”

I tug her closer, pressing a kiss to her temple. “I don’t mind at all.”

Inside the house, we all say our goodnights, Zoey and Ethan also choosing to stay the night. As we head down to the separate wing that houses mine and Zoey’s old bedrooms, I point out the spare room where Harper and Sammie can stay. As much as I’d love to have her sleep in my room, I get that we aren’t there yet.

“Night!” Zoey says, giving Harper and then me a hug. Ethan gives us both a grin and nod before the two of them disappear into Zoey’s old room.

“I’ll get you something to sleep in,” I say as I show Harper to the spare room before heading to my old room to grab a t-shirt. I don’t have much of my stuff here, but Mom has always insisted on keeping our rooms available for whenever we want to stay over. It’s nice being able to come here and chill whenever.

“Here you go,” I say, handing her one of my old t-shirts. “There should be towels and toothbrushes and stuff in the bathroom,” I add, pointing to the adjoining room. “Use whatever you need.”

“Thank you, Max,” Harper says.

I smile, stepping closer to her. “Looks like she’s out for the night,” I say, nodding my head at Sammie who is already changed and fast asleep in the bed behind her.

Harper smiles. “Your parents wore her out. They’re amazing by the way.”

“I think you’re amazing,” I whisper, leaning in to press a soft kiss to her lips.

She smiles against my mouth, her hand moving to my hip. “Thank you for today, we both had a great time.”

I kiss her again, a little deeper this time. “You’re very welcome. I’m glad you had fun.” Harper kisses me now, the kiss slow but intense as I slide my arms around her and pull her closer. “I’m just next door if you need anything,” I eventually say, breathless and a whole lot turned on.

I’ve no doubt Harper can feel what this kiss has done to me, but she makes no move to pull away, pressing up on her toes to kiss me again. “Thank you.”

I pull back though, knowing it’s already a struggle to stop this from going any further. “Goodnight, Harper,” I whisper, by thumb brushing across her jaw.

“Goodnight.”

Inside my room, I let out a long, slow breath, stripping off my t-shirt and jeans as I make my way toward the adjoining bathroom. I’m fucking hard just from that kiss and there’s no

chance I can fall asleep like this, so I figure a shower and some quick hand action should sort things out.

Just as I reach the door to my bathroom though, pulling off my boxer briefs as I turn on the water in the shower, a soft knock sounds at the door. Sure, I've misheard it, I stop, looking back over my shoulder at the closed bedroom door.

The room is silent, the only sound is that of my breathing and the pounding of my heart in my chest. Just when I'm about to step into the bathroom and take that much needed shower, the knock comes again and this time I know I heard it.

HARPER

I have no idea what I'm doing when I knock on Max's bedroom door. I debated in the bedroom I'm sleeping in for what felt like forever, checking multiple times to see that Sammie was for sure asleep. She's out like a light, exhausted from the day at the parade and now spending the evening running around the private beach on the Holden property and trying to stay up late to watch the fireworks.

This is the first time in my life that I haven't just felt like Sammie's mother, someone undesirable and weak. I feel independent and wanted and strong, and making the decision to uproot my child with no plan other than to get away, feels like the best decision I've ever made.

Without waiting for Max to answer, I open the bedroom door, catching him just as he's wrapping a towel around his waist. He's naked from the waist up and while I've seen him like this before, nothing prepares me for this moment of us, alone in his bedroom, desire pooling hot between my legs.

"Harper," Max gasps, and I can't help but giggle at his response, his eyes wide, his cheeks flushing pink. "You okay? Is Sammie okay?"

"I'm fine," I tell him, wetting my lips. Maybe I should have had a plan before I came busting in here, but I'm totally unprepared and I love it.

"And Sammie?" he prompts, asking again, and I swear like hell there's nothing sexier than this guy in front of me and his concern for my kid.

“She’s asleep,” I whisper, closing the door and walking through the bedroom toward where he stands in the bathroom, my fingers tracing a path down his bare chest. I watch him swallow hard, his eyes falling to where my bottom lip is pinched between my teeth. “Are you okay?” I now ask, wetting my lips again as I look down at where the towel has an obvious bulge.

“I’m fine,” he mutters. “I was just about to get in the shower and...” he trails off, his voice cracking a little, and holy shit if this isn’t so perfect.

It’s been so long since I’ve felt like someone has wanted me, and standing in this bathroom with Max, the hot shower filling it with steam, I’m so fucking turned on. I was turned on the moment he kissed me just outside the bedroom, his hard-on pressing into my hip.

“You were just about to get in the shower and what?” I ask, hearing myself, the boldness of my question, loving that Max has made me feel so sexy.

“I was about to jerk off,” he admits, the flush moving down his cheeks and onto his chest. “I think this is the most action my hand has had since I was fifteen,” he jokes, and we both let out a chuckle.

“Can I help?” I ask, my words coming out as murmurs of seduction, and I swear this boy makes me feel like he’s never been around anyone hotter or anyone who has turned him on more. I’d be lying to myself if I said he didn’t do the same thing for me.

But I don’t wait for him to answer, my fingers sliding into where the towel is tucked around his waist, letting it fall to the floor.

My eyes instantly drop to his dick, and I don’t even realize I’ve said it until the words slip from my mouth. “Oh my god, you’re fucking huge.”

Max’s head falls back, letting out a laugh, but that laugh turns to a moan when my hand circles around his hard length, stroking him gently.

“Like this?” I murmur, my tongue slipping out to trace a path along his swollen bottom lip. His breath is coming out in quick puffs, encouraging me on. “Max?” I question when he doesn’t answer me, my thumb moving in a circle around the head of his dick.

“Fuck, Harper,” he groans out and with each word, with each ragged breath, it pushes me for more.

“Not tonight,” I whisper, my lips trailing a path along his cheek till I reach his ear. “We’re saving that for another night.”

“Yes, like that,” he responds, his hips moving instinctively in time with my hand. “But, Harper...oh fuck.”

“Yes, Max?” I question seductively, as I begin sucking at his neck, his hands grip my hips, pulling me closer to him. My panties are soaked and I’m totally getting off on this. I’ve never felt like this before, and he’s barely even touched me.

“But...” he starts, my hand moving faster, distracting him, and then without warning his hands grip my ass, lifting me up, he walks me over to the bathroom counter, setting me down. I spread my legs wider and he steps between them, my hand barely leaving his dick.

His mouth connects with mine in a hard and desperately needy kiss. His tongue tangling with mine causing me to moan into his mouth. I’m absolutely obsessed with this moment between us right now.

I move back, my chest heaving with each breath, but not needing anything more than this, anything more than being this connected to Max.

“Do you think about me when you jerk off?” I ask, my words a hushed whisper on my lips.

“Every fucking time, Harper,” Max moans, his hands gripping my thighs, and his fingers begin to slide higher, brushing against my center.

“Tell me your fantasies, Max.” My eyes lock with his, watching his face, loving the way he closes his eyes as I continue to move my hand. My nipples harden, and I guide

Max's hand under my shirt, letting him cup my breast, needing to feel him against me.

"I dream about fucking your wet pussy, Harper. I dream about having you ride me, your tits bouncing as you move on my cock. I dream about the way you smell and the way you taste, and fuck..." Max moans, his hips jacking into my hand, harder, faster.

And then he comes, riding it out with soft, slow movements of my fingers caressing him.

Still breathing heavy, a smile on my face, my hand on his dick, I watch Max lean in and kiss me.

"That was a terrible idea, Harper," Max mutters, his lips against mine, his hands resting on the counter and my eyes closed, basking in the bliss.

"What? Why?" I ask, my eyes shooting open, and I try to keep my mouth from dropping, worried I've done something wrong.

Max reaches for the towel on the floor, taking my hand in his, he wipes it off. "Because you got nothing out of that," he replies, his hand cupping the back of my neck, pulling me in for a soft kiss.

"I think we need to end that narrative that everyone needs to get off. You have no idea how fucking hot that was, and it only makes me want you more," I say, winking at him. "And when we do get there, it's going to be amazing."

"You expect me to sleep after that?" Max asks, chuckling. "You in the room next door, your tiny hand making my dick look huge."

"It wasn't my hand that made your dick look huge. It pretty much did that all on its own," I compliment.

"Harper, you are...you are the biggest ego boost, and so fucking gorgeous," Max tells me, and it feels like my heart wants to leap from my chest. "And next time, it's all about you because we're ending that narrative about everyone needing to get off," Max adds, echoing my previous comment.

“I’ll see you in the morning,” I now say, kissing him a few more times, both of us with ridiculously big smiles on our faces.

“You want to shower with me?” Max offers, and I shake my head.

“I’m gonna wash my hands and then go to bed. Getting in that shower with you feels like something neither of us are going to be able to control and I’m not going to have sex with you in your parents’ house,” I say. “They were so nice to Sammie and me tonight and I’m not going to ruin that reputation.”

I hop down off the counter, twisting so I’m able to wash my hands and Max tosses the towel in a basket before grabbing another one off a shelf.

He watches me, his eyes taking me in as I wash my hands, a smile still plastered on his face. It feels amazing to know I’m the reason he’s smiling like that, that he likes me enough to bring me home to meet his parents. There’s nothing about today that I would change, basking in every second of it. It feels like home. It feels normal.

“Goodnight, Max,” I say now, stepping over to him and giving him a simple, yet long slow kiss.

“Goodnight, Harper.”

I leave the bathroom, the stupid smile on my face feeling like it’s permanent. Next door, I crawl quietly into the bed next to Sammie, who has no idea I was even gone.

It only takes me a few seconds to fall asleep, the bed, the sheets, the room, everything about it is perfect.

I WAKE up the next morning to Sammie whispering my name, her little voice soft and raspy with sleep like always.

“Mommy,” she says, cuddling into me and I wrap my arms around her.

“Yes, baby,” I reply, my eyes still closed, enjoying the simplicity of not having to jump up and get ready for work or

get Sammie off to daycare, or even to make breakfast.

“I love it here,” she tells me, and I don’t bother to ask her if she means here at Max’s parents’ house or if she means here in Tahoe. It doesn’t matter. All that matters is that she’s happy.

I feel safe with Max. I trust him wholeheartedly with me, with Sammie, with our life. Max’s parents’ house is a gated beauty, and it has to be the reason I slept so well, that feeling of complete and utter safety. Sammie feels it too.

It’s early, I can tell by the way the light filters into the room, but I also know that Sammie’s little internal clock loves to get her up no later than seven.

“You hungry?” I ask her, which is her usual reason to get me up and out of bed even on a day off.

“No, but I want to get up. Is it okay for us to get up?” she whispers, and it’s so sweet. It’s like she’s worried about waking up everyone else. “Do you think Max is up?”

“No, I don’t think Max is up, but if you’re ready to get up, I’ll get up with you,” I tell her, slipping from the bed, and finding a robe in the closet. “You ready?”

Sammie jumps from the bed, skipping to the door, her light brown hair a disheveled mess, telling me she slept like a rock last night.

We head out of the bedroom and down toward the kitchen to find Pam sitting at the island, a cup of coffee in front of her, a book open next to her.

“Good morning,” I say, not wanting to startle her in the quiet stillness. I’m sure she’s up this early as a way to enjoy some time to herself.

“Oh, good morning,” Pam says, turning around to greet us. “How did you sleep?”

“Good, thank you. Your house is wonderful and that bed was so comfortable,” I say. “Thank you so much for letting us stay.”

“Of course. Why don’t you go back to bed. Sammie and I can hang out while you get some rest. I know how it is being a

mom,” Pam says, and as much as I want to accept, not having a moment to myself since Sammie was born, I feel guilty relying on her.

It’s not her job to take care of my kid. She’s not even Sammie’s grandparent or anything, not that Sammie’s actual grandparents ever offered anything like this.

“That’s okay. I’m good,” I say, really wanting to take her up on that offer.

“Harper,” Pam says, a tone in her voice that feels very motherly. “It’s okay to say yes. No judgment here. I offered because I want to help.”

“Okay, I’d love to go back to bed,” I admit, getting a bit choked up. This family’s kindness knows no bounds. They’ve been welcoming to Sammie and me without question when they could have easily turned us away, especially given how wealthy they are. I’m sure they worry about the motives of people who come into their lives.

“Go, Sammie and I are going to make cinnamon rolls. What do you think of that?” Pam asks, turning to look at Sammie.

“I love cinnamon rolls,” Sammie replies, a huge smile on her face as she climbs up onto the stool next to Pam.

“I figured you would,” Pam says, winking at Sammie. “You want something to drink?”

“Thank you,” I say gratefully, immediately trying to think of a way I can pay Pam back for her kindness, kissing Sammie on her head as I head back toward the bedroom.

“And, Harper,” Pam calls out, her voice soft, but loud enough for me to hear it. “You can sleep in the other room. I’m not naïve enough to think that you aren’t...” she trails off, not finishing her thought with the little ears listening.

I nod, not sure if I should go to the room Max is in or into the room Sammie and I slept in, but Pam did tell me it was okay. Ethan and Zoey are sharing a room, and I know that they live together, but I guess it’s not really all that different. The

only difference is that I have a kid that I have to watch out for, and staying here has taken that stress away.

I take in a deep breath, walking to Max's bedroom, and without knocking, I enter the dark room, the sound of his breathing filling the silence, his smell making me smile. The room smells like him. It smells like home.

MAX

I roll over, still half asleep until I realize someone is in bed with me. Blinking my eyes open, I'm surprised to find Harper lying on her side beside me, eyes closed, and her hands tucked beneath the pillow. Slowly lifting my head, I look over her to the other side of the bed, half expecting to see Sammie here too, but she's not.

It's just Harper and me.

Alone in my bed.

With a smile, I lower my head to the pillow and shuffle closer, pulling her into my arms as she stirs against me, our legs tangling together. She's all warm and soft, still dressed in my t-shirt and not a whole lot of anything else.

"This is a nice surprise to wake up to," I murmur, my lips against her temple.

Harper mumbles something, still half asleep as she burrows herself against me, her hands now tucked up between us and resting on my bare chest. I'm wearing even less, only a pair of boxers separating us beneath these covers.

"Did you sneak in here?" I whisper, wondering what inspired this. I mean I know we took things to a new level last night when she came into my bathroom and jerked me off, but she also made it pretty clear that sex was off the table. At least here at my parents' house anyway. I kind of got the feeling it wasn't something that was permanently off the table though.

“Mmm, Pam sent me back to bed,” she murmurs. “She’s looking after Sammie.”

Chuckling, I slide my hand up her back, pressing between her shoulder blades as I pull her closer. Just the feel of her in my arms, the smell of her in my bed is getting me hard, but I’m no longer worried about that freaking her out.

Not after last night.

When she came in here and started things. Things I spent the entire night dreaming about.

“Maybe Pam should be on babysitting duties more often,” I say, pressing a kiss to her cheek before kissing the corner of her mouth and eventually her lips.

Harper lets out a soft moan as she kisses me back, all slow and sleepy and I can’t resist easing her onto her back, my body half covering hers. Never taking my mouth from hers, I slide a hand down her side, my thumb brushing against her breast through the fabric of my t-shirt on the way down to her hip, my fingers now teasing the edge of her panties.

“Max,” she groans, and I swear it’s the sexiest thing I have ever heard.

Smiling against her mouth, I gently nip at her bottom lip, kissing her again as I whisper, “Now it’s your turn,” before I gently ease my fingers under the waistband and between her legs.

“Oh shit,” she gasps, her fingers clamping around my wrist. She doesn’t pull my hand away though and the second my fingers brush against her, she groans again, her grip loosening, her hips ever so slightly lifting off the bed as she lets me continue.

“Jesus, Harper, you’re so wet,” I moan into her mouth.

“Uh huh,” she murmurs, parting her legs a little more.

“Have you been wet since last night?” I whisper, knowing I spent most of the night hard as I replayed the bathroom incident on a constant loop inside my head. “Because last night was so fucking hot,” I continue.

“Yes,” she breathes out, another moan falling from her lips as I gently slide a finger inside her. “Max, oh god.”

I smile, kissing her again as I slide my finger out, my thumb finding her clit now. “I’m going to make you come, Harper,” I whisper, never stopping the slide of my finger as I move it inside her, my thumb brushing against her with just enough pressure to drive her crazy.

She groans again, louder this time and I cover her mouth with mine in a deep kiss, knowing she’s worried about doing this here, even though there’s not a chance in hell anyone will hear us, given the size of the house. But I also get why she’s nervous about it, so as I work my fingers against her beneath the covers, I never stop kissing her, muffling the sounds she makes as I gently tease her.

“You are so fucking beautiful,” I murmur between kisses, smiling as Harper’s hand now grips my arm, her fingers digging into my skin. “Tell me when you’re going to come, Harper,” I whisper. “I want to watch you.”

Her whole body bucks now as I feel her tighten around my fingers. “Oh god, Max,” she whispers, her eyes flying open. “God, I’m going to—”

I pull back just far enough to watch her, sliding two fingers inside her this time as I brush my thumb against her one more time and she completely shatters and falls apart in my arms. I can tell she’s trying to be quiet and with a smile, I cover her mouth with mine again, kissing her deeply as I swallow her moans.

When I eventually pull back, I open my eyes again to find Harper spent beneath me, her eyes closed, her cheeks flushed and her breathing heavy. My fingers are still inside her and I wait until she opens her eyes before I slowly slide them out, lifting them to my mouth as I lick them clean, smiling at the sound Harper makes.

“Next time, it’ll be my mouth making you come,” I whisper, before kissing her again.

“Okay,” she breathes out and I can’t help but laugh.

“Are you okay there?”

She shakes her head as she murmurs, “I don’t know.”

Chuckling, I ask, “I don’t know in a good way, or I don’t know in a bad way?”

I watch as she pulls her bottom lip between her teeth, a slow, shy smile tugging at her mouth as she says, “In a very good way.”

“Good,” I whisper, leaning in to kiss her again.

She curls a hand around the back of my neck, holding me to her as she deepens the kiss, the two of us making out like a couple of teenagers. Eventually though, I pull back.

“I’m gonna go take a shower,” I say, kissing the end of her nose. “As always you’re welcome to join me, but I can’t guarantee I’ll keep my hands to myself,” I add with a wink.

She blinks, chewing on that bottom lip of hers again as though she’s actually trying to decide if she should join me.

With a laugh, I kiss her quickly before rolling out of bed. “Go take a shower, Harper,” I say, smirking when her eyes drop to the obvious tent I’m now pitching in my boxers. “To be continued,” I add, with a wink.

I start to walk toward the bathroom, when she calls my name, “Max?”

Turning, I ask, “Yeah?”

“Thank you.”

I walk back toward the bed, leaning down to kiss her softly. “I like you in my bed, Harper,” I whisper, kissing her once more before disappearing into the bathroom.

AFTER I SHOWER, I get dressed and head into the kitchen to find Harper already dressed and sitting at the island drinking a cup of coffee.

“Morning,” I say, leaning down to kiss her.

She smirks up at me as she whispers, “That was a long shower.”

Chuckling, I move my mouth to her ear, nuzzling her as I murmur, “Well yeah, I had to take care of the hard-on I got from making you come, didn’t I.” Harper giggles at my answer and it’s fucking adorable.

“Max!” Sammie shouts and I lift my head to find her standing on a chair at the kitchen counter, a smear of icing on her cheek.

“Hey, Sammie,” I say, walking over to her as I wrap my arms around her from behind and tickle her. “Whatcha doing?”

“Making cinnamon rolls!” she shouts, throwing her arms up.

“Yum,” I say as I make my way over to the coffee pot to grab a cup. “Where’s Zoey and Ethan?” I ask my mom who’s standing by the island watching me.

“Left about thirty minutes ago,” she says, smiling at me like she’s got a secret.

I’m about to ask her what that’s about when Sammie calls for her. Mom walks over to her, now apparently deep in conversation with Sammie about whether the rolls have enough icing on them. Turning to Harper, I find she’s also watching them, a smile on her face.

“Hey, come with me?” I ask her, holding my hand out. Harper grabs her coffee, sliding her other hand into mine as I lead her outside to the deck. “You okay?” I ask, wrapping an arm around her shoulder.

She looks up at me, still smiling as she pushes up on her toes to kiss me. “Yes, your family is amazing. You are amazing.”

Grinning, I kiss her again, pulling her close as we both look out at the lake, the water reflecting the sun that is already high in the sky.

“Thank you,” she whispers, her head resting on my shoulder.

I glance down at her. “You said that before,” I remind her. “What exactly are you thanking me for?”

She stares out at the lake as she takes a sip of her coffee. “I’ve never had anything like this.”

“Like what?” I ask, expecting her to say this place or this view or something else about how amazing my parents’ house is.

She doesn’t say anything at first, just continues to gaze out at the water as I watch her. Eventually, she lets out a small breath as she says, “Someone who just accepts me the way I am. Someone so patient.”

My heart cracks a little in my chest at her words, at the thought that someone, her ex, has hurt in some way. A way that’s bad enough to make her run to the other side of the country with nothing but her four-year-old daughter.

I curl my arm tighter around her, pulling her closer as I press a kiss against her temple. “I don’t know what happened to you, Harper,” I whisper, my lips against her skin. “But I need you to know two things, okay?” I pause and she nods, not saying anything. “First, that I’m here, whenever you’re ready to tell me about it. And second, I’m not him, okay. I’m not that guy.”

She turns to me, a small smile on her face even though her eyes are now wet with unshed tears. I put my coffee on the railing of the deck as I reach for her jaw, my thumb brushing against her cheek.

“You’re safe here,” I whisper.

“I know,” she says, swallowing hard. “That’s why I’m thanking you.”

“Baby,” I breathe out, pulling her close as I lower my mouth to hers, kissing her softly, wishing I could take whatever this fear and hurt is away from her. When I pull back, she’s smiling up at me again, a contented look on her face that I don’t think I’ve ever seen before. With a grin, I ask, “What’s that look for?”

Harper laughs, shaking her head as she says, “Oh nothing, just that I think you’re pretty perfect, Max Holden.”

I let out a loud laugh, squeezing her against me. “Yeah, didn’t we already establish that?” I tease.

Harper rolls her eyes playfully just as Sammie walks outside carrying a plate of cinnamon rolls, my mom close behind and watching her.

“Breakfast!” she shouts as Mom helps her put the plate on the table. “We made them!” she adds, just in case we missed that part.

Harper laughs again as she rests her head on my shoulder, whispering, “She really loves it here.”

I lean in so my mouth is against her ear. “Yep, also means we now have a babysitter.”

“Max,” she whisper-shouts, slapping her hand against my stomach. “I can’t ask your mom to babysit!”

“Sure we can,” I say, chuckling before I turn and say, “Hey, Mom, you think you’d watch Sammie for us sometime so I can take Harper out on a date?”

Harper groans beside me, but my mom just smiles and says, “Of course, we had great fun, didn’t we, Sammie?”

“Yes!” Sammie shouts and I can’t help but laugh.

“See, babysitter.”

Harper looks up at me again, a different kind of smile on her face now as she watches me, taking in the full meaning of what this all means. I’m not trying to pressure her, far from it. In fact, I’m certain us taking the next step is something we both want.

It’s just something we both know we need to do carefully. When the prying eyes of her four year old daughter aren’t around to accidentally see something they shouldn’t.

“No pressure, Harper, okay. Whenever you’re ready,” I say in a way I hope she understands doesn’t just refer to me and her.

Her hand on my back tightens a little, her fingers digging into my skin just like they did this morning when I was touching her, getting her off in my bed. With a smile, she leans in, her nose brushing against my cheek as she whispers, “I am ready,” before she pulls herself from my arms and walks over to where her daughter sits at the table, already halfway through a cinnamon roll, leaving my heart now pounding in my chest.

As I look over at them, I feel my mom watching me and when I turn to her, she offers me a smile that tells me a million different things. With a grin back at her, I mouth a quick *thank you* before I grab my coffee, walk over and take a seat at the table.

HARPER

It's been three days since Max and I had our little bathroom and bedroom fun while at his parents' house, and I've been dreaming about it ever since. He's back on shift for the next two days, and I can't believe I'm about to admit this, but I seriously miss him and so does Sammie.

When I left Florida, I swore I would never allow another man into mine and Sammie's lives, but Max is different. He's made our lives better, and I've never been so happy. It feels crazy to me that I moved across the country and found someone who treats not only me well, but also Sammie.

I have no idea where things with Max will go, but for the first time in forever, I can see a future with Max. I spent so many days just living day to day, never really being able to see beyond the next day.

My phone chimes out just as I'm walking out of Sammie's room. She barely made it through the book tonight, her eyes growing heavy with each page. She's been so calm and relaxed, loving our life here together.

She loves daycare and ends the day happy, but exhausted. Today she asked if she could start ballet classes, and I swear the smile on my face couldn't have been bigger. I've always wanted her to be able to do social things, and before we left Florida, it was never an option.

I look down at my phone and seeing Max's name on the text has me beaming.

MAX: I'm outside. Want to let me in? Lol.

I QUICKLY HEAD over to the door, checking the peephole, I find him waiting on the porch, his eyes watching his phone. I watch him for a few seconds, still wondering how the hell I landed a guy like him. Being new in town and pretty much closed off to anything, Max's kindness was hard to ignore.

"Hey," I say as soon as I open the door. "What are you doing here?" I add, my voice now a whisper.

"I wanted to see you," he replies back, his answer hushed. "I missed you."

He's dressed in his uniform and there's something about it that's incredibly sexy. Not that this is the first time I've seen him in it, but after what happened between us the night we stayed at his parents' house, the attraction has only grown.

"I missed you too," I tell him, slipping my fingers through the belt loops on his pants and pulling him in for a kiss.

His lips are soft against mine, and I let out a quiet moan when his hand slips under my sweatshirt. The warmth of his fingers trailing along my stomach and up until his thumb caresses the swell of my breast.

"You're not wearing a bra," Max murmurs, letting his teeth graze my swollen bottom lip. "Are you trying to make me want to stay?"

"Sammie is sleeping," I reply, hoping with everything in me that he does stay. I've wanted him to ever since we were in that bed at his parents' house. It felt amazing being next to him, feeling his hands on my body, wanting so much more.

"I'm at work," he groans, his head falling back as he lets out a defeated sigh. "I'm on shift till tomorrow night."

"Hang on," I say, holding up one finger as I slip into the kitchen and grab the keys I have waiting for him on the counter. I'm about to take a huge fucking step here, one that I

hope doesn't scare him off. One that took a hell of a lot of thought from me, but one I know is the right move.

"These are for you," I tell him, holding out the keys. I take in his face, trying to read his expression, and still worried I've gone too far. Maybe this is just a casual thing and I've made it awkward. Maybe he likes his freedom to come and go without me knowing where he is, and me giving him keys to my house implies that I'm looking to control him. I don't fucking know, but all I know is that Sammie's dad would have hated this.

"Seriously?" Max says, a smile on his face. "You sure about this?" He knows I'm guarded, but slowly I've let him in. He's earned my trust and he's shown me so much of his life that I feel nothing but safe with him.

"I am, Max," I reply, my arms sliding around his waist. "I want you to be able to come by and see us whenever you want. No more knocking, no more checking to see who it is on the other side of the door."

"This means so fucking much to me," he says, his voice louder and he quickly clamps a hand over his mouth. "Sorry, I know Sammie is sleeping."

"And you know if she hears you, she's going to come busting out of that room and I'll never get her back to sleep," I tease, wagging a finger at him.

"How about I come by tomorrow after my shift and have dinner with my girls?" he suggests, and every single time he includes Sammie, I want to cry. Never once has he tried to make it just the two of us or alluded to not wanting Sammie around. We're a package deal. He gets it.

Not that I don't want to spend some time alone with him. I fucking dream about it every night. But putting that on someone is something I'm still coming to terms with. Leaving Sammie is hard for me, but I know I need to. It's not healthy for either of us to always be together. It's another reason why working here at Badger Creek has been life-changing for both of us. Sammie going to daycare.

“I think Sammie would love that,” I say, pulling him to me again, kissing him as my entire body responds, wanting to beg him to stay.

“And you?”

“I’d love it too,” I admit, my cheeks warming at the idea of having him here with me tomorrow night. God, what I wouldn’t give to have him in my bed after Sammie is asleep. I’ve never wanted anyone the way I want Max Holden and this wait is really starting to wear thin. I can only imagine how he feels. He’s been so ridiculously patient with me.

“I’ve got to get back to work. My partner is out in the ambulance waiting for me,” he tells me, and I laugh out loud.

“Max, you’ve left him waiting out there? What did you tell him you were doing?” I ask, shaking my head at his need to see me, but loving that he feels this way.

“I just told him I had to stop by and pick something up,” he says, holding up the keys.

“But you didn’t know I was going to give you the keys.”

“Did you want me to tell him that I wanted to stop by for a quick make out session?” he jokes. “That’s what I really came by for.”

“I thought you said you missed me?”

“I did miss you, but I also wanted to kiss you and see your face, and remind you that I made you come when we were at my parents’ house,” he says, making both of us laugh.

“And I think I made you come too, but I’d love for it to happen at the same time,” I admit, his hands squeezing my ass. I can feel the bulge in his pants, feeling a little guilty that he’s going to have to head back out to the ambulance with a serious boner.

“I think we can find a way to make that work,” he starts just as his radio goes off, his hand quickly going to the volume, turning it down. “Sorry,” he mutters, biting on his bottom lip. “Hopefully that didn’t wake Sammie.”

“I’m sure she’s good,” I tell him, following him as he walks to the door. “So we’ll see you tomorrow night then? You sure you won’t be too tired? You’ve been on shift for the last two days.”

“Harper, I want to see you and if that means I don’t get to sleep more than a few hours, I’m good with that.”

“It’s going to be a long twenty-four hours,” I say, hoping he catches what I mean.

“I’ll make it worth it,” he says, leaning in and kissing me. His hands slip under my sweatshirt again, this time his fingers find my nipple, teasing me and making me want to grind against his leg. “And don’t have a bra on tomorrow night.”

“And maybe you could show up in your uniform,” I add, and he pulls back, looking at me, his eyes a little wide.

“You like the uniform, huh?”

“So fucking hot,” I tell him, even though my admission makes my face heat up. I want to throw caution to the wind. I want to let go of any inhibitions I have and let Max fully in. No more hiding what I want or making myself into something I’m not.

“I’m certain we can entertain that fantasy you have,” he says, his lips moving across my cheek till he reaches my ear. His breath is warm, sending goosebumps dotting across my skin as he whispers in my ear. “Harper, you have my heart. Anything you want, I will give it to you.” He nips at my ear lobe, my heart leaping in my chest, ready to tell him to head right to my bedroom.

The radio goes off again, this time muffled, the voice quiet, and Max shakes his head, almost like he’s trying to get himself back together.

“Fuck, I gotta go. Tomorrow,” he says, kissing me quickly before he heads out the door.

I fall back against the door as soon as it closes, my head bumping it as I think about just how fucked I am. I am fucking head over heels for this guy, and I don’t even care to reel myself back in.

THE DAY PASSES WAY TOO SLOWLY and by the time five o'clock rolls around, I can't wait to get home and see Max.

"Guess who is coming over tonight?" I ask Sammie as we're walking home, not that she isn't going to be able to guess. He's really the only person we see on a regular basis, and the only person who gets me this excited.

"Max!" Sammie calls out, skipping around as she grabs my hand, looking up at me with a smile on her face.

I smile back, winking at her to tell her she's right, and when I push my key in the front door and open it, he's actually waiting inside for us.

"Max!" Sammie cries out, echoing herself just moments earlier. Running to him, he scoops her up, tossing her in the air.

"Sammie!" he calls back, as she slings her arms around his neck in a huge hug that he returns. "And how about I set you down and go say hello to your mom."

He walks over to me, pulling me into his arms, he kisses me, and I don't even try to stop him, not caring in the least if Sammie sees. It's good for her to see me happy, something she didn't see when we lived with her dad. She never saw us kiss, and if she did, it was usually after we'd had a fight. Definitely never in a positive way.

"How was your day?" Max asks, his lips still brushing against mine. "I ordered pizza, it should be here in about thirty minutes."

"My day was good. Busy with all the new job stuff, but good," I answer, trying to hold back the tears. He has no idea that a simple question like that means so damn much. "You didn't have to order dinner but thank you."

"One more thing," Max says, pulling back so he can look at me. "My mom said she'd watch Sammie tomorrow night so you and I can go out. But only if you're okay with it. No pressure."

I take in a deep breath, closing my eyes as I relish the idea of having a family, even if they aren't my real family, they're treating me as if I'm part of it. I've wanted this for so long, not just for myself but for Sammie too.

"Sammie, you want to go to Pam's tomorrow night?" I ask her, looking over my shoulder as she plays with some blocks on the floor of the living room. "Max and I are going to go out for dinner together."

"Okay, Mommy," she replies like it's nothing and it just solidifies that I made the right decision to leave Florida.

"I think that's a yes," Max jokes, and I kiss him again. I want to kiss him every day for the rest of my life.

"It is. And how was your day?" I ask him, not wanting this to ever be a one-sided thing. I want him to know how much I appreciate him and that his day is just as important as mine.

"So much better now that I'm here with you."

MAX

I didn't stay at Harper's last night, even though I would've loved to. I got the feeling she wanted me to stay too, but at the same time, we both know that there are some things we should do alone first, before we expose Sammie to it.

Me sleeping in Harper's bed for the night being one of them.

I hope that eventually it's okay. Just like I hope eventually the two of them might consider coming and staying in my condo some nights too.

It had surprised the shit out of me last night when Harper gave me keys to her place. I know she has trouble letting people in and I know that must have been a monumental step for her to trust me with something like that. Just like her letting my mom look after Sammie tonight is huge too.

But I'd also meant what I'd said to her. She did have my heart. Right there in the palm of her hands for her to do whatever she wants with.

I don't ever remember feeling this way about a woman before and while it kind of scares me a little that one person can have this much hold over my feelings, I also can't let go either. I'm seriously crazy about this woman *and* her kid and I cannot explain how or why, just that I am.

Just like I also cannot contain my excitement at the prospect of our date tonight.

I walk out of the gym and head to my car in desperate need of a shower after my workout. I'd told Harper that I'd pick her up so we could both take Sammie to my parents' place before heading out for dinner.

The implication is that Sammie will spend the night with them, although I'm still not one hundred percent certain that's what will actually happen.

And I'm totally fine with that. I get that it's hard for Harper to trust people and leaving her daughter with a woman she barely knows has got to be scary for her.

My phone rings just as I'm getting in the car, Alex's name flashing on the screen.

"Hey, dude, what's up?" I ask, as it switches over to Bluetooth.

"You wanna grab some beers?" he asks, the sound of someone laughing in the background coming through the speaker.

"Can't, have a date," I reply, pulling out of the parking lot.

"A date?" he shouts. "With who?"

I roll my eyes even though he can't see me. "Harper, you idiot," I reply. "Who else?"

"Ohhhhh," he says, letting out a laugh. "Hey, Max has a date with Harper!"

"Who are you talking to?" I ask.

"Laney and Zoey," he replies. "They're doing some chick flick marathon or some shit, that's why I was asking if you wanna grab some beers. Ethan and I are heading to The Matterhorn. I love my girl, but there's only so many cheesy movies I can sit through."

"You love it!" I hear Del shout in the background.

"Yeah, yeah," Alex says with a laugh. "Anyway, a date with Harper, huh, that's cool. Whatcha gonna do?"

I exhale, turning onto the street that leads into town and toward my condo. "I'm taking her to Farmhouse," I admit.

“Fancy,” Alex says before relaying the restaurant name to his girlfriend and my sister.

“Dude, what’s with the live fucking updates to Delaney and Zoey?” I ask, pulling into my drive.

He lets out a laugh. “Just keeping them in the loop, that’s all,” he says. “I’ll be texting Nick as soon as we get off the phone and filling Ethan in too, just so you know.”

“You’re a shithead,” I say, laughing as I get out of the car. “Anyway, I gotta get going, but have a good night. Maybe we can catch up soon?”

“Yep,” Alex says. “Sounds good. Have fun on your date, fill me in tomorrow.”

“No fucking chance,” I say with a laugh. “Later.”

AFTER I’VE SHOWERED and changed, I head over to Harper’s, using my newly acquired keys to let myself in. I smile as Sammie’s eyes light up and she runs over to greet me. With my hands around her waist I pick her up, flipping her over my shoulder, laughing at the uncontrollable giggle she lets out.

The kid is great, so happy and chill, and I really hope part of that is because she’s so comfortable around me. Not having any nieces or nephews yet, I haven’t spent a ton of time around kids this young before. I didn’t know what to expect at first, but so far it feels like everything is going great.

“You ready for your big adventure tonight?” I ask, spinning Sammie again as I lower her to the ground.

She laughs, stumbling a little as I hold onto her hands. “Yes! Pam said we can make cookies!”

“Cookies, huh? I hope they’re chocolate chip, that’s my favorite.”

Sammie’s smile widens. “Mine too!” she shouts just as Harper walks out of her bedroom.

“Oh fu—, wow,” I breathe out, catching myself just in time as I drink in the sight of Harper. It’s not like she needs the

make-up or the nice clothes, but fuck me she looks amazing in the tight black pants and pale blue top she wears. Her long hair hanging loose around her shoulders.

“Mommy you look so pretty!” Sammie says. “Doesn’t she look pretty, Max?”

“She sure does,” I say, walking over to her. “Jesus, Harper, you look amazing,” I whisper, leaning in to gently kiss her red colored lips. “Good enough to eat,” I quietly add. The blush on her face is fucking adorable and I can’t resist slipping an arm around her waist and pulling her against me. “You ready to go?”

“Yes,” she says, glancing down at her daughter who stands beside us, smiling up at us. “You ready, Sammie?”

“Yep.”

Harper grabs a bag from the couch, which I immediately take from her as she says, “Pam said she could stay the night.”

I reach for her hand, squeezing it gently as we make our way outside. “Only if you’re okay with it. I want you to feel comfortable tonight, Harper.”

She squeezes my hand as she replies, “I know, thank you.”

The drive over to my parents’ house is filled with Sammie’s chatter, her excitement over what’s happening tonight, evident. I’d given Harper my mom’s cell number yesterday and it’s obvious they’ve spoken about tonight too. I’m grateful my mom is doing everything she can to make her feel comfortable about leaving Sammie with them.

Mom is outside waiting for us when we pull up and the second Harper gets Sammie out of the car, the kid is running toward my mom like they are old friends. Family even. I hang back, letting Harper say her goodbyes, knowing this is a really big deal for her.

When I eventually walk over to say goodbye, I give my mom a quick hug. “Thanks, Mom, I really appreciate this.”

She’s smiling when I pull back and there’s a glint in her eye that I swear means she fucking knows exactly why I

appreciate her doing this for me. “Go have a good time,” she says. “You can come for breakfast tomorrow when you pick Sammie up.”

I say goodbye to Sammie, letting Harper have another few minutes with her before we eventually get back in the car. “You okay?” I ask.

Harper lets out a long exhale, nodding once as she says, “Yes.”

I reach for her hand, lifting it to my lips. “We can come back anytime you want to, just say the word.”

She looks over at me, a smirk on those red lips of hers. “I’m good, Max. I want to do this.”

“Alright then,” I reply, grinning. “Let’s go on our date.”

“Wait, you mean we’re actually going out?” Harper asks, sounding genuinely surprised.

I let out a laugh as we drive out of my parents’ place. “Yeah, why, what did you think we were doing?” Harper doesn’t immediately answer and when I glance over, I notice she’s blushing again, her bottom lip between her teeth. “Oh my god, Harper, did you seriously think I was just gonna take you home and, well, you know...”

Her blushes deepens as she covers her face in her hands. “I don’t know!” she wails, laughing. “Yeah, kind of.”

“Jesus,” I reply, shaking my head, chuckling. “You really think that’s all I’m interested in?”

She takes her hands away as she looks over at me. “I mean no, but it’s kind of a big thing that we *haven’t* been doing, isn’t it.”

With another laugh, I rest my hand on her thigh, giving it a gentle squeeze. “Yeah, maybe. But it’s not the only thing I’m interested in with you, okay?”

“Okay,” she says, exhaling.

“So we’re going for dinner?” I confirm, still grinning at her.

“We’re going for dinner,” she says with a nod. “But we’re totally skipping dessert,” she adds and this time we both laugh.

WE DO SKIP DESSERT, even though I make a point of not rushing the meal, desperate to prove that this isn’t all about sex for me. But we do spend a couple of hours laughing and chatting over dinner as Harper fills me in on how her new job is going and how much Sammie is enjoying living in Tahoe.

As we walk out of the restaurant, she checks her phone for the first time, smiling as she shows me the texts and photos from my mom, clearly showing Sammie having a good time.

“So,” I say, taking her hand in mine as we wait for the car. “You want to go get her or...” I trail off as Harper turns into me, her arms slipping around my waist as she looks up at me, her big brown eyes filled with want now.

“How about you show me your place?” she whispers, leaning in to press a kiss to my mouth.

I smile against hers. “Okay.”

The drive to my condo is quiet, neither of us saying anything. Harper’s hand rests on my leg the whole way and the few times I glance over at her, she’s got a small smile on her face as she looks out the window.

“This is me,” I say, pulling into my drive.

“Wow, this is nice,” she says. “And you really live here by yourself?”

“I do,” I say as we get out of the car. “Alex moved in with Del a while ago, so it’s just me.”

“It’s a really nice place,” she says as we walk up to the front door.

I push the key in the lock as I pull her closer, my arm around her shoulders. “So confession time,” I say with a sheepish grin. “My parents actually bought it for me.” Harper laughs at this. “What?” I scoff, smacking her on the ass as she walks in. “Why are you laughing?”

“No reason,” she teases, looking back at me over her shoulder, a cute little smirk on her face.

“Hmmm,” I reply, closing the door. “Can I get you any—”

The rest of my question is cut off as Harper’s mouth collides with mine in a hard kiss, her body pressing into mine as she kisses me with an almost desperate longing.

“Fuck, Harper,” I growl, my arms wrapping around her, one hand on her ass and the other sliding under her top, my fingers trailing up her spine.

“Bedroom?” she breathes out, her hands gripping my shirt.

I walk us back to my room, never stopping the kiss, even when we both fall onto my unmade bed. “Shit, sorry, you okay?”

She laughs, her hand around the back of my neck as she pulls me back to her and whispers, “You didn’t make your bed?”

I grin, nipping at her bottom lip. “Wasn’t exactly expecting company,” I admit.

“No?”

“I mean I was hoping, yeah, but I didn’t want to assume,” I reply. “You sure you’re okay with this?”

Harper nods. “Yes, but I...I um, I haven’t done this for a while,” she admits.

“Me either,” I say, kissing her again.

“Yeah, but I’ve...” she trails off, licking her lips before she continues, “I’ve had a kid, Max.”

I press up on one elbow as I stare down at her, my fingers brushing the hair back from her face. “Harper, you are beautiful,” I whisper, kissing the end of her nose. “And really, *really*, fucking sexy.” She smiles now and it lights up her entire face in a way that has me laughing. “But we don’t have to do this if you aren’t ready, you know that right?”

She pushes me off her now and I fall to the side, watching as she lifts her top up and over her head. “Your turn,” she

whispers.

I grin as I take my shirt off, throwing it on the floor without ever taking my eyes off her. She removes her pants next, hitting me with a look that tells me I should do the same thing. I do and then the two of us are left in nothing but our underwear, my dick hard and straining against the fabric of my boxer briefs as I take in the sight of her. She looks amazing, her body lean, her tits fucking perfect.

I crawl over her again, pushing her back onto the bed. “Do you remember what I said to you after I made you come last time?”

She stares up at me, her bottom lip between her teeth as she shakes her head at me, even though her smile tells me she does remember.

I drop a kiss to her mouth as I rest my hand over her heart. I can feel it pounding beneath me and I’m not sure if it’s nerves, excitement or both. With my gaze locked with hers, I slowly slide my hand down her sternum and over her stomach, before slipping my fingers under the material of her panties. Harper widens her legs, groaning when I brush my fingers against her, before I hook them into the material and tug.

“I said,” I whisper, pressing a kiss to her neck, “that the next time I make you come.” I pause, kissing the top of her breast, before I graze my teeth across the fabric covering her hard nipple, “it would be with my mouth.”

Harper lets out a hard exhale as I move my way down her body, trailing my mouth over her warm skin until I’m between her legs, her panties now hanging off her left foot. I smile as she kicks them to the floor, resting my chin on her thigh as I look up at her.

“I have been dreaming about this ever since that morning,” I tell her, pressing a soft kiss to the inside of her thigh, before I move my mouth to her. “Fuck,” I groan, nuzzling her, my tongue tracing the length of her. She’s so fucking wet and she tastes amazing and Jesus, I just want to spend all night here.

With my hands on her thighs, I push her legs wider, burying my face between them as I fuck her with my tongue. I feel her hand move to my head, her fingers gripping my hair as her hips buck beneath me and she pushes against me, grinding against my mouth.

I don't stop, licking and sucking as I slowly slide two fingers inside her now. Harper groans, her grip on my hair tightening and even though this is the first time we've done *this*, I can already tell what she likes and how close she is. And even though I want to make this last, I don't stop, thrusting my fingers in and out of her as I suck on her clit.

She comes without warning, her entire body bowing off my bed as she grinds hard against my mouth, her fingers pulling on my hair to the point of pain. I ease off, but only a little, gently licking her as she rides out her orgasm, before I kiss my way back up her body to her mouth, my hand finding her bra clasp and undoing it, as I shove my own boxer briefs down my legs and off.

“So. Fucking. Sexy.” I say before kissing her, the taste of her still all over me.

HARPER

I taste myself on him when his lips touch mine and I've never been so turned on in my life. I had no idea life could feel this good, this free, but with Max, I feel everything. He kisses me again, leaving me breathless and so consumed with him. I want to be even closer to him, but it's been so long since I've done this, since I've wanted to do this, and I want this to be good for both of us.

"Max," I breathe out, the air floating between us as he traces my bottom lip with the tip of his tongue. The sensation has my thoughts and my body reeling with need and want and desperation. "Now it's my turn to confess."

I barely get the words out, Max's fingers slipping between my legs, my body teetering on the edge of screaming out with pleasure. His touch has set me on fire, wanting him like I've never wanted someone before. It was never like this with Sammie's dad or the few guys I dated before I met him.

"Tell me, Harper," Max murmurs, his mouth dancing across my skin, leaving goosebumps everywhere he touches.

"No one's ever gone down on me before," I admit, closing my eyes and savoring the feeling of bliss that lingers after that orgasm. I feel like a different person. I feel free and relaxed and finally not like someone's mom. Not that I don't love being Sammie's mom, but this break has been long overdue.

"Oh, really? You better get used to it because it's going to happen a lot more. I'm fucking addicted to you, Harper."

His words send a shiver up my spine, making me feel like this is more than just sex for him, that he plans to stick around. He's already been better to me than Sammie's dad ever was, not to mention how his family has taken me in, taken Sammie in.

"Are you trying to get me to never leave your bed?" I ask him, playfully, but it's not really a joke. I do want to stay here with him. I'm not looking a gift horse in the mouth or anything, but Max's place is certainly nicer than my employee bungalow. Sammie would love the view from the balcony and that hot tub would just be a mini swimming pool to her.

"Maybe. I certainly wouldn't object to you spending the night. You could even bring Sammie," he says, and I hold a finger to his lips.

"Shh, tonight it's just me and you and I want to enjoy every fucking second of it," I tell him, his fingers moving slowly between my legs, like he's making sure I'm ready.

I've been fucking ready since the second we walked in here. Honestly, I've been ready since we made this date. Who am I kidding? I've been ready since that night in the bathroom at his parents' house.

"I've been waiting to hear you say that," Max responds, my hands exploring his body, ready and waiting for him to make the next move.

"I know you didn't make your bed because you didn't want to assume we'd be having sex," I say, clenching my teeth and wrinkling up my nose. "But I hope you were a little better prepared in the protection department."

Max smiles at me, rolling away from me, he reaches into his nightstand and pulls out a box of condoms. Holding them up for me to see, and I can't help but laugh.

"You are definitely prepared. That's a big box." I smile back at him, taking the box from his hands, I open it and take a condom out.

Max settles himself back on his heels as he watches me open the condom, moving toward him, his eyes now falling to

where my hands are positioning the condom on him.

He lets out a deep, sexy moan the second my hands are on him, his dick hard and ready. Everything about this moment encourages me on. Max makes me feel sexy and wanted and not at all worried that I might not be as good at this as he is.

“Come here,” he says, hooking his arm around my waist, pulling me to him.

Without thinking about it, I straddle his hips, pushing up on my knees until he’s nearly inside me. Stilling for just a moment while I take in his gorgeous face, reminding myself how fucking lucky I am to have found him amidst the chaos of my life.

He watches me, his eyes focused on my face and when his hand slips around, gripping the back of my neck, I sink down onto him. We both let out a low groan, my eyes closing, taking in everything, wanting to feel it all.

I commit it all to memory, never wanting to forget what this first time with Max is like. It will never be the same between us, this connection only growing stronger with each day that passes.

We move slowly at first, my body moving in time with Max’s as he shifts to meet my hips. He feels amazing inside me, like we were meant to be together. Fitting like two pieces of a puzzle and with the exploration of our hands and mouths, we begin to move faster.

Max’s mouth goes to my breast, his teeth grazing my nipple, and my head falls back, letting out a groan of appreciation. My body moving faster, riding him with more desire and want than I’ve ever felt.

I don’t even know how it’s possible, but it feels like time is moving in slow motion, yet so quickly all at the same time. We watch each other, take in each other’s bodies, getting to know each other in ways that are incredibly intimate and perfect.

“Fuck, I could watch you forever,” Max says, his words said with a bite, with possession. “Ride me. Get yourself off.”

His words have me moving faster, needing the release as his fingers trail between my breasts and down my stomach, to where our bodies are joined.

“Touch me, Max,” I beg, his thumb now rubbing a circle on my clit, making my body feel like it will explode if I don’t come.

“Tell me, Harper. Tell me when you’re close. Tell me when you’re going to come,” he says, his hips thrusting up to meet mine.

With his other hand, Max roughly grips my hip, his fingers cutting into my skin, making me move harder and faster, my release building.

“Max,” I moan out, my hands tangling in his hair as he continues his assault on me. I clench around him, my words lost in the moment.

“Come for me, baby,” he orders, and his words push me over the edge, a cry of pleasure tumbling from my lips.

I ride him harder, tightening around him and when I open my eyes, I watch Max fall apart around me. His hips thrusting into me, burying himself deep inside me as he comes hard, my arms wrapped around his neck, holding him to me.

Eventually I lift myself off of him, smiling as I watch him let out a soft moan, his eyes closed, savoring what just happened between us.

After ditching the condom, he falls back, reaching for me, taking me with him. Our hearts beating in time together, our labored breathing the only sound in the room, and I can’t think of anything more perfect.

With my head resting on his chest, Max’s fingers tracing soft, slow circles on my back, I can’t imagine anything more wonderful than being here with him.

“Thanks for making me wait,” Max says, his words quiet in the stillness of the room. “It made everything that happened between us just now...” Max trails off, not finishing his thought, his eyes closed, his body relaxed and sated.

“Perfect,” I say, filling in his missing word. “It sounds cliché, but I can’t think of a better word.” I let out a slow ragged breath, my body still wired and slowly coming down.

Max leans down, his lips resting on the top of my head, leaving a few gentle kisses, we lie in a comforting silence, both of us just enjoying each other.

“I’m glad I came here and I’m glad I met you,” I eventually say. “I had no idea that moving across the country would bring me to you, but I’d do it all over again in a heartbeat.”

“How did you end up here?” Max now asks, and I knew what I just said would bring questions, but I think I’m ready for it.

“I needed to get away from Sammie’s dad. Far away,” I say, my response vague, but I don’t even know where to begin.

When Max doesn’t say anything, I wait a few seconds longer, wondering if I should say more, if I should tell him everything.

“I don’t love Sammie’s dad. I never did. It was…” I pause, trying to find the right words, searching my memory for all the reasons I left. “He was toxic.”

“I figured as much,” Max now says, as I rest next to him, his arms wrapping around me, making me feel safe.

“I was in a really bad place when I got pregnant with Sammie. I was young, obviously, but my mom was really sick and I was a mess.” I scrunch my eyes shut tightly, trying to rid my mind of these old memories. They’re memories that serve no purpose other than to remind me of why I had to leave.

I swallow back the feeling of tears. I hate crying over any of this. It was a string of poor choices, and I’ve moved on from it. I don’t want to look back, but I guess if Max wants a future with me, I need to.

“My mom died a few weeks after Sammie was born, but she had already kicked me out when she found out I was pregnant. She told me she didn’t want to raise another kid.”

“That’s awful, Harper. I’m so sorry that happened to you,” Max says, and holy fuck the sympathy in his voice nearly breaks me.

“It’s okay. I had options, but I chose to have the baby.” I stop, my thoughts going a mile a minute, and while I’ve always had this in the back of my mind, I’ve never felt safe enough to say it out loud. “I chose to have her for all the wrong reasons.”

As the words leave my mouth, the tears spill from my eyes. I don’t want him to take this the wrong way, but saying it out loud feels freeing, like I know Max won’t judge me.

“Please don’t think that I’m saying I don’t want Sammie or that I don’t fucking love her with all my heart. I just thought it would make Sammie’s dad stay. I thought I would have the family I never had growing up.”

“Harper,” Max says, shifting so he can look at me, swiping his thumb at the tears that stream down my cheeks.

“As soon as I had her, I knew I had to do better. I had to make a life for us. It was so fucking hard, but I spent years saving money so we could leave,” I say, the words spilling from my lips like water. “Sammie’s dad never wanted her, and it was a constant battle. All he ever wanted was me, to control me.”

“You did the right thing,” Max tells me, and it’s the encouragement I need. “You’ve done an awesome job as Sammie’s mom too.”

“Thank you,” I mutter out, burying my face in his chest, needing to feel him, needing his smell to calm me.

“I’m really fucking proud of you. I can’t even imagine what that must have been like, and now, doing it on your own with no help. You’re a fucking badass,” Max now says, swatting my ass, making me let out a soft laugh.

“I owe you so much, Max,” I tell him, pushing up, my eyes now on his face. “I owe your family for accepting me so openly, and your sister for giving me a job and a place to live. And you, I don’t even know what to say. You’re so fucking

amazing and good to Sammie and me. I couldn't be any luckier."

"It isn't luck, Harper. It's what you deserve."

Fuck me, if everything he says doesn't have me swooning and wanting to cry. Max Holden is my dream come true.

"What do you say we get cleaned up in the shower? And after that we open a bottle of wine and have some late night pizza?" Max suggests, and I couldn't think of a better way to spend the rest of our night together.

"Why don't you start the shower. I'm going to text your mom and check up on Sammie. I'm sure she's fine, but just in case," I say, but Max doesn't get up to head to the bathroom.

Reaching over, he grabs my phone from the nightstand, handing it to me. "I'll check in on Sammie with you," he says, waiting while I text his mom. "You're kinda a package deal." He hits me with a wink and my body instantly turns to mush with how fucking sweet he is.

"Max Holden, I am totally fucking falling for you."

MAX

I grin, leaning closer as I nuzzle her neck. “Good, because I’m definitely fucking falling for you,” I whisper, gently biting her ear lobe.

Harper turns to me, her mouth finding mine in a deep kiss as she rolls into me, her text to my mom apparently forgotten. “How are you so perfect?” she whispers between kisses.

I fall onto my back, taking her with me so she’s half lying on me. “I mean it’s tough, but someone’s gotta do it,” I say, smiling up at her. She bursts out laughing, her phone now on the bed beside us as she leans in to kiss me again. “Ok, so while this is a question I never thought I’d ask when I’m naked with a woman, but weren’t you gonna text my mom?”

She laughs again, “Itching for that pizza huh?”

With a grin, I take her hand and lower it to my dick, which is hard as fuck again because I just can’t get enough of her. I don’t know what it is, but Harper has me all messed up in the best possible way. “Among other things, yeah.”

Her smile turns to a smirk as she grips me, a low groan falling from my mouth as her fingers curl around my dick and she gives me one slow stroke, leaning in so her tits are pressed against my chest. “Well okay then,” she murmurs, before letting go, reaching for her phone and typing out a quick text to my mom.

Mom’s response is quick, *thank fuck*, letting us both know that Sammie is all good and now fast asleep in bed. I watch as Harper types out a thank you text before dropping her phone

onto the nightstand again. “Now, where were we?” she asks, reaching for me.

With a grin, I roll her onto her back, lifting her arms above her head as I cover her body with mine. “Well, I was thinking I should probably go down on you again,” I whisper, leaning in to kiss her neck before moving down to suck on her nipple. “And then I was thinking I should most definitely fuck you. Probably again in the shower, too.”

Harper moans, her body arching up into mine as she grinds her hips against me. “Okay, if you insist,” she breathes out.

AFTERWARDS, I grab some boxers and a t-shirt for Harper to wear, before pulling on a pair of boxer briefs and heading out to the kitchen.

“Anything I can do to help?” she asks, sliding her arms around my waist from behind.

Grinning, I look over my shoulder, giving her a quick kiss before I say, “You can grab that leftover pizza in the fridge and put it in the microwave.”

Harper’s jaw drops and she pulls back a little, her eyes wide. “Um no, that’s not gonna work,” she says.

Turning, I drop an arm around her shoulder. “What do you mean, what’s not going to work?”

“Reheating pizza in the microwave,” she says.

I tilt my head to the side, confused as I ask, “You want me to turn the oven on?”

Harper slow-blinks at me, dropping her arms from my waist as she puts her hands on her hips. “Um, no I don’t want you to turn on the oven because the only way to eat leftover pizza, Max, is cold. So if you want to reheat it,” she says, air quoting the word reheat. “Then I’m not sure this,” she pauses now to move a hand between us, “is going to work out.”

I burst out laughing, wondering if it’s possible this woman could be any more adorable right now. Hooking my arm

around her shoulders I haul her back in for a kiss. “Yeah, I’m pretty sure I can live with cold pizza.”

She smiles now, her arms going back around my waist. “Trust me when I say it will be the best thing you’ve ever eaten.”

With a smirk, I raise a brow at her. “Really? Cause I’m pretty sure I’ve already had the best thing I’ve ever eaten tonight. Twice.” She blushes now and fuck me, I was wrong, because *this* may be the most adorable thing ever. With a laugh, I lean in, my mouth at her ear as I whisper, “You like it when I go down on you?”

“Uh huh,” she says, nodding her head, as her grip on my waist tightens.

“Good,” I say, slipping my hand beneath the t-shirt of mine she wears and sliding it up her back as I pull her closer. “Because it’s gonna be happening a lot,” I add, before kissing her deeply, already hard and ready to go all over again. When we eventually pull back, we are both a little breathless. Smiling down at her, I tuck some loose strands of hair behind her ear. “Red wine okay with your cold pizza?”

“Red wine is great,” she says with a laugh, and I give her ass a quick smack before I grab some glasses and a bottle.

We take the pizza and wine into the living room, sitting on the couch together, Harper crossing her legs as she turns to face me, watching as I pour us both a glass of wine. “Tell me about growing up here,” she says, taking the glass I hand her.

“It was great,” I say with a smile. “Mountains on my doorstep, snow in the winter, hiking in the summer. I loved it. Still love it.”

Harper smiles, reaching for a slice of pizza. “And you went to college in Colorado, right?”

“Yeah, me and Nick went there, pretty much because it had all the things we loved about Tahoe. Elissa was supposed to come with us, but that didn’t happen. It’s where we met Alex too.”

“How come Elissa didn’t go?”

I reach for another slice of pizza, Harper's eyes following me. "Her mom got sick. She and Nick were dating back then, and he wanted to stay in Tahoe with her, but she insisted he go. Said she'd come out the next year, but by then everything had changed."

"What do you mean?" she asks, licking her fingers.

With a smirk I reach over and grab her hand, sucking her thumb into my mouth, chuckling when her eyes widen. "You do shit like that in front of me, babe and I can't help myself," I whisper, before letting go of her hand. "He'd been scouted for the US team," I tell her. "Left college, so Elissa didn't bother coming out, just stayed here and worked at Badger Creek."

"Is that when they broke up?"

I shrug. "Not sure on the exact timeline, neither of them like talking about it much. What I do know is that they are both still crazy about each other and clearly want to be together, they just don't know how to make it work."

"Oh, that's so sad," she says, sticking her bottom lip out.

"Yeah, it is."

"And so Alex, you met him at college?"

I smile, remembering when Nick and I first got to Colorado and the crazy house party we were at as part of orientation week. "Yeah, we met him in our first week, been best friends ever since. All three of us are tight, even if we don't see much of Nick."

"He never comes back here?" she asks, reaching for her wine.

"Not so much anymore, no," I reply. "Kinda sucks to be honest, but I also get it. He's busy living his dream and he's really fucking good too. He'll probably be at the next Olympics."

"Seriously?" Harper asks, shocked.

Chuckling, I nod. "Yep, seriously. Wearing Holden gear too, which is awesome for my folks."

“Wow,” she breathes out. “That’s amazing.”

“I know.”

“What about you,” she now asks. “You didn’t want to ski for the US?”

I burst out laughing, shaking my head a little. “I mean I can ski good enough for a college scholarship,” I tell her. “But I’m not that good. Elissa is though. She should be with Nick right now, to be honest.”

Harper blinks in surprise. “She is?”

“Yep.”

“So why doesn’t she go?”

I let out another laugh. I know Harper doesn’t ski or really know anything about it, but she’s being seriously cute right now. “It’s not as easy as that. And I kinda get the feeling that Elissa has let that dream go now.”

“But she and Nick could be...” she trails off, not finishing her sentence.

“Elissa and Nick are kinda complicated,” I tell her. “They absolutely love each other, have since we were kids, but they’re just in different places right now.” I pause, settling back into the corner of the couch before crooking a finger and beckoning her closer. Harper moves so she’s sitting between my legs, her back against my chest. “What about you, do you have any friends that know you’re here?” I now ask, changing the subject.

Harper shakes her head. “No, I kind of didn’t really have any friends left by the time I could get away,” she says quietly. “My ex made sure of that.”

I tighten my arms around her, hating that this ex of hers had so much control over her. I’d love to punch the guy in the face, but at the same time I’m glad she’s so far away from him and that he has no idea where she is.

“I’m sorry,” I murmur, nuzzling against her. “But you know you have friends here, don’t you?”

She turns so she's facing me, a small smile on her face. "I know, thank you. And don't be sorry," she says, her hand on my chest. "It was shitty, everything that happened, but it's also what led me to you."

A slow grin tugs at my mouth as I settle back against the couch even more, pulling her closer. "Which is exactly where you're supposed to be," I whisper, one hand sliding up under her t-shirt and the other into the back of her boxers. Harper giggles when I grab her ass, squirming against me in the best possible way. "You keep doing that and we might be going for round four," I breathe out, nipping at her bottom lip.

She giggles again, settling herself against me so her hips are resting right against my dick. "I'm okay with that."

"Yeah?"

"Yes," she replies with a nod. "I feel like I've got a lot of time to make up for."

My grin widens, as my hand on her ass pushes her even harder against me. "Yeah, well I can't get enough of you, Harper."

She rests her hands on my bare chest, smiling as she slowly starts to move down. "Mmm, well it might be time I returned a certain favor," she whispers, her fingers teasing the waistband of my boxer briefs, where my dick is currently pitching a fucking tent.

"Harper, you don't—"

She puts a finger to my lips. "I want to," she says, before slowly sliding my boxers briefs off.

I let out a loud groan the second her lips touch my dick, her tongue swirling around the tip in a way that drives me fucking crazy. "Jesus, Harper," I moan, my head falling back onto the arm of the couch.

She repeats the move, before slowly lowering her mouth, taking me all the way in. It's like heaven and hell all at once, the feeling of her hot, wet mouth around my dick almost too much, but I never want her to stop.

When she starts to lift her head, slowly dragging her mouth off my dick until she releases me with a pop, I swear my eyes roll back in my head. “Holy fuck, baby.”

She grips my thighs and I force my eyes to open only to find her grinning up at me. “You like it when I go down on you?” she teases, repeating my earlier question back to me.

“Holy shit, yes. Yes!” I practically shout.

Harper laughs, leaning in to kiss the tip before she repeats her earlier moves. I keep my eyes open this time, watching as her head moves up and down, as she slides my dick in and out of her mouth. I don’t think I have ever been harder or ever seen anything hotter, until she looks up at me, her eyes hooded and my dick still in her mouth.

“Jesus christ,” I breathe out, my chest heaving as I try not to lose it. “Baby, you keep doing that and I’m gonna come. I’m—”

The rest of my words are cut off as Harper lowers her head again, taking me all the way in and sucking hard, increasing her speed now as she continues to suck me off, like she’s making a point, like she’s telling me she wants me to come.

“Harper, babe, fuck...” I grit out, my jaw tight. “I’m gonna, I’m...”

She squeezes my thigh, looking up at me again and it’s enough to send me over the edge, my dick pulsing as I come, Harper never slowing down, never stopping as I explode in her mouth. She swallows everything, never stopping her movements, just slowing down until eventually I collapse back onto the couch.

With one final kiss, she lifts her head, crawling back up my body and lying against me, her head resting on my shoulder, her hand over my pounding heart.

“Fucking hell, that was amazing,” I say, my breathing ragged.

“It was,” she says, leaning up to kiss my neck.

I turn, capturing her mouth with mine in a deep kiss, as I slide my hand back under her boxers, grabbing her ass hard. “I just need like two minutes and to go get that box of condoms and then we are totally going for round four. Probably five, six and seven if I’m being honest. I hope you weren’t planning on sleeping tonight.”

Harper laughs, her hand sliding down my bare chest and stomach to my dick, which twitches in her hand. “Not even sure you need two minutes,” she whispers against my mouth.

I squeeze her ass hard before forcing myself off the couch, knowing she’s probably right. I am seriously turned on right now. “Don’t fucking move,” I say, pointing a finger at her as she lays on my couch looking sexy as fuck.

She grins, giving me a wink as she lifts the t-shirt she wears up and over her head. “Not even to do this?”

I swallow hard, torn because I really want to fuck her again, but also knowing I need to go and get those condoms. “Okay, that’s okay,” I breathe out. “You can take those off too,” I add, pointing to my boxers.

Harper grins, hooking her fingers into the waistband as she makes a point of slowly sliding them off so she’s now completely naked.

“Ah fuck it,” I say, leaning down to pick her up and throw her over my shoulder. “Let’s go back to bed,” I say, sliding my hand up between her thighs, my fingers slipping through her wetness. “Right fucking now.”

Harper laughs. “Okay, if you insist.”

HARPER

After that weekend, going back to work is a little tough. Spending the night with Max was more than I ever expected it to be, and knowing that Sammie was being taken care of, was a huge part of it. She had the best time with Max's mom and dad, so worn out that she even slept later than usual, and she still hasn't stopped talking about her sleepover. Her first ever sleepover.

Every time I think about the weekend, I can't stop smiling. I'm smiling for the normalcy and happiness I feel, but also for Sammie who is completely head over heels obsessed with Max and Pam. I don't know how she couldn't be. They have given her the world. They've given her a life she never had but has always deserved.

I roll over, the alarm sounding, but I've been awake for at least the last hour replaying everything that has happened since moving to Tahoe. My only regret is that I didn't leave sooner, that I didn't do this years ago. Maybe it wouldn't have played out this way since Max would have still been away at college and Zoey wouldn't have been in her management position.

My phone chimes out seconds after I silence the alarm. I don't even need to look at it to know it's Max. He's on shift for the next three days, and he's been texting me ever since heading back to work.

MAX: Good morning, beautiful. I hope you and Sammie have a great day. I'll see you Wednesday night.

Me: Good morning to you. Did you get any sleep?

Max: Sorta, but it's all good. Don't usually sleep much while I'm working.

Me: I'll make dinner Wednesday.

Max: Perfect. Did you give any thought to my mom and I taking Sammie to dance on Thursdays?

Me: I have and I'm going to put you both down on the paperwork to pick her up from daycare.

Max: Sounds good.

OUR CONVERSATION ENDS THERE, but I know it won't be the last I hear from him today. One of us usually texts around lunch time and then late into the evening. He keeps me company after Sammie has gone to bed.

I move into Sammie's room now, waking her up and helping her get dressed before we head into the kitchen to have breakfast. Plunking her down in front of the TV, a cartoon playing while she sleepily rubs her eyes, and lets out a sigh.

"What's that for?" I ask from the kitchen while I heat up a pancake for her, topping it with some whipped cream and some slices of strawberries. I narrow my eyes, giving her a cheeky smile when she looks over at me. Letting out a giggle, she flops back onto the couch, giggling even harder now.

"You're very giggly this morning," I now say. "Letting out sighs and giggles. What's going on in that cute little head of yours?"

"I love it here, Mommy. I never want to leave," she answers. "Can this be our forever home?"

"This is our forever home, baby. You have nothing to worry about," I tell her, hoping to reassure any fears she has that we will somehow end up back in Florida or with her dad.

It's not like it hasn't happened before, but I always hoped she was too young to remember those times. The times I tried to leave but failed. Failed her.

"I love it here too," I add, my thoughts immediately going to Max, realizing that I not only love it here, but that I love him too.

But saying it out loud is a different story. It hasn't been that long, and jumping in headfirst is never a good idea, especially in my situation. But in my heart, I know I love him. Something I'll hold close, something I'll let live quietly inside me until the time feels right.

I walk over to Sammie, pushing her hair back, I bend down and kiss the top of her head, setting her breakfast down in front of her.

"You eat, while I go take a shower and get ready, okay?" I say, not like she doesn't already know the routine. It hasn't changed since we moved into our little bungalow.

"I know, Mommy," Sammie answers back, grabbing a strawberry and dipping it in the dollop of whipped cream.

I have never felt so good about a decision that caused me so much grief for so long.

AN HOUR later Sammie and I are skipping through the parking lot of Badger Creek and to the daycare center. Sammie scampers up to the door, yelling for me to let her ring the bell. Like I would dream of ringing it and crushing her morning excitement. It's the one thing that gets her moving out the door faster than me telling her there is a chocolate donut waiting for her.

The door unlocks and I pull it open, holding it for Sammie to go in. She waves to the woman behind the desk who calls out a good morning to Sammie.

She knows the routine, throwing her arms around my waist and then taking her backpack from me, Sammie slips it over her shoulders and runs off to find her friends.

“Bye, baby, love you!” I call to her, trying not to hold it against her that she’s so comfortable here. I have to admit, it breaks my heart just a little that she doesn’t need me. But I should consider myself lucky. Some of these parents bring their children in screaming. Not Sammie.

“I need to update my pickup list,” I tell the desk clerk, a woman who works here on Mondays and Wednesdays, but I can’t remember her name.

“No problem,” she says, rolling her chair back to a file cabinet, she pulls out Sammie’s file and sets it on the counter. “Just let me know what you’ve updated, and I’ll add it to the files on the computer too.”

I flip through the paperwork, coming to the pickup list, I add Max and Pam, and I also include them under my emergency contacts. And as I do, my eyes fall on his name. A name I wrote the first week we were here.

It sits there, staring at me, reminding me that I made the right decision. Reminding me that he should be listed as someone who should not have access to Sammie. Not that I think he would ever show up here and try to take her, but I just don’t know. He knows that she’s the most important thing in my life, and that would be his way to get to me. Taking Sammie.

I want to write his name on there hundreds of times, over and over and over again. Driving the point home that he is never to have contact with Sammie. But this is just a daycare center, not a court of law.

His name will never leave me even though we left him.

Tyler LaFrey.

I hand her back the paperwork, pointing to the places I made the changes, and she tabs them with little sticky flags. I watch her face as she takes in the names, smiling a little, but I can tell she recognizes the names. If you live here, the Holden name is one that is well-known and respected.

“Good to see you found such a great guy,” she says, winking at me as she points at Max’s name. “Sammie talks

about him nonstop.”

I smile at her, not sure how to respond. Max and I may have gone public with everything, being at the parade together and all, but I still worry that just one small thing could ruin it all. My life always feels like one wrong decision away from falling apart again.

“Have a good day,” I say, giving her a little wave. I peek through the door, and seeing Sammie already settled, I head over to work.

AS SOON AS I walk in, I’m met with Elissa, a huge smile on her face as she shoos me into my office. She closes the door behind her, her eyes wide as she stands there with her hands on her hips.

“Omg, I was going to text you this weekend, but I didn’t want to come across as creepy,” she says, and I let out a laugh.

“And shoving me into my office and closing the door isn’t coming across as creepy?” I joke, pulling out my chair and sitting down. “What’s up?”

“Seriously, Harper?” she questions, her brows going up as she sits down across from me. “You had your kid-free date with Max. Fill me in!” She squeals out her last few words, as she rests her elbows on my desk, her lips pursed, waiting for me.

“It was good,” I reply, and she slams her hands down on my desk now. “What? You want details?”

“Um, yes, I want details. Where’d you go to dinner? Did you finally have sex with him? Did he sleep over? All the fucking details, Harper!”

“Elissa, dear, you really need to get laid. Living through me is really lame. I haven’t had sex in like two years,” I reply, which only makes her laugh.

“Then we’re in the same boat, which is why you gotta spill it,” she demands, rolling her hand in my direction.

“Fine, fine. It wasn’t just good,” I admit, slightly embarrassed with what I’m about to unload on her. I scrunch my eyes shut tight, letting out a giggle. “We did it like four or five times in like twelve hours. And I gave him a blowjob. And he went down on me. First time ever, and holy shit that was a life-changing experience.”

“Hell, yes! I’m so damn happy for you!” Elissa shouts, holding up her hand for me to high-five her. This is the most ridiculous conversation I’ve ever had at work, but I’ll admit, I’ve missed having friends. I didn’t realize it until I started spending time with Elissa at work, and then when she invited me out with Zoey and Delaney.

“Thanks. It’s been amazing,” I say, pausing for a second, and while we’ve just been talking the sex end of it, I feel like I need to admit to her what just happened this morning.

I take in a deep breath, Elissa waiting for me to say more, and I do, but I’m sure it’s not what she was thinking I would say.

“I added Max and Max’s mom Pam to Sammie’s pickup list at the daycare.” It comes out in a rush and I wonder if she thinks I’m crazy or a bad person for trusting these people so quickly.

“That’s awesome. I’m so glad you found Max and his family. You deserve it,” she says, taking my hand in hers now. “I know what it’s like to feel alone. I’m always here if you need anything too.”

“Thank you, Elissa. Are you trying to make me cry?” I ask, laughing a little, trying to keep things a little light, but I can tell both of us are thinking about our past. “Max told me your mom was sick and that’s why you didn’t go away to college with Nick and Max,” I say, not trying to rub salt in her still open wound. But I feel like this is something we can both bond over. “My mom passed away from lung cancer right after Sammie was born.”

“I’m really sorry. It’s a tough thing to go through,” Elissa says, the excitement of earlier dying off a little. “My mom had breast cancer. I couldn’t leave her here by herself. My dad left

when I was a baby, and it was just my mom and me.” Elissa shrugs as if it’s nothing, but I know it stings to have that in the back of her mind all the time. To have Nick leaving too. It might not have been the same circumstances, but it’s still leaving.

“I get it. I was raised by a single mom too. She kicked me out when I told her I was pregnant with Sammie. I was with her when she died though. Sammie and I both were,” I tell Elissa, like that makes up for the way things went down with my mom and me.

“You can’t let that tarnish what a great mom you are. You became the mom you always needed, the best mom Sammie could ask for,” Elissa tells me, and this is what it feels like to have real friends. Someone who encourages you, someone who believes in you when you don’t believe in yourself.

“Yeah, you’re right. I’m doing a damn good job,” I echo. “You want to hang out with Sammie and me after work tonight?”

“Girls’ night? Fuck yes!”

MAX

“Hey, Max? You here?”

I step out into the ambulance bay to find Alex there, a grin on his face and a bag with the Tony’s Tacos logo on the side of it. “Hey, what are you doing here?” I ask.

“Thought I’d see if you wanted to have dinner,” he says, holding up the bag.

“Ohhh,” I tease, my hand on my chest. “Is this like a date? Do you miss me, Alex?”

“Fuck you,” he says, laughing as he walks toward me. “If you don’t want the tacos, no problem. I’ll take them home with me. Your loss.”

“Don’t be fucking stupid, course I want the tacos,” I say, slapping him on the back as I lead him over to the gym equipment set up on the far side of the bay. “Thanks, man, I appreciate it, seriously.”

Alex grins as he sits on one of the weight benches. “No worries, just with you working these shifts and getting all mushy over Harper and everything, I feel like I haven’t seen you in ages.”

“Oh, so you *do* miss me!”

“Again, fuck off,” he says, giving my foot a kick.

I laugh. “Just giving you shit, dude. You’re right, it has been ages. How’s things?”

Alex hands me a container of tacos and a bottle of water before reaching into the bag for his. “Yeah good, busy with work, but it’s good.”

“Everything on track for the opening in winter?” I ask, knowing he and Ethan have been working their asses off to get the new ski academy set up. I have to admit, I was surprised when Ethan wanted to do this, especially when he admitted to me that he couldn’t really ski and had only done it a handful of times with Zoey.

But I also really liked that he was doing it too, because just like all the renovations for the lodge and the surrounding condos and that sketchy motel that he has planned, he was making Badger Creek even better. And he was doing it without compromising what this place was about. I have so many memories of skiing here, me and Zoey both do, and they are good memories that Ethan is protecting, even with the changes.

“Yep, all set,” Alex says around a mouthful of food. “You know Ethan’s given Holden exclusive rights and first access to any sponsorship opportunities, don’t you?”

I take a massive bite of taco as I nod. “Yeah I know. It’s pretty cool. Mom and Dad were blown away when he told him.”

“It’s very fucking cool,” Alex says. “He’s just a cool guy, and he and Zoey seriously are the Badger Creek power couple.”

I let out a snort, shaking my head at him even though he’s probably right. It’s not like either of them go looking for that kind of shit, but when you combine my family’s name and brand with Ethan’s, it’s pretty fucking impressive. I’d hate to think what the dollar value behind that pairing is, but it’s got to be massive.

“Kiss ass,” I mutter, knowing Alex has a bit of hero worship going on when it comes to Ethan.

Alex grins. “Speaking of couples, how’d your date with Harper go?”

I raise a brow as I take a sip of water, glancing at my watch as though to note the time it's taken him to finally get around to asking me this question. "So this is the real reason you've shown up with my favorite food? Trying to get all the dirty details?"

"Ohhhhh, so there *are* dirty details, huh?" he says, grinning as he leans over and punches my arm. "Nice one, dude, 'bout time you got laid again. Welcome back to the club."

"Oh Jesus," I mutter, shaking my head at him.

Alex laughs. "Nah, but seriously, how was it?"

I smile now, unable to stop myself. "It was good, really good actually," I admit. "Sammie stayed the night at my folks and Harper stayed the night at my place."

Alex smirks, cocking a brow. "I see, so things are going well?" he asks, pulling out his phone.

"Things are going awesome," I say with a laugh. "I really like her *and* her kid. It's...I don't know, surreal and weird, but amazing, all at the same time. The two of them are just...just so much fun to hang out with."

"That's great, Max," Alex says, distracted as he starts typing away at his phone, before putting it on the bench beside him. When he looks back at me, he's smiling, even as he shoves the rest of his taco in his mouth.

"What?" I ask, glancing at his phone quickly as I hear the sound of mine pinging with an incoming message. "What the hell was that?" I add, gesturing toward it with my half-eaten taco.

Alex's grin widens. "Just updating Nick, that's all. If you checked our group chat once in a while, you'd know this."

I slow-blink as I reach for my phone in my back pocket, see the new notification as I open up the message app to see the screen now filled with back and forth messages between Alex and Nick about my love life. "Seriously?" I ask, lifting my gaze to Alex.

He shrugs. “Nick was curious, you weren’t filling him in, so I did.”

I glance down at my phone again, my eyes scanning their conversation.

NICK: So he’s met a girl huh?

Alex: Yeah he’s totally whipped, hangs out with her all the time. Texts her all the time too, according to Elissa who told Zoey who told Laney who told me.

Nick: Sounds serious between them.

Alex: Totally is, she’s even met Pam and Jeff!

Nick: Fuuuuckkkk that IS serious. Where is Max anyway, MAX??? Dude, get online?!!

Alex: It is and...they just had their first sleepover! Our boy is growing up!!

“ELISSA WHO TOLD Zoey who told Laney who told you,” I repeat, brow raised. “You realize you sound like a gossiping old woman, right?”

Alex snorts, finishing off his taco. “Dude, someone has to keep Nick up to date on this shit. I’m just relaying the information, that’s all.”

“Fuck me,” I mutter, as I type out a quick text to both of them.

ME: You two are idiots. But yes, I like her alright. I like her a lot. She’s great and maybe when you’re next back here Nick, you can meet her 😊

ALEX LOOKS at his phone when the text ping sounds, smiling. “You trying to guilt him into coming back here?” he asks.

I shrug. “I don’t know, kinda. Probably a shitty thing to do, but I get the feeling you and I aren’t the only ones who miss hanging out with him.”

Alex gives me a knowing nod because he knows who I’m referring to. He might not have seen Nick and Elissa when they were together, but he certainly heard enough about Elissa in our first year of college to know that what she and Nick had was the real deal. Both of us then seeing how torn up Nick was after they broke up only confirmed it.

“Well, in all seriousness, Max,” he now says, “I’m happy for you. She seems like a cool chick; I know Laney really likes her.”

“Yeah,” I reply with a nod. “Zoey and Elissa have been great about making her feel at home. I know they’ve hung out and shit, with Del too. It’s exactly what Harper needs.”

Alex tips his head to the side. “What do you mean?” he asks.

I take another bite of taco, stalling as I try to decide how much to tell Alex. It’s not that I don’t trust him or care if he knows, it’s just that it’s not my story to tell. Hell, I’m pretty sure I don’t even know the full story about Harper and everything she’s been through.

“She’s kinda starting over,” I eventually say, letting out a breath. “She doesn’t really have anyone here so it’s nice for her to find some people to hang out with. People she can... well, people she can trust.”

Alex gives me a curious look and I know he wants to ask more. Before he gets a chance to though, my phone pings with an incoming text. I grab it from my pocket, expecting it to be Nick responding to my message and smiling when I see Harper’s name light up my screen.

HARPER: helloooooo, how is work? I miss you.

CHUCKLING, I type out a response with my thumb, another taco in my other hand.

ME: Baby, are you drunk?

Harper: Maybe...yes...Elissa is here. Also, I'm a lightweight.

Me: You're also adorable. I kinda want to meet drunk Harper.

Harper: COME OVER!!!

I LAUGH, wishing I could.

“Dude, what the hell? You sexting your girl while you’re having dinner with me?” I lift my gaze to my best friend, hitting him with a smirk. “What?” he says, smiling. “You know you, me and Nick have this bromance thing going on. It’s cool, I’m man enough to be okay with it all.”

“Fucking knew you missed me,” I say, grinning at my best friend who just rolls his eyes. I glance back at my phone, typing out a quick reply.

ME: Wish I could...maybe I'll swing by later if you're not too drunk to see me?

Harper: NOOOOOOOO! Come by anytime...you have a key 😊

I LAUGH, shaking my head as I slide my phone back into my pocket, wondering if I could manage a quick drive by just so I can see her. I love working as an EMT during the summer, but these shifts aren’t great for my dating life, especially with everything that happened between me and Harper on the weekend.

To say it had been awesome was an understatement. I couldn’t keep my hands off her and it seems as though that

feeling was entirely mutual. I don't know how many times we hooked up that night or the next morning, but it wasn't enough.

I want more of her.

Lots more.

“So, what's going on?” Alex asks.

“She's hanging out with Elissa, they're drinking and I think Harper is a little drunk,” I say with a smile.

Alex grins now. “You gonna head over there, maybe get a little drunk sex in?”

“Dude, I am working,” I deadpan.

He scoffs. “Please, like you haven't dropped by and seen her while you're working.”

I roll my eyes at him. “Dropped by, yes. Had sex, no. It's not like I can just tell my partner to hold all emergencies for like thirty minutes or whatever while I go and get laid now, can I?”

“Thirty minutes, huh?” Alex teases.

Laughing, I shake my head at him. “At *least*,” I reply, emphasizing the word. “But enough of this shit, you wanna hang out on Friday, maybe go for a hike or something?”

Alex laughs, finishing off the last of his taco. “Yeah, sounds cool. Meet at the trail parking lot after work?” I nod and he continues. “Maybe we can see if the girls wanna come?”

“Sure we can ask, but it depends on Sammie too. Can't exactly hike our usual trails with a four year old in tow.”

Now he's smiling, shaking his head at me. “Man, you really are whipped, aren't you? But no worries, we can either do an easier trail or just meet them for dinner after?”

“I'll ask Harper and let you know, yeah?”

“Sounds good,” he says, just as a call comes through on my radio. “Guess that's my cue to leave?”

I listen to the staticky voice calling in what sounds like a minor car accident as I shove the last of my taco in my mouth and stand. “Yeah, probably need to check this out, sorry dude.”

“All good,” Alex replies as he stands and gathers up our rubbish.

“Thanks for the tacos, that was great.”

He smiles, dropping a casual arm around my shoulder. “No worries. I needed to see my boy and I figured with your big weekend, you probably needed the calories.”

I elbow him in the side, but I’m smiling because I have missed hanging out with him.

“Catch you Friday, yeah?” he shouts as he heads toward the open door of the ambulance bay.

“Yep, see you then.”

“And ask your girlfriend too,” he calls as he disappears into the night. “If you can stop sucking her face for five seconds.”

I shake my head, but I’m smiling, because he’s sort of right. After everything that’s happened between Harper and me, I do find it hard to keep my hands to myself. I cannot wait to see her Wednesday night, am literally counting down the seconds until my shift is over.

It’s going to be interesting though, given I’ll be at her place this time and Sammie will be around. I’m still not sure on the whole protocol with me staying over when her daughter is there. I hope it’s something I can do because now I’ve had a taste of Harper, she’s all I can fucking think about.

HARPER

Wednesday night can't come soon enough, and I feel like I've been walking around with a smile on my face that screams to everyone near me that I'm getting laid tonight. Or at least I hope I am. Turns out when the sex is good, I can't get enough of it. It also turns out, I've never had good sex until I met Max. Getting pregnant at seventeen didn't leave much room for exploration and being shackled with an asshole of a boyfriend didn't either. He was always in it for himself.

Max on the other hand, is here for it all, and he's especially into making sure I'm having a good time. I have no idea how I couldn't though. He knows his way around a woman's body, and holy shit am I grateful for that.

"Max is coming over tonight," I tell Sammie as I pick her up from daycare, her hand in mine, a huge smile on her face.

"Yay," she calls out, tossing our hands in the air, skipping a little. "Can we have pizza for dinner?" she now asks, switching subjects like only a four year old can.

"What did you have for lunch today?" I ask her, knowing that pizza was on the menu at the daycare today. I give her hand a squeeze when she looks up at me, narrowing my eyes. She lets out a silly giggle, knowing I caught her.

"I had pears and cucumbers, milk, and cheese," she pauses, and I can see the wheels turning in her little head, trying to figure out what else is on pizza.

“Maybe some tomatoes and bread?” I suggest, making her giggle again.

“Mommy,” she squeals, laughing. “We had pizza, but I could eat pizza every day. Please, please, please. Max loves pizza too.”

There was a time when I left Florida with only the little money I was able to save, so I never thought I’d be ordering pizza or doing anything but eating peanut butter and jelly sandwiches. With my bungalow taken out of my check, and the amount nothing in comparison to what I would pay in rent, I actually have money to do things like order pizza.

“Max does love pizza,” I respond, scooping her up and settling her on my hip. She’s getting too big for this, but I’m still trying to hold onto all of this while she’s still little. “And guess what?” I now whisper in her ear, making her squirm and giggle. “Max is going to spend the night.”

“Can he sleep in my room?” she immediately asks and now it’s me laughing.

“I don’t think so. He’ll probably sleep in my bed, but I’m sure he’ll read you a story before bed.” Sammie is absolutely beaming with happiness, and there’s not a chance in hell I will ever regret moving her across the country. The smile on her face says it all.

Setting Sammie down, I push the key into the lock, opening the door for us and as soon as I do, Sammie lets out a high-pitched squeal. Running straight to Max as soon as she sees him, and he picks her up, giving her a hug.

“Hi, Sammie. What do you think about having pizza tonight for dinner?” he asks, pretending to whisper like I can’t hear him. Max looks over at me, Sammie in his arms, and my heart feels like it might explode in my chest. Seeing him with her, seeing how happy they both are, I have to swallow hard to suck back the tears.

This is my life. Holy shit.

Max makes his way over to me, still holding Sammie, he leans down and kisses me. “Hi, baby,” he whispers against my

lips, sending a ripple of excitement and happiness through me. “How was your day? I missed you.”

“Did you miss me?” Sammie asks, sounding a little indignant, which only makes Max laugh. Tickling her side, she wiggles around, laughing.

“Of course I missed you too,” he tells her, setting her down and she runs off, flopping down on the couch, giggling like mad. “I think we should get some pizza and watch a movie tonight for our first scheduled sleepover.” His suggestion sounds perfect, and it was probably what I was going to say too. Although, we never talked about us having a sleepover.

“So you’re just assuming I want you to sleepover,” I say, my arms wrapped around Max’s waist, looking up at him, I give him a playful smirk.

Grabbing my ass, he lets out a low groan, his mouth close to my ear now so just we can hear. “I can’t be away from you for another second.”

“I feel like you say that all the time,” I whisper back, my hand slipping under his t-shirt, my fingers caressing the taut muscles of his stomach.

“It’s true. Being away from you is hard. I can’t wait till I’m back at Badger Creek and we can arrange our schedules together,” Max says, and I still find it hard to believe that I’ve fallen so hard for him so quickly. But I guess looking back on things, it’s easy to know what’s right when I’ve spent so many years knowing what was wrong.

“We do have my roommate to contend with, don’t forget,” I say, pushing up to kiss him before slipping away to order the pizza.

“Is that what we’re calling her?” Max teases. “She’s a pretty cute little roommate, but it looks like we’ll need to keep things quiet tonight when we’re in bed.”

“Luckily for us, she’s a pretty hard sleeper too,” I joke back, and just when I’m going to look up the number for the pizza place, Max takes my phone from me.

“Pizza is on me, Harper.” He shakes his head, smiling a little. “You don’t need to pay for it.”

“I know I don’t need to, but I want to. You have been so good to Sammie and me, let me just get dinner for tonight and then you can go back to spoiling us.”

Max lets out a hard sigh, shaking his head, but eventually he gives in, and it makes me feel good that I can finally return the favor, no matter how small.

A FEW HOURS LATER, we’ve eaten, Sammie has been bathed and Max is currently on his second book. I watch from the doorway, taking in just how much Sammie adores him, her eyes heavy as he reads the last page. Pushing back her hair, he kisses her forehead.

It’s almost impossible for me to imagine our life without Max now. He’s made moving here the easiest thing I’ve done. And while he isn’t here helping me parent every single day, he has stepped up and put in a ton of effort when he is. It’s really non-negotiable for me. I don’t want to parent alone; never have wanted to, but I did for the last four years.

I walk over, pulling Sammie’s blanket up, I lean down and kiss her cheek, whispering goodnight to her and that I love her. Sleepily, she mutters it back, and then she says something that brings tears to my eyes. She snuggles into Max’s side, telling him that she loves him too.

I watch him swallow hard, his mind processing what she’s just said and how he should respond. A few seconds go by, the time passing slowly, and I want to tell him he doesn’t have to say it back. Sammie needs consistency and the truth. She needs to know that when someone returns it, they mean it too. I don’t think her father ever said those words to her. And if he said them to me, they were used as a weapon. His words were always a weapon.

“I love you too, Sammie,” he whispers, kissing her head, and now I’m sobbing.

I quickly leave her room, not wanting to disturb her with my wailing, and the last thing I need is for her to see me crying. That's a thing of the past, even if the tears I'm crying now are happy tears. It's always there in the back of my mind that all of this could end. I could be back where I started, alone and scared. Somedays I feel like Cinderella, waiting for everything to turn back into a pumpkin.

A few seconds later, Max emerges from Sammie's room, coming to find me in the kitchen, crying into a dish towel like a fool. I feel far too vulnerable and while Max knows a little bit about my past, he doesn't know it all. And honestly, I'm not sure I want him to know it all. I don't want him to look at me differently, and I certainly don't want him to know the weak and manipulated person I was before I met him.

"Harper, baby," Max croons sweetly, and it only makes me cry harder. "Come here." Opening his arms, I go to him willingly. "I hope it was okay that I said that to Sammie. You aren't mad at me, are you?" he asks, his question pulling at my already destroyed heart.

"I'm not mad at you. I just..." I start, but I can't seem to get the words out. My sobs making everything I want to say to him hard. "I need you to..."

"I do mean it, Harper. I meant it when I said it to her, and I'm going to mean it when I say it right now." I pull back to look at him, confused by what he just said. "I love you too, Harper. I love you both more than I ever thought I could love someone."

And just when I thought I couldn't cry anymore, I'm back to sobbing. How in the hell is this happening to me? I left Florida to start over, and make things right for Sammie and me, and this is not at all how I thought this would go down. Everything has been like a fairytale, a perfect fucking fairytale.

"Max," I sob, burying my face in his t-shirt. "I love you," I say through fabric, feeling each word as they leave my mouth. Now I truly know what it feels like to be loved and I want him to know that I mean it too. "Thank you for making my life so

great. You coming into mine and Sammie's life is more than I could have ever asked for."

I pull back, smiling through the tears so he sees that I'm not only happy, I'm so fucking head over heels in love with him.

"You do?" Max asks, and it's the cutest thing I think he's ever said. He's this adorable combination of worried and hesitant, yet excited. Seeing him like this makes me love him even more. This big guy, in a job that puts his life at risk, fearing nothing, but the idea that I might now be in love with him. How could he think I'm not? It's obvious I'm obsessed with him.

"Yes," I reply, resting my hand on his chest as he swipes his thumb at a stray tear that rolls down my cheek. "I've never felt like this about anyone. You make me..." Again, I trail off, shaking my head. I can't find the right words, the words that can say everything I'm feeling. I don't think there are words for it.

"I've never felt this way about someone either. I know it's real, Harper. I want to be with you all the time. When I'm not with you, I'm thinking about you. I want to help you raise Sammie and I want to teach her how to ski. I want to wake up next to you every day. I want to be here when you need me. I want to pick Sammie up from dance class and make dinner for us. I want all of this."

"Holy shit," I breathe out, shaky and ragged. I have no idea what to say, other than I want all of this too. I want everything with Max.

"Tell me you want the same thing," he says, waiting, his eyes wide, looking for me to respond, worried he's crossed the line.

"I want all of that too," I finally respond, throwing my arms around his neck as he wraps his around my waist.

"I know this is hard for you, but I'm going to spend every fucking day of our life together showing you that you deserve to be happy, that you deserve to have the life you were meant

to have,” Max says, a bite to his words that tells me he’s here to help me forget about my past. That despite my past, he loves me.

Lifting me off the ground, I wrap my legs around his waist, kissing him hard and deep, both of us savoring the connection.

“Take me to bed, Max,” I practically beg, needing to be closer to him, needing to feel every inch of him.

He doesn’t waste any time, walking us to my bedroom, closing the door quietly behind us. With my body still wrapped around his, his arm under my ass holding me to him, he turns me around, backing me up against the door.

I forget where I am, I lose track of my thoughts, not worrying for once where Sammie is and if she’s okay. I know she is. We’re in our house, and this is so fucking right.

Setting me down, Max’s hands make short work of my pants, sliding them down my hips till they pool at the floor, dropping to his knees in front of me, he wets his lips.

His mouth nips at my hips, his teeth grazing my skin, skin that feels like it’s on fire, wanting him, needing him.

There was a time that I worried about Max seeing me naked, but all self-consciousness about my body and about having a kid, has gone out the window and all I care about is how good he makes me feel.

“I want your mouth on me,” I say, my words coming out almost as an order, and when Max pauses a second, my chest heaving, my body desperate for him, he lets out a moan of appreciation.

“Fuck, Harper,” he growls, his fingers holding my hips as he pulls me close to him. I hook my knee over his shoulder, opening myself to him. “I can’t get enough of you.”

MAX

If I thought I couldn't get enough of Harper before, it's got nothing on how much I want her right now. She's like a drug to me, and I am addicted to every single part of her. Especially after everything we've just confessed to each other.

"Max," she groans, her head falling back against the door with a soft thud as I brush my mouth against her. I feel her fingers tighten in my hair, her heel press into my back as though she's urging me closer, and I can't resist giving her exactly what she wants.

What I want.

So I do, devouring her, licking and sucking and tasting her until her chest is heaving with every soft moan she lets out. Without moving my mouth, I lift my eyes to her, watching her reaction as I now slide two fingers inside her, pumping them slowly as I continue to suck on her.

She comes hard and without warning, the long groan of my name sounding loud in the silence of her bedroom. I don't move though, just slow my fingers and tongue, riding out the orgasm with her until she slumps back against the door, her leg falling from my shoulder.

Standing, I press my body into hers, my hands cradling her face as I press a soft kiss to her lips. "God, I love eating you out," I whisper against her mouth.

"So good," Harper breathes out. "So fucking good."

Chuckling, I pull her off the door and back her toward the bed, lifting her top off and undoing her bra along the way so she's now naked. "Lie back, baby," I tell her. She does, shuffling to the middle of the bed, her breathing still a little ragged as she watches me undress. When I'm done, I crawl over her, settling my body on hers. "I brought you something," I whisper.

"Oh, what is it?"

With a grin, I gesture toward the nightstand where the brand new box of condoms I'd bought and stashed here earlier now sits. "Well, I mean it's more like something for us, but you know," I say with a wink.

Harper laughs, her arms looping around my neck as she smiles up at me. "I'm also on the pill. Have been ever since..." she trails off, the smile disappearing from her face as she quietly adds, "Well, since I learnt things the hard way."

I lean in and drop a soft kiss to her lips, hating that so much of her past still haunts her. I know she's told me about her reasons for having Sammie, but I still don't really know the situation that led to her getting pregnant in the first place.

She has definitely alluded to her ex being a dickhead though and it actually scares me a little to think of all the different possibilities that may have happened to leave Harper in this situation. A single mom, running from an ex who apparently doesn't give a shit about his child or her mother. An ex that feels dangerous, even from the small amount I know about him.

"Harper," I whisper, unsure what to say. "No choice you made was the wrong choice." It feels stupid and kind of cliché, but I still mean it.

She gives me a small smile. "Yeah, I know. They all led me here to you."

"This is very true," I say, giving her another kiss.

She takes in a shaky breath as she whispers, "I trust you, Max."

I smile against her lips. “And nothing could be sexier,” I murmur. “But we’ll still use condoms. I know this is a big deal for you.”

Harper takes in a deep breath, almost like she’s calming herself, before letting it out slowly. “Are you...are you sure you don’t mind?” she asks quietly.

“Not at all,” I whisper, giving her a smile.

She huffs out a laugh, pulling me closer as she says, “I really love you, Max Holden. Thank you.”

Now it’s me laughing, as I kiss her again, deeper this time, before grabbing a condom from the box and quickly rolling it on. Then I hover over her, sliding my hand slowly down the side of her body, my thumb caressing the side of her breast, her hip and finally her knee, before I hitch it higher. Then I push inside her in one long thrust, groaning at the feeling of being inside her again. It’s been three really long nights since the weekend.

“Jesus,” I moan, my forehead on hers. “I could seriously embarrass myself right now.”

“What?” she asks with a laugh. “Why?”

Grinning, I lift my head. “Because I’m pretty sure I’m only gonna last like five seconds, because it’s been too long, and you feel that fucking good.”

Harper bursts out laughing, angling her hips a little so I sink even deeper. “Well, it’s just as well we have all night then, isn’t it?”

“Oh, so I am sleeping over?” I tease, even as my whole body electrifies with a million different sensations because of how deep I am inside her.

“Yes, Max,” she whispers. “You are definitely sleeping over.”

“Thank fuck,” I whisper before I kiss her deeply and we don’t talk anymore and thankfully I don’t embarrass myself.

THE NEXT MORNING I'm woken by an alarm that's quickly silenced before an arm snakes around my waist. "Don't get up," Harper whispers from behind me.

I lower her hand to my dick, which is currently pitching a tent in my boxers. "Too late, I'm already up." Harper lets out a soft laugh, gripping me gently before she slips a hand under the waistband and curls her fingers around my dick. "Fuck, baby," I groan.

She nuzzles the back of my neck as she pushes her tits against my back. She's wearing a tank, but I can still feel the hard press of her nipples against my skin. "You like that?" she asks, her voice husky and low and sexy as hell.

"Jesus, yes," I groan, rolling onto my back. "How long do we have?" I ask as I curl my hand around her neck and pull her in for a kiss.

Harper giggles. "I may have set my alarm slightly earlier."

"Thank. Fuck.," I reply as I deepen the kiss, my other hand now pushing up her tank as Harper works my boxers down my hips. When she pulls back though, I groan in frustration, "What, what are you doing?"

She doesn't say anything, just gives me a sexy as hell grin before she disappears beneath the covers and replaces her hand with her mouth.

THE NEXT TIME the alarm goes off, the two of us are lying together, Harper's head on my shoulder as I trail my fingers up and down her spine, her skin warm beneath my touch.

"What are you up to today?" she asks.

I drop a kiss on the top of her head. "Probably hit the gym, maybe swing by my parents' shop and then I'm taking Sammie to dance classes, remember?"

She lifts her head now, her arm resting across my chest as she smiles down at me. "I gave them your name at daycare. Pam's too."

“Good,” I reply, tucking some loose strands of hair behind her ear. “And you’ve told Sammie about today?”

“No,” she replies, shaking her head. “I didn’t want to tell her in case something happened and at least this way you can surprise her this afternoon. She’ll love it.”

I do love the idea of surprising Sammie, but it’s what Harper said first that bothers me a little. “Baby, you know if I say I’m gonna do something, then I’m gonna do it, right?”

Harper blinks, as she mumbles an unconvincing, “Uh huh.”

I trail my fingers up her arm and over her shoulder, so my hand is cupping her jaw. “I mean it, Harper. I don’t say things I don’t mean, and I don’t promise something I’m not going to deliver on.”

Her gaze drops now, her eyes watching her fingers as they move across my collarbone. “I know.”

Exhaling, I slide my fingers under her chin, tilting her face up so I can meet her gaze. “I’m not him, babe and I’m never going to be him.”

“I know,” she says again, a sad smile on her face.

“He really did a number on you, huh?”

She licks her lips, pulling her bottom one between her teeth as she gives a small nod and whispers, “You have no idea.”

I brush my thumb across her mouth before leaning up to kiss her softly. “You can tell me about it, you know that, right?” She nods, her eyes closing. “Sometimes talking about it can help.”

“You’re already helping,” she replies, as she opens her eyes. “So much that sometimes I can barely believe you’re real.”

I let out a soft chuckle, my other hand gripping her ass and pulling her so she’s lying on top of me. “Does this not feel real?” I ask, pushing my hips off the bed and against hers.

Harper smiles, a tiny, almost shy smile as she whispers, “Yes.”

My grip on her ass tightens as I push her against me. “Sorry, what was that? I didn’t hear you?”

“Yes,” she repeats, a tiny bit louder.

Sliding my hand down her arm again, I can’t resist tickling her side, loving the laugh she finally lets out as she squirms against me. “One more time, just to be sure.”

“Yes, Max, yes! Ahh, stop, please.”

Chuckling, I stop, wrapping my arms around her in a tight embrace. “I love you, Harper and I’m going to spend every day proving to you that what I feel is real and who I am is real. Every day until you believe me, okay?”

She leans in, resting her forehead against mine as she says loudly, “Okay!”

With a laugh, I snake a hand down to smack her on the ass. “Good girl,” I say, giving her a hard kiss as a tiny knock now sounds on the closed bedroom door.

“Mommy! Max!”

We both turn toward the door as Harper says, “Wow, she’s knocked and isn’t barging in here.”

Chuckling, I lean up and kiss the side of her neck. “Smart kid you got there, babe. You go shower, I’ll get her breakfast.”

“Max, you—”

I smack her ass again. “Go, baby, I’ve got this.”

She rolls her eyes now, but she’s smiling as she rolls off me and slides out of bed. I watch as she grabs the robe from the back of her door and pulls it on before I climb out of bed and grab some sweatpants and a t-shirt from the overnight bag I’d brought in here last night.

Then with one last kiss and gentle squeeze of her ass, I open the bedroom door to find Sammie standing on the other side, dressed in pajamas with penguins all over them and her hair all standing on end.

“Good morning, Sammie,” I say, scooping down to pick her up and throw her over my shoulder. “Are you after some breakfast?”

She’s giggling so hard, she can barely get her answer out as I walk us into the kitchen, glancing quickly back at Harper who is standing in her bedroom doorway, smiling at us. *Go!* I mouth to her, giving her a quick wink before disappearing into the kitchen and depositing Sammie onto one of the stools at the kitchen island.

“Right, what will it be?” I ask, clapping my hands together.

“Waffles!” Sammie shouts, throwing her little arms up.

“Waffles,” I repeat, looking around the small kitchen. “Do we have waffles?”

“Yes!” she replies, dropping one arm as she points toward the freezer.

“Got it!” I say, giving her a thumbs up as I open the freezer door to find a box of waffles inside. I throw two into the toaster before grabbing the milk from the fridge and pouring Sammie a glass. I then get some coffee started so that by the time Harper walks out, freshly showered and dressed, Sammie is halfway through her first waffle and there’s a steaming cup of coffee waiting for Harper.

“Beautiful,” I whisper, handing her the cup as I press a kiss to the corner of her jaw. “You want waffles too?” Harper smiles, her hand moving to my cheek as her gaze meets mine. I can see the unspoken words in her eyes, the silent thank you she’s giving me, and I can’t resist leaning in and giving her a kiss. “I’ll get you a waffle.”

I grab the box and throw a couple more in the toaster, turning back to lean against the counter as I wait for them. Harper is still watching me, that same soft smile on her face.

“Hey, Sammie,” I say, turning to her daughter.

“Yeah?”

I grin, because of course she has maple syrup all over her face. “What would you say if I told you that Pam and I were

taking you to ballet classes this afternoon. Is that something you'd like to do?"

Sammie's little mouth opens into a tiny O as her eyes widen and she turns to her mom. I watch as Harper smiles at her, giving her a tiny nod as if to say it's okay, that she can believe me. It hurts my heart just a little that even Sammie has had this doubt and fear ingrained into her from that asshole, but it doesn't take long before she's smiling and clapping her sticky hands together and shouting, "YES!"

HARPER

I have gotten at least six pictures from Max in the last twenty minutes. All of Sammie at dance class and one selfie of the two of them in the car on the way there. His bun skills need work, but I wouldn't dare tell him that. He's doing something I never expected and for that I am forever grateful.

"That's a huge smile on your face," Zoey says as she stops in the doorway to my office. "Guessing Max has done something ridiculous."

"I know he's your brother, but do you have any idea how perfect he is?" I ask, my phone chiming out with another picture. I'm pretty sure this smile will be on my face forever. Just seeing how happy Sammie is, is enough for me.

"Ugh, he's always been that way. What has he done now?" she asks, rolling her eyes in the most loving way.

"He took Sammie to ballet class. You have got to see these pictures," I squeal, feeling like a very proud mom right now.

I hold my phone out and Zoey comes into my office, the two of us side by side as she scrolls through the pictures, cooing right along with me. Sammie couldn't look more adorable in her little pale pink leotard and tutu, along with her pink ballet shoes and her messy bun. Max gave it his best shot, and that's all I ask.

"Oh my god," Zoey croons, pushing out her bottom lip. "Could she be any cuter? Is this her first day?" She continues

to scroll back through the pictures, stopping on the selfie of Max and Sammie.

“It is her first day. Max and your mom will take her on Thursdays when I work late, and I’ll take her on Tuesdays.”

“You could have told me. We could have worked around that and changed your late day,” Zoey tells me, and I just shake my head. I need to learn to rely on people now that I have a support system. I can’t always assume everyone will cater to me because I’m a single mom.

“Nah, it’s all good. Max and your mom were excited about it, and I need to start letting people help me more. I’m just not used to it. Sammie’s dad...” I start but cut myself off. I don’t even know why. I worry that people don’t want to hear me whine about all the bullshit I dealt with.

Zoey waits, looking at me, waiting for me to finish my thought. “You know you can talk about Sammie’s dad. It’s not an insult to Max or anything. He is her father.”

“Yeah, I know that, but it’s a part of my life that I don’t like to look back on. There’s a reason I left and there’s a reason he hasn’t tried to find us. He doesn’t care.” It all comes out in a rush, and even as I say it, I know it isn’t fully true.

I’m sure he is looking for us. There’s no way he can handle the way I left. I took all the control away from him, control he had over me for years. It was the only way I could break the cycle of toxic behavior that I found myself in.

He doesn’t care though. That I know for sure. He only wants what he can’t have. Unless he found someone else to gaslight and treat like shit, that’s the only way he’ll move on. It’s me he wants, not Sammie. He didn’t even show up when I went into labor and there was not a chance I was giving Sammie his last name. Not to mention that paternity test his parents insisted on, making sure that Sammie was really his. Not sure what the fuck they thought was going on. He was the only one out sleeping with other people, but they would never acknowledge that.

“I’m sorry that you dealt with that for all those years, but if it means anything, I’m so happy you’re here. It’s been great getting to know you and Sammie,” Zoey says, and I feel the exact same way.

“Thank you for taking a chance on me when I showed up here with my kid, desperate for a job,” I tell her. It’s something we’ve never talked about, but it’s always there in the back of my mind. Zoey is the reason I stayed here. She’s the reason I was able to start over.

“I looked at you and knew you needed a fresh start. Sometimes things happen for a reason. You showing up here was a sign that you were meant to be part of the Badger Creek family.” She reaches for me, pulling me in for a hug. I can’t help but feel my eyes fill with tears. “And if I’m lucky, I’ll get to call you my sister-in-law someday.”

“Zoey,” I wail, trying not to break down and cry, but it’s too late for that. The tears are spilling from my eyes before I can even stop them.

“Don’t cry,” she says, her hands resting on my arms. “Let’s celebrate. You know that it’s been two months since I hired you, right? Two months since you showed up in our little ski village with that sassy little kid looking for a job.”

“Has it really? It feels like I’ve been here for a week and forever if that makes any sense,” I reply, laughing a little as I sniff back the tears.

“It makes total sense. I feel the same way about you. I can’t imagine you not being here, and I know Max feels the same way. He’s head over heels for you,” Zoey says, and I have no idea if Max has told her anything about us, but the words leave my mouth before I can stop them.

“He told me he loves me and Sammie,” I say, my voice loud in the quiet space, the excitement of sharing it has my heart racing.

“I’m not surprised at all. I’ve never seen my brother like this. He’s so fucking happy and I love you for giving him that.” Zoey says, and I never looked at it like that. I always felt

that he did so much for me. I never thought of it as me doing something for him too.

“Okay, enough of this. I think you were about to go home and I still have an hour left of work. I can’t be walking around here blubbering like a baby as I’m checking to make sure turn-down service has been done,” I joke, smiling, but my mind is still a swirling mess of happiness and gratefulness.

“But seriously,” Zoey now says, “let’s plan another girls’ night with Elissa and Delaney to celebrate you. Maybe this weekend? I’ll check with Elissa and Del and see if we can make it work. You think you can find someone to watch Sammie?”

“I know Max is on shift this weekend, but I could ask your mom. She’s always telling me to call her if I need anything.”

“Then do it!” Zoey shrieks. “She loves Sammie. Plus, it takes the heat off me and her asking when Ethan and I are going to have kids. She loves being a grandma to Sammie.”

“I will. I’m excited to go out with you girls again. I had so much fun last time. It’s so nice having friends again.” I say it without even thinking about it. I sound like such a loser, but it’s the truth. I didn’t have any friends after everything with Tyler. He managed to alienate me from everyone I knew, and it was even easier after my mom died.

“Oh, I’m so glad we all have each other. We’re one big dysfunctional family,” Zoey jokes, and I can’t help but laugh. It is true. We are all a bit dysfunctional and that’s what makes this all so perfect. No competition, no gossip. Just friends who support each other.

“I’ll text Del and Elissa and get back to you, but plan on Saturday.”

“Sounds great.”

I FINISH the evening and head home, knowing Max and Sammie will be there waiting for me. I swear this smile on my face is going to stick forever. It feels like all I do is smile now.

I never knew I could be this happy, this comfortable and this safe in a place I've never been.

I open the door to my bungalow and find Max sitting on the couch, Sammie asleep in his lap. It's not that late, but she's going to be up at the crack of dawn since she's already asleep now.

"Hey," I say, walking over to Max, bending down to kiss him. "How long has she been asleep?" I now ask, brushing back Sammie's hair, I lean down and kiss her forehead. "How'd ballet go?"

"She's been out since we left dance class. She fell asleep in the car," Max tells me, and I clench my teeth. "I woke her up and she just started wailing," he admits, his eyes wide.

"Ah, yes, you met Sammie's alter-ego. She's a nightmare when you wake her up from a nap. Sorry," I whisper, hoping that Max isn't scared off by it.

"No big deal. I carried her inside, but I worried someone might call the police, thinking I was kidnapping her with the way she was crying," he says, trying to joke about it a little. "I put on *Frozen* and then she fell back to sleep almost immediately. We've been right here ever since."

"Wait, you've been on the couch with her like this since you got here?" I ask, biting down on my lip, as I think about how damn cute it is that Max hasn't moved.

"I have been. I didn't want to wake that bear again," he teases. "Should I move her to her bed?" he now asks, and I have to give him credit. This isn't his kid and he's never been around kids in this capacity either. He's done an amazing job.

"Max, you are nailing this side dad thing, I gotta say. Most would have called me when she started crying. Not you though, you stuck it out. She can be a bit of a beast when she's tired or when you wake her up. Nice job making it through the worst of it."

"I don't really want to be her side dad, as you call it. I want to be her dad," he now says, his words low, his voice a whisper. "Harper, I want to be here with you through all the

bullshit and all the good stuff. I'm not going to run away when things get a little tough."

I nod, knowing he means every word of it. "What about when things get really tough?" I now ask, partially joking but also not.

"Even when things get really tough. I'm not going anywhere."

I lean down, pressing my lips to his and when I pull back, I whisper, "I love you so damn much, Max Holden."

"Same to you, Harper Neely," Max replies, a shy smile on his face. "Now should I carry her to bed?"

"Probably but be ready for the three a.m. wakeup call we're going to get since she's been asleep since six. Did she eat anything?" I ask, hesitantly. It may be earlier than three if she didn't eat dinner.

"I fed her before dance. We had mac and cheese, raspberries, cucumbers and some yogurt. She wasn't a fan of the yogurt with the fruit chunks in it." He laughs a little, sticking out his tongue.

I take Sammie from his lap, cradling her in my arms. She's almost gotten too big for me to carry, her legs dangling as I walk toward her bedroom.

I kick back the covers with my foot and plop her down in the bed. I look at her lying there, her bun having fallen out, her hair a mess. She's still wearing her leotard and tutu, her ballet slippers in the living room on the floor. I don't bother to change her into her pajamas, not wanting to wake her for a second time. It's crazy how much things have changed. I smile down at her, loving how peaceful she looks, how happy she truly is.

I give her a quick kiss, pulling the blankets up around her, she nuzzles into her pillow, letting out a contented sigh. Our life is pretty much perfect. I couldn't ask for anything more and I know she couldn't either.

I turn around and find Max standing in the doorway watching me, a loose smile on his face. "I could watch you all

day,” he whispers. “Everything you do is amazing.”

“You’re ridiculous,” I tell him, whispering too as I walk toward him. I slip my arms around his waist, kissing him. I can’t get enough of him. I’ve never wanted to spend time with someone the way I want to spend time with Max. Nothing ever gets old or boring or annoying. He just fits so well with me.

“No, it’s true. I can’t imagine my life any other way than with you.”

“Same,” I say. “It’s been two months since we met, did you know that?” I ask now, wondering if he’s been thinking about it too.

“I knew it was getting close. Best two months of my life,” he replies, as we make our way out to the living room.

“Zoey wants to do another girls’ night to celebrate. She was thinking on Saturday, but I know you’re working. I was going to ask your mom if she could watch Sammie.”

“I think that’s a great idea. Then you and I can celebrate the next weekend. What do you say?” Max says, absolutely beaming.

“Okay, I’ll text your mom and see what she says.”

“She’s going to say yes.”

MAX

I wake the next morning to find the bed beside me empty. As I roll over onto Harper's side, inhaling her scent, I can hear muffled voices through the door before Sammie suddenly lets out a loud and piercing scream. Jolting upright, I scramble from the bed, pulling on some sweats and a t-shirt as I scramble out the door. Harper is sitting on the couch, rocking a crying Sammie in her arms, tears streaming down her tiny cheeks.

"What happened? Is she okay?" I ask, rushing over to them.

Harper gives me a weary smile, nodding just as Sammie lets out another loud sob. "She's okay, just tired and cranky, so when I told her she needed to turn off the TV and either have breakfast or get dressed, she wasn't happy."

"Shit," I mutter, sitting down. "This is on me, isn't it? Because I let her fall asleep yesterday."

Sammie lets out another sob, that's cut short by a hiccup and Harper hugs her tighter, rubbing her back. "No, Max, it's not," she says, giving me a smile. "This is just the reality of living with a four-year-old. It happens from time to time."

I run a hand over Sammie's hair, but she pulls away from me, annoyed. I try not to let it show how much that stings, especially given how good everything has been going between us. "How long have you been up for?"

Harper exhales and I sink back into the couch, dropping my arm around her shoulders. "A little after five."

“Seriously, why didn’t you wake me?”

She leans her head back, turning so she’s looking up at me. “It’s your day off, you should sleep in.”

“Harper...”

She smiles now. “Plus, you also sleep like the dead,” she adds. “You didn’t hear her knocking on our door?”

I shake my head. “Nope.”

“Good, I wanted you to sleep. You have a weekend of work coming up and—”

“And you have a day of work,” I say, cutting her off. “You’re allowed to wake me up, to ask for help, you know. I meant it when I said I am here for the bullshit as well as the good times.” She smiles up at me, her eyes tired. I lean in and drop a soft kiss to her lips. “Let me help, baby,” I whisper against her lips. “I’m not going anywhere.”

She lifts a hand, cupping my face as she smiles. “You’re a good man, Max Holden and I am very lucky to have you in my life.”

Now it’s me smiling as I lean in and kiss her again. “Pretty sure I’m the lucky one,” I whisper, kissing her again. “Why don’t I take her so you can at least get ready for work.”

Harper lets out another sigh, glancing down at her daughter. The crying has slowed, the sobs now more like hiccups as she snuffles, her tiny little fist rubbing at her eyes. “You sure?”

I raise a brow, hitting her with a smirk that makes her laugh. “You know, one day you’re gonna believe me when I tell you something and when that day comes, I swear I’m gonna throw a party so we can celebrate.”

She laughs again, handing Sammie over to me. “Shut up,” she says, teasingly as she gives me a quick kiss before standing up.

I pull Sammie close, brushing the hair back from her face before I swipe my thumbs across her cheeks, brushing the tears away. She doesn’t pull away from me this time, just

sniffs as she looks up at me. I smile at her, leaning down to drop a kiss on the top of her head.

Harper stands watching us and when I look up, she's smiling. "See, I've got this," I tell her. "Go take a shower."

Her smile widens and she leans down, kissing her daughter's head before turning to me. "I love you," she whispers, giving me a quick kiss before heading to the bathroom.

BY THE TIME Harper's showered and dressed, I've cleaned Sammie's face and convinced her to have some of the pancakes Harper had already started making her breakfast. She's now sitting at the table, quietly eating, her little head resting in her hand as she does.

"Oh wow, thank you," Harper says as she walks into the kitchen and takes the coffee I hand her.

I sling my arm around her shoulders and pull her close, kissing her temple. "Why don't I keep her with me today?" I suggest. "We can stay here, and she doesn't have to go and deal with daycare and stuff."

"I don't know," Harper says, taking a sip of coffee. "I don't want her to get used to the idea that every time she throws a tantrum, she gets to stay here with you."

Chuckling, I kiss her temple again. "I mean yeah, I know that's living the dream, but maybe today, that's okay. She's pretty exhausted."

"Weren't you going for a hike with Alex?"

"Uh huh," I nod. "But I thought maybe we could hang out here this morning, I'll get her to take a nap and then this afternoon, I'll take her with us. Get her out in the fresh air and then we can all have an early dinner tonight with Alex and Del." Harper turns to look up at me, a look of complete amazement on her face. "Maybe you and Sammie could come stay at my place tonight too," I continue. "I got some keys cut for you; I've been meaning to give them to you for a while."

Harper doesn't say anything to my suggestion, just puts her coffee down on the counter and turns fully into me, wrapping her arms around my neck and pulling me down to her. When her lips touch mine, a groan rumbles in my chest, but when she deepens the kiss, my arms wrap around her, pulling her close as my whole body comes alive.

"I mean, or I could call in favor with my sister, get you out of work for the day and you can stay here with us. Maybe you and I could also take a nap," I suggest with a wink, my hands moving to her hips as I pull her closer against me to reinforce my point.

"Now that is a tempting offer," she whispers, her hands sliding down to rest on my chest. "But I don't want to...well I don't want to get special treatment because of who I'm...who I'm dating, you know."

I smile, resting my forehead on hers. "I know and I get that, trust me. So option one, we'll go with that?"

She lets out an exhale. "Are you sure you're okay with it, it *is* your day off?"

"Baby," I murmur. "I'm more than okay with it. I wouldn't have suggested it otherwise. Plus," I pause, pulling back a little to give her a grin. "You need to come over and stay so we can christen my hot tub," I whisper. "We never got there last time."

Harper bursts out laughing, giving me one last kiss before she pulls back and turns to Sammie. "Baby, do you want to spend the day with Max instead of going to daycare today?"

Sammie looks up at us, tired and still a little grumpy. But she manages a small smile as she nods and says, "Yep."

BY THE TIME I'm pulling into the parking lot by the lake, Sammie is back to her usual self. We spent the morning at home, doing nothing more than coloring and playing with her toys. After lunch, I'd put her to bed for a few hours and by the time I woke her around two, she was smiling and laughing and ready to head outside.

“You ready, Sammie?” I ask, as I get her out of the car, grabbing my backpack of supplies. We’d swung by my place so I could change and drop off the overnight bag Harper had packed before she left for work.

“Yes!” she shouts, a huge grin on her face as she jumps down.

I pick her up and throw her over my shoulder just as Alex pulls into the parking area, a huge grin on his face. “Hey,” he says, opening his door. “Hey, Sammie.”

“Hi,” she answers, a little shyly. She’s met Alex a couple of times now, but she’s still always a little shy for the first few minutes.

“Gotcha something,” he now says, smiling at her.

Sammie’s eyes light up, a huge smile on her face as she cries, “What?!”

Alex laughs before pulling a small pair of blue sunglasses from his pocket and sliding them onto her face. When I glance at them, I can see they are *Frozen* ones, with some of the characters on the arms.

“What do you say?” I ask, tickling her side a little.

Sammie giggles like crazy, shouting a “Thank you,” to Alex as I spin her off my shoulder and back onto the ground.

“Thanks, dude,” I say, my hands on Sammie’s shoulders as she stands in front of me, pulling her glasses off to inspect them before putting them back on, her shyness with Alex now well and truly gone as she looks up at him like he’s just given her the greatest present ever.

“No worries,” Alex replies with a shrug, like it’s no big deal. “Alright, we ready to hike?”

Sammie jumps up and down in front me, the monster from this morning well and truly gone now and replaced with the happy go lucky kid she normally is. We walk over to the path and set off on one of the easier trails, Alex not caring that I’d ditched our earlier planned hike for something a little easier.

Sammie walks between us, Alex in front, chatting away to her like they are best friends. I watch the two of them, grateful that my best friend is so cool with me bringing her along. Being with Harper is everything I want, but I know that part of this includes being with her kid too. I'm totally cool with it, because tantrum this morning aside, she is a cool kid and I do love her. I'm just glad my friends are cool with it too.

When we stop for a quick drink break, I watch as Sammie is all over Alex as he pulls some water and snacks from his backpack.

"Careful," I tease. "Del sees you like this, she might get some ideas."

Alex throws his head back as he lets out a loud laugh. "While I have no doubt I'll be knocking Laney up at some point," he says, grinning. "Right now, we are totally okay with just practicing. A lot," he adds, giving me a wink. "You on the other hand."

I grin, taking a swig from my water bottle. "What?"

Alex scoffs, shaking his head at me. "Please, like you aren't fu—" He pauses, glancing at Sammie before continuing. "Loving this whole dad thing," he says.

"Maybe," I say, shrugging, the grin still on my face.

Alex throws a protein bar at me, still laughing as he says, "You so are, it's written all over your face. How many photos of her do you have on your phone?"

"I don't know," I lie.

Alex gives me a look, holding his hand out as if to ask me for my phone.

"Fine," I huff. "I have a few...okay, a lot," I clarify when he raises a brow. "What can I say, she's entertaining and I like hanging out with her."

"And you think her mom is smoking hot," Alex adds, grinning. "So you know, there's that."

I throw the protein bar back and it hits him on the head, making Sammie laugh. "Small ears around, dude and they hear

and remember everything.”

Alex’s eyes light up at this as he looks down at Sammie and says, “Hey, Sammie, did you know that Max thinks your mom is smoking hot?”

Sammie looks up at me, before turning back to my best friend. “What’s smoking hot?” she asks him.

Alex looks over at me and I roll my eyes, shaking my head at him as I hold a finger out in warning. “Don’t even think about it!”

AFTER OUR HIKE, I take Sammie back to my place. When we walk inside, Harper is already there, standing in my kitchen drinking a glass of water.

“Now this is something I could get used to,” I say, walking in and pulling her into my arms as Sammie wraps hers around Harper’s legs.

“Hey,” she says, giving me a kiss before bending down. I pick Sammie up for her and Harper gives her a kiss and cuddle, tickling Sammie until she’s giggling uncontrollably. “Good to see you’re back to your usual happy self,” she says to her. “Did you have a good day?”

Sammie’s eyes widen as she nods her head, the sunglasses Alex gave her, falling onto her face. “Yes, Mommy, Alex gave me these glasses and we went hiking and did you know that Max thinks you’re smoking?”

I burst out laughing, shaking my head as I bury it against Harper’s neck. “Oh boy.”

Harper eases me back, a huge smile on her face. “Smoking?”

I roll my eyes, but I’m grinning. “She means smoking hot and you can thank Alex for putting that little gem in her head.”

“Oh,” Harper says now, her brow raised in question. “So that’s not what you think then.”

I give her a playful growl, nuzzling her neck as I murmur, “Oh you know it is.” Sammie is still giggling, and I can’t resist leaning over and blowing a raspberry on her cheek. “And you little miss are very cheeky.”

This only gets her laughing more and when I turn back to Harper, she’s smiling at us, her eyes filled with happiness. Leaning in so my mouth is against her ear again, I whisper, “What do you say we put *Frozen* on the TV and you and I go take a shower before we head out to dinner?” I press a kiss just below her ear, loving the way goosebumps spring up on her skin in response. “I kinda need to show my girlfriend just how smoking hot I think she is.”

Harper throws her head back laughing, her hand snaking down to my ass, which she squeezes hard. “Sammie, you wanna watch some *Frozen* before we go out to dinner?” she asks her daughter.

“YES!” she shouts, and I know exactly how she feels.

HARPER

Max and I quickly figured out the best way to have sex with a kid around is to either wait until Sammie falls asleep or to do it in the shower, which is exactly what we did last night at his place and exactly what we're doing now at mine, when the door to the bathroom comes flying open. I hear it hit the wall, jarring both of us out of our already forced quickie.

"Mommy?" Sammie calls, and right now I've never been more thankful for a shower curtain in my life. "Are you done yet?" And that's when I see her little hand grab the curtain, and I nearly scream out loud.

Quickly peeking around the curtain, I see her standing there, a smile on her face, looking adorable as usual.

"I'm ready to go to Pam's," she tells me, holding up a bag that I'm sure is packed with stuffies and a pair of plastic princess high heels. "Where's Max?" Always the inquisitive one.

"I'm in here, Sammie," he calls out over the running water, and I have to slap a hand over my mouth to keep from laughing. "We're almost done."

His comment is not going to work. It's only going to get her asking all kinds of awkward questions, but he doesn't know that just yet. He's still new to this parenting thing. Nothing is a secret when it comes to kids.

"Can I get in the shower too?" she instantly asks, and now I'm biting the inside of my cheek, the laughter making its way

up. I'm interested to see how he answers this question, since he's currently inside me, his hand on my hip, my ass pushed against him.

He's silent for too long and I know if I wait for him to answer, she's going to be pulling this curtain open and getting an eyeful. She's never experienced this before because I wasn't interested in having sex with her dad when she was old enough to remember.

"Nope," I quickly reply. "Do you have your toothbrush packed?" Sammie's lip quirks up in the corner like she's thinking about my question, and then she shakes her head. "How about any pajamas in that bag?" Again, with the head shake. "Why don't you go pack those two things and Max and I will be out when you're done."

"Okay, Mommy," she replies, but I can tell she's not going to leave just yet. "What are you doing in there?"

"Getting dirty!" Max yells out, letting out a laugh that has me, turning to smack him. Both of us are laughing now and when I look back out from behind the curtain, Sammie has a confused look on her face.

"Max, you're so silly," she giggles out. "The shower is for getting clean."

"I know that Sammie," he replies back, and this conversation is going on way too long. "Go get packed so Mommy can take you over to Pam's."

"Okay," she calls back, scampering out of the bathroom, and I know we literally have about thirty seconds before she's back in here.

"Welcome to the life of a parent," I tell Max as he slowly slides in and out of me, trying to work back up to where we were, but it's not going to happen.

"Guessing we're done here," Max grumbles, but not in a way that says he's annoyed or that he wished Sammie weren't in the picture.

"Sorry about the blue balls and the fact that you're on shift for the next seventy-two hours. This was supposed to be our

last hurrah before then.”

“It’s all good, babe,” Max says, sliding out of me, he wraps his arms around my waist, turning me so I’m facing him. “We have next weekend to ourselves, remember?”

“I remember and I can’t wait.”

It’s been so amazing having such a wonderful support system here. Between Max’s family and my friendship with Elissa, I can’t imagine being anywhere else. I even updated Sammie’s pick-up list at daycare to include Zoey and Elissa.

Zoey is actually going to be watching Sammie next Saturday when Max and I go out because Pam and Jeff have plans. She jokingly told me she was going to show up dressed as Elsa. At least I think it was a joke. Wouldn’t surprise me if she did.

“What time are you meeting the girls again?” Max asks, kissing the tip of my nose as he reaches around me to turn off the water, but I hold up one finger, telling him to give me a minute more.

“Eight and dropping Sammie off at your parents’ at seven. Figured I’d hang out with your mom for a bit and just make sure Sammie is good before I leave,” I say, giving my hair one last rinse as the water blasts Max in the face. We both laugh, and he scrubs his hands over the water, brushing it away.

“You trying to get me out of here?” he asks, and I push up on my toes, kissing the tip of his nose.

“Nothing could make me want to get rid of you,” I tease, turning the water off, and grabbing a towel. “You have to be on shift at seven, right?”

“Yes, and that’s why we were having a quickie in the shower. I won’t see you for seventy-two hours,” Max whines, and it’s so damn cute.

“I think you’ll be okay,” I tell him, tossing a towel his way, hoping that Sammie doesn’t bust in here again.

And just as she crosses my mind, I hear her call my name, reminding me that she’s ready to go. I still can’t believe how

quickly she's adjusted to the move, not caring in the least about leaving the only home she's ever known. Not that it was much of a home. The number of times her dad kicked us out or told us it wasn't our house, couldn't have been good for her well-being or her mental health.

Now we have our own place and there isn't anyone to tell us to leave, besides Zoey and unless something crazy happens, we're going to be here for a while, if not forever. Although, I don't think we'll live in a Badger Creek bungalow forever since I did just get a promotion. We could afford to move into a place that we can truly call our own. Saving up some money and buying a place would be a dream come true.

"What are you thinking about?" Max asks, cutting through my thoughts and I realize I've been standing here, a towel wrapped around me, lost in my own brain.

"I was thinking about how great it is living here and how I hope to eventually buy a place. Be here permanently."

"Would you ever consider moving in with me?" Max suddenly asks, catching me off guard, but something tells me he has been thinking about this for a bit. Judging by the look on his face, he's quietly confident that I will say yes. Max isn't the type of person to impulsively ask a question he doesn't already know the answer to.

I pause, taking in his question, wondering if I would consider it, but I don't really need to think all that hard about it. The answer is yes. It's something I've known since we first started dating even if in the beginning, I was hesitant.

Max is different though. He wants to be a part of mine and Sammie's life and he's shown that over and over. There's nothing that's sent up a red flag, not a single thing that has made me take a pause. I guess dealing with everything from my past has taught me what I want, and Max has been that since day one.

"I would, but I want stability for Sammie. I don't want to be moving her from one place to another. I want her to start school and come home to a house, a house that is ours."

“I get that and she needs it. Something tells me you need it too,” Max says, smirking at me a little as he hits me with a wink.

“That’s probably true.” He knows me well, so well that it feels like we’ve been together far longer than we have. That should tell me everything I need to know.

In the past, there were days that felt like months when I was with Sammie’s dad, long and brutal. There were days when I couldn’t wait to go to bed at night just so I had the silence, just so I knew there was no way he could get inside my head. But he still did.

I grab my bra from the back of the door, slipping it on as I take my undies from the counter, pulling those on after. I leave the bathroom, heading down the small hallway to the bedroom.

“You need to get dressed. We’re both going to be late if we don’t get moving,” I tell Max, taking a dress from my closet. I bought it the other day when I told Zoey we could have another girls’ night, wanting something new. I haven’t bought anything since moving here, besides essentials, which included clothes to wear to work, and a pair of jeans.

“That dress looks great on you,” Max says, pushing back my wet hair, he kisses my temple as he walks by.

And I have no idea why, but his words cause a lump to form in my throat. He says things like this to me all the time, but something about it feels different, like *déjà vu*, and then it hits me. I was waiting for the comment afterward, the comments I was so used to getting. I have no idea why that particular comment brought me back, but it did. And I hate it.

“Everything alright, babe?” Max asks, and again he can read me like a book.

“Yeah, babe, everything alright?” Sammie echoes, and Max bursts out laughing. He’s standing there in his boxers, Sammie in the doorway, her hands on her hips.

“Who are you talking to there, missy?” Max asks Sammie, walking over and heaving her off the ground, tossing her over

his shoulder.

“I was talking to Mommy,” she squeals, laughing hysterically. “You asked her.”

Max takes Sammie out into the living room, telling me to finish getting ready. I call out a thank you to him, needing this time to get my hair done and my makeup on.

AN HOUR LATER, Sammie and I are dropping Max off at work, and I’m running her over to Max’s parents’ house. I’m running later than I planned and no longer have time to visit with Pam and make sure that Sammie is settled. Although, as soon as we walk in the house, it seems that Sammie has zero interest in me sticking around.

She runs right to Pam, who leans down and hugs her. Pam points to some Play-Doh that she has set out on her kitchen table. That woman is a damn saint because that table had to have cost more than a used car and we both know that Play-Doh is going to be everywhere.

“Thank you so much,” I say, hugging Pam.

“Of course. Stay out as late as you want. Sammie will be just fine here. She loves sleeping in the guest room and it’s right next to mine and Jeff’s,” Pam assures me, and even though I know all of this is true, I still worry. It’s just part of being a mom.

“I’ll have my phone on, and Max has his, so if for some reason you can’t get me, you can call Max at work.”

“All good, Harper. Go have fun. Where are you going?” Pam asks, sitting down beside Sammie and opening up a plastic container filled with cookie cutters.

“I think the plan is to have a drink or two at The Matterhorn and then out to dinner. Zoey organized it all, so I have no idea.”

I roll out a flat piece of dough, pressing a cookie cutter in the shape of a heart down onto it. Handing it to Sammie, she smiles up at me.

“I love you, Mommy,” she says, and I swear I need to stop being so emotional. We say this to each other all the time, but something about it gets me tonight.

“I love you too, baby. You be good for Pam and have lots of fun. I’ll see you in the morning, okay?” I kiss the top of her head, leaning down now to give her a hug.

“Okay. I’ll see you after my sleepover.”

Pam walks me to the door, and I thank her once again. Shaking off the feeling of nervousness I have leaving Sammie, knowing it’s all in my head. It feels this way every time I drop her at daycare or when I’m not with her. It’s just because it was the way our life was for so long. Always together. I even took her to class with me during my first two years of college.

It’s good to have some separation.

I drop Max’s car off at my house, tossing the keys in my purse, I head toward The Matterhorn. The sun is just starting to set, and the town is filled with this beautiful orange glow.

I pull out my phone and text Elissa, letting her know I’m on my way over, and before I can even put it back in my purse, she’s responding.

ELISSA: Already have a table. Just waiting on you and Zoey. Delaney’s here too.

Me: Be there in five.

I STOP AT THE CROSSWALK, letting a few cars go by before I begin crossing, and that’s when I hear it. The sound of screeching tires, like someone is driving way too fast for the quiet little ski village. I turn my head to see where it’s coming from and that’s the last thing I remember.

MAX

I walk into the kitchen area to grab a cup of coffee, wishing it was something stronger. Actually, what I really wish is that Harper drops by on her way to meet the girls for dinner so I can drag her into the bunk room and finish what we started in the bathroom earlier tonight.

It had been hot as hell sneaking a quickie in the shower, right up until a certain four-year-old had barged in and killed the mood. Not that it was intentional on her part, but it had definitely left me with a solid case of blue balls. A semi too, if I'm being honest, which is not a great look when responding to an emergency.

"What are you smiling about?" Jim, one of the senior EMTs asks as he walks into the kitchen. He's been on shift since Thursday and will finish tomorrow sometime.

"Nothing," I say with a shrug, as I turn and lean back against the counter, my brain still flashing back to the shower. To Harper bent over in front of me, her ass snug against my hips as I thrust my dick inside of her, hard and fast as we both raced to get there. Which neither of us did thanks to Sammie.

The whole thing, including the awkward conversation Harper tried to have with her daughter, actually made me laugh, despite the blue balls that I know won't be getting any relief for at least three nights. Well, unless I can find a way to get thirty minutes with my girlfriend. Never in my life did I expect to be dating a woman with a kid, and even more than that, never would I have guessed I'd be okay with that kid

busting in on us while we were fucking and stopping us in our tracks.

I mean yeah, the timing sucked, but I also couldn't wait to use the story to embarrass Sammie in a speech one day, like at her twenty-first birthday party or something.

"Sure seems like something," Jim says, mirroring my pose as he stands beside me, giving me a grin.

I chuckle, knowing there's not a chance in hell I'm telling him what I'm thinking about right now. The guy might have given me this job and taken me under his wing, mentoring me and stuff, but this is definitely information he doesn't need to know.

"Mmmm, maybe it is," I say, smiling at him. "But maybe not something you specifically need to know about."

Jim lets out a loud laugh. "Oh I see, so thinking about your woman, huh?"

"Maybe," I reply.

Jim laughs again, shaking his head as he takes a sip of his coffee. I've known the guy for about six years now. Like me, he's a local, but I didn't really get to know him until he showed up to career day at my high school.

Back then, I had no idea what I wanted to do. Sure, I had the option and the safety of working for Holden, but I also wanted more than that. I wanted adrenaline and also wanted to help people, and in a way that was more than just me fitting them for a set of skis.

When Jim had started talking about working as an EMT, I was instantly hooked. Everything about it sounded amazing and exactly what I was looking for. When he added that some of the guys even worked at the ski resorts in the winter, those that employed medics anyway, I was sold.

Landing a job at Badger Creek when my future brother-in-law bought the place only solidified the whole deal, giving me the best of both worlds.

And even though it meant that neither me nor Zoey were following our parents into the family business, at least not right away anyway, they had been supportive of our choices. I actually think deep down, they both respected the fact that Zoey and I were trying to make our own way in the world without riding on the coattails of the Holden name.

Which is not to say I wouldn't eventually go and work there. In fact, I know I will one day, especially with Zoey more and more tied up in her own business venture with Ethan. I just want it to be on my own terms and when I'm ready to.

"So things are still going well?" he asks. He knows about Harper and Sammie, because when you spend an endless amount of nights driving around in an ambulance with someone, you tend to get to know them pretty quick. Plus, I really like the guy, he's been a great mentor and friend ever since I started this job.

"Things are going awesome," I tell him.

"How's life as a stepdad?" he asks.

His question and the memory of earlier tonight makes me laugh. "It's...it's good," I reply. "She's great fun, zero filter which is both funny and dangerous, but I really love having her around. Most of the time anyway," I add, chuckling to myself.

Jim cocks a brow at me, a smirk on his face as he says, "I'm guessing you've had the whole kid busting in on you while having sex scenario happen, huh?" His comment has me letting out a loud laugh, because of course it's right on the money. Jim's smirk only widens as he shrugs and says, "You forget, I've raised four kids, Max, and I've lost count of the number of times this has happened to me."

"Oh boy," I mutter, scrubbing a hand down my face. "I mean she didn't see anything, but yeah, something like that might have happened."

Jim laughs. "Welcome to parenting."

"Yeah, look, I gotta admit, I never actually thought about something like this happening. I mean I've stayed the night

and she doesn't come into the bedroom," I add, even though this is definitely now verging on the too much information side of things.

He lets out a snort. "No, you were too busy thinking about getting laid, right?"

I hold my arms out. "I am on shift for the next three days."

"Oh, I know that feeling," Jim says, chuckling. "You just gotta get—"

The rest of whatever he's about to say is cut off by loud crackling on his radio before the dispatcher's voice comes through.

"Ambulance required to a single person vehicle accident. Believed to be a hit and run. Location is 415 Main Street, over."

I watch as Jim picks up his radio, confirming acceptance of the call and letting the dispatcher know we are enroute. Taking one last sip of my coffee, I throw the rest in the sink, leaving my unwashed mug there as Jim and I walk quickly to the ambulance. Already the blood is pounding in my veins, just like it is every time an emergency call comes through. It's a weird rush that's always hard to come down from when it's all over, but somehow, I keep coming back for more.

Jim drives, while I sit in the passenger seat, writing down details from the dispatcher as they become available. Apparently it's a young female. No sign of the driver, who fled the scene. Witnesses said they were speeding and swerving on the road, and I'd put money on it being a tourist and likely a drunk one.

Tourists are the biggest cause of accidents and issues in this town. Doesn't matter if it's summer and they're out and about drinking and doing whatever, or winter and they're drinking and skiing. None of them have enough respect for the dangers of combining alcohol and outdoor spots.

No matter how reckless me, Alex and Nick were with our outdoor activities, we never did shit like this. Not even at college.

“We’re here,” Jim says, killing the sirens but leaving the lights flashing as he pulls to a stop about a block away from The Matterhorn. There are people standing around, some of them holding iPhones, like this is something that should be captured on video. Fucking idiots.

We jump out, grabbing the gurney from the back as we push through the crowd of people to get to the patient. Jim moves to her first, while I take over crowd control, pushing everyone back as the bouncer from The Matterhorn, a guy I actually went to high school with, tries to help me out.

“I ran down as soon as I heard the tires,” he says, pushing people back. “Called the police and they’re on their way.”

“Thanks,” I nod, as the sound of more sirens fills the night, letting us know the police are close. As the car comes to a stop not far from us, I watch as a policeman climbs out and walks toward us. I let the bouncer take care of explaining what happened as I turn around to help Jim.

And my entire world comes crashing down.

“Fuck,” I breathe out as I rush toward them, falling to my knees beside Harper who lies unconscious on the road in front of us. “Harper, baby, can you hear me?” I cry, my hands hovering over her, desperate to touch her, but also too scared to.

“Max?” Jim says, immediately sensing something is wrong as he pushes my hands away and wraps a blood pressure cuff around her arm.

“It’s...it’s, Harper,” I stutter, looking over at him. “My girlfriend.”

“Shit,” Jim mutters as he starts the blood pressure monitor, before moving to her face, gently lifting her eyelids and flashing a torch over her eyes.

“Is she...is she...alive?” I ask, my heart pounding in my chest as my hands start to shake.

“Yes,” Jim says, glancing at the blood pressure monitor when it beeps. One ninety over a hundred. Way too fucking high. “Unconscious but breathing. Pupils are responsive, BP

and heart rate high. I'm going to start a line," he says, all business as he moves about with calm confidence. "Max, I need you to call in another ambulance," he says, not looking at me. "Now."

"No," I shout, not wanting to leave her. I grab her hand, which feels hot and clammy in mine. There are bruises already covering her left arm, shoulder and leg. God knows what else.

"Yes, Max," he says, his words firm, his focus on Harper. "I need you to call it in."

"I'm not leaving her," I blurt out.

Jim pushes the needle into a vein in Harper's arm, hooking up the bag of saline, before he undoes the tourniquet around her bicep. He finally looks up at me, his face awash with sympathy and concern. "I'm not asking you to leave," he says calmly. "But you can't treat her, and I need someone else."

"We need to get her to the hospital," I shout, my voice harsh even though deep down, I know everything he's telling me is true. I am in no condition to look after Harper in any medical capacity and honestly, I'm not sure I'd trust myself to do it either.

"We will," he says, just as I hear my sister call out my name.

I look up to find Zoey standing with the crowd of people, an anguished look on her face as she takes in the scene, pulling her phone from her purse. The policeman isn't letting her get any closer and even though I know there is nothing she can do, I still call out, "Let her through."

The policeman glances over at me and I nod, before he lets Zoey through. She rushes over, standing beside me as she cries, "Oh my god, what happened?"

Neither Jim nor I answer her, Jim too busy checking Harper's vitals as I sit here, holding her hand and doing absolutely nothing. Inside, it feels as though my heart is being ripped from my chest, like a vice is wrapping around it, crushing it so I can barely breathe.

I have no idea what to do, no idea how to help her or save her, my mind going completely blank so that all I can do is sit here and hold her hand.

“Max,” Jim repeats, looking up at me. “Call it in. Now.”

My radio crackles with noise and it finally snaps me out of whatever the fuck this is as I reach for it, my brain finally switching to work mode as I call out the patient’s name, the condition and request a second ambulance. I don’t even know why, no one else is hurt, but when the second ambulance finally arrives, the two EMTs joining Jim as they assess Harper, I realize it’s because I am completely fucking useless right now.

Nothing from my training or all the hours I’ve worked has kicked in. I can’t figure out what to do or what Harper needs and when the other EMTs finally get her onto the gurney, all I can do is keep holding her hand as they wheel her over to the ambulance.

I climb into the back with her, Jim following me as another of the EMTs moves to the driver’s seat. Almost immediately, the ambulance starts, the vehicle lurching slightly as the driver turns on the sirens and we make our way through the crowd toward the hospital.

Jim hooks Harper up to the EKG machine, his fingers moving quickly as he pushes the front of her dress down to stick the electrodes on before covering her up with a blanket to maintain her dignity. As I watch him work, tears fill my eyes and I blink rapidly, trying to clear them, knowing I can’t afford to lose my shit right now.

I wish to fuck I knew what to do, but my mind is a complete and utter blank.

“Harper,” I whisper, moving so my mouth is by her ear. “Wake up, baby, I need you to wake up for me.”

Somewhere, a soft groan sounds and I pull back, holding my breath as I wait to see if it’s come from Harper. When I don’t hear it again, I lean in once more, brushing my lips

against her forehead as I whisper, “Wake up, Harper. Come on, baby, wake up for me. Please.”

When I pull back, Harper moves her head, turning it on the small pillow as she lets out another groan. I have no idea what her internal injuries are, but given she’s been hit by a car and the obvious bruising she already has; I’m guessing at the very least a broken bone or two and possibly some internal bleeding.

“Harper,” I try again and this time I watch as her eyes blink open, widening when she takes in her surroundings, the harsh white light above, the rocking of the ambulance and the beeping machines that surround her. I watch as she scrambles on the gurney, fear all over her face as she tugs at her hand, which is still in mine. “Shh, baby, you’re okay, I’ve got you,” I say, squeezing her hand as I glance at Jim.

He looks at me, before turning to the monitors, just as the driver calls back, “ETA one minute.”

“Patient is awake and confused,” Jim calls back, knowing that the more information we can give the ER before our arrival, the better. “Harper,” Jim now says, standing a little so she can see him. “You’ve been in an accident. You’re in an ambulance and we’re taking you to the hospital. Can you tell me if you can feel this?” he asks, before dragging a cold metal rod up the bottom of her foot.

I watch as she flinches, before he repeats the move on her other foot, and she flinches again. I breathe out in relief, knowing that is a good sign as I turn back to her, trying to smile. “You’re okay, baby,” I tell her, even though I know I shouldn’t be saying stuff like this. “I’m here with you,” I add, leaning in to press a kiss to her forehead.

Harper flinches at my touch and when I pull back, she’s staring up at me, her eyes wide as she swallows and says, “Who are you?”

WHAT'S NEXT

Continue Max and Harper's story in Forget Me Not!

Find it here!

[Forget Me Not: Max and Harper Book Two](#)

Losing two years of her memory is something Harper Neely never expected, but she also never thought she'd end up across the country with her four year old daughter. Confused and alone, she turns to the one person she can remember.

And then there's Max Holden. Devastated and broken at the loss of his love Harper, he tries his hardest to help her remember what they had together. Determined to make her fall in love with him again, he can't let go of their undeniable bond.

But when Harper's past resurfaces, it puts everything they've created at risk, including Harper's future at Badger Creek.

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Happy reading and thank you!

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

As always, thank you to every reader who picks up our books. We have nothing but love for you and are forever grateful for your support.

Badge Creek has been our love for the last year and we hope it is yours too. This world has brought us so many wonderful characters and we can't wait to continue it with Nick and Elissa's story.

Again, thank you!

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Not only is Claire Raye a really sweet pen name, it's actually a pen name for two sarcastic best friends who met through their mutual love of reading. After bonding over books (and wine and cheese), they decided to take the plunge and see if they could write a book together and ta dah... *The Rockport Beach Series* was born! In addition to their shared love of food and dropping an occasional (read, a lot of) f bombs, the writing duo that is Claire Raye like to write about strong, sassy females who aren't afraid to say what's on their mind and the overprotective men who fall in love with them.

Both halves of Claire Raye are married and both of their husbands have a cheeky side that gets plenty of airtime in their books. From their smart mouths to their witty one-liners, there's plenty of material to use for all those alpha males they love to write about.

While Claire Raye isn't sure they'll ever reveal who they really are —there's just something about your co-workers knowing you write erotic love scenes that makes having a pen name that much easier— they're definitely going to keep on writing. Plans are already underway for the next series, which is sure to feature plenty of sass, steam and humor, and of course, a happily ever after!



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