



THE
WELLSTON

HATING HER
~~EX~~FOREVER

BRYNN PAULIN

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Hating Her Ex Forever

by

Brynn Paulin

Bristol

He left me. Six years ago, Axel Pendleton, the love of my life, the man I was supposed to marry, left me to pursue his stock car racing career. To him, it was one or the other. Racing or me. I was black flagged and left choking on his retreating dust.

Is it any wonder I hate him?

Worse, he doesn't even know what he left behind. I wonder if he'll care when he finds out.

Axel

That's not how it was.

Bristol is wrong about a few details. In particular...the "supposed to marry" part. And when she finds out the truth, then she might end up hating me even more. But if I have my way, I'll no longer be an ex. I'll be her forever.

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touch and follow my news, please visit me
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One



Axel Pendleton

My head throbbed as my assistant, Marta Kurtz, cued up the latest NASCAR news and forced me to listen to the two hosts discussing bad boy, Alex Pendleton, *again*.

“I didn’t do that,” I muttered, leaning back in the lounge chair of my motor home and staring out the large window into the bright sunlight. In the next lot, one of my competitors chased his daughter around the lawn furniture set up beside their own rig, stretching their legs before traveling.

Today, we were all departing the exhibition location, some heading to their homes, for a final stint of off time before things got serious. More serious, anyway. In fact, a bunch of the drivers and their families had already moved out late last night after the exhibition races had finished. We had two weeks before the season officially began, and one week before the drivers reported to Daytona for testing, practices and qualifying.

I needed to start stuffing the gear I wanted to take with me into my duffle bag. I didn’t keep a place during the season, choosing to spend all my time in my motorhome or at hotels. Renting a place I wouldn’t see the inside of for weeks on end, made no sense to me, and I had no desire to buy a place. Not at this stage in my life. So my crap was either with me, in this motorhome that I did in fact own, or in my storage unit in Charlotte, North Carolina, where the team’s headquarters were located.

“AI, there are pictures,” Marta scoffed. In the swivel chair across from me, she tapped her fingers on her long leg, which she had crossed over the other. Her foot, encased in a shiny candy apple red heel, that ironically matched my car, bobbed up and down. The short, straight skirt of her suit hiked up to expose a good amount of her tanned thigh.

Some guys might be interested in that display. I was utterly unimpressed and not in the slightest enticed by the sight. As my assistant and so-called righthand, who listened to the team’s owner more than she did me, not only was she off-limits and at least ten years older than me, but she was a perpetual pain in my ass.

“I don’t care about pictures,” I growled. Hell, I hated it when she called me AI. How hard was it to say Axel? Or Ax? But no... Marta eliminated the middle of my name, practically whining it out when she said it. Just like everything else she did lately, it got on my nerves—especially with the hammers pounding at my temples this morning. It wasn’t from a hangover, though commentators would have pinned the cause on that if they knew. Rather it was post-race dehydration and lack of good sleep.

Pushing aside the pain and my irritation at her, for now, I focused on the annoyance at hand. “I didn’t run through some fricking fountain naked. I have more sense than to do that. Has the video even been authenticated? You know what they’re doing with AI shit now.”

She rolled her eyes.

“What?” she asked. “You want them to compare the dick in that video to yours?”

“No,” I groused. Fuck. Why would she even suggest that? Thank God, the member in question was blurred in all the footage. I had no doubt a search of the web would show the “Full Monty”, the so-called evidence.

“It’s not me,” I reiterated, completely pissed I was the target of image bashing *again*. That seemed to be my thought of the morning. Again, again, fucking again. Why did this keep happening?

“The video says otherwise.”

“Well, maybe, it’s AI created, like I said. Maybe, it’s a lookalike. Maybe... *it’s not fucking me!* Have you thought of that?” I shot to my feet and paced away from the seating area, which wasn’t nearly far enough. “I can prove it’s not me, but I’m not going to because that’s *fucking private.*”

I certainly wasn’t sharing views of my intimate piercing with Marta or anyone else. Despite my aching head, when I’d viewed the *evidence*, I’d noticed the birthmark on my upper leg wasn’t apparent—but since I was rarely shown with shorts that were *that short*, most people didn’t know about that feature. Which I *also* wasn’t telling Marta about. Very few individuals knew about my piercing or my birthmark.

“It doesn’t matter if it’s real or not,” she retorted. “Word’s come down from on high. You need to clean up your act or else. So if you have any skeletons in your closet, you’d better fix them now.”

Clean up my act? When it wasn’t even me? How about I performed some other miracles, too?

“Or else what?” I asked, catching the ultimatum in her statement.

Her words immediately sent agitation through me. “On high” meant my sponsors and my boss, the owner, who also happened to be my uncle. It was a toss up who would be a bigger problem.

“Darius.”

My uncle, then. But that didn’t mean my sponsors weren’t getting annoyed that their clean-cut boy had run into troubles.

What no one knew was that I *did* have one skeleton in my closet. And I really needed to deal with it someday. The problem was, I didn’t want to change things. With each new media blow-up, it became clearer and clearer, I would have to. Just as I’d made a heartbreaking decision regarding the very same person, six years ago—for the same reason, my career—I’d have to act again.

“Also,” Marta continued, looking at her nails and avoiding my eyes. I wasn’t sure if it was the news she was about to impart or because she just didn’t care. “An opportunity’s come up in your hometown for some good PR—which you need, so don’t argue with me. There’s a fundraiser for the Children’s Hospital, and management wants you to be there.”

Translation: my uncle wanted me to be there. He made no bones about frequently reminding me that I was only a driver on this circuit at his whim and discretion. Which was crazy, because I wasn’t the only one on his team, since he ran three cars. But lucky me, I was always a moment from the ax falling.

Once upon a time, I’d been stupid and put myself under his control. And now, I didn’t know how to escape unscathed. Closing in on my mid-twenties, wiser than I’d been six years ago, I realized he’d manipulated me into making decisions no eighteen-year-old should have to consider.

Which was neither here nor there at that moment.

I had no doubt Darius had found out about this fundraiser via my extended family, many of whom still lived in Cherish Cove, Michigan. My parents still lived there, too, though they didn’t speak to Uncle Darius, despite what he’d done for them.

And then there was my ex-girlfriend, Bristol, AKA the skeleton in my closet and the woman I’d love to my last breath, even though I’d broken her heart. She still lived in Cherish Cove, as well.

And she wasn’t actually as much of an ex as she should be. Not that she knew that.

Bristol Donovan was the love of my life, who I couldn’t have.

She was also still my wife.

And she didn’t know it.

And I was pretty sure she hated me. Faced by that, I would rather be barreling down the Talladega straightaway at 200 miles per hour, wearing no safety gear, than go home to throw myself at the mercy of the girl I’d left behind.

Two



Bristol Donovan

“Are you excited?”

I looked up from where I was shelving books at the Cherish Cove library and wondered what Helen Prewitt was even doing here. I’d gone to high school with the pretty blonde, and I was fairly sure she would rather do anything but read. I wasn’t saying she couldn’t, but she had one-hundred percent been the type to pay or con someone into doing her schoolwork, in whatever way was necessary. That wasn’t judgmental; it was a known fact. I knew that because I had been one of the people she’d conned a time or two. I was pretty sure things hadn’t changed in the six years since we’d graduated high school.

“Excited about what?” I asked, sure she’d fill in the details to go with her question. In addition to not being all that into schoolwork, she had the rumor tree down pat—in fact, she was probably the CEO of the town’s gossip chain. If you ever needed to know anything, ask Helen. She wasn’t malicious, just knowledgeable.

“About Axel.”

With difficulty, I bit back a growl when she practically squealed her reply, his name echoing through the quiet library. I did *not* want to talk about Axel Pendleton. Six years... It had been six freaking years since he’d left. You’d think that just hearing him mentioned wouldn’t hurt so much. But no, it

always scraped open a big, gaping wound that barely ever scabbed over.

I hated him.

And that was saying something. I loved everyone. Mostly. And even those I didn't *love*, I didn't *hate* them.

“What about him?” I scoffed. “Did he drive off a cliff?”

In my ire, I shoved a book onto the shelf harder than necessary and hurriedly had to right it before the whole lot went tumbling. Annoyed, I picked up the next book on my cart then pushed farther down the aisle to where it belonged.

The last thing I wanted was to discuss my ex, the man I'd dated all through high school and had been sure I'd marry—we'd talked about it enough. We'd even pretended to have a wedding during an impromptu trip during spring break our senior year. Axel and Bristol forever! *Brixel*. Until he left me and Cherish Cove in his dust when he'd run away to pursue bigger things in life...like driving on the highest, most prestigious circuit of professional stockcar racing.

Did I follow his career? No.

Did I hear all about the racing star everyone gushed about as if they'd had a direct hand in his meteoric rise to national fame?

Unfortunately.

Did I know all about his recent bad boy antics?

Also yes, unfortunately.

To my great frustration, if I didn't see the latest news about Axel, someone always made sure to I knew because they were “sure you'd be interested”. No one had needed to tell me about the video of him tromping naked through that fountain in California last night. Nope. That had tripped onto my social media all on its own this morning. I hadn't watched it, but I wasn't fooling myself into thinking I wouldn't eventually see it.

Sometimes, I was my own worst enemy.

“He’s coming to town this week.” She practically hip-hopped in place as she said it. You’d think *she* was his long, lost girl. But wait... If she were, she wouldn’t be so excited to see him, would she?

Despite myself, my heart sped up a little at the news. Surely it was from anxiety and anger.

“Oh...has he decided to slum it awhile? Is he bringing his camera crew to document him hanging out with the little people?”

Bitter? Me? Nope. Not at all. I knew where I stood with Mr. Too Big for You. If you got specific, I would be the *little people* he was too good for.

Did I know he’d gotten *Rookie of the Year* when he’d driven in the circuit below the one he was in now? Yes. Did I know he was considered one of the up-and-coming drivers in his current series, the top level for professional stock car racing, NASCAR, and that last year, he’d nearly won the year’s top prize, the Cup championship? Yes.

Did I hate that I knew that?

Yes. Yes. And definitely, *hell, yes*.

How was I supposed to get over the pain of being left behind when his face was plastered all over the place during the interminable race season that seemed to last forever? It kind of did, since it ran from mid-February to the beginning of November. And it seemed as if every Cherish Cove venue with a television had crowds gathered to watch him speed around whatever track he was at on race day.

I avoided those places.

“Are you going to go see him?” Helen asked, bulldozing on and not getting the hint that I in no way wanted to discuss my freaking ex.

Go *see* him? Ha!

“Um...no.” I wheeled my cart around the corner and down an aisle three rows away, wincing as the front right wheel squeaked. I’d been meaning to get that taken care of.

Doggedly, Helen followed me. Because, of course, she did.

“He’s coming here for the Woods’ fundraiser for the Children’s Hospital. You know...that they’re holding at the elementary school.”

My heart stilled. Of course, I knew. My aunt had organized the whole thing since before I was born. Crap. I was slated to work at the fundraiser.

“Huh,” I murmured, almost to myself. “Aunt Willow didn’t tell me.”

As one of the Woods’ cousins, I had always worked at the event in one capacity or another. And Axel knew it. Of course, us being in the same place at the same time was no big deal to him. He probably thought things were just peachy between us.

Oh, yeah. Right. Just, freaking, peachy.

“It’s a new development,” Helen told me. “He was just added to the lineup this morning.”

There would probably be no avoiding him. He’d be there. I’d be there. Would be matchmakers would try to push us together for a photo op or something. No one seemed to get the hint that he’d broken my heart.

And this year, I was running the book fair. A twist on a traditional book fair, anyway. We would sell books to youth in attendance—of course, we would. We were librarians, not monsters who’d deny a little kid a book. But our main purpose was for patrons to buy books and craft kits for kids at the children’s hospital. For every non-donation book purchased, money would also be contributed to the hospital.

This was the third year I’d be working the book fair portion of the fundraiser. It had been my idea, and when I’d pitched to my aunt, she’d been all in for it. The past two years of it had been a ton of fun and the event for a good cause. I’d been looking forward to it for months.

Not so much now, though. But maybe, Axel would be so occupied with his adoring public, he wouldn’t make it down the grade school’s hallway to where I’d be set up. One could always hope.

“I’m surprised he has time in his busy schedule,” I sniped since Helen hadn’t yet gotten the hint this wasn’t a welcomed topic.

“Since the event is being held the weekend between his exhibition race in California and the opener at Daytona in Florida, I guess he has time.” Helen sighed, unfazed by my sarcasm. “It must be exciting to travel all over like that, not to mention all the celebrity lifestyle that goes with it.”

“Mm-hmm,” I replied, noncommittal, praying she’d get the clue I didn’t want to talk about Axel. I headed down another aisle, cart squeaking all the way and cutting through the silence of the library. My chest grew heavy as thoughts of Axel invaded my mind and triggered the sadness I’d tried to tamp down for the past few years. I needed to move on, but I just hadn’t been able to.

“Do you think he’ll have his car here? Danny would love to see it. He watches the races every weekend and—”

“Did you need something, Helen?” I interrupted before she could go into detail about her fiancé’s weekends. “A book? The log-in code for one of the computers? The kids’ story time or adult book club schedules?”

An escort to the front door?

Really...what was she even doing here? It wasn’t as if she’d just happened to see me at the library and come over to chat. Helen didn’t frequent the place.

“No, um... You know, I work over at the print shop with Danny, now. I came over to bring these flyers.” Reaching inside her voluminous, tote-sized purse, she fished out a brown-paper wrapped parcel and held it out to me. “They’re for the fundraiser, and we had to make new ones with the change in lineup. Ms. Woods said you guys could hand them out when people check out books, have them sitting on the counter for people to take.”

“Yeah, sure. I’ll make sure they’re on the desk.” I’d already been handing out flyers for weeks, and I could add these to

what I had. Right now was the final push for the upcoming weekend and all the activities.

Helen beamed at me as if I'd promised her the puppy she'd always wanted. She really was a sweet woman, and I felt a little guilty for my low-key bitchiness. What could I say? Axel did that to me.

"Thank you," she sing-songed way too loudly for the library, but we didn't have many patrons right that moment, so I hoped no one would mind. "I'll see you at the fair."

"Yeah, see you," I muttered, but she was already halfway across the floor. I dropped the package she'd given me onto my cart and finished re-shelving the rest of the books that had been returned.

It wasn't until I got back to the checkout desk that I unwrapped the flyers. Reflexively, I grimaced, my chest squeezing and the remembered pain of heartbreak running through me. There was Axel's big fat face grinning up at me as if he weren't a total, self-centered jerk.

I smacked the little ad pamphlets facedown on the countertop and pushed them way over to the edge of my sight, so I *almost* couldn't see them. I didn't want any kind of visual reminder of the breathtakingly handsome guy, with his black-brown hair and piercing dark-brown eyes, who'd stomped all over my heart then raced off into the sunset.

I didn't need a any *reminders*. As my heart galloped, I remembered everything about him just fine. And that was the problem.

Three



Axel

My fingers tapped on the steering wheel of my rental that was about fifteen notches down from what I usually drove. I swore the guy at the rental place had recognized my name and given me the smallest, lowest power vehicle they'd had in stock. No need for a restrictor plate on this engine. It wasn't going over sixty-five no matter how hard I pressed the gas.

Maybe, I should look at my long drive from the airport as a blessing. I wasn't in a huge hurry to face the music in the little town where I'd grown up. Still, while I hadn't been there in a bit, I still called the place home. It was. Far more so than where Pendleton Motorsports was headquartered in Charlotte, North Carolina.

However, the painful truth was, I'd avoided Cherish Cove, the little town I loved, for the past six years. I'd pretended I was too busy to visit. I'd even gotten my parents and brothers to come see me in whatever place I'd been racing or vacationing. I mean, who doesn't appreciate a tropical vacation in the dead of winter?

Of course, I felt guilty about that, too, since my mom had been battling life-threatening cancer. But hey, warmth, relaxation and sunlight were good for her. We all knew that.

Claiming to be busy wasn't a complete lie, either. I was. Being a NASCAR driver, climbing through the ranks and wooing sponsors took plenty of time. Sure, I'd signed onto my uncle's team and a bunch of the vetting of sponsors fell to people

above me, but I was still the face of the #57 team. I still had to keep an iron grip on my spot driving that car, as well.

Nepotism wasn't the reason Darius had signed me. I was damn good, and he knew it. Still, one slip and I was out.

So I smiled, schmoozed, trained, and drove. That was all. I didn't have time for going home.

But despite my time away, I knew I'd be welcomed to my old town. Not by everyone. Specifically one person. My biggest regret. She wouldn't be thrilled to see me.

Worry gnawed at my insides. Pissed didn't begin to cover how angry Bristol would be when I told her the secrets I'd been keeping. She didn't know I'd been given the ultimatum by my uncle—a career and all my mom's medical bills paid in exchange for giving up the girl I loved. And as a caveat, he'd made me promise no one would know about the deal. Worse, way worse, I had a marriage certificate hidden in my things that could blow up everything.

I caused Bristol a lot of pain when I'd left. Now, six years later, I felt fathomless shame over my decision, too. On the surface, a lot of people probably thought I was an asshole. I'd been a dick and hurt the most important person in my life for what appeared to be self-serving purposes. Everyone in Cherish Cove believed I'd picked driving over Bristol.

And *that*, not busyness, was what had kept me away from the small lakeshore community that had always been my home.

Did I feel like a Grade-A heel? Yes.

Did I have regrets? Yeah...hundreds of them.

Did I know I'd chosen correctly? Most days...yes. Some days, I thought I should have given up my dreams and stayed with Bristol, not taken the proffered golden ticket. But then, my family would have suffered. My mom might have even died without the treatments she needed.

And one thing I knew above all things: Uncle Darius didn't bluff. Family and sentimentality meant nothing to him. He put on an act, making it seem as if his team, Pendleton

Motorsports, was family, but he'd just as much sell my grandma up the river if he could get ahead.

I understood that now, maturity opening my eyes wide. He'd seen me as his guaranteed ride to a championship and a ton of money. Either I performed and complied to his rules or I was out. And when it came to his ultimatums, there was zero wiggle room.

As if summoned by my dark ruminations, the screen on the car's dashboard lit up to alert me to an incoming call—from none other than the man in my current thoughts.

"Uncle Darius," I answered.

"What the fuck were you thinking?" he growled. Frankly, I was surprised he'd taken this long to contact me about the so-called video of me. Apparently, siccing Marta on me wasn't enough.

"I was thinking of bunking down in my motorhome. I don't know who's in that video, but it sure as fuck isn't me."

"Watch your language."

Oh sure... *Hello, Pot? It's fucking kettle.*

"It wasn't me," I repeated through my teeth.

"That's what you said the last time. And the time before that."

The last time, two women had been snapped supposedly stumbling out of my alleged hotel room. The images had been blasted all over gossip sites.

Did anyone want to verify if I was there or not? No. It could have been any nondescript hotel room in America. No one cared about that. Nope, it was just more fodder for Axel's bad boy antics. Laughable. If anyone knew the exact amount of sex I'd had since joining the circuit, they'd be shocked and my new nickname would be The Monk. I just wasn't interested in pit lizards. Or anyone else.

Plus, unlike Bristol, I knew I was married. And I wasn't a cheater. I wasn't screwing around with the multitude of women who came on to me. I could. But I didn't.

“And it wasn’t me then. I wasn’t in those pictures. There’s not even any proof it was actually my room. I promise you, I’m not running around having threesomes or more-somes and sullyng the name of the family sport or of our very family-oriented sponsors. Christ, why don’t you put a freaking tracker on me just so you can prove I’m not doing this crap? You know how boring my life is.”

”Swear to me.”

I rolled my eyes since I already had, but I didn’t hesitate. “I swear I’m not streaking, not sleeping around, not doing drugs, not speeding recklessly down city streets drunk off my ass, not being rude to fans, not feuding with other drivers, not doing any other shit. You *know* I’ve never lied to you.” All of those things had supposedly happened between the championship ceremonies last November and now. Apparently, I’d had a busy couple months.

“Shit,” he muttered.

Exactly.

Way back when I started racing karts when I was only five years old, who could have guessed I’d be dealing with this stuff just twenty-ish years later? I hadn’t ever envisioned it when I’d started driving on circuit-sanctioned tracks at fourteen. If I’d known the coals I’d be raked over, I might not have wanted to go pro at sixteen. As it was, my parents had made me wait until I’d graduated high school and was eighteen.

Their approval had been grudging, and if they’d had their way, I never would have started racing for Uncle Darius, who I only called Darius now, so as not to remind the world that we were related.

But back then, if I’d wanted a run at going pro, if I’d wanted the favor he’d promised, he had been my shot. My *only* shot. Despite my dad managing me until I’d moved up to the professional circuits, he didn’t run a pro team. I’d had no choice but to go with someone who could put me in a high-level car, with the sponsors that could foot the hundred grand

or more bill, per race, that it took to run the vehicle and its team.

I heard Darius huff. “I’ll get someone to look into this—someone outside our organization. I know a few media people. But you... Keep your nose clean. You have until you fly out on this weekend to get any shit in order.”

And he bitched at me about my language? I shook my head until his words fully sank in.

“What?” I snapped.

“I know you have...*things* to deal with back there. I know you’ve been avoiding it. I’m fully aware you haven’t been back since you left, so there must be something. So you have until then to take care of your baggage. Friday afternoon and most of Saturday, you’ll be at the fundraiser at the elementary school. One of the haulers has been dispatched up there with the demo car, so people can take pictures and shit. Sometime on that second day you’re also doing a special signing. Then there’s a ticketed dance is scheduled for Saturday evening. Sunday night, you’ll have your ass on a plane and get down to Daytona, because we need you here.”

Which I knew. I was supposed to be doing test runs and inspections and getting ready for qualifying and practices.

“I could leave Saturday after the signing.”

“No. I have Teddy running the car until you get here,” he continued, setting my teeth on edge. “He and Garrit communicate well.”

I bit back my retort. Teddy was our backup driver, who usually ran in the lower circuit. He’d been after my seat for a while. I was sure he’d be thrilled to drive in my place while I was gone. And Garrit was my brand new crew chief, who used to work with Teddy’s team before getting promoted. We hadn’t exactly meshed since he’d gotten the position.

“Something you’re trying to tell me?” I gritted out, my fingers tightening on the steering wheel of my rented clown car.

“Yeah,” he grunted. “Don’t fuck up.”

Four



Bristol

“Bristol.”

I jumped at the voice, startled as I left the library at five-thirty that night and exited into the unseasonably warm February evening. My mind had been in a muddle all day, my thoughts consumed by Axel, despite my efforts to push him away from my mind. Would I see him? Would we avoid each other? What would it be like if we came face-to-face?

And here he was...

As if to answer all my questions, as if I'd conjured him, yeah...he was really right here. Butterflies took off in my belly, which was a strange counterpoint to the twisting of my heart. The blood raced through me so fast, I felt faint. Breathing in, I closed my eyes and let my hand rest heavily on the knob I'd been locking. Darn it! How freaking close was he? I could smell him, his heady mix of spice and musk that always drew me into him.

“You're not going to say hi?” he asked, his rumbly tone rolling over me. My shiver in reaction to him infuriated me. “You're not even look at me?”

Was that hurt in his voice? How dare he? How...fucking... dare...he!

I finished locking up then turned slowly, keeping my outrage in check—barely—though there was no way he wouldn't know anger blazed through me. For a long time after he'd left,

I'd been hurt, brokenhearted, but then it had morphed into simmering anger. Until now, I'd thought I'd moved on to indifference and healed. I'd been wrong apparently.

"Axel," I said coolly. God! Why did he have to look so damn good? I'd seen him plenty in media—around here, it was unavoidable. Still, standing before me now in jeans, a black T-shirt, bike boots and a leather jacket that was totally inappropriate for Michigan weather in February, he looked like a sexy bad boy personified. His shaggy, near black hair was slightly mussed, styled yet not, and his deep brown eyes... There was no missing the way they devoured me.

Another shiver prickled down my spine and through my limbs, igniting long-silent arousal. I steeled my resolve and fought not to squirm under his heady stare. My chin angled, jutting up, while my eyes narrowed.

My body might still react to him, but my heart and mind knew better. My heart gave a hard thump of protest as I shut down my system's stupid excitement. Okay, *my head* knew better, anyway. My heart was apparently a masochist.

"What do you want?" I asked, careful to keep my low tone flat and emotionless.

One dark brow lifted. "Not even a hello?"

"Well, what do you expect?" I retorted sharply before I immediately grappled back my control and enunciated my position in a carefully even voice. I wouldn't let him affect me. "You left me. Dropped me to run off to the next racetrack. What did you expect? That I'd run into your arms? Unlikely."

He swallowed hard, a tic working in his cheek. Then he swallowed again before taking a deep breath through his nose. His head tipped in a single nod. "Okay. But we need to talk."

I crossed my arms. "I think we've talked about everything we'd possibly need to. Ever. Anything else is years too late. Frankly, if we never speak again, I'll be just fine."

Yeah, I was angrier than I'd thought.

And *why* did he have to look so good? It wasn't fair! I probably looked frazzled and wrung out after a day at work,

and he looked... *Damn it.* Mouthwatering. And being near him still made my thighs clench with the need for a hate fuck. Which *so* wasn't happening.

He held out a hand. "Will you just grab a coffee with me?"

"No. Actually, I can't. I have a date," I semi-lied.

"On a Tuesday?"

Seriously?

"People have dates on Tuesdays, Axel."

He shook his head, smirking, smug knowledge seeping into his expression. "Not you."

"And what do you know about me?" I almost yelled. There was so much he didn't know. By all appearances, it might look like I'd maintained my status quo, but it wasn't true. It so, so was not true. "You haven't seen me in six years! You. Don't. Know. Me."

His throat convulsed as he swallowed again, absorbing just how much I may have changed, just how much hurt I carried inside me. Even so, I knew he had no idea. I'd admit, he was right. I didn't usually go out during the week if I could help it because it screwed up my schedule too much. Axel didn't need to know that. What he *did* need to know was I wasn't buying whatever bullshit he'd come here to sell.

Was I curious why he'd shown up? Well, yeah. That didn't change my resolve.

"I have to go." Finished with him, I started down the narrow path between the library's back door and the building next door. It wasn't really what anyone would call an alley, since it was wide enough that most of the day it was brightly lit by the sun. The landscaper the city had hired had turned it into a beautiful oasis worthy of picnics or sitting on a bench to drink coffee and read a book. Very parklike.

Except now. At the moment, it might as well be a dark, seedy alley to match my mood.

"Bristol," Axel growled in frustration, the proximity of his voice letting me know he followed on my heels. Using the

intelligence God had given him, he hadn't tried to touch me.

I swung around. "What?" I practically yelled. "*What?*"

"We need to talk."

"We do *not* need to talk. Not now. We needed to talk six years ago. And at the moment, I have something else to do. I don't have time to recap or whatever you have in mind." I purposely glanced at my watch. "I have to go."

I wasn't completely lying. I did have a thing. With a guy. But it wasn't a date, and my cousin, Sutton, would be there since the *guy* was her husband. But Axel didn't need to know that. The pair had gotten married two weeks ago, and this was the first time I'd get to see them since then. We'd all met her husband, Hasya, in the month and a half since she'd brought him home with her from the Czech Republic, though. Met him. Overwhelmed him. Probably scared him a little, too. Our family was huge.

Tonight, I was looking forward to hanging out with Sutton and Hasya at the old house they'd bought on the edge of Cherish Cove. Just the three of us without a trillion other Donovans or Woods—the two biggest branches of my relatives.

"Enjoy your time in town," I told Axel as I spun and walked away.

When he muttered my name this time, I didn't stop and kept walking toward my little lime green car, the one he'd helped me pick out. Six years ago... Maybe, it was time for a trade in.

I ignored him watching my from the sidewalk, his arms crossed and his feet planted shoulder width apart like some immovable statue to male perfection. Okay, so I didn't completely ignore him. When I turned to climb into my vehicle, I noticed the way his shirt pulled tight over his chest and biceps, power clearly vibrating through him, his narrowed-eyed stare watching me the whole way. That stare practically stroked over me, grabbed me. I wouldn't cave.

But my heart... It beat a mile a minute while my core throbbed, begging me to go back and throw myself at him. I.

Would. *Not*. How could he still get me so damn worked up, with only his presence?

It pissed me off.

“Hey, girl,” Sutton greeted me from her front door when I pulled up and got out of my car a few minutes later. A cold breeze blew over the lake, drawing my gaze to the icy shore and the waves rippling lazily farther out, beyond the plate of jagged ice over the shallow water.

I shivered and hurried toward Sutton. I hugged her after we both stepped inside her three-season porch. “How’re you doing, old married lady?”

She giggled, the sound musical against the faint lilt of a violin melody coming from somewhere inside her house. “I’m younger than you. Maybe, I should call you *old spinster lady*.”

“Nah...I have a few years before that. Maybe, you should wait until I get a few cats.”

She bumped my shoulder as we walked into her homey living room. A half-wall divided it from the dining room and the doorway to the kitchen lay behind it. Her new place was over a hundred years old, and while it was freshly painted and all the wood trim gleamed, most of it hadn’t been updated much since it had been built.

“Maybe, you’ll find a man before then,” she teased. “Trust me, they turn up in the most unexpected places.”

“Like on planes?” I said, trying not to think of the NASCAR driver I’d left on the sidewalk in town a few minutes ago. My heart sped up again, and I had to force back the reaction before Sutton noticed. *Isn’t happening, heart.*

“Then at the AirBnB,” she laughed since that was how she’d met her husband, who happened to be the brother of the exchange student who’d lived with her family while she’d been in high school. She hadn’t known who he was when they’d been seated beside each other on the plane. Hasya, who’d become a US citizen, had been headed home to visit. Their paths had crossed again in the airport, and the rest was history as they said—witnessed by the fact they’d gotten

married less than two months later and making a home together here.

“I set up coffee in the sunroom in the back—and brought in an extra heater. I can’t wait until Ginger gets in here to start remodeling things. Her business with Trevor is really taking off, you know?”

“I’ve heard. Does she still miss her TV show, though?” Ginger was practically family via a long, convoluted connection of her being married to the cousin of the girl my own cousin loved but wouldn’t date—as I’d said...convoluted. Ginger used to have a syndicated house flipping show on one of those home and garden channels that devoted their airtime to people buying real estate and doing renovations.

“I don’t think so. Her local projects, blog and YouTube are filling the gap. That and Trevor.” Sutton smirked.

“Sutton Donovan Novak!” I exclaimed, pretending to be taken aback by her innuendo.

We fell into laughter again, my mood lightening even more with each minute with her.

“Is Hasya coming down?” I asked, glancing toward the ceiling and the faint music I heard. He’d have a soundproofed third-floor studio when Ginger was done, but not yet.

She shook her head. “He just got an invitation to be a guest musician for an orchestra in New York. I don’t really know which one, but it’s a big deal and last minute since the original person they’d scheduled had to cancel.” She leaned toward me. “If you ask me, they’re getting a better deal with my man.”

“And you’re not biased at all,” I teased. But I had seen him perform with his band *Czech Mate*. The man was insanely talented, so I knew she was right.

We walked out into the sunroom which was more of a four-season porch with huge windows that could be opened to enjoy the lake in the warmer weather. Sutton had set up a small coffee bar beside the door from the kitchen.

“So,” she started after we’d settled into thickly cushioned rattan chairs with steaming mugs in our hands.

“So?”

“I heard a rumor...”

I grimaced, my brows drawn together. Of course, she knew. *Everyone* seemed to know. This would be the longest week of my life. “If it’s the one that you and everyone else in town seems to know, it’s true.”

“Well, you know I work for Aunt Willow and Uncle Alder. Since she’s the fundraiser’s organizer, she *knows all things*,” she finished in a mocking mystical tone, her hands waggling in the air. “Anyway...she told me Axel’s coming home. I wanted to warn you.”

“He’s not coming home. He’s attending the fundraiser, and that’s it.”

She raised a brow at me. “Tell me how you really feel.”

“And...he’s already here. He showed up at the library when I was leaving and wanted to talk.” I made air quotes around my last word. The more I thought about it, the more annoyed I got. Now? Six years later? He wanted to *talk*?

“And you’re mad.”

“Of course, I’m mad. He’s a selfish dick.” In some ways, I blamed him for what had happened after he’d left town. How sad I’d been. If he hadn’t gone, I wouldn’t have been in the wrong place at the wrong time—of course, no one in my family knew much about that. Even Sutton. They knew of the accident, but nothing else.

Sutton rolled her lips together and shifted her head to the side, as if not wanting to say she disagreed with my not talking to Axel, but the gesture also silently told me she did.

“I don’t think you really feel that way.” She held up a hand to stop me when I started to protest. “I know he hurt you. But... maybe...you should talk to him. See what he has to say before you tell him to take a short drive right into the racetrack wall.”

I couldn't help but chuckle, with a slight shake of my head. "I did mention him driving off a cliff today."

She raised a brow. "We do have a nice tiny pier he can take a long drive on. But before that, maybe you guys can talk. From what I hear, he'll be here most of the week. You can let him have his say."

What was it with people wanting me to *talk* to Axel?

"Where? I don't want him in my space, and you know how everyone in Cherish Cove is. They're completely into everyone else's business. Even if I did 'talk' to him, it wouldn't be a private conversation."

"You're exaggerating."

I raised an eyebrow. "I know you bought a pregnancy test this morning."

Her hand clapped over her mouth, and she looked around us, as if she expected the older ladies who hung out at *Nan's Diner* to pop out of the woodwork. "What? Oh my God. I didn't want Hasya to know that—because I'm probably not... *you know what*—and now, he's going to find out and be disappointed."

She sniffled, and as if summoned by her dismay, her tall, dark and handsome Czech husband showed up in the doorway and pulled her into his arms. I averted my eyes, their gushy love and the fact they'd likely be pregnant soon making me uncomfortable.

"*Princezno*," he murmured as he lifted her from her seat then took her place and settled her onto his lap. "I love you. You're all I need."

Just like they were kissing, momentarily forgetting I was there. And I took my cue to leave. The three of us could have coffee another day when just seeing their adoration of each other wouldn't stab me through my barely mended broken heart.

Five



Bristol

With my evening cut short by what I was sure was about to become baby making, I took a drive up to Adrian Point, the small city north of Cherish Cove. Being larger than my hometown, there was less chance of me running into anyone who would see me then tell Axel about my activities for the afternoon. Honestly, even at home, there was little chance of that. But—and it was a big old but—I would definitely be stopped and told all about his arrival then questioned about him as if I were his social manager.

After grabbing a iced specialty drink from my favorite coffee shop, I headed home to my empty apartment, intent on spending a couple hours on my passion project.

I had two real passions nowadays. One was books. More specifically the dream of opening a bookstore in Cherish Cove. The town didn't have one and in my opinion, the we really needed one. Of course, I thought that. Books were the foundation of my existence, not to be too dramatic about it. Opening minds to the written word was practically a life mission. That was what I did at the library, of course, but since I was a little girl, I'd wanted to run a store that sold all my favorite books.

My other passion project was researching and writing the history of Cherish Cove. I didn't see myself ever writing fiction, but I could weave together an engaging history. I couldn't believe no one had ever recorded the town's origin

and formation into a single written account. When I'd started exploring the past, I'd been entranced.

Okay... Maybe, Sutton was closer to the mark than I'd thought. I was edging nearer and nearer to eccentric spinster aunt status with every passing day. I needed to get out more. Meet people. Perhaps, even a guy.

My psyche rebelled at that, not wanting anyone but *he who would not be named*, my own personal villain.

And truly, yeah, I admired the hot actors on movie and TV screens. The models posted in some of my reading groups on social media were nothing but perfection. But the idea of being with one of them or any guy, for that matter? Right. No. First of all, despite the tread marks Axel had left on my self esteem, I knew I was passably pretty, but I wasn't the sort to be on a celebs arm. Second—and this was the worst thing—whenever I thought of a man, *being* with any man, my brain immediately zoomed to Axel. Even after all this time.

Maybe, it was time to breakout the dating app my cousin, Fiona, had set up on my phone.

I chuckled. Her doing that had resulted in my cousin being grilled by her boyfriend, Liam, about why she knew so much about the site. She was years younger than me, and she'd already found *her one*. I was sure I'd hear about her engagement any time now. My cousins were all dropping like flies when it came to getting coupled up.

And then there was me.

Determined not to feel sorry for myself and vowing not to be the stereotypical librarian anymore—after the fundraiser this weekend, anyway—I promised myself to get out more. With new resolve, I parked my car in the designated spot in my complex, noticing a tiny silver car nearby that was out of the ordinary.

New neighbor? I guessed it could be. Mr. Anderson, the guy who owned the six-plex where I lived, never had trouble keeping the units filled. I hadn't realized there was a vacancy, though. So...maybe, it was a visitor? The people around here,

mostly college-aged kids who went to Michigan Valley University, the college that wasn't far from here, all tended to have more of a social life than I did.

Until next week, Bris. Next week, you're gonna hit the bar or club or something and stop being so...single.

Determined, I grabbed what remained of my drink, the tote I carried back and forth to work and my wallet then headed toward my place. I was on the third floor and some days that seemed forever away. I reminded myself for the thirty-seven-thousandth time that all the stairs were good for my legs and cardio. And I definitely didn't want to move to another rental. My home was close to everything.

My home.

I'd spent years turning it into a cozy little refuge, my sanctuary.

My domain where I could dance around in my underwear if I wanted to because I was all alone.

Except...

When I turned to drop my things on the console table beside the door, I nearly tripped over the rolling suitcase that had been left in front of it.

What the...hell?

Frozen, I stood there and closed my eyes. The fortifying breath I took did nothing to calm me. I knew. I knew *what the hell* without even looking. My traitor heart sped up as if it were a homing beacon closing in on its prize. Thump-thump. Thump-thump. *Thump-thump-thump-thump-thump!*

Axel.

Axel was here.

In *my* apartment.

"What are you doing here?" I asked quietly, knowing he had to be nearby, though I didn't look for him.

"It's still my place. My name's still on the lease, right beside yours."

“Yeah, well, you haven’t paid any of the rent or utilities in the past five years.” I had to give him credit for one of the six years he’d been gone because he’d used a chunk of money he’d gotten from his uncle to pay his portion of the first year he’d been gone. It was a courtesy to make sure I landed on my feet. Not that I wanted to give any kindness credits to the jerk.

“Prove it,” he replied.

Jackass. He knew I couldn’t. Not without a lot of trouble that would take more time than he’d even be in town.

My teeth clenched, and my hand fisted.

“Fine,” I ground out. “But don’t get any ideas about sharing the bedroom.”

“That’s disappointing, but I figured you’d say that. It’s why my bag is there.”

I heard his hand pat something and glanced over to see he was on my couch, tapping his fingers against the cushion next to him. The triumphant look in his eyes made it clear my ire amused him and he was pretty damned pleased with himself over his perceived win. “The old couch is as comfortable as always. It’s like you never use it.”

“I’m not home much,” I lied. “You know? I have a social life now.”

His eyes narrowed, his amusement falling away, and his chin lifted toward me. “You’re back early from your date.”

“It was just for coffee.” I raised a brow. “It is Tuesday, and we both have *real* jobs.”

“Ouch,” he deadpanned.

“Wouldn’t you be more comfortable at the hotel? I’m sure my aunt would set you up in one of the best rooms at the resort since you’re here for her big event.”

“Nope.”

Silently conveying my irritation with him and my desire for him to just freaking leave, I stared at him with narrowed eyes. He stared back, his chocolate brown gaze taking in every bit of

me. I couldn't help doing the same with him. Drinking him in. However, I schooled my expression to exasperation.

Dang...it... This close, I could see so many of the ways he'd gone from teenager to man over the past six years. Even in high school, he'd been built with solid muscle, but he hadn't filled out like this yet. Now, his face had matured, hardening some, and his shoulders seemed wider, his hips slimmer, and his thighs thicker.

What the heck was I doing looking at his thighs? I jerked my stare away. Apparently, Axel Pendleton was my kryptonite, and I was a masochist. He was the sun and I was Icarus. There were consequences of flying too close to the heat, too. I'd experienced it.

"We need to talk," he said, reverting what he'd said earlier.

Nope.

I shook my head.

"I'm going to my room." It had been a long day. I couldn't deal with him tonight. Or ever. I was a coward. Pressure throbbed at my temples. I needed to eat, too, which I wouldn't be doing since I was escaping his presence.

"Bristol..."

The way he said my name did things to me. A million barely identifiable things that just reminded me of loss and made me long for what I couldn't have. Myriad different emotions buffeted me, but mostly, right now, above everything else, I wanted to cry for what we'd lost. I wanted to cave, go to him, but I knew he'd just hurt me again.

"Not now, Axel. I... I didn't ask you here and... Tonight, I just can't, okay? Maybe, after all this time, I should just be okay, I should just be glad you're here and you want to talk. But it's too late. And I'm not glad. Maybe, another girl would fall all over you, but I won't. I *won't*. All the talking, all the... *anything* between us, that was six years ago. It's over. Done. There's nothing to talk about."

Six



Axel

This was going way worse than I'd imagined it would. Yeah, I'd thought Bristol would be angry—honestly, I'd known she would be. My girl could hold a grudge like no one else, and she had good reason to with me—but I'd always been able to break through her defenses.

That was before, I supposed.

Blowing out a breath, I watched her disappear into the short hallway across the room. I couldn't pull my eyes from her curvy figure. Not for a million bucks. *Fuck*, she'd gotten even hotter. She always had been, but now, she had curves to wreck even the best driver. Not the girlish ones she'd had years ago. No... Bristol Donovan was all grownup woman.

Today, she wore a straight skirt that molded to her ass and thighs and a prim white button-down shirt that enticed more than she probably thought it did. I wanted nothing more than to reach out and pull up that hem and see if she wore nylons or thigh-highs. To tug open her buttons and see what lacy confection she wore beneath.

The woman I still loved was fucking sexy as hell.

I shifted, swallowing hard and desperately attempting to ignore the impossible-to-ignore throbbing trying to bust through my jeans. Fuck rules and ultimatums, I had to make her mine again—no, not again. She was mine. She was *still* mine.

When my phone buzzed on the coffee table yanking me from my arousal, I nearly dove for it, grateful for the distraction. Until I saw the text was from my mom. Groaning, I sagged against the couch, dropping my head against the cushions and staring at the ceiling.

I knew what she wanted, even without looking.

Mom: *You are coming to dinner, right? We're eating at 7.*

Axel: *Mom, I don't know.*

Mom: *Your dad already started the grill. I'll see you soon. Bring Bristol.*

Of course, she knew I was staying at the apartment—without me telling her. Likely, half the town had known before Bristol did.

Axel: *She's not even talking to me.*

Mom: *Awkward. I guess that will be tough living together. Bring her anyway. You're a smart boy. You'll figure it out.*

I didn't bother answering. There was no point. My mom being my mom would expect me to bring Bristol, no matter what. And there would be hell to pay if I didn't. I could tell her Bristol had married another guy and my mother would still insist. After what she'd been through and survived, I'd do anything she wanted, too, even if it meant kidnapping Bristol to my parents' house.

Levering myself off the couch, I shoved my cellphone into my back pocket and stared in the direction Bristol had disappeared. The layout of the small apartment was burned into my memory. It had been my first place with Bristol—my *only* place with her. The alcove I'd been staring at had two doors—one to the bathroom and the other to the bedroom. Loath to start the impending confrontation, I headed that way, nonetheless.

For someone who made his living with speed, my feet dragged as I trudged that way, preparing to be shot down faster than an enemy aircraft infringing on her airspace. Which...technically, I was. If I were smart, I'd drop into stealth mode and stay out of her way. I could take the brunt of my mom's wrath when I

didn't bring Bristol with me. But then, no one had ever accused me of being smart. How could they when I'd hurt my girl? I'd had to leave her before I'd been able to untangle the knot of bullshit my uncle had thrown at me.

A boulder-sized rock lodged in my throat when I stopped outside the innocuous light-brown panel and stared at the woodgrain. The old axiom of "What's the worst they can say? No?" ran through my head. Somehow, it didn't help me here. I didn't want to hear that from Bristol. I deserved no less, though.

But standing there, outside the door restricting my access to my woman, I resolved not to let her shut me out. No matter how guilty I felt, I'd fight for Bristol with my last breath. Considering what had happened, that shit was hypocritical. So she could shoot me. I'd still fight for her. Ironic since I'd left her before; I knew that. Still, though I'd only had scant minutes with her since I'd gotten to town, everything had become crystal clear the moment I saw her again.

I was not the misguided youth I'd been when I left here. Not anymore.

It was amazing the difference half a dozen years could make. Six years ago, I was absolutely sure I had no choice, that I was making the right decision in the face of the ultimatum I'd been given.

Yeah, I regretted the decision. Partly. Mostly. But seeing my mom healthy and full of vitality made my choice worthwhile, even as my heart screamed that I should have been able to have it all. That I shouldn't have listened to a bitter old man who couldn't maintain a relationship and thought all women were poison. Seeing other drivers thriving with their families at their sides, constantly missing Bristol, living with guilt and longing, I knew I'd chosen wrong—that my uncle's beliefs were wrong, too. Every day on the road, with the proof in my face, drove home the truth while it forced me to insulate myself.

The other racers probably thought I was a reclusive asshole who shunned them. In truth, the pain of seeing what I'd lost

was too much. Even with my growing success on the track.

I should have been able to find another way.

Braced for rejection, I lifted my hand and rapped lightly on the center of the wood—the incredibly thin wood. I very clearly heard Bristol sigh in response to my knock.

“Go away, Axel.” Her tone conveyed her annoyance, loud and clear.

“Uh...did you eat? Dinner?”

Silence answered me.

“Bristol?”

“I’ll order delivery or something. Don’t worry about me,” she replied, then I heard her grumble, “You never did before.”

Which was patently untrue, but I didn’t call her on it. I didn’t have that right. Plus, I was sure I wasn’t intended to hear what she’d said. It still struck me through my heart.

I silently cleared my throat. Swallowed. Swallowed again. Took a breath and released it. “My mom wants us to come to dinner.”

“Have fun. I’m sure she misses you.”

I shook my head, not fooled by her tart retort. “Us. She wants *us* to come to dinner, and apparently, my dad already started the grill. I know you’re pissed at me, but it’s not their fault. They’ll be really disappointed if you don’t come.”

The door wrenched open, revealing my gorgeous, pissed-off girl. Christ, I wanted to hook my hand behind her neck, forking my fingers into her lush dark hair, and pull her to me.

“Are you seriously guilting me?” she demanded.

If that’s what it takes.

“Don’t make me show up without you. Please. I promise, if you come with me, I won’t think it has anything to do with me. I know you’ll only be going over there for them.”

Her eyes narrowed, her lips pursing, and she crossed her arms. The pink-tipped fingers curled on her upper arms. I wanted to

curl my hands over them and tug her to me.

“I’m glad you understand that, at least.”

“You’ll come?” *Please, say yes.* I craved her company. Fuck the fundraiser; I wanted to spend every moment with Bristol.

“Not for you. I mean...” she quickly corrected when she caught the unintended innuendo. “Going to your parents’ has nothing to do with you.”

“So you will come for me?” Yeah, I shouldn’t have said it.

Her glare cut me dead, and I knew I’d pushed my moment of banter too far.

“I need a few minutes to get ready.”

She shut the door right in my face. Roiling with frustration, I headed back into the small living room where I paced while I waited for her. I had my work cut out for me. Bristol wouldn’t just let me off the hook, that was for sure. And I needed her to be...less mad at me, I supposed, before we had the serious talk about our spring break trip six and a half years go.

God, we’d been so young and gotten so drunk on the tropical island we’d visited. We’d been playing around that night. None of us—Barke and Oakley Woods, Sadie Grant, Ginger Bing—thought the events that night were real. Hell, if any of them had an inkling, they would have stopped us. Especially Barke or Oakley since they were Bristol’s cousins.

How it had happened didn’t matter. Utmost was what was between Bristol and me now. We’d deal with the rest later.

“Ready?” she grated, interrupting my thoughts as she swept past me toward the front door. My throat closed, arousal vibrating through me as I took in the snug jeans that hugged her curves and the silky blouse that clung to her torso in all the right places. Fuck...she was just so...lush. Womanly. Perfect. I’d missed her—being with her, having her naked in my arms—but seeing her now, all I could imagine was the new softness pressed against me.

Fuck! I needed her.

And the way things were going, I’d never have her.

No. That wasn't true. I'd *just* vowed I'd fight for her, but I suspected I'd have a hell of a battle.

"I'll drive," I told her.

"I didn't see your car."

I grimaced as I followed her out of the apartment and downstairs to the sidewalk.

"Rental," I told her. "I was going to get my SUV out of storage, but I didn't have time to get it prepped, since it was such short notice. So I'm stuck with a silver roller skate."

She giggled as I pressed the key fob and a squeaky chirp responded. Hell, the car even *sounded* like something out of a cartoon.

"Must be torture," she chuckled.

"You have no idea."

She snorted, the cute little sound taking me back to when we were together. Until she spoke. "Can't say I feel bad about that."

I couldn't help but grin, shaking my head. She glared at me when I insisted on opening her door, but she got in without a word. We still didn't speak as we drove the three minutes to my mom and dad's house. The four cars in the driveway hinted that my brothers had been summoned for dinner, too. Of course, Molly Pendleton would see tonight as an opportunity for an impromptu family reunion. At least, it was just immediate family. And Bristol.

After parking in the short driveway, I leapt out of the car and raced around to Bristol's side, but she was already opening the door.

"Stop with the chivalry," she admonished.

"No."

Bristol rolled her eyes, releasing another annoyed huff.

"I'm not here for you," she reminded me. She could say that all she wanted. I wasn't giving up.

Before I could counter her argument, my mom raced out of the house. Did she run for me? Nope. Ignoring me, her oldest child, she folded Bristol into her arms.

“I’ve missed you so much, baby girl,” she said. Turning, she led Bris into the house.

“Yeah, hi, Mom. Missed you, too. How are you feeling?” I looked her over, trying to see any signs of the cancer that had attacked her six years ago. She seemed healthy, but I knew better than to believe appearances.

My mom waved her hand at me, otherwise not reacting. What did they say? You’re never anything special in your hometown. Not quite the saying, but close enough. There was nothing like family to bring you right down to earth.

Seven



Bristol

Axel's dad, Benz, an older version of the man I'd once loved, hugged me much like Axel's mom, Molly, had when we'd arrived.

"Missed you," he said. Holding my shoulders, he held me away from me and stared into my eyes. "Just because Dumbass was a dumbass, that doesn't mean you can't come around, you know?"

I barely held back my chuckle while Axel groaned. Grappling with my memories, I kept my expression light and didn't let the breakup and subsequent events play out over my face.

"Dad," he moaned, stealing Benz's attention and unknowingly giving me the needed reprieve to get myself the heck together.

Benz hmphed, unrepentant. He raised a brow at his son. "It is what it is, kid. Shoulda listened to your old dad. Who alive knows your Uncle Darius better than me? No one."

"You know what about him? He put me in a car on the professional circuit."

"Is that *all* he did?"

Axel didn't answer, his lips flattening together. I had a feeling this was an argument they had often, especially when Benz turned a raised eyebrow on his son.

I loved these people—well, not Axel. I hated him. But his parents were awesome. They adored their son, but they didn't

give him a pass on anything. Thing was, I kind of understood why he'd done what he did. He'd had an opportunity, and he'd taken it. That didn't mean I accepted his actions. I wasn't giving him a pass, either. There wasn't much that could be done to repair my heart after he'd done a burnout on it before racing to the victory lane of his future.

"You know what I mean," Benz said cryptically.

When he slid a side eye toward me, I redirected my attention to Molly. I hurried my steps to catch up with her as she scurried back into the kitchen—her sacred domain as a cookbook author. I really admired that she'd done that, turned her passion for cooking into a publication to share with the world.

My steps slowed as I passed the wall of pictures where Molly documented their lives, noting the new ones that had clearly been taking on vacations during the past six years. The one on the end, a portrait of the five of them—Axel with his parents and two brothers—smiling on a beach with the ocean and a vivid sunset behind them, must have been taken during the past year. Molly rearranged her photos to reflect chronological order, so its position was a telltale sign.

My heart ached, knowing what was missing.

Stop! I yelled at myself. *Just stop it! You can't go back!*

"I made the seven layer salad you like," Molly called from the kitchen, and I finished my trek into the big airy room—Molly's well-lit domain had granite counters, a huge island and even a double oven. "And Van's girlfriend and I baked sugar cookies earlier today."

"Yum," I groaned, my mouth watering at the idea. To think I'd almost ordered delivery. Molly's food was half the reason I'd agreed to come with Axel tonight. His family was the other forty-nine percent because if I were honest—really, really brutally honest—Axel was still one percent of the reason. Maybe more if I included the pleasure of seeing his family razz him.

It's more than that, and you know it, my heart whispered, but I ignored it. I didn't want to soften toward him. I wouldn't allow it.

"Are they here tonight—Van and his girlfriend? Aston?" I asked to push away the feelings I didn't want. I could never forget why I'd said never again with Axel.

"Yes, Ree, Van, Aston and his friend, Carrington, are in the rec room out back."

Van and Aston were Axel's younger brothers. Last time I'd seen them, Van hadn't been even remotely interested in dating. Or girls, in general. At least, not that he'd been willing to admit at thirteen. To think he had a girlfriend now blew my mind a little. He had to be nineteen already, which was a hard for me to believe. Aston had been in high school at the same time as Axel and me, a freshman when we were seniors. I'd known all of the family for years, since Axel and I had gotten together when we were in eighth grade.

Yet as small as Cherish Cove was, I'd barely seen any of them since that day in November when Axel's uncle had come to him with the offer of driving for him, starting the next February. One day, we'd been planning what we would be doing for Thanksgiving, so we could see both our families, and the very next week, Axel had been gone to training in North Carolina.

I forced a smile as I tried to eschew the memories. "Is there anything I can help with? Set the table or something?"

"That would be great. You and Axel can get us set up for eight in the dining room. Aston and Van's friends are staying for dinner, too."

"On it, Ma," Axel said, appearing at my side, though if I were honest, he hadn't been far from me since I'd walked in the front door—of my apartment tonight. Even when I'd disappeared into my bedroom, he'd been yards away. And when we were in the same room? He stayed mere feet from me.

“Here,” he said, reaching down the plates and handing them to me. “I’ll get the silverware and glasses.”

His hands brushed mine as he handed them over, sending an unwelcome sizzle buzzing through me. Winter static electricity, I told myself. *Not* a reaction to him, not at all. But it didn’t recede when he cupped the outsides of my fingers with his palms. “Got them?”

“Yeah,” I rasped. My voice sounded strangled as I carefully pulled away, trying not to look too obvious or affected, then marched into the other room.

The table already had eight heavy, dark-oak chairs and sage-green placemats around it. Cream-colored cloth napkins in braided-gold rings were on each setting. I took just a moment to admire the aesthetic Molly had created in here, with a low centerpiece of greenery that complemented the wood and seemed to blend with the linens.

Walking around the table and ignoring Axel on my heels, I placed a dish on each place, moving a ringed napkin to the center of every plate, while he followed, situating the silver on the mats. He worked quickly, putting down the utensils fast enough to stay right beside me. He repeatedly brushed into me as he moved, ratcheting up my awareness to an irritating, itchy level that made me want to scream from frustration.

I was well aware that in other circumstances, it might have made me want to jump him. Not tonight.

“I’m going to see what else your mom might need,” I said and practically sprinted from the room after I’d set down the last cream-colored ceramic plate with a design that matched the greenery. Molly didn’t miss a detail.

“What else?” I asked her.

“We’re ready to go,” she told me. “Go get the boys and Ree?”

“Sure.” Ignoring Axel, who was getting the glasses for the table, I headed toward the back of the house where I’d spent so much time over the years. Leaving the kitchen, I took two steps down onto a all-season porch. It was much like Sutton’s,

only the Pendleton home was farther inland and didn't overlook Lake Michigan the way my cousin's did.

On the right end of the porch, a second door led into the addition Benz had made to the house when Axel was in middle school. Since their home was on a large parcel of land, there had been plenty of space to add this yawning room whose footprint was about as big as the main house itself. It was also the only testament to the fact that they had some money—something they didn't flaunt with their otherwise understated living. But here... This was a teenager's paradise.

To the far side, there was a small tiled area with a basketball hoop, the space big enough for one-on-one matches. Nearby, there were pinball and arcade games, including a driving simulator Axel had spent countless hours in. More to the center stood a pool table and a ping-pong table. But none of it was crowded in the enormous area that had its own heating/cooling units placed on three of the four walls to offset the stress on the main house's HVAC.

Of course, no teen oasis would be complete without a wet-bar kitchen, including a sink, fridge, microwave and stools around the counter. Seriously, Axel and I had practically lived here in high school. On plenty of days, I'd curled up in a chair and studied with him. Or I'd read or shot hoops while he practiced in the simulator.

Sometimes, I'd watch a movie because straight ahead from the door was a large seating area with three—yes, *three*—large screens before it. At the moment, one TV had a basketball game, one showed a motocross competition and the third, in the center, featured a video game where two characters were going head-to-head in a martial arts fight.

"Dinner's ready," I said as I approached. Four heads popped up and one of the people leapt to his feet.

"Hey!" Van vaulted over the couch and ran over to me. A moment later, he enveloped me in a tight bear hug.

"Bristol," he murmured, holding me tight for a long moment. When he let go, I was handed over to Aston who'd followed and now repeated the warm embrace. Tears pricked my eyes.

These guys had been my family just as much as my own biological relatives were. I'd missed them so much. As much as I'd like to say this family was another thing Axel had taken from me, not being around them had been my own damn fault. I couldn't really blame him for that.

"My God, you guys are all grown up," I exclaimed when I stepped back and surveyed them. Van looked a lot like Axel had around that age, and Aston had the same build as his older brother now. All three men were about the same height and had identical coloring.

My gaze drifted to the other two people who had come over, and I offered a friendly smile. These had to be the other two Molly had mentioned. Van introduced me to Ree, a sweet red-headed girl who pressed shyly to his side, holding his hand but seeming to angle slightly behind him. Aston slung his arm around the shoulders of a slightly shorter man with a wiry build.

"This is Carrington," he said.

Carrington tipped his head toward me with a grin. "Nice to meet you." His gaze shifted. "And you. You're Axel, right? You look like your brothers."

I turned to see Ax had followed me, and I wasn't quite sure how I wanted to feel about that. He really was becoming my shadow today. I'd have to call Sutton later to talk to her about it. We were cousins but both only children, so we'd grown up as close as sisters. And I needed to talk to her about this—if she wasn't otherwise occupied with Hasya.

"That's right," Axel said, stepping forward and holding out his right hand. Somehow, his left snaked around my waist, his fingers trailing over the small of my back before he pulled me into his side. I stood there, stiff and frozen awkwardly. My senses screamed to step away, but I didn't want to make a scene.

"It's nice to meet you, Carrington," he said as they shook.

"Man, you, too. I love watching you race. It's amazing! When Aston told me you're his brother, I about died."

Aston cleared his throat, looking wholly unhappy with his friend's admiration of his brother. But then Molly called us all from the doorway and like obedient little chicks, we all followed the mother hen inside. Aston seated Carrington beside him and Van made sure to get Ree next to him. With the parents at either end of the table, that left me and Axel on opposite sides, diagonal from each other no less since he was near his dad and I was by his mom. And he was clearly unhappy about the arrangement.

It made me happy. Thrilled. And I mentally gave a vindictive cheer.

"So where are your parents these days?" Benz asked me after we'd started eating.

I set down my fork to give him my attention, carefully keeping Axel as far out of my gaze as possible, which was difficult with him right there.

"My father's doing an dig in South America and my mother went with him. He signed onto the archeological study until June, and my mom is spending the time learning local traditions and customs." My parents were quite the pair, one being a doctor of archeology and the other a doctor of anthropology. Made me feel a little of an underachiever.

"That must be exciting."

I nodded. "Worries me a little, too. They had an earthquake there the other day. Nothing super major, but enough to do damage."

Molly grabbed my hand, squeezing it. "Baby girl, we're here for you if you need us. Don't forget that. If you're ever worried or you need anything, you call us."

"I will," I promised. Once again, warm feelings of nostalgia and cold regret over pulling away from Axel's family clashed inside me, rousing a storm of mixed emotions. Especially, since I knew Molly had been sick during those first years after Axel and I had broken up. I just hadn't known how to handle things then. I'd thought that was what I was supposed to do—I

was broken up with the boy, so I was broken up with the family. It didn't make me feel any less guilty.

Axel's parents had always loved me like one of their own, though. Six years ago, I'd lost so much, but it wasn't just Axel's fault. There'd been the accident. The heartbreak. I had pushed the Pendletons away, too. I'd cut them right out of my life, even though they weren't responsible for what he'd done. I'd just thought I couldn't be a part of the family anymore. With more maturity, I saw I'd been wrong. I could have been a friend.

"Axel, tell us what's going on with the team," Benz cut in, probably sensing my tension and therefore shifting the spotlight onto his son. "Why the hell does Darius have you here when you should be in Daytona? You need to be there, getting ready for the biggest race of the year."

Despite my vow to ignore him, my gaze settle on the man in question as he shoved food around on his plate then set down his fork. "Image. He wants a photo op to combat the other crap that's in the news."

"That's crazy season for you," his dad muttered, naming the break time between championships and the start of the new race schedule. "Media sites have nothing better to report on when it's between race seasons, so they find whatever gossip they can."

"Or they make it up," Axel muttered. My eyes widened, and he must have seen it when he glanced toward me. This was news to me, that things would be fabricated about him, a sports figure.

"What do you mean?" Molly asked.

"Are you saying that wasn't you prancing around in that fountain, wagging around your dick?" Aston asked. "That was priceless."

"Aston," Molly admonished on a gasp.

Axel scowled at his brother. "No. It *wasn't* me."

"And what does Darius say about it?" Benz asked, his tone harsh and more serious than I'd seen it in the years I'd known

him. Fury burned in his eyes while a tic, so similar to Axel's, throbbed near his eye. Benz was pissed. I knew there was no love lost between him and his brother, but I hadn't seen it so close to a full-on display. Except once. When Ax was getting ready to leave for the professional circuit. He hadn't wanted Ax to go, not if he planned to sign on with Darius.

Axel's eyes shifted toward me ever so quickly again before he returned his gaze to his dad. "He told me to clean up my mess...and any messes I may have in my closet."

"Fucking hell. Typical," Benz spat. "It's all about money with him, and it doesn't matter who gets run over as he rakes it in. He should be helping you, stopping this, not threatening you."

Axel hadn't mentioned anything about a threat, but something in the way Benz assumed there was one told me that he wasn't wrong. Especially when Axel's jaw clenched, and he didn't deny that it. And he must be taking the threat seriously. He planned to clean up things.

But...did he think *I* was a mess he needed to be taken care of? Was that why we needed to talk so urgently? Great.

Eight



Axel

Dinner last night had been... a step forward. My parents got to express their displeasure at my boss AKA my dad's brother, I got to spend time with my family, and best of all, I was with Bristol in a non-threatening environment for her. Alone would have been better, but I understood she needed the buffer.

She'd been quiet on the way back from my mom and dad's house, but she hadn't seemed quite as angry. The only time she'd spoken, though, had been when we'd gotten back to the house and she'd asked me if I needed to use the bathroom before her then later when she'd told me goodnight.

Overall, I was defeated, frustrated, but holding on to a glimmer of hope. After a bad wreck or losing a race, I'd experienced the same mindset. You just got back in the car as soon as possible and tried again. There was no quitting, no wallowing in what had happened. You kept charging forward, aiming for the prize. That was exactly what I would do with Bristol.

At the moment, I'd been left to my own devices, though. She'd left for work early this morning—far earlier than I thought she needed to, considering the library didn't open until nine. After my grueling daily workout at the local gym, I had nothing to do beside wander around the apartment and nose into things I shouldn't. This visit was so last minute, I hadn't made arrangements to hang with friends, and I had zero responsibilities until Friday.

And I still had to tell Bristol we were married, but that was a whole other can of worms, especially since I was sure she had no inkling.

She was going to kill me. But to have her hands on me... Death might be worth it if I could feel her touching me one more time. Yesterday, when I'd brushed against her, breathed in her fresh floral scent, snuck the moment with my arm around her waist... It had been a glimpse of the heaven I'd lost when I'd plunged myself into a purgatory of my own making.

And if I stayed in the apartment much longer, I knew I'd get myself into trouble by snooping into her things. Bristol was the type to know exactly how she'd left things. She'd *know* I'd pawed through her shit.

Momentarily, I considered going to the library to see her, but I decided to give her space and a little time to accept I was here. Me being in her past was done. It troubled me that she'd gone out on that date yesterday, but it was just one more hurdle I would leap over for her. I had to. I'd practically set up the barricades all on my own.

Tapping my fingers on my thigh, I stared out the living room's front window. From here, you could almost see the lake. Just the barest glimpse of blue filled the horizon through gaps between the buildings nearer to the water. I wasn't sure what it was about the scene, but it made me think of motorbikes soaring through the air and gave me the idea to head over to the track east of town. It was possible no one would be practicing, but the visit to my old stomping grounds would take me back to happier times.

Grabbing my coat, I headed down to the disappointment of a rental car almost hoping someone had stolen it during the short space of time since I'd gotten home. No such luck.

It was a short drive to the tracks where I used to ride dirt bikes and karts before leveling up to ARCA then into the NASCAR Cup series racing. When I got out of the car, the welcome sound of motors roared across the air. Someone was here—several someones from the number of engines I heard. I wondered if it was any of my friends. I knew Flip Anderson

still practiced for motocross here, but who knew what bikers raced the course at breakneck speed today?

When I cleared the trees and the track came into view, two bikers took the hills and careened into the air while they sped around the winding dirt track. A few others—probably coaches and crew watched from the edge, behind a short barrier. Standing off to the side, I watched, vicariously feeling the exhilaration fill me. There was only one thing I loved more than speed and being a daredevil. One *person*. Bristol.

“Miss it?”

I glanced over at the man who’d joined me without me noticing.

“Mr. Anderson,” I said with a smile, greeting Flip’s dad. That told me Flip must be one of the riders on the course.

“After all this time, I think you can call me Carson now,” he replied, grinning back at me. Carson Anderson could best be described as the cool dad. I’d never wished he was mine, because my father was pretty awesome, but I thought Carson would make a good uncle. He was also an excellent landlord. Bristol’s place and the grounds around the building were top notch.

“Okay, Carson,” I said, giving him the obligatory reply, using his first name.

“So how’s life over in NASCAR land? I mean motocross is where it’s at, but I guess stock car racing can take second place.”

I chuckled. “Some days, I miss motocross a lot.” It wasn’t as if I’d ever been more than an amateur, but I’d loved the freedom and adrenaline of it. “There’s nothing like the Gs you feel while racing the track at almost two hundred—sometimes more—but I do miss flying through the air on purpose and feeling that wind whipping past me while I calculate my landing or navigate a trick.”

“I could still get you on a bike,” he said with a wink. “A driver crossing over from stock car racing to bikes? Sponsors would eat that up.”

“Worth a thought,” I conceded. On many frustrating nights, alone in my trailer, that would be an outstanding offer. “I think I might stick with the car, though. More longevity. For the most part.”

There were always stories of the tragedies, but as a driver, I tried not to dwell on them much. All the what-ifs would do was freeze me up.

One of the bikers skidded to a stop near us and leapt off the bike. When he yanked off his helmet, I saw it was Flip.

“Axel!” he yelled, jogging toward me then almost body-slaming me into a hug. “Welcome home, man!”

“Thanks. You guys look great out there.”

He waved a hand. “My timing’s off today. Not enough sleep. Neva’s killing it, though.”

“Little Neva Woods? Bristol’s cousin?” I knew of her. Two of her brothers, the twins, had been good friends of mine. They were the ones who’d come to spring break with me and Bristol.

“Not so little anymore. She’s all grown up and kicking the asses of the guys on the circuit. Almost beat me the last time out.”

His dad shook his head. “Kid...your ego is showing.”

“Racing mojo, Dad.” He turned toward me as his father waved goodbye and headed over to the group who’d been watching Flip and Neva. Now that I’d been here for a few minutes I saw there were two other riders on the course, as well.

“What brings you over?” Flip asked me.

“In town with nothing much to do until Friday. Thought I’d check out the old stomping grounds. This place has grown up,” I said.

“Industry secret,” he said, matching my stance in his practice race suit, arms crossed and feet planted, while we both watched the course. “We’ve built up things to high standards, with trainers, facilities, and stuff. A lot of up and comers are training here now. Plus my friend, Barrett, opened his garage,

and he specializes in custom work and race bikes. I bet three-quarters of his business comes from the circuit. He and AJ, the guy who works for him, are the only ones I trust to touch on my ride.”

“Barrett... Wells-something? That guy you brought to the track a few times?”

“Yeah, Bare Wellston. He’s the best with bikes...motorcycles. He’s into a bunch of other stuff, though. Real estate investments like my dad but lower key. He just regentrified one of the factories on the north side of town and turned it into condos. You should see them. They’re in your paygrade.” He winked. “Plus, I live there. He’s about to start renovations on two more nearby buildings.”

“Wow. I should look into it. I don’t have a home base, at the moment.” A bigger place for me and Bristol sounded good. A home where we could build a family—once she was talking to me again. She’d always wanted kids, and I definitely wanted them with her.

Flip and I talked for a while more, and it reminded me of how much I enjoyed my friends here in Cherish Cove. I’d missed that kind of connection. Chatting without competition lurking in the background. Even when I’d ridden bikes, Flip and I hadn’t been shut off from each other.

A lot of the drivers in my circuit were friends with each other, too; I knew that. They shared a camaraderie with each other that I wasn’t a part of. Like being with Bristol, my uncle had forbidden it. He kept me segregated from everyone else.

“They’re the enemy. You can’t trust them,” he’d say. He claimed it was for my own good, and if I ever tried to spend time with other drivers, he shut it down fast.

Thing was, as I watched Flip practice, talked to him on his breaks and saw him interact with the other riders, I knew my behavior had to change. When I got back, I wouldn’t close out other drivers and treat them like potential threats anymore. They were colleagues. Treating them like the enemy made me weak.

Somehow, on that embankment, entrenched in my memories, I realized how much of the past six years hadn't been for my own good. Things were going to change, and Darius wouldn't like it. But fuck if I cared. I didn't. Not at all.

Nine



Bristol

If one more person told me Axel was in town or asked if I'd seen him, I might scream. Thing was, it confused me that, despite all their gossipy info, they *didn't* know he was staying at my apartment—*our* apartment.

I saw Axel Pendleton driving through town today! Such a nice young man.

Oh my God! Axel was in the coffeeshop this afternoon. He said hi to me. Isn't he hot! You're so lucky, Bristol!

That one had confused me. How was I lucky? We weren't together.

Did you know Axel's in town? I swear I saw him at the supermarket a little while ago. Madison Wyler said he signed an autograph for her son. Do you think you could ask him for one for me?

It was almost as if they didn't know he was only in town for the fundraiser. I just handed over flyers and let them know he'd be at the school, meeting people, and *signing* things on Friday and Saturday. If nothing else, we'd get a lot of traffic at the event.

The last thing I wanted right now was for one more person to mention him—and there had been a lot in and out today. About triple the library's normal daily patrons. Thankfully, I was free of town's information party line for the rest of the night, since I was on my way home.

To my place.

Where he was squatting until the end of the week.

Crap. That wasn't much better.

At a stoplight, I pulled up my reminders on my phone and added a voice memo to cue me to call Mr. Anderson, my landlord, about getting Axel's name off the lease. I just couldn't force myself to do it today. I loathed the idea of one more conversation about my ex.

A quiet growled escaped me as I pressed the gas. I *hated* how he had me all twisted up inside. It wasn't fair! Six years. After six years, the need, loss and heartbreak shouldn't be so raw.

I had to get myself straightened out. This mix of desire and anger would drive me to the brink. My heart would be scraped raw again in about two minutes when I got to the apartment.

Maybe, Axel wouldn't be there? Could I be that lucky? He hadn't shown up at my job today. That was pretty lucky, right?

As pushy as he was yesterday, I'd half-expected him to pop into the library all day. I wasn't sure if I was glad or disappointed he hadn't. See? More confusion. In the past twenty-four hours, my emotions had knotted into an impossible tangle. I was a disaster.

I wanted Axel.

But I hated him.

Yet if he pulled me into his arms, right now...

No! I *hated* him.

I was beginning to think maybe—*maybe*—I shouldn't. Last night at the Pendletons, it had seemed as if there were things I didn't know, things Axel should have told me. Something about him, something hidden in the shadows that crossed his eyes, told me Axel waged an inner battle no one knew about. I didn't want to believe it. That would torpedo all the anger that had ebbed and surged inside me since our breakup.

So was I ready to forgive him? No.

Minutes later, knowing I was in for a long night unless we got invited to his parents' again, I trudged up the steps to our third floor apartment, feeling as if it were the fiftieth level. The two flights up seemed longer than usual today.

"Maybe, you should see if Mr. Anderson has any first-floor walk-ups available," I panted to myself, blaming being winded on wearing heels, being tired, and a long day at work. I wasn't *that* out of shape. I jogged. Sometimes.

Outside my door, I paused, steeling myself for whatever was on the other side. If Axel had trashed the place, I would kill him.

"Unlikely. He wasn't here all day," I muttered. "You sure heard enough about his activities."

The door swung open before I could put the key in the lock. Axel. He looked mouthwatering in worn jeans and a heather-gray thermal shirt, the sleeves pushed up his muscular forearms.

"Thought I heard something. You talking to yourself?" he asked, looking past me to see if someone else was around. His dark-eyed gaze swung back to me, making me feel melty inside. Again. Damn it.

"No. Just hung up my phone," I lied, not wanting to admit I'd been talking to myself.

He backed up, swinging the door open farther. "Come in."

I ignored that he'd just invited me into *my own* home and brushed past him. An immediate sizzle burned through my arm at the featherlight contact. My breath sucked in, and I closed my eyes, to steady myself as blood seemed to rush to my center. Dang it. I mean, come on. This was getting ridiculous. I couldn't get aroused whenever I was near him. I wouldn't survive the week.

"I figured you'd be tired from work," he said, taking my things from me and setting them on the console table while I slipped off my coat. "I made dinner. One of my mom's recipes, so it has the Molly Pendleton certification of being good."

I laughed and dropped my outerwear onto a coat tree hook. “You know... Using her recipe doesn’t guarantee it’s edible. I’ve seen the results of your efforts before.”

With a faux gasp, his hand flattened over his heart as if I’d wounded him, then he joined me in my mirth. “I’ve gotten better. I promise. I cook for myself all the time now. It’s either that or go out to eat every meal. That’s bad for my training and gets old pretty quick. I’ve practically memorized my mom’s *Everyday Meals* cookbook.”

He cooked now. And he’d cooked for me. A warm fuzzy sensation fell over me, partially smothering my mad.

“I’m kind of impressed,” I admitted with reluctance. “I’ll hold judgment until I try dinner, though. What did you make?”

“Stuffed chicken breasts in a white wine sauce with baby potatoes, steamed green beans and artisan bread—I bought the bread, so if nothing else, that will be good.”

“It sounds amazing.”

His lip curled between his teeth, and he gave a slight nod, clearly pleased I wasn’t stomping away into my bedroom this evening. “I have seating for two right this way when you’re ready.”

He swept an arm toward the kitchenette. From here, I could see he’d set the table with nice dishes. He’d placed a couple lit candles and a fishbowl vase of short-stemmed flowers in the center. So romantic. And so similar to how we’d tried to make mac and cheese seem special back in the day.

I swallowed hard. Romantic. I should leave and avoid this, refusing his gesture.

My head shook. No, I should just suck it up and have dinner with him. Yeah, he was clearly making the effort to woo me. He wouldn’t succeed, but I was hungry—for food and spending more time with him.

Despite my resolve, I was *so* caving. So, so, so caving. Being angry was exhausting. Unhealthy. Maybe, instead, we could at least come away from this week as friends. Maybe...

“Just...give me a minute. I want to change out of my work clothes.”

“Okay. Wine? I can pour while you change.”

And I bet he'd gotten my favorite sweet Riesling. Judging from the hopeful gleam in his eyes that said he'd spent a lot of time planning tonight, I knew I was right, even without asking.

“Yes. Please. I'll be right back.”

Bees buzzing through me, ratcheting up all my awareness, I hurried into my bedroom. Closing the door, I leaned against the wood and shut my eyes, my back and palms the smooth surface as if to ground myself.

My heart raced, and I could barely catch my breath. Why did I feel like a giddy teen about to go on her first date?

This was Axel. My ex. The guy who'd left me behind, left me alone.

But he'd made me dinner, and screw it. I planned to enjoy the hell out of the meal and his company. For tonight. Tonight only. He'd leave in a few days, and who knew? I probably wouldn't see him for another six years. This time, he wouldn't leave behind more than just me, far more than he knew.

My excitement dulled at that thought.

Yeah, that was the problem right there. Axel was leaving again. I couldn't forget that. I couldn't let myself give over to him then get hurt again. I couldn't fall in for whatever was on his mind, but I supposed I could enjoy the moment. Dinner and company. That was the most he'd get from me.

Determined to just be friends with him—or at least, be friendly for tonight—I quickly changed into thick black leggings, maroon slouchy socks, and an off-the-shoulder sweater of the same color with a black tank beneath it. Then I released my chestnut-colored hair from the tight twist it had been in all day and ran a brush through the thick mass, biting back a moan at the prickly sensation in my scalp.

When I came out, Axel leaned against the half wall that partitioned the kitchen from the living room. He straightened

and met me partway across the room. There was his scent of spice and musk again, drugging me and pulling me under his spell.

His hand came up, pushing a strand of my hair behind my ear, his fingertips caressing the skin at my temple. A shiver slid through me, mocking the control I tried to muster.

“You look beautiful, Bristol. You’ve always been gorgeous, but now... This body you have now. You take my breath away. You were always pretty but...fuck...”

Flames ignited low in my belly, and I sucked in a breath at the immediate fiery response to his rasped words.

“Axel... Please don’t.”

“Can’t help it, baby.”

When I started to reply, he held up a palm and took a step back.

“I’ll try, okay?” he defended. “I just...”

He shook his head and didn’t finish, and of course, that left me to wonder what he’d planned to say.

Dang it. Every minute with him made me more confused.

Ten



Bristol

Leaving me to ponder what his argument might have been, what he really wanted to say to me, Axel instead offered his elbow to guide me to the kitchen. He held out my chair for me.

The table was in a corner of the kitchen, on a semi-circle of parquet flooring to differentiate it from the kitchen itself, though it was the same room. Two windows abutted each other, one facing east and the other north, filling the space with sunlight in the morning. Now, it was twilight over the park outside. He'd situated us so we could overlook the landscape behind the building, neither of us with a back to the windows.

This setup took me back to old times before everything got messed up. We always used to sit like that when we'd first moved in and we'd made the most of our meals together, making even ramen and vegetables romantic with low lights, candles, and the linens we'd gotten as housewarming gifts from his mom.

Once I sat, he turned to the counter that was only an arm's reach away.

"Your wine," he said, placing it before me. "Hang on a sec and I'll get our food."

"Thank you." My fingers wrapped around the stemless glass, absorbing the cool against my heated flesh. Looking over my shoulder, I watched him moving efficiently around the kitchen—okay, mostly, I just watched him. I couldn't help noting the

physical changes in him again. But more, he moved around with an assurance he hadn't had years ago. Yeah, he'd been a pro at ramen, just like most teenagers, but actual cooking? Not so much.

"Do you need help?" I asked.

He shook his head, while he plated our meals. "Nah. You just relax. You worked all day. I didn't do anything."

"That's not what I heard. You were the talk of Cherish Cove today. Everyone who came into the library mentioned hearing you're in town or that they'd seen you."

He grimaced, but it didn't hide his amusement. "That must have been annoying for you. Being pissed at me and all."

I sighed, looking away and taking a sip of my wine. Perfect. Cool, crisp and sweet. "I'm trying not to be. I mean, we're both adults. We can at least *try to* get along."

"Get along," he echoed. "Sure."

He sounded...disappointed. Surely, he couldn't be expecting more.

Signs all point to that, Bris. Open your eyes.

But I didn't want to. Opening my eyes would mean facing the past more than I was. It would mean telling him about what had happened after he went, opening old wounds I would never fully heal from.

Unaware of where my thoughts had digressed to, he placed the meal in front of me and effectively brought me back to now. I raised a brow. Geez...our meals looked like one of the pictures in the cookbook he'd mentioned. Or something from a restaurant. He'd even garnished each with a spring of rosemary.

"Axel," I gasped. "This looks amazing."

I hadn't tasted it, but the stuffed chicken breasts in a white wine sauce smelled divine. The baby potatoes and green beans appeared to be the perfect doneness.

“Are you going to be impressed now?” he asked, taking his place beside me.

“I’m getting closer; that’s for sure.”

He chuckled then bowed his head for a moment before looking back at me. He nodded toward my plate. “Give it a taste.”

“Should I be suspicious?” Taking my time, I placed my napkin on my lap—it was a soft lavender linen embroidered with small flowers in one corner. I’d always loved them, but they’d been in the bottom of one of the kitchen drawers, like so many things related to Axel Pendleton. These had been a “prewedding” gift from his mother, since she’d been sure an engagement was coming soon and couldn’t resist.

Ignoring the memory, I picked up my fork.

“No,” he laughed.

I raised an eyebrow at him, making a show of putting down my unused fork. “Isn’t that what someone would say who really shouldn’t be trusted?”

He shook his head. “Have you been spending too much time in the thriller section of the library? How do you like it there, by the way? At the library, I mean.”

I watched his hands, his long fingers on the utensils while he cut into his tender chicken. I swallowed hungrily, and it wasn’t so much for the food he’d cooked. I recalled those capable hands...on me.

Done teasing him, I cut a bite of my own food before he caught me staring at him.

“The library is okay.”

“You’re not happy there?” he asked, gazing at me in curiosity.

I shrugged. No one had actually ever asked me that. My parents were great and all, but they were busy. Sutton assumed being a librarian was my life ambition. It really wasn’t. Since I felt like such an underachiever compared to so many of my family members, I didn’t complain. And here was Axel, asking me what they never had.

“It’s a job. With books. I get to help people discover the joy of reading. When little kids come in...” I pressed a hand over my heart, and I couldn’t hold back my smile. “They’re so adorable when they pick out the books they’re going to treasure for a few weeks.”

“But it’s not your own place,” he correctly guessed. His eyes drew together as he studied me, his gaze thoughtful. “Are you still thinking about opening a bookstore here? Do you still want that?”

“Well, yeah. But...you know. Money, time to make that money, a business plan.... All those things are issues.” I might want to open my own business, but it was so far out of my reach that I didn’t know how I’d ever get there. Sure, I had been consistently savings, and I had a rudimentary plan, but I wasn’t getting very far very fast.

He reached over and squeezed my hand. “You’ll do it. If you really want it, you get there. I know you. You’re smart and resourceful and determined. I know you’ll find a way. It may be six years since we’ve really talked, but you’ve always been driven. I’m sure that hasn’t changed.”

Warmth bloomed in my chest, a tingle running along my skin from where he clasped my fingers. I gave him a small smile. “Thank you. That means a lot. I just feel like...I’m destined to do something more than work there. At the library, I mean.”

“And...” he continued. “You will. I have money, you know? I would help you.”

Gah! I wanted to say yes. My own bookstore was one of the two things I’ve always wanted most in my life. The other being him. But I could never say yes. He was not a ways to a means, and I wouldn’t give him an in to get past my anger—even if I was determined to play nice while he was here.

“That’s...generous, Axel. It’s a lot to think about,” I hedged.

“But *do* think about it.”

I didn’t say anything. I couldn’t lie, and I didn’t want to argue. I was so tired of arguing. “Axel...” Knowing I needed to

change the subject, I finally took a bite of the food he'd made. "Oh my God," I moaned. "Axel, this is so good."

He grinned. "Told you I learned how to cook."

"You really did!"

"Tell me about what's been happening in town. My parents are crap about updating me."

While we ate, I told him about Cherish Cove's businesses that had changed or closed, new ones that had come in, friends who'd moved away or gotten married, and what other friends were up to.

"So that girl Oakley fell for while she was on vacation came back to Cherish Cove?" Axel asked while I took my plate to the sink.

"She came back, and he married her in a hot minute," I said with a nod. Quickly, I rinsed my dinnerware and placed it in the dishwasher. Then I held out a hand for his. When I was finished, I leaned against the counter and watched him put away the leftovers.

"I read Oak's last book," he said. "Fucking creepy. I got up and checked all the motorhome's windows and the door—and maybe, the closets, too."

"And what were you going to do if you found someone?" I teased.

"Scream? I don't know," he laughed. "I have to admit, the story freaked me out, though. That man has a dark brain."

"Which is why he doesn't tell anyone who he is." I chuckled.

"And he honestly thinks none of his friends know."

"I'll try not to let on, I guess, but I have questions! Dude... who hurt you?"

I was about to tell him I wanted to know, too, when a knock rapped on the front door, startling both out of the moment. As if cold water splashed over me, I was snapped out of the camaraderie we'd fallen into. For a second there, it was almost like old times. When we'd been friends. When we'd been in love.

“Expecting someone?” he asked, glancing toward the door.

“No.” Talk about creepy. It was dark out, and generally, if someone stopped by unannounced at this hour, I pretended I wasn’t here. What could I say? Text me before showing up with no notice.

“Axel,” an annoyed female voice called loudly when neither of us moved.

“Shit,” he groaned, his shoulders sagging and his head dropping forward. His hands planted on his hips as he slowly shook his head back and forth.

“Oh my God, do you have a—”

“An assistant,” he cut in. “It’s my assistant.”

Closing the short distance between us, he cupped my face with his hand. Despite the gentle touch, I jerked. Then I shivered as his thumb brushed over my jaw.

“Don’t ever think that, Brisk. There’s no other woman in my life. There hasn’t been anyone since you.”

“What?” I gasped, hardly registering that he’d called me by the nickname he’d always called me since we were young, Brisk—him and no one else. I doubted anyone even knew *why* he called me that.

Leaning in, he brushed his lips over mine. “Only you.”

Breathless, I stared at him but before we could get lost in this moment, the banging came again. Axel swore, and the electric pleasure that had sizzled through me evanesced away.

Eleven



Bristol

With a growl, Axel stomped to the door. He yanked it open so hard the hinges were in danger.

“What, Marta?” he demanded in a near yell. “What the fuck are you doing here?”

When I tilted my head, I could just barely see the woman beyond him in the hallway. From my vantage point, I made out flawlessly smooth honey-blonde hair that tumbled past slim shoulders. His visitor wore a black suit with the skirt that barely came to mid-thigh while it hugged her thighs. When she pushed past him into the apartment, I saw her four-inch black heels with the flash of red sole as she walked.

She didn’t look anything like someone I’d associate with NASCAR. She was too sleek and too polished, seeming like someone from *Real Housewives of Somewhere*. And this Marta appeared to be a good ten years older than Axel and me. Not that it seemed to matter to her, if the hungry look in her stare meant anything. She practically devoured Axel. And I was pretty sure she had no idea I was even in the room.

“I’m making sure everything’s going alright,” she explained, placing perfectly manicured, red-tipped fingers on his arm and sidling close to his side. “I’m your assistant. I’m supposed to assist you. In *any* way you need. Making sure you have *everything* you want.”

Seriously?

Bile rolled up my throat as I took in the scene. And the way she said *everything* scored across my nerves like a razor. *Only you, my ass!*

“You could have called,” Axel said, yanking away from her and not seeming to buy what she was trying to sell. I wasn’t entirely sure, though. “I just got here yesterday, and this is my *time off*. I don’t need a damn babysitter.”

“Assistant,” she purred, and my eyes narrowed. “Ready to *assist* you.”

“I don’t need *an assistant* during my time off, either,” he grated. “What is wrong with you?”

“Don’t be like that. You know that’s not why I’m here,” she murmured, her tone implying she was something more than a coworker to Axel. “I missed you.”

The hell...?

And that was my cue. I’d leave them to...whatever this was.

Without a word, I headed into my bedroom. Axel bit out something at her as I shut the door behind me, but the fury crackling through my head like static drown out anything but my brain yelling how stupid I was.

Pulling out my phone, I curled up into the nest of pillows piled up against the headboard of my bed and hit the icon for my interactive word game. I still heard Axel and Marta’s muffled voices, but I couldn’t make out the words—not that I tried—but I could tell Axel was pissed.

Maybe, I hadn’t read him so wrong, but I’d been out of his life for six years. I wasn’t going to stand there and watch some woman come on to him while he shut her down—had that only been for my benefit? Was there as reason she thought something was there between them?

Still, did it make me a little happy he wasn’t thrilled to have her show up? Maybe. A bit. A lot, really.

Slightly annoyed that I even cared, since I wasn’t supposed to have a dog in this race, I focused on my game and beating my

cousin's ass with killer words—which was tough. Maisie was premed. Her brains awed me.

Fifteen minutes later, I startled when Axel knocked on the door.

“What?” I asked, my voice a little snappy. Heh. Apparently, I was more pissed than I'd thought. I hadn't realized just how irritated I was, though. Taking a deep breath, I tried to dial it back. It wasn't his fault that wannabe cougar had showed up. Was it?

He opened the door and barged in as if he owned the place or had a right to invade my space.

I shot upright. “What are you doing?”

“Why are you mad?” he asked, his voice even despite the way he'd burst into my bedroom.

“I'm *not* mad,” I snapped. “I'm fine.”

Why was I mad? Was he really asking that? Was he high? There he'd been, trying to romance me or whatever he'd been trying to do over dinner, and then a woman, who clearly believed she had a claim on him, showed up?

Of course, I was annoyed.

Gah! I was so stupid to start falling for him again. And he was stupid not to understand why I was put out right now.

“Right. *Sure* you're not angry, Brisk. How long have I known you? I know when you're F.I.N.E.”

I scowled at him, even more pissed he'd pull that out.

“Why do you think, Axel? *Oh Bristol, there hasn't been anyone else. What. Ever.*”

“There *hasn't!*” And now, we were both yelling.

“Yeah, then what was that out there? She was all over you!”

“That was my assistant stepping out of line and trying to win points with my uncle!”

“Are you sure? Because it sure looked and sounded like something else.”

“Very sure.” he said, sitting on the edge of the bed, partially turned toward me. “I’d fire her if I could, but even though she’s my assistant, I don’t have a say in letting her go or not.”

“Let me guess... Darius holds that power.”

“Yeah.”

What the heck situation had Axel gotten himself into? From the little he’d said, it was beginning to sound like he’d signed on for the indentured servitude we’d studied in history class.

His hand snaked out and loosely grasped my ankle where it was tucked under my knee in my cross-legged position. His fingers traced back and forth, sending shivers up my leg as he grazed sensitive spots. “Come out with me?”

I shook my head. “No.”

“See... I told you you’re mad. Twenty minutes ago, you would have said yes.”

He wasn’t wrong.

“Look,” he continued. “I know you have tomorrow off because of the fundraiser this weekend—”

“How do you know?”

A smirk edged his lips, his eyes full of mirth. “How did you know my every move today?”

Right...

“Point taken,” I sighed.

His fingers tightened. “Come out with me. Hang out with our friends. You know... Oakley, Barke, Sadie. I’m sure we can track them down. Or we can go up to *The Point*.”

The Point was one of the local make-out spots that overlooked the lake.

“Have you been sucking exhaust fumes? We are not going to *The Point*. Geez, Axel.”

“Fine. Then come with me to the bar.”

I rolled my eyes. When people talked about a dog with a bone, they might as well be referring to this man. He didn’t give up.

“Fine,” I echoed. “But what about your...Marta?”

“I sent her on her way.” With a squeeze to my knee, he stood then headed for my bedroom door. “Believe it or not, there’s only one woman I want, Brisk, and it’s not *that* pain in the ass. I’m interested in an entirely different one.”

“Axel!” I huffed. That smirk of his emerged again, the one that declared his victory and promised things I didn’t want to think about, even if my body was prepping for his return.

No. Nope. Not gonna happen.

His lips quirked, and I knew *he knew* what was going through my thoughts. “Be ready to go in five,” he said in that low rumble that made me shiver. “I’ll go text them.”

Twelve



Axel

“What the fuck?” I muttered to myself after I’d set up things with our friends and waited for Bristol to get ready. My thoughts rolled over what had happened. I had no explanations to get Marta’s behavior to make sense. “What. The. Fuck?”

Fucking Marta. I just couldn’t catch a break! And right when I’d been making progress with Bristol.

I couldn’t believe my assistant had shown up and broken the mood just when I was finally breaching the protective wall Bristol had erected around herself over the past six years. The only way I could be more pissed at Marta would be if she’d come right out and told Bristol we had some kind of bullshit physical relationship—which we didn’t! Not now; not ever.

Still, the way she’d acted tonight skeeved me out, and I’d be talking to my uncle about reassigning her if he wouldn’t outright fire her. For once, he wouldn’t be the only one with ultimatums. Being the number two driver in the circuit had to count for something, even if it was only controlling which people I allowed to be around me.

Marta’s implications, touching me like that, what she’d said... All of it was too far out of line to be ignored.

People said guys were oblivious to things, but as a driver, I’d had to train myself to be aware of everything. When I was in the car, I had to multitask and notice everything at once. The skill carried over into everyday life.

Because of that, I'd known the exact instant Bristol had taken herself off to the bedroom, and I'd felt the ice-cold waves coming off her. It had probably been good she'd left. She didn't need to hear what I said to Marta. I'd seen the avarice in Marta's eyes and the small victorious smile when Bristol had gone to the other room, though for all intents, she'd acted as if Bristol wasn't in the apartment. In that flash of a moment, it became clear my assistant's days were numbered when it came to working for me.

Clearly, Marta didn't read the room as well as I'd learned to.

"Axel," she'd said, her voice a sultry come-on I couldn't miss. "Let's go sit down together."

I'd shied back in the split second her hand had moved to touch my arm.

"Why are you here?" I'd demanded, not allowing her farther into the apartment.

"I just got the information on your travel and appearances for Fontana."

My eyes had narrowed, and I'd crossed my arms over my chest, not falling in with the bullshit. This conversation could have taken place over the phone. Or in an email. No way had she flown into Michigan, early, to deliver that information, when there were about thirty-seven hundred other things she had to do leading up to the beginning of the season and Daytona—the race *before* Fontana.

"You could have emailed me."

Apparently, my gritted words had little effect on her. She'd given a tiny, negligent shrug, coupled with a small, flirty smile. "I missed you."

What the fuck? That seemed to be my main thought of the hour. Seriously, though... What the fuck? A decade older than me, she was way beyond these coed-level games.

"What are you even up to?" I growled. Actually, I knew. She was pounding nails in her professional career's coffin. "We don't have a relationship like that—we're not even fucking friends, Marta, and you know it. I'm your boss, and that's it."

So I'm fucking sorry you hauled ass out here..." Not really. I wasn't sorry at all; I was pissed. "But you need to leave and find someplace to be—away from me and on your own dime—until you're supposed to *assist me* on Friday."

"Axel," she simpered.

"Dead serious, Marta. Stop whatever you're doing. You're walking a microscopic line as it is. This...whatever it is you're thinking isn't up for discussion."

Her eyes glittered with anger, and she'd huffed. "Coming back to this little hole in the wall place certainly hasn't improved your attitude at all. You're usually more..."

She waved a hand as if to finish the thought.

My brow lifted. "Tractable? Spiritless? Beaten down? Under my uncle's boot? Spineless? Yeah. Maybe, my vision and motivations are a little clearer than they have been in a while. For a lot of things."

Her eyes widened just slightly before she'd clamped down on her reaction, hiding it behind the plastic mask she generally kept in place.

"You need to leave," I'd continued.

"I just got here. We haven't even—"

"Have you been listening to me at all? Get. Out. I'll check my email, and *that's it*."

Now, almost an hour later, while I waited for Bristol to come out, I took deep breaths and tried to clear the annoyance still seething through me. I couldn't be agitated around Bristol; things were on edge enough as it was.

Marta's appearance had reminded me of one thing, though. One thing I was hard pressed to forget. I had precious little time with Bristol before I had to hit the circuit again. It made me ache. It made me worry. I needed her, and I wasn't sure I could easily say goodbye to her again. Ever. And that was with her barely giving me the time of day at the moment. Once I got past her defenses, it would be a thousand percent harder to

leave her. That didn't stop my determination to press forward with my campaign.

Bristol would be mine again.

Hell, technically, she was still mine.

I cared about her. I wanted her. Hell, she was married to me whether she knew or not. Which circled me back to the knowledge that plagued me. It had been in the forefront of my thoughts for days, and it wouldn't subside.

It pushed to the center of my awareness again when I'd texted our friends, knowing we'd hang out with the people who'd been there when the wedding had occurred. My thoughts didn't abate when Bristol emerged from her room, looking fucking sexy in jeans and a silky pink blouse that draped alluringly over her breasts. I helped her into her coat, wanting to touch her, to thrust my hands into her hair and kiss her until we forgot anything but our bodies coming together. My need taunted me when we got into the car where her floral scent reminded me of what I couldn't have.

My fingers drummed restlessly on the steering wheel. We were in her little lime-green sedan, which gave me a little more leg room than the silver roller skate. She'd agreed to let me drive, after a short discussion—i.e. me begging. I hated the rental, but I also hated being a passenger. Driving put me in control and gave me something to do. What could I say? When it came to cars, I had control issues.

Still, the distraction of navigating to the bar didn't erase the worry that gnawed at my insides like a plague.

“Will I have to deal with a boyfriend showing up to kick my ass?” I finally asked her, wondering if I'd be facing a bar fight tonight when someone challenged me over her. It wasn't my main concern. I'd win. Hands down. No matter who the guy was. However, getting in a fight would be the opposite of the press I was supposed to be garnering.

Not that I gave a shit about press, tonight. Seeing my potential replacement would destroy me in ways I didn't want to contemplate—yet, I had been thinking of it. Relentlessly.

Bristol snorted, the sound half-strangled in the darkness of the car as she made a half-ass attempt to hold it back.

“I don’t think many people in Cherish Cove could kick your ass, Ax.”

“Yeah, but... Will there a problem with the asshole you met for coffee after work last night?”

She was silent for a moment, the quiet a knife on my skin. Fuck. My hands tightened on the steering wheel. My knuckles turned white, and the cover she had over it creaked beneath the pressure. I deserved this. I’d brought this on.

Fuck.

Clarity slapped me harder than than ever before. In the silence, the stray gravel on the road crunching beneath the tires of the vehicle, I knew I couldn’t lose her.

Though I should, I couldn’t stand down.

No matter what I’d done, I wouldn’t walk away.

I glanced over. Bristol stared at her twined hands. Her tongue dampened her delectable lips. Fuck, I wanted to kiss her more than anything. More than I wanted to breathe. I fought the urge to pull over this car and kiss the fuck out of her and stake my claim again. Right. This. Second.

But, Christ. Was she in love with this guy? Was I fucking up her plans for the future? Damn it. Decency dictated I should step aside here. I was the one who’d fucked her over. For a good reason and with no choice—it had been my mother’s life or a relationship with Bristol.

Still, I’d hurt Bristol, and for that, I did deserve to lose her.

And the agony of that about caused me to swerve the car.

My hands clenched even tighter on the steering wheel, my hands aching with the grip while I tried to come to terms with my position, with how Bristol probably saw me as an interloper.

“Bristol—” I started, but she interrupted me.

“It was Sutton. I went over to Sutton’s. I... I don’t date, Axel. Probably, that’s dumb, and I’ve been thinking, maybe after you go, I should. I should try to get out there and start to live my life, but you know... Once bitten, twice shy. It’s taken me a long time to move forward.”

Utter relief washed over me. Yeah, I was an asshole to be so happy about that. I let out a slow breath, almost light-headed from the near euphoria filling me. Because apparently, I was a jackass. She’d just confessed she hadn’t been able to move on from me because I’d hurt her so badly, and I was relieved. I was a dick. And a dumbass, as my father would say.

“I’m sorry, Bristol. You have no idea how sorry.” I wanted to tell her I wouldn’t be letting her go this time—or ever—but I knew right now probably wasn’t the time. She’d figure it out when I stuck like glue and begged her to come with me to Daytona then Fontana then the every race after that until I retired.

That thought startled me. Until that moment, I hadn’t considered asking Bristol to uproot her life for me.

That was probably an asshole move, too.

She lifted a shoulder. “The past is the past, and we both need to come to terms with it, right? Let’s just have fun tonight.” She chuckled. “Even though it’s a Wednesday, and I should be thinking about bed right now. But yeah, anyway, you don’t need to worry someone will try to punch you—not because of me.”

I wasn’t so sure of that. Plenty of her cousins were girls, but not all of them. Some Donovan out there likely wanted to punch my lights out for leaving Bristol. I’d lay money Oak and Barke aren’t super fans of mine. They’d probably only agreed to come out so they could rip me a new one. It might take a while for them to believe I was all in for Bristol, but I’d prove it.

“Did you get ahold of the crew?” she asked.

“I texted Barke and Oak. It was short notice, but they’re going to meet us, even though Oak tried the old *Who Dis* line.

Asshole.”

I actually suspected the twins had been expecting me to contact them because there hadn't been even a moment of hesitation before they said yes—aside from Oak razzing me.

“Well, you have been away a long time. You're pretty lucky they can meet us, what with Barke's restaurant and Oakley's writing schedule and filling in at the resort's diner most mornings. Do you think Sadie will come?”

“Barke mentioned calling her. Those two are *still* not together?”

She blew out a scoffing breath. “They're stubborn. You might know something about that mindset.”

I grinned. “Maybe a little.”

Thirteen



Axel

I pulled into the lot for the sports bar on First street, noting not many cars were parked there. Good. I didn't want to interact with a bunch of people. I just wanted to catch up with my friends and Bristol.

"Don't get out," I told her, remembering last night when she'd been annoyed at me opening and shutting her door.

She huffed, but when I made it to her side of the vehicle, she'd only taken off her seatbelt and she'd waited for me. Good girl. Showing attitude, however, she rolled her eyes at me when I opened the door.

"Thank you," she said primly, a wide swath of sarcasm bleeding into her tone.

"Every time." I winked, purposely not saying anytime. She rolled her eyes again, but she didn't protest when I put my arm around her for our walk into the building. Despite the abnormally warm weather the area had been experiencing this week, so temperate you nearly didn't need a jacket, the parking lot was slightly slippery beneath our feet now that night had fallen and the temps had dropped.

That was the story I told, anyway. Mostly, I wanted to touch her, to feel her small body pressed into my side, to breathe in her scent that had never changed and took me back to our past—from picnics and victory lane at races to my face buried in her neck when we fucked.

She gasped when I moved like lightning and kissed her throat right where I always did, loving the way my touch to that spot made her shiver.

“Axel...” she whispered, but I just pulled open the door and held it for her.

A wall of noise hit us as we walked in, the sound cutting off her protest. Good. She had to come around to being mine, and the sooner the better.

Acting as if nothing were off with us, I glanced around for our friends. Apparently, since there wasn't a big game tonight, the owners had opted for a small band to play on the stage at the far end of the bar. I didn't know if it was a local group, but I didn't recognize any of them.

However, I *did* recognize five of the six smiling faces that turned toward us when we entered. Oak and Barke waved, and I guided Bristol over to the high rectangular table with tall stools around it.

“Axel,” Oak exclaimed, meeting us halfway and pulling me into a bro hug. “Good to see you, man.”

“You, too. Missed you. But I—” I stopped abruptly. I'd almost mentioned I'd read all his books, but remembered at the last second that I wasn't supposed to know about them for some fucked up reason. Someday, I'd find out *why*. “I heard you have news.”

“Yeah. I conned a girl into marrying me and staying in Cherish Cove.” He grinned, so damn happy it glowed off him, and he reached for the hand of a pretty woman, with light brown hair and an obvious but small baby bump, who had come up beside him. “This is my wife, Luna. Luna, this is our friend, Axel. You met him when you were here that summer? He was always busy racing and training, so you might not remember him.”

She nodded thoughtfully and smiled toward me.

“We went to a couple of his races,” she told her husband then turned her attention to me. “Nice to see you again.”

“Nice to see you. I'm glad you're back.”

Oak squeezed her side, as if any of us needed the reminder how glad *he* was. There was no mistaking it.

“And you know my cousin, Bristol, right?” he said. The Donovan-Woods were a large family. It didn’t surprise me he’d have to ask.

Her sparking eyes turned at Bristol—clearly Luna was as delighted as my friend. “We’ve met a couple times. You work at the library, right?”

“I do,” my girl said.

Luna looked back at me after a nod and smile at Bristol. “And like old times, you’re the one Oak and his brothers watch race almost every weekend for most of the year.”

“Guilty. You look familiar—more than just from that summer.”

“She’s a social media influencer,” Oakley said, looking as proud as if he were living vicariously through her and wasn’t a New York Times bestseller, who occasionally had more than one book charting at a time. I’d feel the same way about any of Bristol’s accomplishments. Fuck, she was amazing with her passion for bringing words to little kids, so they could develop a love of books. I wondered if she’d ever considered writing kids’ stories.

“I’m not on socials very much, but maybe, that was where I’ve seen you.” Or maybe, she just had a familiar face. God knew, I saw plenty of them during race weeks with all the meet-and-greets, as well as signing autographs on my way to practices or back and forth from the hauler or the garage.

“Hey, man,” Barke interrupted us, pulling me into a hug similar to his twin’s. He didn’t have to introduce me to the woman beside him—Sadie, his not-girlfriend. She ended up as his plus one all the time, but the stupid ass wouldn’t make their relationship official due to some feud between them. I didn’t get it, it made no sense, and I couldn’t understand why she hadn’t given up on him yet.

“Hey, Sadie,” I said, giving her a full hug as soon as Barke released me. “Did you check out that dating app I sent you

yet?”

It was bullshit. I hadn't, and she knew it, but Barke didn't.

“Some hot guys on there,” she answered, playing along with a wicked smile. Her eyes sparkled, and I knew I'd just fed the flames of their bullshit feud.

“What app?” Barke demanded.

She ignored him, giving me a wink before walking back to her seat.

“Sadie! What app?” Barke repeated, following her.

“You're terrible,” Bristol chided me. She knew what I'd done. I shrugged, unrepentant.

“It's no less than he deserves after the hell he's put her through,” our friend, Ginger said, coming up for her hug, while Bristol took the opportunity to follow after Sadie. “Hey, hey, the gang's all here.”

“It's great to see you! I didn't know you were coming!” I pulled her into a quick embrace, but my attention was half on Bristol and eyeing the too-buff waiter who'd rushed over to get her drink order. I didn't like him near her while I was here.

“Gotta get the whole crew together when we can,” Ginger said, stepping back and into the side of a man, who wrapped his arm around her shoulders, the move clearly staking his claim.

Don't worry, dude. The only woman I want is the one I came with.

Ginger wasn't wrong about our group of friends, however. Even with me away, we were close enough we'd fall back into familiar patterns. The six of us had been thick as thieves all during school, though Bristol and I had been the only official couple.

“And the group's growing,” Ginger added. “Now, there's Luna and Trevor.” She leaned her head on the shoulder of the guy beside her. “My husband.”

I gave him a chin lift, recognizing him now. While he hadn't been in our circle, we'd gone to high school together. He'd been into robotics, and I thought his dad owned a construction company or something. With his tan and tall, muscled frame and sun-streaked hair, he sure looked as if he might work in that field. And tonight, Ginger had stars in her eyes when she looked at him, which meant he was a good guy in my book.

"Good to see you," I said, smiling. "Welcome to our hell-raising group."

"Eh, not so much hell-raising anymore," Ginger scoffed. "We've all mellowed—except for you, Mr. Speed Demon."

"You'd probably be surprised by how mellow I am, actually," I confessed while we turned toward the table and walked over to the others. I immediately bee-lined toward Bristol, coming up behind her and wrapping my arms around her waist—a habit I would never bother to break. I'd be doing it a lot more if I had my way. Coming up to Bristol, wrapping my arms around her, hugging her to me, was natural. For both of us it seemed. She never missed a beat while she talked to Sadie. Triumph exploded through me when she snuggled back into me. A small victory but I'd take it.

She tipped her head to look up at me, and fuck, I wanted to kiss her.

"I ordered you a beer," she told me. "I hope that's okay."

"Perfect."

"So..." Barke gestured back and forth between the two of us with the neck of his own beer. "You two are back together?"

"No," Bristol said immediately when I would have answered *hell, yes, we are*. Realistically, we weren't there yet.

"We're working on it," I amended.

"Huh," he commented, his tone a little skeptical. "Okay."

"Just leave it," Sadie told him, "or he'll make you explain *our* relationship."

"Yeah, what's up with that?" I asked.

“Oh, hey, isn’t that our song?” Barke hedged, putting down his drink and dragging Sadie to the dance floor. She laughed and tried to resist and stay with us. He was having no part of that, lifting her up and carrying her, while she laughed. God, I missed my friends.

Out on the parquet floor, Sadie settled right into his arms while he said something to her and she shook her head. In a way, they reminded me of Bristol and me. They loved each other, but something kept them apart. I hoped they could bridge that gap, because I sure intended to eliminate the barrier between Bristol and me.

Fourteen



Axel

“This place is nice. Being here with everyone, too,” I said after Barke absconded with Sadie onto the dance floor. Luna and Oakley had followed suit, and a few minutes ago, Trevor and Ginger had seen someone else they knew over by the bar, leaving Bristol and me alone.

The moment was perfect, though, holding Bristol against my body in the dim bar, the strains of *The Dance* winding around us and bringing back memories of what was. Times when we didn’t know what would come, how we’d say goodbye, everything shattered around us. God, back then, I’d been so idealistic. So clueless about life.

Trying to chase away the echoes of heartbreak, I took a sip of my beer and looked around the bar. “It’s good hanging out with friends. I’ve missed everyone. Thanks for coming out with me.”

Melting further into me, she leaned her head back against my shoulder and angled her head to look up at me. I fought the strong, almost overpowering urge to lean forward, just a little, and press my lips over hers. Fuck, I craved it. I needed her. I missed us. Bristol was my everything, and I’d been so fucking stupid. So, so stupid.

“Everyone’s missed you, too, you know? You left and never came back.”

“I couldn’t. It...it was too much. I’m back now.”

She made a small disbelieving sound. “Only because you were forced to.”

She wasn’t wrong.

Of all the things forced on me the past six years, this one was what I’d dreaded most. It was the most important, most needed trip, though. It no longer irritated me that I’d been sent home for the fundraiser when I had race prep to do. This is where I needed to be. Though our relationship was still jacked and off the rails, I hadn’t felt as much peace in six years. Being near Bristol the past two days drove home how wrong I’d been and how right we were. There had still been my mom’s medical bills and treatments, but we could have figured that out.

I’d left behind nearly everything important to me, abandoned here in Cherish Cove. Since I left, I’d had my career. Only my career. I’d chased my empty dreams, and it had been the ride of my life so far, but it wasn’t enough. I missed the people I loved. Without the people I cared about most, my days had been hollow. It wasn’t just Bristol I missed, though she owned the biggest part of me. It was all my friends and my family.

“You okay?” Bristol asked, dragging me from my thoughts, and I realized I’d zoned out while I’d watched the people around us.

“Yeah,” I breathed. “Sorry. I was thinking. Lost in the past and what-ifs.”

“Axel. We—”

“Who would have thought Oakley would be the first of us to get married?” Ginger interrupted, returning with Trevor to sit beside us and following our gazes to watch the dancers.

“Yeah...” Bristol murmured.

“Then it was us.” Ginger leaned her head on Trevor’s shoulder. “Hey, you remember when we went to that wedding chapel when we were on vacation during spring break in high school? You and Bristol pretended to get married then the whole rest of the time, you acted like you were on your honeymoon.”

My stomach twisted at the subject of the enormous secret I kept, the one I still had to talk to Bristol about when I found the right moment. And that moment needed to be as soon as possible. When the conditions were right and I stopped being a chicken.

“I barely recall that night,” Bristol laughed. “Just what you guys told me. I swear since then, I have *never* had one of those little umbrella drinks, not even once.”

“Or six of them,” Ginger teased.

“I didn’t realize they had so much alcohol in them,” Bristol protested. “They just tasted like fruit.”

She wasn’t wrong. That’s how I’d gotten drunk, too. We hadn’t even meant to. If Bristol knew the consequences were more than the hangovers we’d nursed the next day, she gave no hint to it. And my guilt grew exponentially.

“I found pictures of it the other day,” Ginger went on.

“Oh! Will you share those with me?” Bristol exclaimed. She wanted pictures of our so-called *fake* wedding? That was a good sign, right?

“Sure. I’ll send them to you tomorrow.”

“Share what?” Sadie asked as the other four returned to the table. She scooted away from Barke and hopped onto her stool, while Oak carefully helped Luna get seated. Looking none-too-pleased, Barke moved beside Sadie and slung his arm along the back of her chair while she ignored him.

“Pictures of Axel and Bristol’s ‘wedding’,” Ginger supplied with air quotes around wedding. “You remember that?”

“Oh my God, yes! I was Bristol’s bridesmaid, and you were the official photographer. The boys were both best men because they’re twins. Will you send me pictures, too?”

The women giggled about it, talking about the trip for a bit longer while I drank my beer, kind of wishing it was something stronger. Despite being happy to be here, I couldn’t alleviate the guilt eating me while I watched my friends. Trevor looked at Ginger as if she were the most perfect being

in the universe, and maybe, she was in his world. Oak had his hand in Luna's belly while he cuddled her into his chest. Barke kept stealing glances down at Sadie, his gaze a lot hungrier than he probably knew.

My arms tightened on Bristol's waist, needing my own solid connection, tenuous and unearned as it was.

"Come dance with me," I whispered close to her ear as the band started playing *More Than My Hometown*. Inhaling, I closed my eyes and allowed a moment to absorb her sweet, warm scent.

I didn't wait for an answer as I lifted her off the barstool, releasing a breath at the feel of her soft body against mine, then set her on her feet. My hand wrapped around her, letting her know that 'No' wouldn't be an acceptable answer. I'd carry her to the dance floor like Barke had Sadie a few minutes ago.

Her gaze on me, she took a long draw of her beer then placed it on the table before letting me lead her to the floor, our fingers linked. The feel of her skin against mine, palm-to-palm, clicked another lever inside me. One more step toward the forever I wasn't relinquishing again. The switches had been flipping, one after the other, since I set eyes on her yesterday. Maybe, it was even before then. Maybe it had started when I got into the car to drive here. Or when I'd flown into Michigan. Or even when the command to come here had been issued.

To the deepest parts of my soul I knew, I couldn't leave her. I didn't only need to resolve things between us; I needed to completely heal things and find a way to keep her at my side.

I didn't know how I'd make it work, what I'd have to do to scale her defenses, but I couldn't just hit the road again without knowing she was mine. More than on a paper she didn't know about.

"Axel," she whispered as my hands settled low on her waist, pulling her so we were chest-to-chest. Her fingers fisted in my shirt, and her forehead pressed into the base of my throat, notching just below my chin. "What are we doing?"

“Dancing.” I knew she meant more than that, and she knew I wasn’t stupid or oblivious. I couldn’t miss the feeling of her sigh, blowing against my chest and warming me through my shirt.

“This can’t happen,” she murmured. “We can’t... We can’t... just... Too much has happened. Too much time has—”

“Why? Why can’t we happen?” I growled, rock-solid determination driving me. I was pushing her. I knew I was. And it was triggering her fight or flight response—except I was pretty sure I was going to get both at once.

Well, I would battle her *and* chase her as much as necessary.

Everything had changed for me the past forty-eight or so hours—hell in the past few days since the last ultimatum had been thrown down. I’d been questioning everything, and through it all, one thing was clear: I needed Bristol. I didn’t care how many years of time we had separating us. I didn’t care who or what I had to fight. Whatever I had to do, she was mine.

“Can’t you understand why I keep saying no?” she asked, the words hitching on a sob she tried to hide. Hurt I hadn’t seen before passed her eyes. Fuck. And I’d caused that. “The thing is, years ago, if you’d come back, I probably would have jumped into your arms and said yes to just about anything you asked. But it’s been so long. Too much has happened.”

Not for me. I’d been in emotional stasis. From what I knew, she hadn’t moved forward, either.

“Too much of what?” I demanded.

She let go of my shirt with one hand and pounded the side of her little fist into my pec. Tears filled her eye, illuminating her pain in a way that twisted my guts. Her strikes weren’t enough to hurt me, but stabbing pain pierced my heart.

“You can’t just come back here and act like you didn’t do a burnout on my heart then leave skid marks on my back when you sped away to pursue your blaze of glory,” she sobbed, her voice cracking. “You don’t get to act like nothing happened. Like you can just... Like you can just come back as if it was no big deal, as if I’ve just been pathetically waiting for you

while you've been racing after bigger and better things than me." She swallowed and gasped. "Like you didn't leave *everything* behind," she finished on an anguished whisper.

I stiffened. "That's not how it was."

"Well, it's sure how it looked to me and everyone else in Cherish Cove. And they probably think I'm a sucker because I'm giving in to my body's feelings for you. But my head knows. My heart knows." She looked up at me, tears shimmering in her eyes as bright as diamond-hard spear tips to eviscerate me. "I know." Her fist pounded in the middle of her chest now. "*I know*. I know what it's like to love you and not be enough."

"Bristol..." I pleaded. God, I couldn't let her feel this way. I couldn't bear that I'd done this to her. Me...the selfish asshole. Even if I'd thought I was right. Her words rang true, accusing me, but I couldn't stop my feelings for her, my need. She belonged to me, *with* me, and I couldn't veer away now that I'd set my course. I couldn't.

"Don't," she pleaded.

I cupped her face. "You were *always* enough. Don't ever think ___"

She ripped away from me. "*Don't!*"

"Baby... Please... I still love you."

Everything in me stilled at my confession. Except my stupid heart. That idiot raced like a stock car without restrictor plates. And like a punch-drunk fool, it was sailing right toward a wall but couldn't stop.

Bristol shook her head wildly. "No! No, you don't get to come back and...just...say things like that."

"I love you," I repeated, emphatic and undeterred.

Taking a fortifying breath, she shook her head again and reeled back a few steps out of my reach.

What the fuck had just happened? I'd been cruising along on the straightway then crashed straight into a curve that shouldn't even be there.

“Well, that’s just too bad,” she spat, unmoved by my declaration. No, that wasn’t true. She was moved, alright. She was pissed.

Bristol huffed, and I knew she was frustrated. With herself? With me? Both?

“I shouldn’t have agreed to this stupid dance anyway. I shouldn’t have agreed to come here.”

“Yes, you should have.” Rapidly closing the space between us, I grasped her upper arms and made her look at me when she tried to stalk away. We were making a scene, but I couldn’t give a fuck. “You love me, too,” I growled. “Admit it.”

She shook her head. “I hate you.”

Hated me?

Taking advantage of the way she’d stunned me, Bristol yanked away and half-ran from the dance floor. She grabbed her coat then headed for the door, while it was all I could do to propel my stunned body into motion. She might as well have slammed me with a taser, straight to the heart. It clutched, paused, before galloping double time.

She hated me?

Not bloody likely.

Fifteen



Bristol

Guilt and regret.

More guilt.

And I had a headache, probably brought on by both. I turned over in bed, staring at the ceiling as the sun beamed in through the sheers on the two big bedroom windows, the bright rays promising a perfect day. Right. That sunny BS could just go away. I wanted a rainstorm. Hell, I wanted a blizzard that would shut down the town, cancel this weekend's fundraiser and...strand Axel.

That was my problem; I had to admit it. He *was* the storm. That man had determined to break down all my defenses, and I was scrambling to fill the cracks.

What if I gave in to all my feelings for Axel, to all he wanted from me, and he just...left again? For all I knew, he just wanted a quick reunion fuck to tide him over until the next time he came to town.

I closed my eyes. Damn it. Axel wasn't like that. I knew him better than that, and the last six years wouldn't have changed something that intrinsic within him. He had a noble streak in him a mile wide—it was one of the reasons he'd cut off things with a sharp break back then. I thought so anyway. I didn't understand the why of it, but when I was being reasonable, I knew he hadn't wanted to string me along. He'd wanted me to be able to move on, to give me a chance at a fulfilling life on my own.

It wasn't his fault I hadn't taken those steps.

But it also was, and he didn't know it. We'd always used protection, but he'd left me with a baby. One I'd just found out about when he or she had been snatched away. I hadn't decided how to handle the news, though I knew I would love that child with all my heart, then I'd lost the pregnancy. My experience tainted everything—knowing my cousin could be pregnant, seeing another cousin's wife pregnant, even seeing Axel return here.

If I'd told him when I'd found out, it would have been a weapon to drag him back to Cherish Cove as fast as he'd left. What kind of tectonic fault would that have been? Spending our lives rubbing together, the pressure of lost dreams building, ready to explode into destructive, explosive waves when least expected? It would have poisoned everything we thought we had—more than him leaving did. That was the part I hadn't known how to handle—yet if the pregnancy had progressed and I didn't tell him, someone else would have. So I hadn't said a word. Now, I was the only one who knew that angel had ever existed.

Because of his deep-ingrained sense of right, Axel would have returned; I had zero question I'd held that power. Even last night, when I'd tried to leave the bar without him, he'd quickly followed me right out the door. My knight was ready to fight anything to protect me—even if what he had to battle was me.

As I'd run out, I'd realized he had my car keys, so I'd decided to just walk to my apartment to blow off the steam from my temper. He'd insisted on driving me. Or giving me the keys and walking home himself. He wanted me safe. In the end, I'd let him drive me. At the apartment, we'd parted in silence. I'd slept like crap—if you could call it sleep. Upon thought, that could have been responsible for the headache pounding at my temples, now.

I threw my arm over my eyes to block out the sun, but it didn't block out sounds. Axel was awake. Judging by the noises, he was in the kitchen banging around. The heavenly scent of coffee wafted my way, trying to tempt me from the covers, then minutes later...bacon taunted me. My stomach growled to

confirm my headache and morose feelings were in no way a hangover from my half of a beer.

Geez, I hadn't even finished one drink. And I'd run out of the bar without saying goodbye to my friends. I'd have to text them all with abject apologies this morning. And I'd have to say something to Axel, too—maybe not an apology but something closely adjacent.

Knuckles lightly rapped on my bedroom door. “Bristol? Baby? I made breakfast.”

Baby? And he made breakfast? Not just for himself but for both of us. As if I hadn't straight up told him I hated him last night.

I moaned as I remembered my words, not that my actions had been far from my thoughts since night.

They'd been lies. I wished I could hate him. I didn't.

I wasn't even sure in what realm of existence that would be possible.

He tapped lightly again.

“Are you okay? Do you need me to bring you anything? Aspirin? Water?” he called when I didn't answer. Damn it. Why did he have to be so...*nice*?

“I'm okay,” I rasped, my voice rough from disuse. “I'll be right out.”

Blowing out a breath, I pushed upright. The weight of the coming day pushed heavily down on me. Last night had been a turning point, whether I wanted it to be or not. He'd been clear on his feelings and I'd spewed mine all over him.

Yet, strangely, today felt like a new canvas lain out before us, ready for us to paint the future. Or...almost ready. We still had a lot of cards to place on the table before the air fully cleared.

Starting this morning with breakfast.

Okay, Bristol, you can do this. Get out of bed and go face your man. Yeah...your man. Stop being stupid.

Sometime in the night, on one of the many times I'd tossed awake, I'd stared at the ceiling and thought about what he'd said, what I'd said, my jumble of feelings over the past six years—most of which were hurt and *not* anger. Alone in the darkness with sleep evading me, I'd realized if Axel really, *truly*, wanted me, then maybe, I should find the courage to take the leap and let him back into my life.

It terrified me.

Levering myself out of bed, I ran a hand through my hair then pulled on a robe. Axel wasn't in the hallway when I peeked out, so I dashed over to the bathroom to take care of things, which besides the basics, included a swipe of mascara on my eyelashes, a tiny bit of tinted lip gloss and a thorough brushing of my hair to tame the bedhead. I didn't want to be over-obvious, but I wanted to look human and not zombie-like.

"Good morning," I murmured, walking into the bright kitchen where the table was set again, today with sunny yellow placemats and napkins. This guy. His mother had trained him well. Out the windows, I saw several bundled-up kids running into the park, two moms in yoga pants with to-go coffees in their hands following behind at a slower pace.

Turning toward the stove, I sucked in a breath at the sight of Axel. He looked ragged, as if he hadn't slept much last night either. Though his workout clothes were *Men's Health* magazine perfect, dark circles marred the divots beneath his eyes and tight lines pulled around his tense mouth. His intent gaze studied me, determined, yet worried by what confrontation would come today.

Still... God, the man was the most beautiful human being I'd ever seen. His unruly dark locks were more mussed than normal, and he even managed to make the purple shadows beneath his eyes appear sexy. A day's worth of stubble covered his normally clean-shaven cheeks. And none of it detracted one iota from his mouthwatering appearance.

A tight-fitting, cream-colored tee with dark stitching at the seams, strained over his shoulders and pecs, trying to contain that muscular torso and emphasizing his flat, hard belly.

Conversely, loose black track pants covered his long, powerful legs and hid the treasures there. Treasures that had only ever been mine, if he were to be believed.

“Good morning,” he echoed, moving toward the stove. He pulled a plate from where he’d left it to warm in the oven and set it on the table for me, kissing the top of my head before turning to get his own. Immediate tingles cascaded through me. My mouth dried while my gaze stayed glued to him, watching him move with the grace of a feline predator. I couldn’t rip away my stare even to look at the food he’d made.

“I poured your coffee when I heard you head into the bathroom,” he said as if I weren’t practically gaping at him. Thank goodness I’d taken a second to get halfway presentable.

“Thank you,” I whispered, still bemused by how sweet he was being. Didn’t he remember the vitriol I spewed at him last night?

I nodded toward his clothes. “Are you going to work out after breakfast?”

He shook his head and sat down, kitty corner to me like yesterday. His hand curled over mine, squeezing for just a moment before he let go and left me in a confused twist from the tiny touch.

“Already went,” he told me. “Since I can’t afford to miss a day, I usually hit the gym about four or five in the morning to get it taken care of. Thankfully, Cherish Cove has a twenty-four hour place now.”

“I didn’t know that.” My workouts usually consisted of running around the library and going up and down the stairs in that old building. And in this one, too, since my place was on the third floor. Of course, when there wasn’t snow on the ground and it wasn’t too cold, I ran outside. I did enjoy running.

But the gym? No.

“You can’t afford to miss a day?” That seemed like a good not-too-personal place to land.

“I used to stay in good shape before—”

“Yeah, you were in the gym every day,” I agreed. “How you said it seems different, though.”

“It is. It’s a different game now. The G-forces on the body, the constant tension you hold while you’re racing inches from another guy, the heat from track—I have to wear heat shields under my heels now to keep from getting singed. There are people who say driving isn’t a sport, but it is. The strain it puts on the body is at least as great as for any endurance athlete. So I have to stay in the best condition possible. It’s crazy I didn’t realize how much before—back then it was just adrenaline and fun.”

“A lot of things were different before.” Honestly, seeing him move to the next level, hearing about it, impressed the heck out of me.

“Yeah.”

And this was moving too close to dangerous territory. I wasn’t ready to tread through the minefield just yet. Not without a full cup of coffee in me.

“So you’ve already been to the gym, *and* you made breakfast? That couch must be pretty uncomfortable,” I teased.

“I’ve slept in more comfortable places.”

“Yeah, sorry that—”

He held up a hand to stop me. “It’s all good, Bristol. I’m an unwelcome guest. You letting me stay on the couch is a win.”

I kinda hadn’t thought I had a choice. Now that I thought of it, he could have stayed with his parents, and he would have if I’d insisted. Which I hadn’t. I didn’t even realize it had been a possibility—until that very moment. Apparently, subconsciously, my masochist side had wanted him here.

“Well, I’m...sorry I was so...*mean* last night.”

Axel enveloped my hand in his warm fingers again. “You weren’t mean.”

“I was.”

“We both know I had it coming. But I’m going to make it up to you. “

I shook my head, mystified by how calm he was being. I’d told him I hated him. I’d had a fit on the dance floor and walked out on him in front of our closest friends.

His fingers brushed my cheek, and he grimaced a self-deprecating smile. “There are things you don’t know. Things that happened before. I *will* tell you. I promise. But for now, just... Let’s finish breakfast. Just know I’m so fucking sorry, and I’ll tell you the rest later.”

“So...breakfast and a mystery,” I commented.

“Trust me...” He lifted his coffee cup. “It’s too much to digest without being fully caffeinated.”

I stared at him.

“I know how you think,” he explained. “Coffee before drama. Promise I’ll tell you, too. Today.”

“Okay.” I hated waiting, but heaven help me, I believed him. And I could forgive him for whatever it was, though anyone who knew anything about forgiveness understood that act wasn’t a one-time thing. I would probably be forgiving him for his actions for a bit while I worked through my hurt about what had happened. I was stronger now, too. Bristol at twenty-four was far different from shattered Bristol at eighteen and a half. I needed to remember that.

“I know you’re sorry,” I conceded. “Let’s...table it, then.” I shrugged. “Whatever it is you have locked up inside you, I do know the past is the past. We can’t change it, can we?”

He glanced down at his plate, and I realized neither of us had touched the food he’d made.

“I can regret what happened—how it happened—and try to fix it.”

“Let’s eat before things get colder. And talk about that afterward, then.” To veer away from the heavy talk, I picked up a piece of crunchy bacon, cooked dark, exactly as I liked it. “Mmm...perfect.”

Axel smiled, picking up his own piece that wasn't done quite as much, since he contended I ate my bacon burnt. "Just the way you like it."

"You remember."

"I remember everything," he murmured.

Tears burned my eyes, and I stared down at my plate while I forced them away. We ate in silence for a few minutes, each lost in our thoughts, each stealing glances at one another. Neither of us very stealthy.

"It's nice outside. Warm," Axel said as we both sipped our second cups coffee. "Would you be interested in walking along the boardwalk? For old times?"

Old times... Could we get back there and recapture what we'd had? For better or worse, I was coming to terms with the fact I wanted it with all my heart.

I nodded. "Yeah. I'd like that after I get ready for the day. No pajamas on the boardwalk for me."

"Fun hater," he joked.

"That's me. Boring librarian."

"There's not a damn thing boring about you, Bristol."

My breath caught, instant reaction twisting low in my belly and sending a flutter through me clear to my fingertips and toes. My teeth sank into my bottom lip as I stared into his intense chocolate-brown eyes. Speechless, I swallowed hard and tried to grapple for my equilibrium that was long gone.

Grinning, Axel climbed to his feet and pressed his lips to the top of my head again before heading to the sink.

Sixteen



Bristol

“Alright... Explain what’s been going on with the whole media thing that brought you back to town,” I said as we walked along the boardwalk. We’d been strolling along the cement walkway, bordered by a blue-painted steel railing, for a half hour. Keeping it light, we’d talked about our jobs and our families. But I couldn’t hold in my questions for a second longer.

In response to my question, Axel’s fingers tightened on mine. He’d grabbed my hand when we’d gotten out of the car earlier, and I hadn’t tried to pull away. I didn’t have it in me. It was a new morning, and I was trying to get over myself, forcing my brain to stand down and let my heart lead.

I *wanted* my fingers linked with his.

“From what you’ve said, there’s been some sort of media smear on you over the last few months,” I continued. “You were pretty adamant about the situation at your parents’ house the other day, even though you didn’t elaborate on it.”

“You could say that. And I swear it’s not me,” Axel vowed. “Or when the pictures *are* of me, they’re blown way out of context. The sports networks have picked up on some of it, but there are a whole slew of non-sanctioned social media channels dedicated to behind the scenes NASCAR gossip. They may not be affiliated with the organization, but they’re not stopped. Fans flock to them because they look official. Then after the championship race, when the season is over, it’s

like they all go nuts—more nuts than usual—because they don't have anything else to talk about. That's what my dad meant when he called it *crazy season* the other day. It happens ever year, just usually not to me.”

“So you're being framed?”

I'd certainly seen that sort of thing happen to Hollywood celebrities and music personalities. No matter what certain people did, they were painted as *Trouble*. Some were targeted by the news, over and over, and made to look bad when they hadn't done anything different than any other star their age might do. I'd never really thought it happened to sports figures, though.

He sighed, the sound long and full of frustration. “Seems like. All I know is, I'm not some bad boy acting out. Fuck, I practically adhere to a curfew. I go where I'm told to go, I smile, I mingle, I schmooze sponsors and fans, and then I go home. Alone. I promise, Brisk. Alone. There hasn't been anyone else, not even as just a dinner date or a plus one to an event. I certainly haven't taken groups of women to my hotel room for orgies.”

When I glanced over, he was staring at the cement walkway, his brows furrowed while his head shook the slightest bit.

“Have you had any tech guys look into it, authenticate the photos and the video? Have you asked your lawyer step in to demand proof and issue a cease and desist?”

“My uncle is supposed to be handling it.”

His uncle. Just from what I'd heard about the man, I doubted that monument to douchery was doing anything, and it pissed me off on Axel's behalf. I didn't want to throw shade at the older man, but I'd witness enough of his actions via what Axel's parents had said.

“But is he?” I asked.

“I don't know. He just chews me a new one at least once a week.”

The shock had to show on my face. “Axel...that's—”

“I know. It’s untenable. I need to stand up to him. I need to do a lot of things, and I’ve taken too long to do them while I let time slip through my fingers.”

“You know, I’m acquainted with some computer geeks—their term, not mine. My cousin Fiona’s boyfriend’s brother and his best friend. I guess they’re hackers. Whizzes at programming *and* busting into systems. I’m not supposed to know that, but Fiona trusts me.”

“Little Fee is old enough to date?”

I laughed. “Yeah. *Little Fee* is in college. If you want me to hook you up with those tech guys…”

“I’ll think about it.” He nodded, clearly considering my questions and the offer.

His hand squeezed mine again, and he turned, leaning against the railing that ran along the walkway. Letting go of my fingers, he transferred his grip to my hips and pulled me between his splayed legs. I fell into him, my hands pressed to his chest. His warmth seeped into me, even though we had our coats between us. The comfort of nostalgia heated places that had been ice-cold for too long.

God, I’d missed him. I hated admitting it. For so long, I’d tried to convince myself I despised him. I didn’t.

“There was no one for me, either,” I told him, circling back to what he’d told me about being celibate. “I… I wasn’t ready.”

In more ways than one.

His cool fingers framed my face while his eyes met mine, and I melted. His warm breath mingled with mine. The moment locked around us, neither of us moving. I started to lean in, craving his kiss. With barely held will, I stopped myself. Not yet. Not before we got this out. But dang it! He was making it difficult with our bodies aligned chest-to-chest as they were.

“So that video?” I rasped out, struggling to stay on topic, before we digressed back into our past and the apologies started again. “You’re saying it wasn’t you? I’ve seen the clip. Some people in town make it a point to keep me apprised of ‘all things Axel’. Even when what they show me is highly

inappropriate. You know how it is in Cherish Cove. I haven't been stalking your career, but I know all about it."

I hadn't stalked much anyway.

I still couldn't decide if those people had been well-meaning, trying to make me feel better about Axel's terrible choices or if they were rubbing his new life in my face. Since it was usually people who weren't in my friend circle, I leaned toward the latter, but I couldn't be sure.

Axel jerked a nod, inhaling as if to draw in strength. "I'm sorry you saw that. Did anything in it seem off to you?"

His tentative tone made it clear he didn't want to talk about it, was hesitant to lay the issue in front of me to examine. I sure I wouldn't want to talk about allegedly prancing through a public fountain butt naked or engaging in all sorts of sexual situations or driving drunk—all of which he'd been accused of recently.

"Well... *Things* were blurred," I said. "But, yes. Where was your birthmark? Even with strategic blurring, that should have been visible. Clearly, whoever created the video is unaware of it."

"Exactly! And thank God for that, too. Because it's not me. I'm not hooking up with groupies every night. And the pics of me supposedly coming out of a room where I'd been with two women... That's me, but there was no one in that room but me. And as you detected, I wasn't part of a drunken escapade in that fountain in the middle of the city square. *And* I wasn't stopped for intoxicated driving."

He shook his head, the cool air turning his angry exhale into steam. "Believe it or not, that last rumor pissed me off the most. Driving infractions like that have to be investigated by the circuit's officials. If it were true, none of the media smear would matter. I'd be out of the car. And I'd be out of NASCAR," he railed, riled up as we delved deeper into the situation. "But...yeah. That video... No one's seen my birthmark. Even my workout shorts cover it because it's high on my thigh and hip. It's not like I go around dropping trou."

I let that sink be in. I wanted to believe he hadn't been with anyone who would have seen him naked. With resolve, I reminded myself he'd told me he hadn't, and Axel wasn't one to lie outright to me—even if he had secrets he was loath to share. But even drivers on the amateur circuits had women throwing themselves at them. The proverbial pit lizards, who wanted nothing more than to fuck a driver, haunted all levels of the sport.

Swallowing back my unwarranted jealousy, not even wanting to picture someone touching him, I focused on the main topic at hand. The smear campaign. “Do you have any idea who'd have it out for you? Why would you be targeted?”

“No idea. The thing is—and this will sound weird—it feels more like someone is trying to manipulate me. For most drivers, the circuit couldn't care less about this stuff. They'd frown on it, yeah, but they'd talk to me and tell me to keep my nose clean because this is a ‘family sport’—other than the drunk driving thing they had to investigate. The NASCAR company isn't who's threatening to sanction me, to sideline me, whether with fines or not letting me race for some bullshit number of races. It's my uncle, my own team, having it out for me. But people don't know about my uncle and his ultimatums.”

Uh... *I* didn't know about them.

Shocked, I leaned back to study him. “His...what?”

Axel shook his head. “This is what I needed to talk to you about, what I was alluding to this morning. I need to explain some things, and it goes way back. Lots of things do. Remember our spring break trip?”

My brows drew together. Okay... *Holy topic leap, Batman.* And this was the second time that vacation had been brought up in two days. “Yeah. And Ginger was talking about it at the bar last night.”

“Yeah...” he echoed, seeming deep in thought. “What a coincidence, huh? She found the pictures of the...uh... wedding.” He went silent, visibly gathering his thoughts, and I didn't push him, not wanting to probe too deeply into

whatever troubled him. He'd tell me before we left this embrace. That had been one of the points to this walk: his promised explanation.

"It was right after we got back," he finally said in a low tone, as if he were lost back in time.

"What was?"

"Right after that trip was when we found out about my mom's cancer and how bad it was. We were all terrified we'd lose her. And my uncle came to talk to me then, too. He acted like he was in town because he was all concerned about family. And maybe, he was; I don't know. But I doubt it. Anyway, you and I hadn't graduated yet, of course, and he laying out plans for the following season. He asked me if I wanted the car."

"I remember that." It hadn't been a shock that Axel would join the professional league. He'd been working toward it longer than I'd known him, since he was racing go-karts. I'd been the girlfriend who'd spent every Saturday at the track watching him tear around the oval. We'd been a racing couple. *Brixel*. He'd been so excited by the opportunity to get into a high-tech car and to race with the big dogs. *I'd* been excited for him—for us. It was part of why it had been such a shock when he'd dropped me, leaving me in the dust. We'd been a team. We'd had a plan. He'd drive. I'd take college courses online and support him however he needed me, too. I was his rock and his anchor to reality.

The ironic thing was, he'd apparently seen me as weighing him down rather than grounding him.

"Darius told me things would have to change, and I'd have to agree to them in order to take this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. Like a dumbass, I thought he meant more training or altering my driving style or even how I interacted with media or fans. Of course, I agreed. I told him I'd do whatever he wanted. This chance wasn't coming around again."

"And?" I demanded. Anger started bubbling inside me. If Axel had strung me along for six months, so help me...

“And in November... Well, you know he came back to town. He met me at the track after I’d been doing some practice runs. He had contracts, all kinds of paperwork, and so much... There were so many details. Everything got very real. You know how sick my mom was by then. How my parents were struggling. Uncle Darius told me, as part of my signing package, he’d pay for my mom’s treatments and see she got the very best care. Anything she needed. All of it; he’d pay for all of it. I wanted to rush home and tell you—then he dropped the bombshell. I couldn’t tell anyone. Not even you.”

“What? I...”

“There’s more,” he interrupted darkly. “He doesn’t trust people, relationships. In his mind, entanglements dull a racer’s edge. He said... No, he *demand*ed that I break it off with you. I couldn’t have you and race. I couldn’t have you and have him help my parents with all the medical stuff. I was in a no-win situation. It wasn’t about choosing racing over you. I didn’t have a choice.”

“You didn’t have a choice,” I repeated in a whisper. “It was me or your mom.” Tears burned in my eyes as this truth came out. Oh my God...

I couldn’t meet his eyes. I couldn’t...speak. Eighteen years old and he’d been forced to chose between his girl and his mother. And one choice might mean the death of the other person, while the other choice... Well, there had been death there, too, hadn’t there?

Renewed pain, different this time, clenched my chest and stole my breath, I pulled away from him and he let go, letting his arms drop while I paced a few feet away.

My throat, eyes and nose burned as I fought off a napalm of outrage and sorrow. Fury at the old man who’d forced this and devastation for the teenager who hadn’t known what to do. I couldn’t stop the overflow of anger from lashing out at Axel.

“I... I want to say it’s okay and all that, but *it’s not*. You hurt me, and you’ve taken six years to come back around and say you’re sorry. Years to tell me the truth. You should have told me. We could have figured things out! You made me feel

like...like...I wasn't enough. Like I was below you. Like you and your new career were too big for this town and for me. You let us think we were dirt beneath your feet. You know how that feels, Axel?"

I wasn't being fair; I knew it. I understood why he'd made the choice he did. His mom's life had been in the balance. Given the same choice, I couldn't claim I wouldn't have done the same thing. But this hurt had festered inside me for years. If I didn't get it out, it would always be there between us, needing to be excised and still causing problems. It was the same with my fear. What if I just gave in to him, forgave him, and he left me again? Hadn't he been told to do that before and followed that order? Did he even want to be with me, or was he just needing to clear his conscience?

"I'm sorry," he bit out. "I'm more fucking sorry than you could ever guess. I've missed you every damn day. You think I've been out there living it up—that's what the media would have you believe—but I haven't. I've driven my car. I've been all NASCAR all the time. The only life I've had was on that track. I *know* I fucked up how I handled things, and I regret it every day. I can't even drink away the fucking pain because it would screw up my performance in the car. I already trashed one part of my life. I sure as hell can't fuck up the other." He shook his head. "Not that it seems to matter."

"It matters. You dropped me like I'm garbage, lying to me in the process, and now, you're not happy with the greener grass."

"You're not being fair. I didn't have a choice."

Fair? *Fair*? No, I wasn't, and I knew it, but I couldn't stop my anger. And it poured down my face in hot streams of furious tears. Yeah, I knew I was being harsh and not at all fair, but feelings were rarely rational. As much as I wanted to rein in my emotions, they kept escaping my mouth.

"There's always a choice. You should have told me."

He growled, driving his hand viciously through his hair as he stalked toward me to get in my face. "You know what? I was eighteen and fucking stupid, okay? I didn't know any better. I

couldn't see any better way. Are you going to tell me you did? That you would have done this better?"

"I would have at least told you the truth! I knew what I wanted, but it didn't matter," I yelled back at him.

"Yeah? And what did you want?" he demanded. I backpedaled, and my foot caught the edge of the walkway. Axel caught me before I tumbled onto the pavement, and he quickly pulled me flush to his chest. We were both panting hard while we stared daggers at each other.

"What did you want?" he repeated in a harsh whisper, roughened by the need that burned in his eyes and matched the same racing through me. I supposed fighting still worked us both up.

"I wanted you," I confessed on a breathy gasp. "I wanted to be your partner, your support, just as I had over all the years I'd been beside you, cheering you on, helping you keep up in school, loving you."

"Wanted?" he challenged.

"Want," I confessed.

"Fuck, baby, I want you, too." He leaned in to take my mouth, but I leaned back.

"But what if I let you back in, and you just leave me again?" I asked, speaking my truth, voicing the fear that lived deep in my mind, right beside the worry I really wasn't good enough for him. "Nothing's changed. You're still a racer. And on your uncle's team, too. He'll still demand you drop me."

"I won't. I can't. God, help me, Bristol. Even if we have to hide this from everyone, I don't think I'd have the strength to walk away from you again. It's always been you." He brought my hand to rest over his heart. "You've always been right here. I can't just leave again. It almost killed me last time. I *know* it *would* kill me this time."

"Axel, I... I don't..."

"Don't think. Just..." He didn't finish, rather slamming his lips over mine and reigniting the ember that had smoldered

inside me for six years. One I wanted so much to extinguish some nights but never could. In that moment, the fight drained from me, I knew I was lost.

Seventeen



Axel

My mouth on Bristol's was everything. Yeah, I'd brushed my lips over hers a couple times, but *this* time, as if I'd been dead for years, my body came to life. Blood surged through me, deafening me and making me almost light-headed. My hand slid up into her silky hair, the gloss of it a balm against my skin as memories flooded back. Of Bristol. In my arms. Of us. Our bodies moving together.

I traced her jaw with my thumb while I angled her to deepen the kiss. Longing to taste her, I touched my tongue to the seam of her lips, seeking access, hoping against hope passion would eclipse anger and she'd open for me. A groan rolled up from deep in my chest when she responded, and I sank inside. Tasting her. Connecting. It was as close to home as I'd been in years.

"Fuck, Bristol," I muttered against her lips, re-angling my mouth and taking the kiss deeper. Her fingers dug into my shoulders, and she went to her toes and pressed closer to me. My arms tightened around her back, holding her there against me. Peace and rightness filled me while I lost myself in her.

Her hand crept around my neck and slid up into my hair, fistling in the strands while she held me to her as if she thought I'd try to escape. Never. Fucking never. I would never abandon her again, no matter how we had to maneuver our lives to make things work.

As my tongue moved against hers and my hand snaked down toward her ass, Bristol gasped and suddenly yanked back. My arms clenched her to me, so she couldn't escape.

"I can't kiss you," she breathed, her lips glossy and her eyes dilated.

"You can. You just did. You were. We were. And we're going to again."

She shook her head. "I can't. Axel... We..." She sighed in frustration. "I can't."

"Yeah, we can. I know it's hard, but trust me, baby. I'm not giving up on us. Never again. You've gotta know that. I might have to travel, but as far as our hearts, I'm not going anywhere."

Bristol started to argue when I saw a movement from the corner of my eye. Fuck. My attention whipped that direction just in time to see someone ducking behind one of the boardwalk's shops.

"Fuck," I muttered aloud this time. Damn photographers. Turning, I hooked my arm around Bristol's waist, tugging her into my side, and hustled her back toward her car.

"Axel, what—"

"Photographer," I growled. "This is between you and me, not you, me, and the rest of the world. Jesus."

I hated to call them paparazzi. I was a damn race driver, for God's sake. Since when did guys on the circuit warrant stalking by the gossip mongers?

She twisted to look, but I stopped her, pulling her into my chest. "Don't look. Don't let them take more pictures of you."

"This is ridiculous."

"Apparently, this is my life now—our life. I'm sorry, baby. I'm so fucking sorry. I promise, I'll try to keep you out of the limelight as much as I can."

She sighed, the sound more sad than I would have expected in the moment. "Doesn't matter, Ax. You still have the situation

with your uncle. *I'm* not allowed. You're leaving in a few days anyway."

* * *

My eyes kept shifting over to Bristol. I was supposed to be catching up with my crew chief, car chief and team engineer via facetime on my tablet. I had emails I had to deal with, too. A few were urgent, but unlike some drivers, I didn't let my assistant touch my personal messages. She only handled my fan address—and maybe not for much longer. However, I wasn't getting much done. My attention kept wandering away from my work and over to where Bristol tapped away on her laptop, working on the history of Cherish Cove book she'd taken on.

Her words kept repeating back at me. *You're leaving in a few days, anyway.*

I should have said something about that, but I hadn't known what to tell her. I *was* leaving, but I had no plans to *leave her* even if she stayed here while I raced, which was a delicate distinction. I hoped she'd consider coming with me, though.

It was a huge ask. I knew that. Especially since the change wouldn't please my uncle. Fuck him. Really. I wasn't letting him rule my personal life anymore. I'd given him too much leeway already—first because I thought I had no choice. Then because I'd been stuck, not really knowing what to do.

After what seemed like an eternity, I wrapped up with my team and closed facetime. Thumbing through my mail—or pretending to anyway—I watched Bristol, thinking about how to move us forward, in our entire relationship and not just into bed. The former was an imperative. The latter... Well, my body hadn't really calmed down since our kiss earlier. She'd had me on the edge since I got here, with no opportunity to take myself in hand to take care of the aching need, since the proximity and thin walls would probably give her a show she didn't want.

I just didn't know how to move us forward in any way that wouldn't steamroll her. I needed us to be Team Brixel again. I had to believe we might be heading there, even if the

destination was a long way off. I also needed her to trust me, and the remaining bombshell I still had to drop on her would screw that over.

What a pile of shit.

All of my own making.

And the Dumbass Award goes to...

I just needed to tell her, so we could get on the path to fixing things. But right now, I was pretty sure if I did, I wouldn't be sleeping on this couch anymore. I'd be in that roller skate of a car, because I sure as hell wasn't sleeping farther away from her than that while I was here in town. The couch was bad enough.

And fuck me, I didn't want "to fix" things. I *wanted* to stay married to Bristol. To really *be* married to her in all ways, real ways—living together, building our dream home, making babies, traveling, working out problems, doing everything married couples did. Including growing old at her side. I *wanted* her. I wanted her enough to risk my racing future and the retribution of my uncle.

Frustrated, I shoved to my feet. Startled, Bristol jerked her gaze to me. She didn't say anything. In fact, she hadn't said much since our kiss on the boardwalk and the subsequent fleeing back here to escape photog scrutiny.

"I'm going to make us dinner," I explained.

She set her laptop on the coffee table. "I'll help you."

"You don't have to. Just work on your project. Or..." I tipped my head toward the dining table. I definitely wouldn't turn down her company. "You could come in there and tell me about it while I cook?"

I had zero interest in history—even the history of the town where I'd grown up, but listening to Bristol talk about anything would captivate me.

She smirked, proving how well she knew me. "You've always hated history. What did you always say? *The past is the past, and it should stay there, buried under a bunch of dirt.*"

“Maybe, I don’t feel that way as much anymore. I’ve begun to think you can learn a lot from the past, especially when it comes to not repeating mistakes.” I shrugged again. “How about chicken parm?”

“You know how to make chicken parmesan now? Keep it up, and I’m going to become a barnacle clinging to your backside.”

I chuckled, holding out a hand. “One could only hope. C’mon and talk to me.”

After tugging her into the kitchen with me, I took out the wine I’d chilled and poured us each a glass. I handed one to her before I set about pulling out the ingredients for our dinner.

“Where did this all come from?” she asked, sipping her wine. She pulled the glass from her lips, looked at it then lifted it slightly toward me. “And this. It’s different from last night, and I know I didn’t have wine as good as either we’ve had.”

“I went shopping while you were at work yesterday. I’m glad you’re okay with this meal since I already prepped it.”

“When have I ever not wanted chicken parmesan? Which, of course, you know. But geez... Who are you and what happened to the real Axel Pendleton.”

“He learned to cook. A lot of stuff. It’s kind of a hobby now.” I had time on my hands when I wasn’t working—which truly, I worked most of the time due to simulator practices, actual runs on the track, meetings, conditioning and studying stats. Cooking had been a way for me to connect with home and decompress. Plus, I needed to eat, right?

“I’m just having a hard time connecting this Axel to ‘Slim Jim beef sticks are a meal’ Axel,” she said as she settled into one of the kitchen chairs and took another sip of her wine. The sun beaming through the side window haloed her, reminding me she was my angel. God, I needed to reclaim her and prove she was mine.

“So is your manager going to show up and interrupt dinner again?” she asked, smiling behind her glass.

“She’s not *my* manager.”

“Babysitter?”

“She’s just an assistant.” An assistant who’d stepped out of line and thought she could tell me what to do all the time—but I didn’t add that. From Bristol’s snarky tone, it was clear she wasn’t a fan of Marta already. I didn’t need to fan those flames when my assistant would soon have an ex before her title.

“You know what I mean.”

I didn’t, really. Was she jealous of Marta? Ridiculous. Marta didn’t hold a candle to my Bristol.

“She went to Grand Rapids until the fundraiser—hopefully longer, actually. I don’t need her here, and I’m still kinda annoyed she showed up. Anyway, she said it’s too boring in this *podunk* town.”

“She was here for what? Five minutes?” Bristol scoffed, offended by that assessment. Hell, *I* was offended, since I loved this place, too. . But I wouldn’t complain if it kept Marta at bay—and far away.

I raised an eyebrow. “You want to convince her otherwise? Show her all the high points of Cherish Cove?”

“Um... No. But really. If you don’t need her here, why did she come? Doesn’t she take orders from you?”

“You’d think so, right? I’d pin this intrusion squarely on my uncle. He sent her to watch me.”

Bristol didn’t say anything, shaking her head. I got the feeling she was keeping her scathing thoughts about my relative to herself. I knew she didn’t like him. Judging from her earlier questions, she didn’t trust him, either. Hell, she had good reason not to, and now, she knew it.

“Will he be pissed about earlier?” she asked. “I’m sure there will be pictures of us kissing splashed across whatever media is hounding you.”

I shrugged. “He might. I’ll have to talk with him about it and make him understand this isn’t negotiable. He’ll have to deal with.”

“Isn’t that...” She seemed to be searching for words. “Isn’t that playing with fire? Won’t it bring repercussions?”

I shrugged. “Don’t think so, not without him getting painted black by the fallout. I did *not* sign an NDA about our association or his ‘rules’. I’ve proven myself on the track. And my life off the track is my own business, not his.”

“Before you do anything rash, we do need to talk about things,” she said.

I turned from the ingredients I’d placed out on the counter and shut off the heat beneath the pan I’d started.

“Talk about what? Do you really hate me?” I asked, circling back to last night and the one thing that stabbed me deepest and worried me most. There was a fine line between the passion gripping us and the hate she’d professed.

Her lips twisted to the side in consternation. “I should.”

“But do you?” I pressed, unable to keep an edge of concern out of my tone. I might end up on my knees before her if she said yes, yes, she *did* hate me.

Slowly, her head swiveled back and forth, denying her earlier assertion. “No. God help me, I can’t.”

My knees hit the carpet at her feet, anyway. Happiness pulsed through me, and a stirring awakened in my jeans. My hands skimmed up Bristol’s denim-clad thighs then wrapped behind her waist, pulling her toward me. Our mouths met, clashing hungrily. I wanted her. I craved her. I wished more than ever that I could carry her into the room we used to share and make love to her.

I knew I couldn’t. We weren’t ready. Groaning, I just took what I could, accepted her lips on mine and the taste of her on my tongue. Her fingers clenched in my hair again, and I pulled her off the chair to straddle my legs where I knelt. For the first in years, we were chest-to-chest, sex-to-sex, grinding together, touching each other.

A pounding on the door ripped us apart. I groan, my frustration load and clear as I dropped my forehead to hers.

“Fuck.”

“I swear if that’s Marta...” Bristol gasped, equally annoyed.

“If it is, she’s fired—more fired,” I muttered.

“More fired?” she giggled, the mirth rocking her against my hard-on.

“Don’t laugh, baby,” I grunted. Gripping her hips, I held her still. “You’re gonna make me come in my pants.”

“Oh, really?” She wiggled, dragging a strangled groan from me.

“Baby...” I growled. Jerking to my feet, I brought my woman to stand with me. “I don’t think you realize what you do to me.”

She licked her bottom lip before sinking her teeth into it. It didn’t hid her naughty smile at all.

Another knock on the door kept me from doing anything about her devilry. With long angry strides, I stomped over to the apartment’s entrance. What the hell with these evening visitors? It was like Grand Central Station around here when I just wanted to spend time with Bristol.

I wrenched open the door, then immediately struggled to choke back my ire and school my features.

“Mom.”

“I brought over dinner,” she announced, with a huge smile stretching her face while she held up a basket. “I thought you and Bristol might like some of your favorite beef potpie. And I know it’s got a crust, but I still made fresh bread to go with it, too.”

“That’s so nice. We love your potpie,” Bristol said, coming up behind me and saving me from myself when I would have probably said something like *I can cook, Mom*. But of course, my woman knew better. “Geez, Axel, let your mom inside.”

I nodded, shaking off my confusion at finding my mother at the door. Unaffected, she marched toward our little kitchen.

“How are you feeling, Mom?” I asked, trailing on her heels.

“Same as always when you ask,” she chirped. “I feel better than ever. Really. Stop worrying, honey.”

“Okay.” I wouldn’t stop. Ever. But that was a battle for another day.

I just eyed her as she swanned across the apartment on a mission. She did look healthy, but I knew better than to judge her appearance to determine that.

When we got to the kitchen, I saw an empty counter. Bristol had put away everything I’d pulled out of the fridge and done something with the pan. I glanced over at her, and she winked.

How had I ever left her behind? She was truly the best. My partner. The love of my life.

Eighteen



Axel

“Don’t you have other team stuff to do? Something to promote me? Maybe find out who the hell is smearing my name?” I grumbled as I sat in the back of the SUV beside Marta. Despite what I’d told Bristol, my assistant showed up in the morning to take me to the fundraiser. In a chauffeured vehicle no less. As if I couldn’t drive myself.

The whole thing was bullshit. I rolled my eyes and stared out the window at the passing landscape, all the places I’d haunted as a teenager. I missed my hometown.

“All I have to do is you,” she replied, and the way she said *do you* put me even more on edge. Not in my lifetime, she wouldn’t be. “Boss’ orders.”

Her hand landed on my arm, and I jerked away.

“Don’t. *I’m* your boss.”

“You’re the ‘boss’,” she said with snarky air quotes. “Unless Darius intercedes, which he has. When he gives me an order, I follow it—something you’d do well to implement into your own behavior.”

Was she seriously telling me what to do now and commenting on how I acted? Come Monday morning, I was getting a new assistant, no matter what. Period. I wasn’t sure how it would go down since she was my uncle’s golden girl, but her speaking to me as if she were my boss, rather than the other

way around, was out of line. Again. Add to it the subtle way she'd started hitting on me, and I was done. Finished.

I wasn't letting her screw up things with Bristol, and I certainly wasn't letting her drag me through the mud, which was where I was sure this was headed when I told her to fuck the hell off. She being possessive and weird.

I sank into silence, keeping my focus solely out the window.

"You should have worn a different shirt," she said, fussing over me. Again, I jerked my arm away when she fingered my sleeve.

"Don't touch me," I growled loud enough for the driver to hear.

"I'm just saying, you should have worn something with your sponsors' logos on it—at least Marksum, your top sponsor."

"It's a casual appearance. I'm not wearing my fire suit." It was the only thing with all my sponsors' names emblazoned on it. "This is fine."

"I thought you went back inside the apartment to change," she chided.

No...I'd pretended to forget something, so I could go back inside to Bristol without an audience. I'd made Marta wait in the SUV while I said goodbye to my girl and kissed the fuck out of her, so she knew I planned to come home with her later.

"I'll see you later. Promise," I'd told her for good measure. "I'll try to come see you down at the book fair, if I can."

Bristol had pulled me back to her and kissed me again. Minutes later, when I'd returned to the vehicle, there was no way Marta didn't know what I'd been up to.

Now, I silently watched my town pass by. Cherish Cove was just the same as it had always been. Shops that had been there for a century and handed down through generations were a reminder of the past I'd left behind, the familiar I'd enjoyed and now I missed. Though some buildings had changed names and business type, everything looked near identical to what I

remembered, thanks to town ordinances dictating the look they were required to maintain.

My lips pursed, and I rolled my eyes as the driver, who was from the city, turned the wrong way for the school because he was relying on the GPS. Neither he nor Marta wanted to listen to me when I started to tell them the thing would take them to a cornfield. It was a giant laugh in town since according to the electronic mapping it was supposed to be the elementary school. Over the years, there had been plenty of *Children of the Corn* mentions.

“What are you doing?” Marta demanded, when the driver stopped at a dead end, with the winter remnants of corn stalks straight ahead of us.

“Making us late because neither of you would listen to me,” I muttered under my breath, still staring out the window.

“It’s not funny,” she snapped.

“Hey, I tried to tell you, but why would you listen to the guy who lived here most of his life?”

“Axel,” Marta said, her voice an annoying whine. What the hell was up with her? She’d never been like this in the years she’d worked for me. The past few months, though, it was as if she’d been switched with a doppelganger who wanted to get into my bed.

I ignored her and leaned forward. “Go back the way you came,” I told the driver. “Take the first right. Then take the first right again. It’ll take you past the field to the other side where the school actually is.”

“Axel,” Marta said, wrapping her fingers on my bicep to force my attention to her.

My gaze slowly lowered to the grasp then lifted to glare at her. “Take your hand off me,” I growled. “Touch me again, and you’re fired on the spot.”

Wisely, she dropped her hand and crossed her arms over her chest. I ignored her the rest of the way to the school, taking out my phone and scrolling to see if there were any train wrecks to

my image I'd need to deal with today. Thankfully, there were none.

I leapt out of the vehicle as soon as the SUV pulled up to the front doors of Cherish Cove Elementary, not waiting for the wheels to fully stop. I definitely didn't wait for Marta.

"Axel," a woman greeted me, smiling at me when I burst through the glass doors. In her fifties, with salt and pepper curls, she looked vaguely familiar, making me think she'd been one of my teachers at one time. Right. Fourth grade. I'd been the bane of her existence.

"Hey, Mrs. Benson. You're not going to send me to the office, are you?"

"Well, you're late," she joked with a laugh. "Welcome back to Cherish Cove. If you'll come right this way, I'll take you to where you'll be set up. Your car is already here."

"I'll take him," a second woman volunteered, practically popping up in front of us. She was about my age, and she looked familiar, as well. She caught me studying her and bobbed her head from side to side. "I'm Helen Prewitt. We went to school together."

I nodded as if that clicked on a lightbulb. It didn't. The honest truth was, besides Bristol—and probably because of my obsession with her—I'd barely ever registered other females in high school, unless they were in my close friend group. Anyone else was just a face in the crowd.

As we left Mrs. Benson manning the doors, Helen chatted about the town and the events of the day, which would include me doing a lot of standing around.

"Here we are," she announced when we reached the metal doors that were still painted the same weird plum-brown they'd been when I'd attended here. I hadn't needed directions here. This had been my favorite part of the school from kindergarten through fifth grade.

The classic gymnasium brought back a million memories. The old space with aged but polished wood-planked floors took me back to happier, carefree days. I could almost hear the echoing

sound of the red rubber dodge balls bouncing off the walls and smell the scent of the oily wood cleaner.

The room teemed with people at the moment, leaving me no room for memories. To the far side was another set double doors that weren't ever used by students. They led to the side parking lot, and two stock cars had been pulled through them and were now on display for attendees to check out later today. To the left was my display car that was only used for this sort of appearance. To the right was another it took me a mere second to recognize—Troy Pressure's from Pressure Racing. He'd been my idol while growing up, but he'd retired now. I knew he lived nearby, though. He also ran a race team—one I competed against most of the year.

I didn't see Troy, but glancing around, I took in who else was here in what Helen had called *Celebrity Row* when we'd been walking through the hallway. Not too far from me, I saw Hasya Novak from *Czech Mate*, sitting on a stool with his violin rested across his parted knees. In truth, I only knew it was him because of the poster pasted to the wall behind him. He had Bristol's cousin, Sutton, pulled close to his side while he spoke in her ear, his hand resting low on her hip. They shared a secret smile, and I shifted away my gaze.

Near him, Flip and Neva stood beside their motocross bikes. They both wore their riding suits, and it made me wonder if Marta had been right and I should have worn my fire suit. I quickly discarded that idea as I approached my car.

Leaning against it, with my arms and ankles crossed, I perused the other side of the room. I spotted Troy talking to Dray Hunter of the mega band *Hunter*. They hugged before Troy headed over, coming straight toward me and not his own car.

Dropping my arms to my side, I straightened and slipped into my public persona. I held out a hand to him. "Axel Pendleton," I said. "Nice to meet you."

"Great to meet you, too. I've been following your career for years. Impressive. You came close to getting the cup last year."

I grimaced then nodded. “Thanks. Too bad close only counts in horseshoes.”

He winked. “An hand grenades. And something tells me you have some explosions bottled up inside you. I’m looking forward to seeing those as you move forward.”

“Thanks,” I said again, a little speechless and awestruck that this guy, one of my idols, had supportive words for me. Since I’d left my dad’s ARCA team, it was more than I’d gotten from anyone who wasn’t a fan. “Glad I’m not racing against you, though.”

“Nah, you’d give me a run for my money.”

“I’d sure as hell try, but it’d get pretty awkward with me riding around the track, trying to get your autograph.”

Troy dropped his head forward while a deep belly laugh rocked his body. He shook his head and clapped a hand on my shoulder. “Kid, you’re okay.”

I tried to hide it, but I wouldn’t have been more elated if Santa Claus had popped up in front of me and given me my greatest wish. I was working on getting that one, all on my own, though. When our laughter settled, we stood in companionable silence, side by side, in similar feet-planted, arms-crossed stances I’d always called the NASCAR driver pose.

“I didn’t realize Cherish Cove had so many celebrities,” I joked after an extended silence. There were at least ten stations with people. Mrs. Willow Woods, Bristol’s aunt and the woman in charge of this whole thing, made her way around the room to greet all of us. She would have her own place, with her softball team, national league champs. The public wouldn’t be let in for a little bit yet, so all of us in here were able to relax and visit for the moment.

Except... I saw Marta enter. The glare I sent her way warned her to keep her distance. I couldn’t deal with her now. She rolled her eyes and turned to talk to some guy near the door.

“Well... technically, I’m not from here,” Troy said. “And neither is Dray. He’s sort of my nephew-in-law, though, so I roped him into coming. Willow was thrilled. I’m surprised

they got you here, though. I thought you'd be down at Daytona for testing. Your qualifying run and practices are in a couple days, too."

Right. As a team owner and former driver, he knew the exact schedule of events. He'd likely be heading to Daytona right after this, since his team was there.

I shrugged. "My uncle made me come."

"Also surprising. And damn dumb of him. You're going to be exhausted for qualifying. You flying out tomorrow?"

I shook my head. "He has my on the redeye Sunday night."

He glanced around us to ensure everyone was out of earshot. "Pardon my language, but he's a fuckin' dumbass. Daytona's the most important race of the season."

I let out a dark chuckle. "Tell me about it."

I couldn't say I was upset to be here, since it enabled me to rekindle things with Bristol, but from a business perspective—a driver perspective—it *was* stupid. Troy wasn't even on my team, was a flat-out competitor, and seemed to care more about me than my own uncle.

"He thinks I need to do some charity work and smile big for cameras to clean up my image."

"That bullshit?" Troy scoffed. "Everyone knows three-quarters of that crap is manufactured. He'd be better off having you in the sim and making sure you're kicking ass on the track. Once the Daytona green flag drops next Sunday, that's all people will care about." He patted my shoulder. "Chin up. A few more days and it'll all pass."

I gave him a chin lift with a grimaced smile. Thing was, in a few more days, I'd still be under my uncle's thumb, and this time, I'd be fighting him about Bristol because unlike six years ago, there was nothing he could do to make me give her up.

Nineteen



Bristol

“Are you kidding me?” I muttered under my breath when Marta walked through the door to the book fair. I shouldn’t have been surprised. I’d halfway expected her to show up, just to check me out. No way did she not know who I was and what I had with Axel. I was competition at most and an annoyance to the owner of Pendleton Motorsports at least.

“What?” Sadie asked, from where she finished up a donation form beside me. She tucked it into the folder and glanced over at me.

“Axel’s assistant,” I said under my breath. I’d told her *all about* Marta while we’d been setting up today. Sadie glanced over at where Marta pretended to be interested in the displays.

“The ice queen whose dressed like she’s on her way to a 5th Avenue board meeting, rather than a county fundraiser? Hmph,” Sadie scoffed. And that was why we were friends. She got it. “I like the Louboutins, though, even if they’re hella inappropriate.”

I bumped her shoulder. “You’re so bitchy.”

“You love me.”

“I sure do.”

Shaking her head, she went to fill one of the book racks while I took care of the pair of customers who’d approached the table—a young boy and his father. I saw them in the library a lot and knew the second grader, Kory, had lost his mom last

year. He was his father Hansen's world. Hansen would do anything for Kory, including buy him twenty-two must-have books, several of them being young reader books about racing.

I leaned toward Kory. "Make sure you go down to the gym and see the racers there," I told him. "Tell Mr. Axel that Ms. Bristol sent you."

I winked at him then smiled at Hansen when I straightened.

"Thanks," he said, giving me a nod before ushering Kory out as the little boy gushed about needed to go to the gym *right now*.

"You have quite a way with people," an icy voice said while I finished making a note of the sale on my log. "That must work out well for you and help you to manipulate them into the exact position you want."

I glanced around to see who else would hear this conversation. Sadie was refilling a rack with books, but otherwise, we had no customers.

"What do you want, Marta?" I asked, putting an effort into keeping my tone even and not letting her know the agitation that rose inside me at her mere presence. If Axel was fooled by her, I wasn't. The couple times I'd seen her were all it took to detect she was a viper—a viper who wasn't getting what she wanted, which made her conniving and dangerous.

She closed in on me and planted her fists on the table between us while she leaned forward, her expensive, overpowering perfume a cloud around her. "I want *you* to stay away from my man. He's not yours anymore. And you need to back off," she spat. "He's going home with *me* tonight, and we're heading down to Daytona. Together."

My heart sped up, my pulse thudding in my temples as bile burned in my throat. With all my might, I fought to remain placid.

"You're wrong. And you're delusional," I said. "Axel isn't with anyone." Even me, to tell the truth. A few kisses didn't make a relationship, but he'd been so adamant that there had been no one but me. And that there would be an us again.

“Am I? Am I really?” Marta almost cackled. She straightened and started digging in her voluminous tote-sized designer purse. She exuded such a demented, desperate air, I tensed, almost expecting her to whip out a gun or some other weapon. Instead, she yanked out an envelope of photos. She pulled them out of the paper sleeve, almost ripping it, then shoved them at me. “If I’m so delusional, what are these? A figment of my imagination?”

I didn’t want to take them from her, but robotically, my hand lifted, and the next I knew, the glossy snapshots were in my hand. Pictures of Marta and Axel together. On the beach. On skis at some resort. At the track. Beside his car. Hugging. Laughing together. His arm around her waist. I flipped through, seeing one of them on vacation with his family in Bermuda. I recognized the place because I’d seen a similar photo the other night at the Pendleton’s house. Axel had told me he’d treated his family to the trip for Christmas last year, when his mom had been declared cancer-free for five years.

I paused, staring at that photo. Wait a minute...

“See!” Marta crowed in triumph.

“Yeah, actually, I do,” I murmured. The heartsickness I’d felt seeped away, eclipsed by anger. Burning anger that made me want to have a throw-down with someone.

Thankfully, tables and racks blocked me from the first person who’d be my target.

“Sadie,” I called to my friend.

“Yeah, boss?” she called. She’d been teasing and calling me that all day.

When I looked over, I saw she’d inched closer and now stood only a few feet away. Her narrow-eyed, suspicious stare took in all of Marta and the bitchiness she represented. I had no doubt Sadie had heard everything and was outraged on my behalf.

“Can you to watch the room for a little bit while I deal with this?”

“Whatever you need.” Sadie smiled softly, sympathy in her eyes. She didn’t know the whole situation, but she’d have my back. I’d have to fill her in later, so she wasn’t pissed at Axel.

“Thanks.” Spinning on my heel, photos in hand, I marched toward the back door of the room—which Marta couldn’t get to, due to the table configuration we’d set up. Thank God. That ought to slow down the poisonous bitch while I found Axel.

I couldn’t even believe this!

“Hey!” she yelled behind me. I heard a clatter but didn’t slow. I hoped I’d see Oak or Barke, who should be nearby, and send one of them to backup Sadie.

“Sorry,” I heard my friend say. “You can’t go beyond this point.”

Whatever Marta replied was lost to me as soon as the door swung shut. I took off running toward Axel. This ended now.

Marta’s words echoed over and over in my head. *He’s going home with me tonight.*

I slowed to a walk as I approached the gym but couldn’t stop from looking over my shoulder to see if Marta was sprinting after me from the other direction. No sign of her. Darkly, I thought it might be a little funny to see her running in her fancy heels, but that was a thought for another day.

“I need to get these to your mom.” I waved the pile of pics at Oakley, who was manning the door and taking tickets. Hopefully, she was in there. I’d left my purse under the table back at the book fair and couldn’t buy an entry ticket.

My cousin rolled his eyes at me. “You sure you don’t want to just see Axel?”

I shrugged, forcing a smile. That was exactly who I needed to talk to. “There’s an issue. Can you sent Barke over to help Sadie at the book fair while I take care of this part of it?”

He stiffened. “She okay?”

“I think so.” Sadie handled customers every day at her grandma’s diner. I had no doubt she could handily deal with

Marta. Still, having Barke there would ease my mind.

“I’ll radio him. You go on in,” he said, jerking his head toward the entry. “Axel is all way at the back by the outside doors.”

“Thanks. When you see his assistant, if you see her, stop her as long as you can, okay? She’s going to be mad as hell.”

“Hmm... Fun challenge.” Oak winked, rubbing his hands together and no doubt plotting a character’s demise—a character who might look like Marta. Family... They knew you better than yourself sometimes, could be a pain in the ass, but they always had your back. My relatives were the best.

He opened the door, and I dashed into the brightly lit gymnasium. A chattering wall of noise immediately enveloped me. It echoed around the cavernous space and bounced off the metal, open-raftered roof that we used to try to throw basketballs through back in the day. I had no time for nostalgia. I had a mission. Determined to end this, once and for all, I made a beeline for Axel where a long line of people waited to talk to him and get an autograph.

This would cause a stir with people from town—though there were a lot of out-of-towners here. With rides, games and all the celebrities, people came to our little fundraiser from all around every year. And with the fame, came a bunch of photographers and reporters, too.

As the person in front of Axel walked away with a huge smile, he glanced up and his eyes immediately locked on me, sending an errant sensation of fuzzy warmth prickling through me. His face brightened from the fake smile he’d been giving everyone, and he beamed at me. That happy expression faded when he saw the look on my face. As his brows furrowed, he said something to the person in front of him, gave a nod then patted the kid’s shoulder as he side-stepped the child then half-sprinted toward me.

“What’s wrong?” he demanded.

I raised an eyebrow at him. “Marta just confronted me to give me a little info and tell me to stay away from her man. She

gave me these.” I shoved the photos into his hand. He didn’t look at them immediately, staring aghast at me.

“She said what? Bristol, I—”

“Look at them.” I lifted an eyebrow and nodded toward the pictures. Only then did his gaze drop.

Righteous fury grew inside me while he flipped from one to the next to the next. His face reddened, his breathing speeding up. His hands shook as he stared at the evidence in his hands. Snapshots of him with Marta, looking all the happy couple.

“*That’s* what’s wrong,” I said through gritted teeth.

Twenty



Axel

“These aren’t real,” I growled, anger surging through me hotter than any I’d ever experienced. I stared at the images in disbelief. I recognized every single picture but didn’t.

“I know.” Bristol took them from my nerveless fingers, flipped through the stack then handed them back. Her fury was evident in her eyes, but otherwise, she seemed collected. Calm. Not at all like a woman who’d just been confronted by evidence of me cheating. Clearly, she didn’t believe these for some reason. Thank fuck. Oh, she was outraged. Knowing her, reading it on her, had frozen me a few minutes ago while I’d signed autographs.

“These aren’t me,” I insisted. “I mean they are, but...”

Fuck. How could I explain? It seemed as if I’d been making this claim over and over for the past few days—the past few months if you counted all the times I’d said it to my uncle and fucking Marta. At some point, that claim would cease to carry any weight.

Bristol tapped the top pic while I looked at her, helpless to explain this. “They look genuine, and I *would* believe them, but lucky for you, I’ve seen this one. The original one, complete with the parasailer in the background and no Marta, is on your mom and dad’s wall. Your mom and I even talked about it the other night when she told me about the trip.”

“And you got these from Marta?” I asked.

Bristol nodded. “Guess you know who faked the pictures—and probably the video. The snake was in your own camp, Ax.”

“I don’t think she’d know how to do this.” I shook my head, but I was already resolved to end this charade. Damn it! All those times we’d talked about the media smear. All the times she said she’d take care of it... She’d taken care of it, alright! “Doesn’t matter if she has the skill to do this or not. She must have hired someone. Just having these and trying to pass them off as real proves she’s involved. She’s gone.”

I shook my head, fighting an intense urge to storm out of here and deal with this matter, but I couldn’t. I had to maintain a demeanor of professional calm and finish the task at hand.

“Can you stay with me while I finish signing?”

I didn’t want Bristol far from me. Knowing Marta was behind this and that she was somewhere in this building, I...just worried. I didn’t think Marta was dangerous, that she’d hurt Bristol, but then again, I never would have believed she’d undermine me like this. I clearly didn’t know her and what she was capable of.

“Yeah,” Bristol answered, taking the hand I offered her.

“Sadie’s covering things, and I had Oak send Barke over to help her. She’s been trying to make me come over here all morning.”

I kissed Bristol’s temple, squeezing her fingers, then guided her back to the head of the line where the young boy waited for me. I shoved the pictures from Marta into my back pocket, just the feeling of them burning into me. Now, I knew how the photog had known where to find me yesterday. I’d deal with this the second I was free.

“Hi, Kory,” Bristol greeted the boy as I clicked open my pen to sign the book he thrust out at me. Leaning to the table behind me, she picked up a sharpie and the pile of glossies my team had provided, so I could sign one of those for the child, too.

“Hi, Ms. Bristol,” he gushed. “Is Mr. Axel your boyfriend? I saw him kiss you.”

“I...” she started.

“She is,” I answered for her, leaning over and brushing my lips to her temple again. “Don’t deny it; you are,” I whispered to her. “My one and *only*.”

And Marta was trying to fuck with that?

Not on my watch.

I’d put up with enough over the past six years. As I answered Kory’s questions about driving, I wondered if my uncle had any clue about her underhanded actions. Was he in on it? For what purpose? Dragging my further under his thumb? The very idea twisted up my guts and made me a ill.

Beside me, Bristol smiled and answered the questions posed to her. It struck me she’d be the perfect companion to be at my side on the circuit, the consummate, poised NASCAR wife. Fuck what my uncle thought. Just as we’d always planned, Bristol belonged beside me while I waited through the opening ceremonies of each race, when I celebrated on victory lane, as I made appearances at sponsor functions and charity events, and everything in between.

Watching her calmed my agitation yet, at the same time, turned me on, rousing parts of me I had to keep under control with so many kids and cameras around. As soon as I could, I planned to drag her out of here, find the first private space, and show her just what she did to me in her cute little blouse and pleated skirt with flying books all over it. I was pretty sure it was a Harry Potter thing, but I wasn’t sure. All I knew was, I desperately wanted to get my hands under it, skim my palms up her smooth thighs and rediscover the treasure I’d craved for six years.

As the meet-and-greet wore down, my hand trailed down her back while my gaze scanned the near-empty gymnasium. I hadn’t seen Marta since I’d arrived, and thankfully, she hadn’t shown her face since Bristol had stormed in here. My guess

was she knew the gig was up, and I wouldn't see her anytime soon. *Never* would be just fine.

Now, as the fundraiser's volunteers cleared the gymnasium, someone rolled in a couple carts of folding chairs from a side room to set up for the next event in here—a Q&A panel after the break.

I tugged Bristol closer to my side, my fingers splaying on her hip while I brushed my lips over her ear. "I need you alone."

She nodded, taking a shaky breath. "Okay."

We might be at an elementary school, but some intimate alone time was long overdue. I needed to kiss her, touch her, and make her bite her lip while she struggled to stay quiet so we weren't caught.

The only splash of cold water over that was that I needed to make a phone call and deal with my soon-to-be *ex* assistant and her bullshit.

"See you at the panel in an hour?" Troy asked, coming up beside me before I could say anything more.

"I'll be there," I agreed.

He nodded then glanced over at Bristol.

"Troy Pressure," he said, reaching to shake her hand.

"Bristol Donovan." She returned the shake. The caveman part of me didn't like her touching any guy's hand, but I knew I was feeling unreasonable. Over the top possessive. I could have lost her today. The pics in my back pocket could have sent her running as far from me as she could get. Marta could have ruined everything.

"It's nice to meet you, Troy. Axel's been a big fan since we were in elementary school," she continued, sliding her arm around my waist. She'd always been so tuned in to me that she probably felt I was on edge from my obsession and anger. Maybe, she was, too. When she'd stormed into the gym earlier, her fury had been unmistakable. She'd tried to keep an outward calm, but one look at the press of her lips and the

tremors in her shoulders, and I'd known something was wrong.

We'd been way too close to the point of disaster. And this time, it wasn't my fault.

"That long," Troy groaned. "Now, I feel old. And you're..."

"She's my girlfriend," I said. I squeezed her hip. "Hopefully, soon-to-be more."

Well, hopefully, she'd *know* she was more, anyway. My wife. My forever. And I prayed she'd stay that way when I explained the validity of our so-called fake wedding to her. If shit could just stop happening, so I'd have some good level ground with her, that would be great. The longer I didn't tell her, the deeper a hole I dug. My family would have my head—her family, too—and she'd have my balls. I deserved nothing less.

"Nice. And together for a while, too," Troy commented. "It's always good to see a driver with stable support at his side. I'm glad you have that."

With another nod, he headed off toward Dray, whose security appeared on the verge of rushing him out of the building. Shaking them, Dray met Troy halfway across the gym.

God, Troy was the polar opposite of my uncle. He considered a rock-solid relationship as a plus, not a minus. Why couldn't he have been the one to offer me the ride six years ago?

I shook my head.

What was done was done, and I just had to deal with it from where I stood now.

"I need to make a phone call—and be with you," I told Bristol. "Someplace private."

"As cliché as it might sound, there's a storage closet near the book fair room."

"Perfect."

Twenty-One



Axel

Taking Bristol's hand, I lifted it up and pressed my lips to the back, inhaling the floral scent she'd sprayed on the inside of her wrist this morning.

"Show me the way, baby," I murmured against her skin. Rotating her arm slightly, I sucked lightly on the tender skin just above her palm.

A tremor worked through her, and when she met my eyes, she clearly knew my plans for after the phone call. She bit down on her lip, before I reached up and pulled it free with my thumb. My mouth brushed over hers, not caring that there might be people still snapping pics around us and immortalizing our interlude.

"Yes," I said, answering her unasked question. "I'm gonna make you moan."

"Axel..." she whispered, her breath wobbling while our foreheads pressed together, our eyes closed. Together. United. Calm filled me, verifying what I'd suspected. She drove away my demons and eased my anger, and she would be the balm over the rough parts of my life.

"Show me the way, baby."

"Okay."

Keeping an eye out for Marta, photographers or any of our friends, I guided Bristol from the gym then let her lead me to the closet. The hallway was blessedly deserted, most everyone

apparently heading to the food booths and the games setup in the cafeteria. As we snuck down the corridor, I felt like a high school kid on the lookout for a make-out spot.

This wasn't too far off that, I supposed.

A dim, flickering light blinked on as we stepped inside the space and shut the door behind us. Boxes filled the shelves of the small area, along with the unmistakable smell of old texts books, crayons and poster paints.

"Who do you have to call?" she asked, her voice low. I supposed we *didn't* want to get caught in here.

"My uncle. In a minute. First..." I pulled her into my arms. "When I came back to Cherish Cove, I didn't see a school closet as the setting for this, but... I love you, Brisk. I can't wait a second more to say that. I love you so much. Thank you for not freaking out over what Marta said. Thank you for coming to me with the pictures, instead."

She made a face. "I almost didn't. It crushed me, Ax. They look so...real. And... I almost believed them for a second. I'm sorry."

"No. No, baby." I leaned my forehead to hers again, gathering her close. After a moment, I pulled her into me chest and pressed my lips into her hair while we absorbed each other and let the quiet intimacy surround us, comfort us. "I would have tracked you down," I whispered. "I would have helped you to believe in me. I know I've said it before, but you have to know there is *only* you for me. There has only ever been you."

"I know. Even when it's difficult, you've never lied to me. When you tell me something, I believe you. Sometimes...it's just harder than other times."

"I know." I stroked her hair, wanting to stay wrapped together like this for as long as we could, yet knowing pressing matters waited. Responsibilities. But my greatest responsibility was to my girl and not failing her again. "The past six years broke something in us. It's my fault. We're going to fix it, though. I'll work hard to fix it. I promise you."

“Some things can’t be fixed,” she murmured. “We can’t go back.”

“Don’t say that. We’re going to be okay. I will fix everything I can—”

Bristol pressed her palm over my lips. “I love you, Axel. I didn’t want to. I’ve been afraid to, but I do. I love—”

I pulled her fingers away and cut off her words, my lips sealing over hers, kissing her wildly. I crushed her tight to me before sliding one hand down and doing what I’d been thinking of since the moment I’d seen her in this little flirty skirt.

She jerked, gasping into my mouth then moaning when I cupped her ass. Turning, I pressed her against the door, lifting her and holding her body there with mine, the ridge in my pants grinding into her softness while her skirt hiked up her thighs. Bristol wrapped her legs around me and pulled me even closer. Her hips rocked into mine, bringing herself to pleasure on my trapped dick. Her heat seeped through my pants, making my length rock-hard while I thrust against her.

My mouth ripped from hers, traveling across her jaw with hot, wet kisses until I could breathe into her ear.

“You’re so fucking hot, Brisk. Nothing gets me revving like you do.” Hell, I called her Brisk because she made my blood race. “Being with you is better than rocketing down any speedway. If we weren’t in this closet, I’d rip off these tiny panties and bury myself as deep as inside you as I can get.” My hand squeezed her ass before slipping inside the elastic at her leg so we were skin-to-skin, my palm to her round little cheek, the smooth flesh tempting me to explore.

“Yes,” she hissed, her head knocking back against the door.

Suddenly, I didn’t give a fuck if someone was outside this closet, if they heard me making Bristol scream. My fingers traced the seam of her ass before encountering the slippery folds of her pussy.

“Looks like you’re all turned on, baby. Is all this wetness for me?” My fingers teased along her opening, pushing apart the

lips of her labia before bumping up against her hot little clit. I squeezed it between two fingers then flexed them, rolling the nub and never letting go.

“Fuck. Axel. Fuck,” she whisper-screamed into my neck.

“Ah... Axel!”

“Come for me, baby girl. Come all over my hand and give me what I want. Give it to your man. Your only man.” I nipped her earlobe. “I am *only* yours. And this is only mine.”

I cupped her mound, squeezing, before pushing a finger inside her and dragging it along her slippery slit.

She whimpered, and I knew she was thinking of the games we’d played and the things we’d explored together in our wide-eyed youth—in particular, how hot she’d always gotten when I dominated her and made her beg.

“Are you going to give me what I want like a good girl?” I rasped against her ear before raking my teeth over her lobe again and tugging her clit with my fingers again.

A strangled cry squeaked from her throat. Her hips bucked into me, making me groan. Releasing her nub, I slipped back and drove the two fingers into her clenching passage this time, almost coming from the feel of those drenched walls spasming around my digits and reminding me of pleasure I’d missed out on for so long. My cock throbbed, wanting in on the action, but fucking hell... When I buried myself inside Bristol, it wouldn’t be a quick dicking in a fucking elementary school closet.

I twisted my hand, and finger-fucked into her while pulsing my thumb atop her clit. She whined, her quiet sobs of tormented pleasure wafting over my senses.

“Who do you belong to?” I demanded in her ear. “Whose body is this?”

She shook, her walls squeezing my fingers. “Oh, God...”

“Try again,” I growled. “Whose pussy is this?”

“Yours. Fuck...Axel.”

“Soon. Tonight, I’m going to spread you wide and make you forget your name...my name...anything but the feel of me filling you up. You’ll be hoarse by morning, and the neighbors will hate me.”

“I need you,” she gasped.

“You’re mine.” I drove my fingers harder, my knuckles knocking against her. The desperation of years apart then almost losing her again stripped away my gentleness. I had a claim to make, and it wouldn’t wait a single second. “This is mine. Mine. You’re never getting away from me. Come for me, baby girl. Give me all your sweetness. Cover me with it.”

“Oh...*fuck*...”

“Now,” I rasped, demanding. My thumb pressed hard on her clit, my fingers jackrabbit-fast in and out of her. She gasped, and I sealed my mouth over hers, capturing her scream as she came apart for me.

Her legs tightened on my waist, her thighs squeezing as her back bowed into her pleasure, thrusting her breasts into me. I couldn’t wait to strip her bare and take those ripe nipples into my mouth again. Tonight. Tonight, I’d be in *our* bed and not on that fucking couch. I’d be buried deep in my Bristol all night long.

My fingers kept driving, imitating what I’d do to her later, how I’d find my own release in her gorgeous body. How I’d fill her up... And damn me as a bastard, but I had no intention of using a condom to block my cum from bathing her womb. I wanted Bristol pregnant with my baby almost as much as I wanted her screaming on my cock...almost. Bred and bound to me. Yeah...I was a bastard. I didn’t care.

She sagged into me, minutes later, burying her face in my neck.

“We’re so bad,” she muttered, her warm panting bathing my skin.

“We’re so right, and you are so mine,” I countered. “Feeling you come apart against me, around me, is the best thing in the world. The fucking best. I swear it.”

“You were supposed to be making a phone call,” she muttered, though I heard the happiness lightening her admonishment. The pleasure in her voice grounded me, reminding me we’d gotten over another hurdle.

“I had a more important message to deliver.”

“Cheesy.” Sighing, she turned her head to rest it against my shoulder. Her arms tightened, and she made no effort to wiggle free of me.

“Don’t care how corny it sounds. I love you, Brisk. You’re always more important. Never again will I make you feel less than or make you think you’re not my number one. You are first for me. More than my career or anything else.”

God help me to never have to make the choice again, but Bristol was more important to me than even my family. She was part of me and having her again showed me I’d been missing my soul all this time.

“I love you, too, Ax.”

I gave her a squeeze before helping her back to her feet.

“Brixel forever.”

“Oh God, don’t start that,” she giggled.

I just laughed. I had so much shit to deal with, but Bristol made everything seem...not so bad. And yes, as *cheesy* or *corny* as it sounded, she just made everything brighter, and with her, I knew I could face anything.

Twenty-Two



Bristol

I was still in a muddle when Axel put me on my feet to call his uncle. Thinking he might need space, I tried to step back, but he didn't let me. He pulled me right back against him while I heard the line ringing as he tried to connect with Darius.

“Stay here,” he murmured—an order despite the soft tone. His lips brushed over the top of my head, softening the demand. I sighed, leaning my ear against his chest and listening to his heavy heartbeat. The sound had lulled me to sleep so many times. I'd missed it almost as much as I'd missed the whole man.

I couldn't sleep after he'd left me, because for so long, I'd slept with my head on his chest. It had been so bad at one point after he'd gone, that I'd tried one of those heartbeat stuffed animals wrapped in one of Axel's shirts.

But when I'd cuddled with it, I cried rather than slept. It could have been hormones. I hadn't known I was pregnant. For a long while after he'd left, I'd been a wreck. I'd been stuck in a gloomy never-ending tunnel with no light in the distance. It was one of the reasons I'd railed against letting him back into my life this week.

As long as that had lasted.

I couldn't resist the pull between us. I couldn't help it; I loved him. Every tiny bit of me, even the part that said I should hate him, loved him. I loved him. And I believed him when he said he loved me, too.

Axel swore when Darius didn't answer his call. Of course, he didn't. Were either of us surprised? I had zero love lost for the man.

"It's Marta," Axel said when the voicemail answered. "She's the one who's been setting me up. I want her fired. I need security to lock her out of anything to do with me. I have proof she's behind smearing me. She's the one who's been setting me up. Call me. I need this done. I won't work with her anymore."

Disconnecting, he shoved the phone into his pocket and dropped his head back to stare at the ceiling. My heart broke for him. The more I saw of his crappy situation, the more I knew he hadn't been living in a world of sunshine and roses while we'd been apart.

Even now, he was in another difficult spot, and I suspected his hands were tied. He didn't actually have proof she'd orchestrated the bad press and fake media. Even the photos weren't much more than circumstantial, even though we both knew it had to be Marta.

"What are you going to do?" I asked. I hated that reality was intruding on the intimacy we shared here in this little closet, my arms around his waist, head on his chest, and his arms draped around my shoulders.

He pressed a kiss into my hair. It was so familiar and yet a gesture I'd missed so much. I closed my eyes, breathing him in and holding on to the quiet moment.

It couldn't last, not with the drama in his life. Not with him needing to join the panel on stage soon.

"I have to trust my uncle to deal with her."

"Do you think he will?"

Axel was silent for a long moment. "I don't know. If I see her, though, I'll tell her personally that she's out. Tonight, I'm changing all my accesses and passwords. I'll call my driver to make sure he doesn't let her into my motorhome. That'll lock her out of the most important parts. I never let her touch my financials, and never let her use any of my cards to make

purchases. My lawyer's team keeps a close watch on my accounts, anyway. She has a company credit card she uses to book my travel and lodgings when I don't stay in my rig, but that's through the team, so it's Darius' problem, not mine."

I supposed that was better than I'd thought. "And your apartment or house?"

"Baby," he chuckled. "My only home is with you."

Okay...that surprised me. One other thing niggled at me, the one item that could cause the most problems.

"Do you think she'll try to blackmail you? If she could do this, with these pictures, she could do worse."

I felt his chest move beneath my cheek as he sighed, and when I glanced up, I saw him shaking his head. His fingers threaded through my hair and massaged my scalp. He dropped a quick kiss on my lips.

"She can try."

Both lost in thoughts, we didn't say anything else. He just held me, rocking me, while I kept my arms wrapped around him and ran my hands slowly up and down his back. I didn't know how long we stood there, secure in each other's embrace, locked in the moment.

This was almost a dance, the one we should have had at the bar, but the only music was our heartbeats and the rasps of our breathing.

"I've missed you so fucking much," he said into my hair, his deep inhaled and exhaled rustling the strands. "Don't ever leave me," he begged.

"You left me," I whispered, my broken heart rising up to remind me of the crushed mess I'd been. That was in the past. Over. Still, I had a difficult time letting it go.

"Biggest fucking mistake of my life. I could have found a way. I *should have* found a way. There had to be some path where I could help my mom and still have the woman I love."

I shook my head. "Could haves and should haves won't take away the past six years and all the pain and frustration. We

can't go back—”

“I want you now,” he interrupted. “I wanted you then, but I want you now with everything in me. My vision is way clearer now than when I was stupid and eighteen with no life experience. I want everything with you, Bristol. Every moment we can have together. Tell me we can make it work.”

I leaned back from his chest, so I could look up at him.

“You're leaving in two day.”

That knowledge had taunted me and overshadowed every overture he'd made. I always came back to that. Axel was going back on the road in a couple days. His time in Cherish Cove had an expiration date.

He jerked a nod. “And I will spend every moment I can right back here with you. Or I'll fly you out to me every weekend. Or...fuck, I don't know. There's got to be a way to make it work. I won't give you up. I refuse.”

“For real?”

He cupped my cheek, his thumb stroking over my lips while he held my gaze. “Yeah, for real. Hell, you can even come with me if you want. I know you have the library and all—”

“Okay,” I agreed. “I... Okay. We'll work it out.”

I wouldn't deny his offer was everything I wanted. To be with him, to have his heart.

“We'll talk every day we can't be together. Hell, I've seen a couple guys set up their laptops on facetime so they can have a meal together with their girl and talk over dinner like a regular couple. I laughed, but to tell the truth, I was fucking jealous of them.”

“I'll be eating ramen while you're eating chicken parm.”

“I still owe you that meal tonight since my mom brought over the pot pie yesterday. Tomorrow night, we have the dance. You'll come with me?”

“Well, I guess I don't have another date.”

“You’d better not,” he growled, reigniting a tingle in my core. As if I’d go with anyone but him, anyway.

I leaned in to him, offering my lips. “I’m only yours. You know that.”

He caught my chin and brought his mouth to mine again. “And I’m yours.”

As we sank into another kiss, that knowledge was all that mattered. Not racing. Not the fundraiser. Not Marta, his uncle or the smear campaign. Not the time we’d been apart. Just us. Together now. And the logistics could be worked out later.

Twenty-Three



Bristol

Axel was late to his panel, but he didn't care. Trying not to be obvious, I slipped into one of the seats near the back while he took his place next to Troy Pressure. A small smile curled my lips as I watched my man get down to business, his hair slightly mussed from my fingers but otherwise completely focused on the questions people asked.

My smile widened when he leaned forward on his forearms and smiled affably at the teenager who asked him if he thought he'd win the cup that year.

"I'd sure like to." He glanced over at Troy. "I'm sure Troy and his team will have something to say about that, but I'm going to give it my all. Coming in second kinda *sucks*, you know?"

The crowd tittered then moved on to a question for Flip and Neva, related to motocross.

Movement beside me drew my attention from the stage. I glanced over to see Oak and his wife, Luna, sliding into the row beside me. My cousin leaned toward me.

"The person in question took off in her SUV about ten minutes after you asked me to delay her bothering Axel," he said.

At his news, I sagged back into my chair, relieved. Until then, I hadn't realized how tense I was about another possible confrontation.

"Thanks," I said quietly, blowing out a breath. I supposed I'd be driving Axel home—not that there had been much question.

Except for the part where we discussed if he'd drive or if I would. I already knew how that would go. He was such a control freak about being behind the wheel. He wouldn't say a word, wouldn't criticize me, but quiet tension would roll like waves from that side of the car. I'd rather just hand him the keys.

"Anytime, Bristol," my cousin said, before he leaned back in his seat and pulled Luna close, one arm around her shoulders and his hand on their child. A sliver of pain twisted through me and burned my eyes. Quickly, I looked away before getting lost in could-have-beens. As I'd said to Axel earlier, should haves and could haves would get us nowhere. There was no place for them. I wouldn't ever forget, but I couldn't get lost in memories of that horrible day.

Crossing my legs and smoothing down my skirt, I tapped my fingers on my thigh. I focused on the sensation of the drumming near my knee, the cool air raising goosebumps on my arms, the familiar lemon oil scent in the gym, and taking in the people around me. The mind tool worked well for me, and it was easier to stay in the moment than it used to be.

When the press of sadness lessened, I was able to refocused on the panel. A smile curled my lips at how effortlessly Axel handled questions, even those I thought would be difficult to answer. His public persona and self-confidence had grown in the past six years, letting him get comfortable in his skin and public speaking. Pride unfurled and spread through my chest. I loved seeing the man he'd become.

The crowd was laughing at Axel's answer to a question about what he wore beneath his fire suit when my phone, in my purse on the floor, vibrated against my foot. I couldn't fathom who it might be. Most everyone I knew was here at the elementary school this afternoon. Worried it might be my parents, I pulled out my cell. Immediately, my brow furrowed at seeing Axel's dad's name on the screen.

"Hang on a second," I whispered when I answered.

Sliding out of the row where I sat, I hurried out of the gymnasium.

“Hey, Benz, what’s up?” I asked once I was in the deserted hallway. Muffled sounds of talking and laughter came from inside the gym, but they wouldn’t hear me. Still, I walked further down the corridor to make sure I didn’t disturb anyone, my ballet flats tapping on the speckled tiles.

“Do you know where Ax is? I can’t reach him.” He sounded breathless and upset, and my senses surged to high alert.

“Yeah, he’s here at the fundraiser. He’s on the panel speaking, right now. Is everything okay?” I was actually surprised Axel’s family wasn’t here, now that I thought about it.

“No. Molly was in an accident. Hit and run on the highway. We’re at the hospital.”

No... My eyes widened, and my gaze swung toward the plum-brown gymnasium doors, staring at them and knowing Axel had no idea his world was about to be shaken again.

“Oh, God...” I breathed. *Please let her be okay. Oh, God, please.*

“We don’t know anything yet—” His voice broke. “The ambulance brought her here. They called me. But I don’t know... I... I don’t know...”

My heart broke at his panic and fear.

“I’ll get Axel there. As soon as he gets off the stage, we’ll be on our way to you. Okay?”

I heard him pull in a breath. “Okay. Okay. Thank you, Bristol.”

“Do you need me to call anyone?” I asked quickly before he hung up.

“No. The other boys are here already.”

“Okay. Okay, we’ll be there soon then.” We hung up, and unable to calm enough to go back inside, I paced outside the doors, listening to the interplay inside and hating that I’d have to upset Axel. Taking deep breaths, I crossed my arms around my middle, staring at the door. I had to be calm. I had to be the rock he needed.

He'd been in a great mood, and I'd have to crush it.

To my surprise, that wasn't what happened. The panelists came out of the gym first. Even as he exited, Axel looked back and forth, clearly searching for someone, his eyes wild. When his gaze locked on me, he beelined toward me as inexorably as if drawn by a tractor beam. He'd been looking for me, worried about *me*.

"Why did you leave?" he asked. His hands clamped around my upper arms as he stared down at me, his face tight with worry. "What happened?"

"How did you know I left?"

"I saw you get up. I saw the phone in your hand. Then you didn't come back," he clipped out. "What is it? Marta—"

"No. Not her. Like you saw, I got a phone call. There was an accident. We have to go to the hospital. Your mom—"

Axel was already dragging me toward the front doors, and I ran to keep up while digging my keys out of my purse.

"What happened?" he demanded. Tension strung through him while we practically jogged from the building and out into the cold air, without even grabbing our jackets. I didn't care about outerwear. I'd text Sadie or Oak or Barke to grab them. I'd have to tell them what happened, anyway.

"I don't know other than there was an accident on the highway, and your dad asked me to bring you."

"My mom?"

"He just said they called him, and they haven't told him anything yet."

"Fuck, that's not good," he muttered.

My lime green car stood out like a beacon in the lot, and Axel sprinted toward it, with me on his heels. For the first time I could ever remember, he went to the passenger side, a sure sign he was shaken up.

I wasted no time climbing behind the wheel then driving us the ten minutes to the Cherish Cove hospital. Before we had

gotten halfway there, Axel was on his phone with his brother, Van, after being unable to reach his father.

“Yeah. We’re pulling into the lot,” he told Van after his brother had rehashed everything he knew—twice—the two of them swearing more than normal, frustration overwhelming them both. “We’ll meet you in the lobby.”

“They had Dad go back to be with Mom,” he told me after hanging up. Which meant she was alive. Hopefully conscious.

“That’s a good sign, though, right?” I hoped so. Molly had always been like a mom to me, too. She’d been through so much—this whole family had. My hands tightened on the steering wheel. She had to be okay. The idea of anything horrible happening to her after everything she’d endured was unfair and terrifying.

Axel shoved a hand through his hair, looking out the side window. He huffed a shaky sigh. “We don’t know anything yet—Van and Aston don’t know anything yet. But Aston’s trying to get some info. Someone hit her on the highway, changed lanes right into her and knocked into her car hard enough she skidded across the shoulder and down into the median. Her car rolled. Asshole didn’t even stop.”

“Oh my God,” I whispered. “Were there witnesses?”

“Don’t know. I can’t believe this,” Axel muttered beside me. He caught my fingers in his hard grip after I put the car in park. “Stay with me.”

“I wouldn’t be anywhere else,” I promised, reaching over to cup his face. I pressed a quick kiss to his cheek. “I’ll be right here the whole time.”

He jerked a nod before we both climbed out of the vehicle. His hand clamped around mine again as soon as we met at the back of the trunk. I’d just become his lifeline. I tightened my own grip and glanced over at him while we hustled across the pavement. If he needed a touchstone, I’d be it. I’d be anything he needed.

If the past years had taught me anything, it was how fleeting things could be, how imperative it was to cherish what you’d

been given. I hadn't done that well for the past six years, not with Axel's family anyway.

But we were back in each other's lives now. I had Axel. I had his family. They had me.

"I love you," I told him for lack of better words, not wanting to use trite platitudes. Pausing on the sidewalk, he pulled me into his arms. He breathed me in, shaking, unspeaking.

Tears burned in my eyes, my breath shuddering. Life had given me another chance at Axel's side. I knew he'd give anything for me, do anything for me. I'd do the same for him. We'd been a team before, and we were a team now. Stronger together. We needed each other.

"Let's go inside," I said, keeping my tone as soothing as I could. "You okay to do this?"

"Yeah," he breathed, lost in his head as I was so often. I knew the signs. "I've been gone for so long. I haven't been here."

I cupped his cheek again, making him look at me just as he often did to me. "You're here now."

A sharp nod marked the change in him, and I watched him morph from worried son to the strong man I knew he was. I knew he still worried—that hadn't left his eyes and his hand still clamped tight on mine. Still, it was as if he'd put on his game face, becoming the unflappable racer who could drive at breakneck speeds, inches from other cars, without flinching.

"Let's go find our family," he said.

Our family. I had a mom and dad and a million aunts, uncles and cousins, but yeah... Axel was my family, and I was his. And Benz, Molly, Van and Aston were just as much mine as they were his, too. Just as I'd support him, I'd be whatever the Pendletons needed right now, too—a support, a gofer to grab food and coffee, a stalwart presence. I wasn't going anywhere.

Van met us at the automatic front doors, not saying a word as he jerked his head then turned to lead us to the family waiting room in the trauma center. We followed in silence. If he'd learned anything in the moments since he and Axel had

disconnected, he would have said something. There were no answers to demand from him.

In the waiting room, Aston sat beside Carrington, holding his hand. Van immediately started pacing. Standing only feet inside the doors, Axel pulled me into his arms, holding me hugged to his chest while he surveyed the room. I wasn't sure he actually took in anything.

I couldn't say how much time passed before we heard a door slide open to the side of the room. All heads turned to Benz when he came out, looking haggard.

"She's heading into surgery," he said to the room in general, but his family were the only ones there. "Her leg's broke. So is the arm on the same side, and that shoulder was dislocated. They're doing scans to make sure everything else is—"

His voice broke, and I pulled away from Axel to go to his father. I put my arm around him and led him to a chair.

"We're here for you," I assured him. "All of us are here."

He nodded, squeezing my forearm. "They're making sure everything is okay...inside." His face buried in his hand. "Fuck," he muttered under his breath. "I have to call the insurance company. Make sure they'll pay...for things."

That was random, but I knew his mind probably grappled with anything to keep him balanced.

Axel came over and crouched beside us. "It'll be okay, Dad."

Benz cupped the back of Axel's head. "You don't know how hard it's been."

"I know. But Mom's better."

Benz shook his head. "Yeah, thank God. We've got loans up to our eyeballs. For the house and the business. All the medical bills..." He scrubbed a hand over his face. "Doesn't matter. As long as your mom's okay. She has to be okay."

"What? What bills?" Axel demanded.

Momentarily pulled from his worry, Benz looked at him as if he were crazy. "For her treatments and surgeries, son.

Insurance didn't cover a lot of it.”

Axel shocked gasp rang through the room and stabbed through me, his sharp anguish was so palpable as we realized Darius' treachery at the same time. He fell back on his butt, with a cry. “No!” His fist hit the carpet. “No! That lying bastard!”

Benz shook his head. “What—”

Axel didn't say anything, his hand clenched in his hair, his head slowly twisting back and forth while he breathed hard. I thought he might combust right then and there. Horror filled me, my anger almost as deep as his.

My eyes wide, I looked back to Benz. “Darius... Darius made him choose between me and paying Molly's bills,” I breathed, the words a harsh rasp as they forced past the knot in my throat. “Axel left us all behind, so that the medical bills would all be paid.”

Ax surged to his feet and stormed from the waiting room. I stood, ready to chase him.

“The bills were all supposed to be paid,” I continued, my fingers pressing to my forehead. Oh my God. This was insane...but horrible. So...horrible. “Axel left here, left me, in order that everything would be paid. All this time, he thought you were taken care of.”

“That fucking bastard,” Benz gritted out, jumping to his feet to follow Axel. I knew he meant his brother and not his son who'd just found out how deeply he'd been betrayed.

Sinking into a chair beside where he'd been, I pressed a hand over my mouth. I couldn't believe this. How could one man rip apart so many lives? Be so...selfishly evil. My other hand splay over my belly. He'd taken more than he even knew.

Twenty-Four



Bristol

After Benz went after Axel, I called my Aunt Willow to tell her neither Axel nor I would be at the fundraiser or the dance on Saturday.

“Do you need food sent over?” she asked, all business when I’d explained what had happened to Molly.

“No—”

But she was already yelling. “Barke. Your cousin and the Pendletons need a meal sent to the hospital. Make it happen. Sadie, help him.”

More conversation followed, but it was muffled since she’d covered the phone speaker. If I knew her, she was probably telling them to not fight with each other and not to complain to her about working together.

“Bristol, they’ll be there shortly. You call me immediately if you need anything. We’ll get a temporary ramp put in for the house. I’ll call Trevor. Trevor will take care of it.”

“Aunt Willow,” I interrupted. “Don’t call Trevor. I don’t know what they’ll need yet.”

“You said Molly broke her leg. She’ll need a ramp. Your uncle is already calling. It’ll be done before she gets home. And we’ll send more meals. You get in touch with us for anything else you need, understand?”

“Yes, ma’am.” I knew any other answer wouldn’t be acceptable. I’d been steamrolled by Willow Woods plenty of times in my life. I loved my aunt, but man, was I glad she was my mom’s sister and not my mom.

“Call me tomorrow,” she ordered.

“I will.”

Her voice softened. “I love you. I’m glad that boy came to his senses. You two were always meant to be.”

There were those tears pricking my eyes again. “Thank you. I love you, too, Aunt Willow.”

Hanging up, I wilted as if I’d run an ultra-marathon. My aunt could be exhausting, but she was one of the most loving, *demanding*, giving people I knew. With that call down, I needed to see how else I could help.

I turned to Axel’s brothers and Carrington. “My aunt is sending over food. I gonna go find Ax and your dad. Will you guys be okay?”

They nodded.

“If anyone comes out with news and your dad doesn’t answer his cell, call me, okay? You have my number?”

“We have it,” Carrington answered when the other two nodded dully, too overwhelmed by everything. Before leaving our family dinner the other day, I’d made sure all the Pendletons had a way to contact me—part of my resolution not to fade away again.

The hospital corridor seemed eerily quiet as I searched out the other two men. I saw them as soon as I reentered the main lobby. They stood outside. Axel had his head dropped forward, shaking it, while Benz had his hands on his son’s shoulders, clearly trying to tell him none of this was his fault.

It wasn’t. But I knew Ax wouldn’t see it that way.

I slowed my steps, not wanting to interrupt, but I knew Axel would need me. I’d promised to stay with him.

“I’m quitting,” I heard Axel say when I stepped outside. “He’s done nothing but lie to me. He’s kicked me around and manipulated me for the past six years. He put you in financial straits, and he made me give up Bristol—I can’t give her up! I’m fucking married to her, and that’s not changing!”

“You’re *what?*” I gasped at the same time as Benz. Shocked, I stared at Axel, waiting for him to say he hadn’t meant it the way it had sounded, because there was no way we were married. How would that even be possible?

Axel scrubbed his hand over his forehead.

“Fuck,” he muttered. Slowly, he turned to look at me. Even before he spoke, the regret in his eyes revealed he wouldn’t say what I’d imagined he would. It hadn’t been some weird figure of speech.

“Impossible,” I breathed.

“It’s not. We... Well. There’s something I need to talk to you about.”

My chin lowered as I leveled my stare at him. I crossed my arms, and my fingers tapped on my biceps. “I’d say so. There’s no way we’re married and I don’t know it.”

“There is.”

That was it? *There is?* That was all his explanation?

“Axel—”

“I’m going to head inside so you guys can...uh...talk,” Benz said. He glanced at Axel, shook his head, then turned to me and patted my shoulder. “Molly’s gonna love this when she wakes up.”

“Dad, I meant what I said,” Axel called after him. “I have the money. There’s no reason for any of you to struggle.”

Benz didn’t look back, just lifted his hand to wave off the words. Even I knew that response wouldn’t deter my man. Axel would see his parents were taken care of. He hadn’t made the sacrifices he did, only to see them still suffer.

That was neither here nor there right that moment.

“Talk,” I demanded.

He looked around us to see who might be nearby, and my jaw set, my lips pressing into a firm line. I was stunned, but part of me... Yeah, there was at least a smidgen of me that waited with the deepest hope, *wanting* his claim to be true.

“I don’t care who hears,” I snapped, drawing his attention back to me. “Explain what you just said.”

Warring emotions tangled through me. I couldn’t even quantify how horrified I was. What if I’d met someone during the past few years? Someone who’d managed to erase my heartbreak?

Did I think that could have happened? No. But still...

Another more stupid part of me, an idealistic starry-eyed version of myself, vibrated with happiness. I had no idea how it could be true, though.

Yet another portion of me was pissed. So incredibly pissed. How could he have kept this from me? The pissed component bled over all the rest, overpowering everything with a red tide of fury.

He had to be lying to his dad, but why would he? He hadn’t known I was there behind him. He had no reason to say that.

“Axel,” I snapped impatiently when he didn’t say anything.

“It’s a long story,” he finally said wearily.

My crossed arms tightened, my head tilting as I glared at him. “Then you better start talking.”

“Spring break,” he said.

Spring break? The one Ginger had mentioned then he’d brought up again the next day. That explained the tension that had rolled off him in the bar when we’d talked about the trip. Because of his *secret*.

“You have got to be kidding me! How could you not tell me? That was real? How could it be real? I... How could you keep that a secret? How long have you known this? Axel! How long have you known we’re married?”

He threw his hands wide. “I didn’t know. Not when it happened. I was as drunk as you. And when I found out... I didn’t tell you right away because I was going to surprise you, do this whole big, extravagant thing, give you the certificate during my proposal. Then the ultimatum with my uncle happened. And fuck me, but I wanted you to still be married to me. I wanted us to have that tie.”

“A tie I didn’t know about?” I exclaimed.

He blew out a self-deprecating huff, stepping closer to me. “I didn’t say it was a smart idea.”

I shoved at his chest. “Don’t try to be cute like that. It’s not getting you off the hook.”

“Right.” He grimaced. “So look... I was thinking with my heart, okay? And other things. Not my brain.”

“And when you got back here? Why haven’t you told me? Or for that matter, why not anytime over the past six years when you knew you weren’t coming back here?”

He grabbed my biceps, holding me where I had to look at him and I couldn’t get away. Not that I had it in me right then. I might be blustering, but my sails were ripped.

His hands slid down my arms and forcing them to unfold before he clasped my fingers.

“Because,” he said, his melty dark-chocolate eyes piercing into me, his gaze filled with sincerity and regret. “Because everything’s been such a damn shitshow. Everything’s been a mess. Knowing I had you anchored me. And then, the past few days, every time I think we might get onto even ground, where I think you won’t be pissed at me, something happens. I needed you to remember you love me, that I love you, before I dropped that bomb on you.”

My eyes closed in resignation. I did love him.

Opening them, I met his gaze. My head shaking the tiniest bit, I stared at him. Speechless. Just... *wordless*. Then *somehow*, his words sank past my anger, along with the reality of what they meant. I was married to Axel. I was *married* to Axel. We were *married*.

“You were going to propose?” I whispered in disbelief.

“Yeah. Of course, I was. I had a ring and everything. *Have*. I still have it, though to tell the truth I can afford to upgrade it to something bigger, now.”

“Don’t even think that.” I didn’t care what size the ring was—as long as the band fit my finger. Knowing Axel, it would.

So many questions assailed me. “Are you sure it’s legal? I bet it’s not. It can’t be.”

He drew me against his chest. His lips pressed to the top of my head, the sweetest balm to my ire. “It is. I checked. Then I had my lawyer check again. At first, it was a secret, so I could do this big thing. A big surprise—”

“Oh, it is a big surprise, alright,” I griped, my fight waning.

“Then...well, I needed you to not hate me before I told you. Because if you hated me, you would immediately run to a divorce lawyer, and that’s the last thing I wanted—the last thing I *want*. If you try to divorce me, I *will* fight it. I want you to be my wife.”

“I should see an attorney,” I growled, pinching his side. That was so far from the truth, so far from what I desired. Somehow, I’d gotten what I’d always wanted, without even knowing it. I was married to Axel Pendleton.

Married...

“Well, fuck me,” I said under my breath, still so stunned, my emotions still warring. I didn’t really know what to do with this.

“Trust me, I will as soon as we get home. That closet was only a foretaste of what I want with you. As soon as we know everything is okay here...”

“Damn, Sadie, we should have brought popcorn.”

My eyes widened while I stared at Axel, we both turned to see Sadie and Barke, laden down with takeout bags.

“Oh, yeah,” I murmured to Axel. “Aunt Willow is sending food.”

“You guys are married?” Sadie asked.

“They fight like they’re married,” Barke muttered.

“Shut. *Up*,” she replied then looked at us again. “You’re married?”

“You were there,” Axel said. “You and Ginger and Barke and Oak. You were even a bridesmaid.”

“No. Way!” she exclaimed. “That was real?”

“Now you know how I feel,” I quipped, with a side-eye at Axel. Undeterred, he slid an arm around me.

“We should go back inside,” he said.

Right. His mom and his family. That had to take precedence. Before we hashed this out. They needed us.

“Thanks for bringing food,” I said. They handed over the bags, choosing not to come in.

“I want details. All the details,” Sadie said into my ear as she quickly hugged me.

“You know I’m telling everyone,” Barke informed Axel with a smirk. I knew what that meant. My whole family would know within the hour. The Donovan-Woods gossip line was strong and fast.

Axel nodded. “Whatever you have to do, man. Can’t say I care. I want everyone to know Bristol is mine.”

My cousin sniffed a laugh, looking at me. “Better call your mom and dad, Bris. They’ll want to hear it from you and not from my mom.”

Crap. He was right. I scowled over at Axel, giving him the evil eye. This was his fault—him and some overly fruity, not-alcoholic-tasting drinks.

“Tell your mom I’ll call her tomorrow. Thanks again, both of you.” After more quick hugs, I turned and walked away. Axel followed on my heels, and his arm slid around me as we crossed the lobby.

“For the record, I’m still angry with you,” I said as he guided me back toward the family waiting room. To *our* family.

“I figured. Am I’m gonna have to grovel?” he asked, though it didn’t sound much like a question.

“Hardcore.”

He was silent for a long moment. “But we’re staying married?”

“Yeah.” I didn’t even need to think about it.

The tension seemed to drain from him, and he pulled me closer. “What about the bookstore you’ve always wanted? Will that be a start?”

I turned my head and raised a brow at him then looked away without a word, silently telling him he was barking up the wrong tree if he thought it would be that easy. I didn’t want things. I wanted Axel.

Stepping clear of him, I directed a smile at his brothers and dad.

“Hey, we have dinner,” I announced, lifting the bags I carried.

“That’s a no then,” Axel muttered under his breath beside me.

“Okay. Well, wife. I’ll figure it out.”

I had no doubt he would.

Twenty-Five



Axel

It was well after two in the morning—probably edging closer to four—by the time we got back to the apartment. This time, I’d driven, and though the trip took mere minutes, Bristol fell asleep.

“Axel,” she murmured, barely stirring when I lifted her from the car.

I brushed my lips over her forehead while I kicked shut the door and pressed the lock button on the fob. “I got you, baby. Let’s get you into bed.”

“Still mad at you,” she muttered, burrowing into my neck.

“I know. It’s late. I’m going to put you to bed.”

While I hurried through the cold to the complex’s front door, her fingers tightened where she held onto my shirt. The temps might be unseasonably warm during the day, but right then, it felt like winter. However, the heat from Bristol’s body burned into me, especially when she tried to snuggle closer.

“M’kay,” she murmured. “You staying with me?”

“Are you going to let me hold you all night?”

“Yes.” Her lips pressed into my neck, traveling toward my ear. Clearly, she was coming awake while I carried her up the flights of stairs.

“If you want me with you, there’s no chance I’ll be anywhere else.”

“I want you with me. I’m really glad your mom’s going to be okay, Axel.”

“Me, too.” I had to silently chuckle. My mother had been kind of annoyed when she’d woken to find us all there, but I could tell she was touched, too. Maybe, it wasn’t the norm in most places that we’d all be allowed into her room, but in a small, close-knit place like Cherish Cove, things were different.

“Hey, Molly,” Bristol had said, cutting through my mom’s bluster. “Axel has something really important to tell you.”

“I do?” I’d asked, glancing at my wife. God, I loved thinking of her that way. Now that she knew, I couldn’t get the moniker out of my head. She was Bristol, my wife. Bristol Pendleton. Randomly, I wondered if she’d change her name to that, keep Donovan or hyphenate both surnames.

“Yeah,” she’d said, the mischief written all over her face. She knew I was about to be in trouble with my mother. “Axel’s been keeping a *big* secret from everyone.”

“What secret?” my mom demanded, trying to sit up. My dad had kept her in place with murmured words and a hand on her good shoulder. When he’d glanced at me, though, he couldn’t hide his amusement at my predicament.

“Well, thing is... I mean—”

“What?” she’d asked, annoyed by my dithering.

“Yeah, Axel, what?” Van had teased, since my brothers had been apprised of the news while we’d waited for my mom to get out of recovery. “What secret is Mom gonna kick your ass over?”

“This’ll be good,” Aston had laughed under his breath, equally amused. Everyone in the room, besides my mom, was having a big laugh at my expense. Even Bristol, though I knew she was still annoyed with me—but not pissed anymore, and I was taking that as a win. In fact, other than when she’d left the waiting room to call her parents earlier, she’d been watching me speculatively, questions in her eyes.

Her eyebrow had lifted at me while I tried to find the words.

With no eloquence, I blurted, “Bristol and I are married.”

My mother had stared at me then looked at my dad. “What kind of drugs did they give me? Am I still dreaming?”

“No, honey. You’re wide awake. Apparently, our son is full of secrets,” my dad had said. “For some reason I don’t understand, even Bristol didn’t know.” When he looked at me, his narrowed eyes revealed a lot about his feelings on everything he’d learned tonight. Oh...he was glad to welcome Bristol into the fold and amused by the shit I was getting, but he wasn’t happy with my actions. My entire family loved her, though, and once upon a time, her joining us had been a foregone conclusion.

Hearing what his brother had done pissed him off, and in turn, he was a bit irritated at me for falling in with it. I had no doubt he’d give me a rough time for a while. In the end, of everything revealed, no one was upset to find out Bristol was one of us. As far as those medical bills and resulting loans, I’d personally see they were taken care of.

While I carried Bristol, I refused to think about Darius and his betrayal, how he’d cast me into stasis for six years. It hadn’t been completely for nothing. My bank account was healthy, I had experience and I’d also gained a reputation as a talented driver. Hell, I hadn’t landed as second in the series by chance. Tomorrow, once I’d gotten some rest, I’d have to sort out my path. I was stuck with Darius for the rest of the year, but I could probably find a new ride after that.

“Are we going to consummate this thing tonight?” Bristol asked, interrupting the thoughts I’d resolved not to have, but did anyway.

I snorted when I looked down at her wide smile—her wide smile accompanied by alert eyes now that she was fully awake. “I think we’ve consummated our marriage plenty times.”

Not that I’d let that stop me. My cock throbbed uncomfortably inside my jeans, wanting her naked beneath me...*right now*. It had been so long since we’d been one.

She raised an eyebrow at me. “That was six years ago. And one party in the equation was unaware of the situation.” Her finger jabbed my chest. “You had a library card, but you were taking books without properly checking them out.”

“Oh, speak sexy librarian to me,” I growled. She moaned, reaching up to slip her hand into my hair while I nipped at her neck. “In case you’re wondering, *yes*, we are definitely finishing what we started in the closet earlier. I want that more than anything. The memory of your walls squeezing around my fingers has taunted me for hours.”

Bristol giggled, throwing her arms around my shoulders to hold on when I took off in a jog the rest of the way up the stairs. As if she sought to make me crazy, she kissed along my jaw, down my neck then back up to my ear.

“I *need* you, Axel,” she breathed after she nipped the lobe.

“Baby,” I groaned, while I fumbled for my keys. The blood rushed from my head to my already hard cock. My fucking jeans were going to strangle it. If my sexy wife didn’t kill me first.

Wife...

Just that thought set the blood sizzling through me and made me even more possessive of her than I’d always been. Yeah, part of me was a total caveman—and I didn’t hide it very well. It had been all I could do to keep that part of me in check the past few days. Especially when I thought she’d gone out on a date with another man. I’d about gone nuts.

“I’ve missed us so much,” she said, trailing her fingers along the back of my neck. Trusting I had her secure in my arms and wouldn’t drop her, she let one of her hands explore and traced down my bicep then over my chest.

I bumbled open our front door and stumbled inside, giving the panel a shove with my foot to help it close faster behind us. With no pause, I rushed to the bedroom on long strides then placed Bristol on the bed, immediately climbing over her.

Giggling, she called out to her Alexa device to turn on the bedroom light and kicked out of her shoes while I shed mine.

“I needed the light on ‘cause I want to see you,” she told me, running her hands down my chest and lingering on my pecs. “It’s been so long. I can feel how different you are. I want to see it.”

“I’m not that different.”

“You are. You’re broader. You have more muscles. You’re harder, too. You work out even more now.”

Maybe, I was all those things because of the conditioning I needed for my job, but I also worked out to vent my constant frustration from missing her. In the past six years, I’d left behind teenage Axel. Then again, Bristol had shed her teen-self, too.

“Let’s talk about changes,” I said, kneeling up while I straddled her. My fingers traced down her sides from her shoulders. They skimmed the swells of her full breasts and slim waist on the way down to her lush hips. My fingers hooked on the waistband of her cute book-nerd skirt. “I need to see you, too. I have to know this isn’t just another fantasy.”

Moaning, Bristol sat up and wrapped her arms behind my back. Her face angled toward me, inviting my kiss. “I’m real. I’m right here.”

Leaning in, I hungrily pressed my mouth over hers, eating, devouring, taking all she gave. Our tongues tangled, both exploring, tugging back and forth into each other’s mouths, playful then warring for dominance. A dominance I’d never give over to her. It wasn’t in me. She didn’t want that anyway. My Bristol loved the feel of me over her, taking what I wanted from her and giving more pleasure than she could stand, never stopping until she overflowed from it.

I could have kissed her forever, but I wanted more. Pulling back, I reached for the hem her shirt. Though everything in my screamed to rush forward, I paused. My eyes met hers.

“Are you sure?” I asked. I couldn’t have her then lose her again. I didn’t want her to regret this in the morning—well later in the morning, anyway.

“We’re married,” she breathed.

“But are you sure? Do you want this? I can wait if... If you’re not ready.” It would kill me, but I could wait. Our future hung in the balance, and I didn’t want to jeopardize it.

“Axel...” Her brows furrowed in concern and confusion. “I want you. I’ve wanted you for as long as I can remember, since... God, I’ve needed you since I understood what sex is, probably. Definitely, I’ve wanted you since the sidewalk outside the library the day you got to town. I *want* you. I want us again. I *need* us.”

“Fuck, baby, I need us again, too. You gotta know, I’m all in. Even if I have to be away from you for a few days at a time in order to race... No more separate lives.”

“No more separate lives,” she echoed. She cupped my cheek in her soft hand and brushed her thumb over my bristly jaw. “I love you.”

“I love you, my Bristol, my forever—for always.”

Twenty-Six



Bristol

As if our declarations had ignited us, I pulled at Axel's clothes while he tugged at mine. It might have been funny if we weren't so frenzied for one another. Now that we'd finally reached this moment, we couldn't move fast enough.

My breath caught as Axel reached behind his neck and yanked off his shirt, in that wholly macho way only guys could pull off, leaving his wide, tanned chest bare. No matter what he claimed, part of him had been exposed to the sun on a regular basis, judging by the golden hue of his skin. I took advantage, running my hands along his warm, hard flesh from his pecs and down over his washboard abs and flat belly.

"You're like a Michelangelo statue. Perfect."

"Spoiler alert: my dick is way bigger than that," he informed me with a smug grin.

"I seem to remember that. Maybe, you should show me... refresh my memory."

He grabbed my hand and brought it down to the bulge in his pants. Meeting his eyes, I squeezed gently, watching his eyes dilate and his mouth drop open.

"Fuck, Brisk," he groaned. Cupping me roughly behind the head, he crushed his mouth over mine.

As if I'd waved a green flag, we flew into a frenzy. Axel pulled at my clothes to strip me bare while I shoved at his pants, wanting to be skin-to-skin again after so long, wanting

so much more than that. Soon, Axel straddle me again, gazing down at me, his fingers trailing up my torso.

My own did the same. My touch skimmed over his hard belly, one tracing the large, tan-colored birthmark on his hip that the so-called video of him hadn't captured. Boldly, I grasped his length, squeezing the shaft and thumbing the apadravya piercing he'd gotten us as an eighteenth birthday present, only to find out it wasn't much of a present because we'd had to abstain from sex for so long. In the end...worth it. So totally worth it.

Axel groaned, dropping back his head. Still, even as he experienced the pleasure, he didn't lose his focus on me. He palmed my breasts. After a moment, he curled forward slightly, both hands molding the mounds he'd captured. His thumbs circled and flicked over my nipples. I gasped, my panting breaths twining with his while I explored him with one hands and jacked up and down his rock-hard length with the other.

"You're so fucking beautiful," he breathed just before he pinched the peaks he tormented. I cried out, arching and reflexively squeezing his cock. A low rumble rolled from him, thunder before the storm we chased, the storm that would soon overtake us and maybe even destroy us in the best ways.

"You are," I replied.

"Baby..."

Rolling us, he switched our positions so I straddled his belly and was forced to release his cock. He pulled me down so he could suck one of my nipples into his mouth. I jerked, the sensation of that warm, wet suction too strong after all this time. My fingers dug into his shoulders.

"Axel," I gasped while fire seemed to erupt through me and arrow to my core. I was so slick with arousal, and he soon, discovered that, feel it on his belly as I jerked over him. He reached between us, finding my pussy and dragging his fingertips through my slit. My cry filled the air when he quickly pinched my clit then abandoned it to stroke me again.

“Mmm...what’s this?” he murmured, the sound practically a purr of satisfaction. “Are you ready for your man?”

“I’m always ready for you—even when I don’t want to be.”

He smirked. Reaching behind me, I found his length and gave him a squeeze. “Don’t be so smug. I’m not the only one.”

“No, you’re not.” He circled my clit, and I forgot about anything but the feel of him touching me. “I haven’t been able to get earlier in the closet out of my head. Feeling you squeezing me and wishing it was my cock instead of my fingers. Having you fall apart in my arms. There’s no masterpiece that’s more breathtaking than seeing your pleasure, hearing you shatter with your orgasm.”

Breathing hard, I stared down at him. *He* was the masterpiece. And the things he could do with his fingers. It may have been six years, but he hadn’t lost an iota of his skills.

“I’ve missed you. I’ve missed your hands and mouth on me,” I said while I leaned in and brushed my lips over his. We kissed wildly. My fingers speared into his thick hair and held on to him while he managed to dominate the kiss I’d initiated. He abandoned my breast to fist the hair at the back of my head, not letting me escape.

As if I would.

And then I knew his intention. His drove two fingers into me, and I cried out into his mouth, breathless and lightheaded while he finger-fucked me, driving me to the edge. I trembled. Tumbled. It took a moment for me to realize I was on my back again, with him over me, still kissing me, still pushing me toward release with his insidious determination, three digits stretching and filling me, his thumb abusing my clit with exactly the right pressure.

My climax rushed toward me, a sense of panic with it since I couldn’t get enough breath. I wailed into Axel’s mouth, arching under him and clawing at his back, my world graying as I came. A euphoric rush surged through me when he pulled back, and I gasped for air, the sudden oxygen making me lightheaded. Tremors still wracked over me. My thighs

squeezed his hips as he wedged himself into their cradle, forcing them wider. I moaned at the feel of his cock nocking into place at my opening, the metal of his piercing taunting me with the sensation to come.

“There’s so much I want to do to you,” he said. “But I can’t wait. I need in you.”

“Yes! I want you now. Please. Oh, please.”

He brushed his lips over mine again, this time not lingering before he moved to my ear. “You feel like lava kissing my tip. So hot and wet. Oh...fuck...” he muttered as he started to push forward. “Fuck...fuck...you’re so tight.”

I gasped at the feeling of him stretching me, the apa piercing dragging along my walls, two extra ribs of pleasure. Holy... wow! I’d forgotten just how amazing he felt.

“God, Axel. You’re so...”

“Yeah,” he breathed. “You’re squeezing me so good, baby. You gonna be a good girl and take all of this big cock.”

“Give it to me,” I begged.

“Oh, I’m gonna. You’re getting every inch.” He surged forward, filling me to his hilt, so deep it almost hurt as he hit against my cervix.

“You okay?” he asked, stilling when I gasped.

“It’s perfect. So perfect. Don’t stop.”

Our words slipped away as he started a slow pistoning that gradually built in speed until we were crashing together, the sturdy headboard of our bed slamming into the wall in steady, rapid thumps that matched the rhythm of his thrusts. I met him drive for drive, his pubis grinding against my clit with each forward movement.

Stars flew in front of my vision while tension coiled in my middle. Spasms started through me. My cries mixed with Axel’s as he rocketed toward his own release. As I tumbled over, hugging him to me, the friction of his chest hair almost too much to bear against my hardened nipples, I heard his

sharp exhale of breath. Then warmth flooded me as he thrust deep once more and came.

Keeping his weight off me by resting on his elbows, he kept kissing me. On my lips, my temple, my neck and shoulders.

“I love you, Bristol. I love you so much.”

“I love you, too. I’ve missed you.” My hand stroked over his damp hair. “I don’t ever want to lose you again.”

“You won’t. No matter what I have to do, you won’t.” Turning us, he cuddled me into him. My hand rested beside my cheek on his chest, making small circles while I listened to his racing heart calm. His fingers caressed up and down my side, lifting small goosebumps, but filling me with warm, fuzzy prickles while a golden glow surrounded us.

“What’s this?” he asked, tracing his finger back and forth on the front of my hip. My eyes closed. I didn’t have to look to know his thumb was moving over the ink just below my bikini line. Over the indelibly marked date, almost four months after he’d left Cherish Cove. Of course, he’d seen it when we stripped. He knew every part of me. We’d been frenzied before, but now his curiosity was free.

I couldn’t answer, my throat closing around the rock that suddenly developed there. The moment had been so perfect. But now...

“Bristol,” he insisted, more urgently. “What *is* this? What does it mean?”

Pulling from his arms, I sat up. My ankles loosely crossed, I pulled my knees up and wrapped my arms around them while I stared at him. Why had I never thought I’d have to have this conversation? Of course, he’d ask. Of course, he’d notice.

“Axel...”

“Tell me,” he demanded, sitting up. Tension reignited through him, and his eyes swam with worry. I didn’t had to say another word for him to know this was bad. He knew me that well. The connection between us had always been so strong—until it hadn’t been.

“After...after you left,” I started. “I-I spiraled, and I was at loose ends. Unsure what to do or how to move forward.”

His brows furrowed. “Did you hurt yourself?”

“No. Not like that. I... I just... I went to work. I came home. I hated it here, but I couldn’t bring myself to move away from Cherish Cove. Sometimes, I ate. Mostly, I didn’t because I was sick a lot.”

“I’m sorry. I—”

“I know,” I interrupted, putting my hand on his naked thigh. There was nothing sexual about our touches now, though. “We’ve hashed this, and I didn’t want to tell you about what a mess I was after you left. Everything’s been bad enough without that added layer. But...I was shattered.”

His eyes closed, his skin seeming to blanch. “No wonder you hated me.”

He had no idea...

I shook my head. “What do they say? There’s a fine line between love and hate?” I covered the tattoo with my fingers. “This isn’t about that; not really. See, my cousin, Nolan, was in a play in Grand Rapids. Somehow, he’d gotten a minor part in one of the off Broadway shows. He’s that talented. He asked me to come see him, so I did. Anyway...” I redirected myself again, not wanting to talk about this but knowing I had to. “He said, ‘You’re sad. The play is funny.’” I shrugged. “At the time, it seemed like the thing to do. But millions of times since then, I’ve thought, maybe, I shouldn’t have. Thing is, I can second guess the past all I want. It won’t change it.”

Axel moved to lean against the headboard and pulled me in to him. I cuddled into his chest, burrowing my face into his neck, craving his warmth. I needed his strength even though he didn’t know it. I prayed he wouldn’t be furious with me, blame me.

I breathed him in and tried to hide from the memory and at the same time, steady myself for what was to come. In my soul, I knew it would destroy him. Whether he pushed me away in his grief remained to be seen. For now, I let his scent strengthened

me, and I tried to savor our proximity for just a moment while I could, just a moment before I delivered yet another blow to the man who'd been ripped up over and over the past few days.

I sighed. "Axel..."

He was so hard beneath me—tense and ready to pounce, prepared for a mythical attack. Maybe, even ready to fight my monsters.

"Tell me," he demanded, his voice low and lethal.

"I... I was on my way back here after seeing my cousin in the play and having dinner with him and some of the other actors after the show. It was late. Someone..." I knew the man's name, but I wouldn't speak it. I had been there in court when he'd been sentenced. I'd stared at him while he'd been hauled away, sobbing, to start his prison term. "He was...drunk. Way over the limit. He got on the highway going the wrong way. I couldn't... I tried to avoid him, but he hit me."

Axel's arms tightened.

"Fuck," he swore, shaking beneath me. "You could have been killed."

"Yeah. He did kill the couple in the other car he hit."

His hand covered the tattoo. "And it was on this date? March fifth?"

"No," I rasped, the ice I'd kept around this memory cracking. I trembled as if surrounded by a glacial bath of it. Submerged and drowning. Tears streamed down my cheeks.

"I don't understand," he whispered.

"I was hurt. I was injured bad enough I ended up in the hospital for a couple days. On the night of March third."

His finger traced over the stark black ink. His brow furrowed, but he didn't speak, waiting, his muscles like vibrating steel beneath me.

"I was pregnant, Axel," I breathed, barely able to speak the truth I hadn't spoken to anyone. Ever. No one except my

doctors knew.

“What?” he gasped, his body starting to shake. His breathing chopped from him as he realized what I was telling him.

“No one knew. I didn’t know I was pregnant when you left, and when I did realize... I didn’t tell anyone, because I didn’t know what to do. My parents were out of the country again. The rest of my family was already confused and angry about what happened between us. And yours... Your mom was battling cancer. You’re whole family was struggling to get through it while they gathered around her. And...” I shook my head, tears burning in my eyes. “No one knew. No one knew that there was this little life, but I didn’t want to forget. I didn’t ever want to forget.”

Axel’s arms tightened, his face pressed into my neck. His body shook harder while his tears singed my bare shoulder. “No wonder you hate me. No wonder. *I* hate me. I left you alone in this.”

I shook my head. “I don’t hate you. I *don’t*, Axel.”

“I should have been there. I should have held your hand through it. I should have...known...” His voice broke on a sob, while my man broke. “Fuck. Fuck, fuck, fuck,” he rasped.

His pain seeped into me while he held me and rocked, his anguish reopening my poorly healed wounds. He didn’t let go of me, leaving me to handle his pain, to break something, to scream into the night. He just held me tighter while somehow, our bond drew us even closer.

Twenty-Seven



Axel

Banging on the front door dragged me from the warm bubble of sleep that had enveloped me, my arms around Bristol, our naked bodies twined. When I opened my eyes to find I wasn't dreaming, mixed feelings of euphoria and sorrow filled me. I was glad to be back with Bristol and have everything out in the open, but the one revelation I hadn't expected tore me apart—for the life lost, for what Bristol had endured, and for our mutual loss, the opportunity to be parents together ripped from us.

We would have children someday, though, especially if we kept on as we had last night. After Bristol's divulgence, we'd talked then we'd made love slow and reverently. I hadn't known such sex was possible, but we'd connected, proving to ourselves we were still alive. We hadn't used a condom any of the times we'd come together. So yeah, we'd likely be a family someday, perhaps sooner rather than later, but our first child would always be in our hearts.

The thought of that loss made me ache, and knowing I could have lost Bristol without her knowing the truth of why I'd left her, without her knowing how much I loved her and how she was my everything, terrified me. I fought back the sudden need to enclose her in bubble wrap. It hammered home the truth that I needed her with me no matter what, no matter what battles I had to fight.

The rapping on the door came again to urge me from the warm cocoon I was in with Bristol. I pressed my lips to her temple,

breathing in her floral scent mixed with the redolent, musky smell from our sex, then climbed out of bed. I stumbled across the apartment while dragging on my jeans, barely doing more than zipping them before yanking open the door.

“What?” I growled, ready to take off the head of the person who’d dragged me away from my woman only a couple hours after we’d finally gone to sleep.

“Axel Pendleton?” a guy in a national delivery services uniform asked. To his credit, my greeting didn’t even faze him. Maybe he got a lot of grouchiness pointed his way. Who knew?

“Yeah,” I snapped

“I have a delivery for you.” He held up an envelope. “Can you sign here, please?” He thrust a tablet toward me with a stylus dangling from it. Once I’d scrawled my unintelligible signature, he took the device and handed me my delivery.

Turning away from the door, I let it shut behind me while I scanned the sender information printed in the section above my address. A rock fell into my belly: David Guest, Darius’ attorney. Yeah... This wouldn’t be good.

I tore into the envelope. My mind went in a million directions as I tried to guess what it could be. A single shitty suspicion rose to the top of the cesspool.

“What is it?” Bristol asked from the entrance to the hallway. She’d pulled on a thin pink robe and looked adorably mussed.

“I don’t know, yet. Hang on.”

I pulled out the documents, my eyes narrowing while I parsed through what looked like a contract. Only... It wasn’t.

And the hits keep coming. Shit.

“Guess I know why Darius wasn’t answering his phone,” I said. Since the call about Marta yesterday afternoon, I’d tried to reach him multiple times, completely pissed off that he’d lied to me and screwed over my parents. “If I understand this document, I’m fired. It severs any obligations. I owe him nothing, and he owes me nothing in return.”

“Are you serious?”

I flipped through the papers again, blowing out a breath. “Yep. Bet if I’d turned on the sports’ news this morning, it would have been all over the networks before I’d even been notified.”

“Oh my God... Axel, I’m so sorry,” Bristol said, rushing to me where I stood rooted to the spot, stunned but surprisingly not devastated. Her arms closed around me, and I pressed my nose into her hair while I returned the hug. God, I loved this woman, and I was so thankful she was mine. In all this shitshow, she was all that really mattered to me.

“It’s okay, baby,” I murmured into her temple before pressing my lips there. I dropped the papers and pulled her into me to kiss her thoroughly. “Good morning, wife.”

She peered up at me. Her cheeks were flushed, but concern filled her eyes. “Good morning. Are you okay?”

“Yeah. I was struggling with how I could keep driving for him after everything he’s done. I can’t believe how he hurt my parents, his own brother and his sister-in-law. So...I guess this solves a bunch of my problems. Answers a few questions, too. I bet he orchestrated all the drama, just for an excuse to end our relationship.”

“Why? You’ve done all he’s asked you to.”

I frowned. “I can’t even fathom how he thinks. Not with all I’ve learned about him.” My arms tightened around her.

“Don’t worry. I have options.”

Offhand, I couldn’t tell her what they were, but I knew I did. Plus, if I never worked another day, we could live in luxury—even after I paid those medical bills.

I kissed the tip of her nose. “And I get to stay with you. That’s the best part.”

“What options?”

I shrugged. “Well...there are lots of things I could do,” I hedged. “Plus the other day, Mr. Anderson—Carson—offered to get me on a motocross bike. I was good, and during off weeks, I still ride when I get a chance.”

Admittedly, that wasn't often.

“Or I can look into opening a shop that specializes in stock cars. I can help my dad run a team and train up-and-comers.” Now that I'd started thinking about it, a plethora of avenues lay before me.

“None of that is your dream.” She sighed, shaking her head as she grimaced. “I'm sorry. That's not helpful. I shouldn't have said that.”

I cupped her face, looking down at her, my forehead almost touching hers. “I've lived my dream for six years. I made a lot of money—a *whole lot*. But, baby, that life I lived kinda sucked. I wasn't happy. To help my family, I was willing to sacrifice and put in the work to be the very best, but now, I know it wasn't worth giving up the things—the *people*—most important to me. Leaving you behind is a mistake I will never, ever make again, no matter what direction my life takes.”

Tears glistened in her eyes. “Axel,” she breathed. “I love you so much.”

“I love you, too, Brisk. And I'm so sorry. I failed you.” She started to protest, but I pressed a finger over her lips. I needed to say this. “It was all for nothing. I hurt you for nothing. I wasn't here for you. I lost all this time with you. For *nothing*.”

She head shook, her expression vehement as she grabbed my wrist and pulled my hand away from her mouth. “Not for nothing. You have professional experience. You got to realize the goal you worked toward since childhood. Not many men—or women—can say they've raced in NASCAR or even claim they've achieved their biggest dream.”

“You're right. Of course, you're right,” I conceded. “But racing for the cup in NASCAR wasn't my biggest dream. It was just my oldest one. Another dream took top place way back in junior high.”

“Ax...”

“It's true. You're everything. Having you as mine became my main purpose, even before I realized how long a lifetime together would be. But it's also true I don't really know what

I'm going to do. Like you said, it's always been racing." I didn't want to admit that, but I had vowed not to keep secrets from her. Not anymore. It had proved to be too destructive.

"There are other teams and even other circuits. You used to love doing all kinds of races. Like you mentioned, there's motocross—though I'm not in love with that idea. I won't dissuade you, but I know how dangerous it is. Or maybe, like you said, you could invest in a branch of the industry, into the talent. You have a lot to offer with your experience. I still can't imagine your life *not* behind a wheel, driving at breakneck speeds, though."

"Yeah," I agreed. I couldn't imagine that, either. "We have a lot to think about."

"We?"

"Yeah. We. I don't do anything without you. Not anymore. Now...since those are thoughts for other days and since we don't have anything to do until we check in with the fam, let's go back to bed," I suggested. I had Bristol. Everything else was just detritus to deal with later. "Let's celebrate really being together."

She wrinkled her nose. "As much as I can't wait to get in bed with you again, I want to take a shower. I feel kinda sticky."

A wide grin split my face, and I let the bullshit problems slip away while I focused on my wife and my new plan that had moved up my priority list—get her pregnant. I knew she wanted us to have kids together; we had discussed that much in the dark last night.

"Shower sex. I like it." I swung her up into my arms. "Good idea. We need to get a bigger place, though. Have you seen the shower here?"

She swatted my shoulder. "Axel, I've lived here for almost seven years."

"Right, good time to move then. I'll get on that first thing Monday, and start scouting places."

"But..."

“Or we can go look for a place this weekend. Wait. It is the weekend. We can go look today...and tomorrow. Flip mentioned these new Wellston condos the other day. That freaking family,” I groaned in a light-hearted tone. “Slapping their name on everything around town.”

Bristol shook her head. “But...but... You don’t have a job, and I don’t make enough to get another place, much less a bigger place or a condo at The Wellston.”

I chuckled. She was so sweet. “Baby, I know you said you didn’t follow my career, but you have to know I won a lot of races over the last six years, right? And I placed really well in a lot of them, too? You don’t get winnings for only the top spot.”

She nodded. “I know you’ve won races,” she scoffed, the *duh* clear in her tone. “I’ve seen pictures and videos of you in victory lane.”

“Not to brag, but you and I are wealthy. Just for winning Daytona last year, my take was twenty million after expenses for the team. Man, I’d like to do that race again and win it two years running. It’s next weekend, though. I bet Darius is putting that asshole Teddy in the car. I should have guessed his scheme when he told me Teddy would be doing the testing and practice runs until I got down there. He probably knew I’d find out what he did and planned this all along.”

“Twenty million,” she echoed, her face pale and her eyes wide as a deer facing an oncoming semi.

“Yeah. And that was one race in six years, so...yeah, we can afford a bigger place and to help my parents and to open your bookstore if you really want one and for me to give you that family we talked about last night—as soon as you’re ready.”

“I think I just fainted. For the record,” she said. She pressed a kiss to the center of my chest. “I’m not after you for your money. It’s your body I want.”

I snorted. “That’s always been yours. And considering I’ve belonged to you since before I had a fat bank account, I wasn’t really worried about that.” Shouldering into the microscopic

bathroom, I set her on the countertop and wedged my hips between her thighs.

My fingers trailed the opening of the robe where it gaped and revealed the generous curves of her breasts. On one side, her areola peeked out and begged for my touch. I pulled her tight to me, splaying my hands on her ass and pulling her into my hard cock that was hardly contained by my barely fastened jeans.

Leaning in, I licked a path along the slope of her breast to that nipple that teased me then sucked it into my mouth. She cried out, shoving her fingers into my hair as she loved to do and wrapping her legs around me.

Forcing a lecherous smile onto my face, I leered down at her. “Maybe, I should just retire from car racing and spend my all time making your heart race.”

“Cheesy,” she accused, rolling her eyes.

“But you love it.”

Her teeth sank into her lips, momentarily hiding the smile that still burst free. “Maybe you need to show me again how you do that. You know...” She circled a finger, acting coy. “You know that thing you do with your pierced cock. I might be forgetting.”

“Are you? Forgetting?”

She twisted her head back and forth then curled her fingers into the open waistband of my jeans. The tips grazed my glans before she sank her hand into the already tight confines and circled my shaft, her thumb stretching up to play with my apadravya. I groaned and pushed into her grasp.

“No, I’m not forgetting, but I want more. I’m greedy that way. Maybe, there’s a benefit to having a horny husband. He wants sex just as much as I do.”

“Maybe even more.” I couldn’t imagine a need greater than what I felt. Having Bristol match my sex drive was perfection. “So you like being my wife, then? Last night you were mad at me about the whole marriage secret thing.”

She squeezed me again and pulled up my length from my root. “I wasn’t angry about being married to you. I was pissed about you keeping it a secret. Maybe, that’s why the sex was so good. It was mad sex.”

“Neither of us were mad—unless you mean in the crazy sense of the word.”

She huffed an amused sound through her nose. “Whatever. I suppose I can get over being annoyed at you if you keep sexing me up the way you do.”

I untied her robe and pushed it off her shoulders and down her arms. “You think so? Or will I need to keep groveling?”

“I’ve yet to see you grovel. Axel... I’ve never really hated you. I’ve been pretty angry at you. Deeply. Repeatedly. But...I don’t think it’s possible for me to really hate you.”

Fuck, I needed in her now, and I couldn’t do this here. I had something to say and I couldn’t—well, I wouldn’t, anyway—say it next to the toilet. Leaving the tiny bathroom, I carried her across the short hallway into our bedroom.

I placed her on the bed and climbed over her. “Marry me.” My lips brushed over hers. “I know it’s six years late. And we’ve been apart for so long...but marry me.”

Happiness shone from her eyes, and she nodded while a laugh spilled from her. “According to verified sources, we already are.”

“I want to marry you again, though. With both our families there. Our friends. With neither of us drunk. A ceremony with all the frills you’ve always dreamed about.”

Bristol tugged at my pants, yanking open the zipper before shoving them down. “All I’ve dreamed about is *you*. Always you.” Her legs bracketed my hips.

My erection notched against her soft, wet, oh-so-hot folds, and I groaned from deep in my chest. “We’re not very good at foreplay,” I mumbled as my thoughts got fuzzy and everything was just *fuck Bristol, fuck Bristol*.

“Our whole life is foreplay,” she answered, lifting into me and taking my tip inside.

“Fuck, yeah, it is.”

This was the life. Our life. Anything else could be figured out later.

Twenty-Eight



Axel

On Monday morning, after dropping Bristol at the library, I was at loose ends. I'd worked out, though it suddenly seemed a little pointless—at least, the intense stuff, since I didn't need to be elite-athlete level fit anymore.

Yesterday, we'd returned the embarrassing roller skate of a rental and gotten my truck out of storage, making me question why I hadn't done it almost a week earlier when I'd first arrived. I kept my registration and plates up-to-date, so other than gassing it, the vehicle was good to go.

With my wife at work, I drove around for a little while and called my lawyer about the paperwork I'd gotten. Afterward, I called my driver, Floyd, about delivering my motorcoach, that I and not my uncle owned, up here to Cherish Cove. By the time I hung up, I found myself on the north side of town and near the industrial section of town, though most of the factories had shut down. One had clearly been regentrified and had sculptured landscaping around it. The others nearby were clearly under construction. A large sign out front announced *The Wellston*. Another smaller sign told passersby that brand new units were available.

So these were Bare Wellston's brand new condos. On a whim, I pulled into the lot then parked in front of what looked like the front entrance. A doorman opened the door.

“Good morning. How can we help you this morning?”

Good question...

“I’m looking for Bare—I mean, Barrett—Wellston. Flip Anderson sent me.”

The man nodded. “Ah, yes, Mr. Anderson. He’s out at the moment, but Mr. Wellston is in his shop. If you go out the way you came in then head along the walkway toward the lake, you’ll come to the door to his garage that’s on the west side of the building.”

“Thank you.” I gave him a nod then headed that direction. As mentioned, Bare’s cycle shop was attached to the far side of the building. Through the glass in bay doors, I saw several jobs in progress. A guy I didn’t know worked on a custom job to a Harley in the far end of the garage. In the closest of the two workspaces were two Kawasaki motocross bikes with no one working on them at the moment.

I headed for the door marked *Customers* and a bell jangled to signal my entrance.

“Can I help you?” a man called before he turned. I recognized him from when I’d met him when he’d hung out with Flip.

“Barrett, I’m—”

“Axel Pendleton,” he interrupted. “It’s good to see you. What brings you in?” he said, heading toward me while wiping his hands with a rag. He tossed it over onto a table. “I’d shake your hand, but I’m a little grimy.”

I waved it off. “Trust me, I’m used to garages.”

“Higher tech than mine.”

“Don’t know about that. Yours looks pretty impressive.” Yeah, it wasn’t shiny and camera ready, but clearly, it was a high-end operation. “Flip mentioned your place. Also, told me about the condos. I might be interested. I know I don’t have an appointment—”

Now, he waved off my words. “You don’t need an appointment. Just give me a minute to clean up, and I’ll show you the places we have available. My wife will kill me if I smudge up the walls.”

“Your wife?”

“Yeah, got married last summer.” He grinned wide. “Lots of changes around here. Petra’s at school—she goes to Michigan Valley—or she’d show you around with me. She has a better grasp of the whole aesthetics aspect.”

“I’m sure my wife does, too.”

“Wife?” he asked, echoing my question of him. “Since when are you married? I gotta admit, I follow your career and watch the races. Everything out there indicates you’re unattached.”

“Not so unattached. News is gonna get out pretty fast, but I’ve been married to my high school sweetheart since, well, high school.”

“Badass. And you’re looking for a place?”

“We have a tiny apartment—emphasis on tiny.”

“I think we can get you hooked up. Be right back.” He headed to a sink off to the side of the garage and scrubbed up his hands and forearms. Grabbing a clean towel, he dried off.

“Hey, AJ, you’re solo for a few. I’ll be back.”

“Take your time,” the other man yelled as he kept his head down over a bike engine he worked on.

“So, we’ve got several layouts,” Bare said as we cut through a side door toward the shiny lobby of the new building. “There are eight floors, and the top two are filled. We have openings on two to six, ranging in size. Are you looking for a one bedroom? Two? Larger?”

“We need someplace where we can spread out and won’t have to move right away when the kids come along.”

He raised a brow at me, probably thinking I’d been hiding a whole lot from the world. I chuckled.

“Not yet,” I clarified. “Eventually, we’ll have some. Soon, I hope. I just have to convince my girl first.” Though I didn’t think there was actually any convincing needed. We were well on the way to getting knocked up. But Bare didn’t need to know that.

“We have a couple three-bedrooms. Anything bigger would have to wait until the other buildings are ready.”

“A three-bedroom is good.”

He nodded and ducked behind the guard’s desk to grab paperwork. He punched a code into a nearby wall panel then pulled out a ring of keys.

Forty-five minutes later, I was sold on a three-bedroom condo that overlooked Lake Michigan. I’d put down a deposit to hold it and made an appointment to bring Bristol to see it that evening. I wasn’t dumb enough to think this was a decision I’d make without her, or else, I might find myself living there alone.

* * *

Bristol rested her head on my chest while we recovered our breath from loving each other. I absently played with her hair and pressed occasional kisses to the top of her head while we just enjoyed the quiet aftermath of sex by cuddling together. The sheets were tangled around us, at least one of the pillows on the floor. Neither of us cared; we could share.

She trailed her finger along my hip, tracing my birthmark she’d always said looked like a fierce lion, a spirit animal to match my driving. I’d always hated the mark until she came along. In fact, I’d been nervous to let her see it the first time we’d gotten naked together. She never said a word, and it wasn’t until I tossed out an off-hand comment weeks later, that she’d told me it was something she loved about me. In her mind, I had a tattoo of a lion without me ever having to go under a needle, and it was a secret between the two of us. She loved to trace it, and I loved her touching me.

She sighed, her breath warming my skin. “I guess my worry about you leaving again was pointless. I kept telling myself not to get reattached to you because you were only here temporarily, but my heart and body weren’t listening.”

“I would have asked you to come with me. Not just asked—begged. There’s no way I could have left you. I’ve missed you so fucking much. I knew I shouldn’t put that choice on your shoulders, that you have dreams I can’t ask you to give up, but being with you again, even just being around you, showed me

how much I still love you and need you. I've been miserable, Brisk."

"I *do* have lots of dreams, like opening a bookstore and writing the history of Cherish Cove book. Those can wait. Other things can shift. Isn't that how life is? I also have dreams about us having a family, us being together, me supporting you in your career. You wouldn't have been asking me to give up something in favor of you. I know that's not a very modern thing to say, but being with you is most important to me. *You* and the life we'll make together are a big part of what I want in life."

"Baby..."

"Aren't you going to be miserable without racing, though?"

I shrugged, letting out a long breath. "I'll miss it; I can't lie about that. It's been my whole life for as long as I can remember. I wasn't even in grade school the first time my dad stuck me in a kart. As soon as I got behind that wheel, it was all over. My entire focus was the race. But I still chose wrong when I was eighteen."

She stilled but didn't shift to look at me. "Darius dangled the fulfillment your ambitions in front of you and made promises to help your family. He was an adult taking advantage of a kid, and he knew it. I'm sorry but that's the worst kind of person. He saw you as a means for success and making money, and he preyed on your hunger for success. I get that now."

"Yeah." The word was practically a growled curse. I hadn't quite looked at it from that angle before. "I can't help thinking, if racing stock cars as more than a hobby was meant to be, an avenue for that would have opened for me. I didn't have to make a deal with the devil—not that I realized how he was back then."

"Maybe. But I've said it before: we can't go down the path of woulda coulda shoulda. Maybe, you had to do that to get your foot in the door. Maybe, bigger things are waiting for you, something totally new. Maybe, we both needed the time to grow. We can never see the big picture and how bad things might have a purpose, a silver lining even, until after the fact."

“Maybe,” I conceded. I’d always known Bristol was smart, but perhaps, my wife was more wise than I’d known. “Those are deep thoughts for eleven-thirty at night.”

“It’s from therapy—though I’m not a model patient. My feelings dig in their heels and don’t want to move. My point is, maybe, driving for Darius’ team was a step you had to take.”

I was too enraged at him to ever give him that leeway. “Or... I don’t know. I could have gone a different direction. Flip’s dad would have gotten me on a bike and seriously trained me in a heartbeat. Fuck, like I said, he’s still offering that. I used to ride that dirt track just as often as I drove the stock car.”

“Yeah, you’ve always had a reckless need for speed any way you could get it,” she laughed.

“Not really reckless. I never did anything I hadn’t worked up to and practiced a million times.”

“I know.”

“I could still do that. Motocross.”

“Do you really want to do that?”

“Right now? No. I just want to be with you for a while. I’ve saved almost everything I’ve earned the last six years. I don’t have to do anything. We can just move into our own place, get settled, spend most of the time in bed...”

“Tempting but no. I have a job.”

“You don’t need to work.”

“I *do* need to work.”

“But we *are* moving. Yes?” We’d gone to see the Wellston condo when I picked her up from the library today. She’d been a little like a wet hen about the whole thing. It had taken a bunch of maneuvering and soothing to get her to come around to the idea and agree.

“It’s too much?” she’d hissed to me while Petra and Barrett had pretended not to listen to us from across the room.

“You don’t even know how much it is,” I’d pointed out.

Her arms crossed. “How much?”

“Doesn’t matter.” I shook my head and indicated around us. What wasn’t to love? The place had three spacious bedrooms, a living room, an actual dining room, family room, chef’s kitchen, four bathrooms and a couple nice-sized balconies—one off the living room where we stood and the other off the main bedroom, both overlooking the lake. “Do you like it?”

“Of course, I like it. It’s gorgeous, and the view is amazing—”

“Could you live here?”

She bit her lip, glancing around. “It would be a dream, but—”

“Then we’ll get it,” I’d interrupted before she could lay out a list of reasons why this wasn’t our future home. I knew it was.

“Axel!” she’d growled, frustrated with me. This wasn’t a fight I’d let her win—unless she really didn’t like the condo.

I’d pulled her into my arms. “I won’t even notice the money is gone. It’ll be less than a drop in the bucket to me—I promise. Let me do this for us. I can tell you love this place. Let me give it to you—and to our kids. Did you see the indoor and outdoor playgrounds and gym? We’ll have room for a family.”

The mention of kids pushed her over the edge to yes—at least, that was the weight that tipped the scale.

“Yes, we’re moving,” she agreed now as she cuddled closer to me now. “I’ll miss this apartment, though. It was our first home together.”

I noticed she didn’t mention the bad times in the middle. It was one of the unspoken reasons I wanted the condo. Aside from more space, it would be a fresh start together.

“We can keep this place, too, if you want,” I said though the offer was disingenuous.

“No. I’m just worried. Are you going to get bored here in Cherish Cove?”

“No. I’m sure you’ll keep me very occupied.” I rolled her under me. “You’ll be begging for a break.”

“Will I?” Her huge smile and the way she bent her knees to either side of me told me she was on board with the direction we were headed. She canted her hips into me, trying to get closer.

“Nah...I’ll make it worth it. Every time. But Bristol...” I paused to stare into her eyes, growing serious for a moment. “I won’t get bored. I’m not a child. And I don’t have wanderlust. As soon as we move, I’ll work on getting my feet back under me and finding something productive that’s racing-related—or at least racing-adjacent—to take up my time. We’ll be fine. As long as we’re together, I could even be content as your house-husband.”

She raised a brow at me then snorted out a laugh. “Okay, let’s not be ridiculous. I’d come home every day to find you rearranged the furniture or took up a new weird hobby.”

Admittedly, she wasn’t wrong.

“The only ridiculous scenario would be me getting bored and leaving you. Bristol...” I shook my head, holding her gaze. “That’s not happening. Please. Stop thinking I’m going to leave you.”

She closed her eyes and sighed. “I’m sorry. I’m still punishing you without even meaning to.” She gave me a little push and turned me onto my back. Coming over me, she straddled me, reached for my erection and took me inside her. Of course, I was hard for her. I always was. We both groaned as she slowly sank down. Equally slow, she started riding my shaft up and down, while I dug in my heels and held her hips, guiding her and making the drives harder while I bucked up into her.

Lost in the sensations, I forgot what we were even talking about until she whispered, still riding me, “I believe you. I know you’re mine, and I’m yours. We’re staying together. Whatever happens, we’ll make it work.”

I nodded, my fingers tightening as I pumped my hips up into her undulating body. “Together. Always together.”

Twenty-Nine



Axel

It had been three days since Darius fired me, and I was bored. Fucking hell, just last night, Bristol had told me she worried it would happen. She'd urged me to start pursuing my options. Once again, she wasn't wrong. Not that she had reason to worry about me leaving, though. Not happening. I'd never be that bored.

I knew I was in trouble when I started considering how difficult it would be to talk her into that bookshop she'd always wanted. We could work on it together. That would keep us busy—and we could spend a lot of time locked in the office while I tried to make her scream and she tried not to let anyone know what we were doing.

That seemed like a great idea and worthy of some exploring. Since my laptop was back on my motorhome, I didn't really have what I needed for research. Which reminded me... Once I'd cleared it of my belongings, I'd have to arrange for its sale. Since I wouldn't need it, it didn't make sense to pay for storage and a driver. I knew Floyd would get snapped up by someone else fast.

Speaking of storage, I needed to go to my unit here in Cherish Cove and empty it. In particular, there was one thing I wanted. Our marriage certificate. I had Bristol's ring in my suitcase. I always carried it with me, and I should have already given it to her...on Saturday, Sunday or even yesterday. I wanted a romantic moment, though, and not just us in bed when I presented it. Dumb, maybe, but I'd robbed her of a lot when it

came to being married, and I was trying to fix that, which was why I'd told her I wanted a big wedding. Today, I'd give her the ring. I longed to see it on her finger, the sign to the world she was well and truly mine.

After scrounging through a drawer for a notepad, I started making a list. Go to my storage unit. Get Bristol's ring cleaned—though, truly it didn't need it since I kept it tucked away in the box. I'd checked on my mom earlier, which I wrote down so I could cross it off. I still needed to contact my dad again about the money. He'd probably be pissed about it, but my parents might just find a mysterious deposit into their account if they didn't let me outright pay the medical bills and loans. I'd apologize after the fact.

To that end, I had to call my accountant then contact my lawyer to make sure he'd gone over the paperwork from my uncle. Before I did anything, I had to make sure everything was copacetic and I wouldn't fall through a loophole.

Looking at everything I wanted to do—all before popping in to see Bristol for lunch at one-thirty—I found I didn't have much reason to be bored, after all. Of course, most of these things I should have done yesterday. Some actually *were* repeats, because I'd already talked to my lawyer, and today was follow-up. On Monday, I'd called my difficult parents, as well. My mom was doing great and had been released from the hospital on Sunday. She was “resting” at home, which probably meant she was running my dad ragged. There were no leads on who had side-swiped her, but it was still being investigated.

I decided to contact my lawyer first.

“Everything looks straight forward,” he told me about the paperwork severing my ties with Pendleton Motorsports. “He didn't slip in any monetary requirements or non-compete clauses. You can move forward without any worries. You're a free agent.”

“I'm not sure that's what a free agent is,” I laughed. The whole situation still waged a battle inside me. I was fucking glad to be free of Pendleton Motorsports, but on the other hand, I

mourned the loss of my career. Even before I'd taken my first lap for this season, there had been talk of me being a favorite for the cup this year. I could taste it. It had been right there within my reach.

But that was in the past. I had to look to the future, but none of the options I'd considered so far really piqued my interest.

"You have fair grounds to sue him," my lawyer offered.

"Wrongful termination of the contract. Though you said this came from his lawyer's address, I'm fairly sure he didn't even have his legal team review this paperwork he sent you. It's got Swiss cheese holes all over it—all in your favor."

"So you're saying I can get back in the car?"

"Probably not. That would be a bitch of a situation, if we forced it, too. You know he'd sabotage you, even to his own detriment."

"Yeah." I had to agree. Firing me would hinder him, as well. But he'd done it, not me.

"Still... You *could* make him pay through the nose."

I liked the sound of that a little too much, and I wanted to get the money he'd promised for my parents. My lawyer was a shark; he'd succeed. Hiring him on the advice of another driver had been one of the best moves I'd made. "Do it."

"I'll get on it. Let me know where to send the bill."

We both laughed, but I knew he was serious. Sports lawyers, good ones, weren't cheap and they didn't work gratis. "I have the same accountant. You can send the bill there. I'll let him know to expect it."

Feeling satisfied, I headed over to my storage unit and grabbed the cardboard envelope containing the marriage certificate and accompanying paperwork, proving it was valid, then grabbed takeout from *Nan's Diner* where Sadie worked. The meal wasn't exactly rife with romance, but our friend knew exactly what Bristol liked on the current lunch menu.

"Hi, baby," I greeted Bristol when I leaned on the circulation desk at the library at one minute before her break time. She'd

likely thought I would text or call, but her smile told me she was thrilled to see me in the flesh.

"Hey, hot stuff. Aren't you that famous guy...?" She waved her hand as if she were thinking. "One of the Andrettis?"

"Ha-ha," I deadpanned. "Ready for lunch, funny girl? I brought us food. It's in the truck."

"Can't wait. Let me grab my coat. It finally decided to be winter, and it's freezing!"

"Truck's nice and warm, and at least, it's not snowing." I couldn't help thinking how much warmer it would be if we were down in Daytona.

Another life, Axel. Let it go.

It was difficult, though.

While I waited for her to grab her jacket, I glanced around the children's section of the library where Bristol worked. Knowing what I did now, I wondered if it had been difficult for her. Clearly, she adored children and working with them, though. The decorations had her hand on them, and she'd setup cozy reading nooks with baskets of board books for little ones and racks of recommended early reader books for those who were a little older.

"You love kids," I commented when she came back in her thick peacoat.

"What?"

I indicated around us. "Kids. You love them, making reading fun and accessible for them."

A soft smile curled her lips. I'd seen it before, but this time, I recognized the longing in her eyes. "Yeah. I love them. Seeing their little eyes light up when a story touches them, when they realize the joy of books... There's nothing like it. Not as a librarian."

"We'll have our own. Soon. And I will cover you in bubble wrap and hover over you every step of the way to keep both of you safe."

Her eyes widened, and I could tell she didn't really know what to say. That longing in her gaze slipped away, though.

"How many do you want?" I asked when we got to the truck.

"A couple. Maybe three."

"Nah, baby," I said, opening her door and helping her up onto the seat. She looked up at me in confusion since I'd *just* said I wanted kids. "If we have more than two, we gotta go for four. Keep things even."

"What about three kids and a dog?" she countered when I slid behind the wheel.

"Four kids and a couple dogs."

"You say this like you're the one who's going to carry them."

"We can adopt," I offered as I drove down the block and around the corner to the carpark overlooking the lake.

"As long as we have more than one," she conceded. "I always wanted a brother or sister or both. I mean, I have a ton of cousins, and some of them like Sutton are really close to me, but I always wanted my own siblings."

I nodded. "I wouldn't trade my brothers—now. If you would have asked me when I was a teenager... Well, you could have had them both in exchange for a half-eaten candy bar."

"Nah, you loved them. You would have kicked the asses of anyone messing with them."

"You're right. I still would," I conceded.

Reaching to the backseat, I grabbed our lunches then handed Bristol hers, along with a cardboard envelope.

"What's this?" she asked, fingering the edge.

"Open it."

Her brow furrowed, she reached inside the torn edge then pulled out the sheets of paper. "Is this...? Oh my gosh. This is our actual marriage certificate."

"There's paperwork about it, too. Where it was filed, the validity...all the stuff I had looked into."

She shuffled to glance at the other sheets.

“I’ll need these to change my name, I suppose,” she said.

“Probably. I was wondering if you would.”

“I’ve always wanted to be a Pendleton. Not a Donovan-Pendleton, hyphenating like some of my cousins. Just Bristol Pendleton. That’s probably pretty old-school of me, isn’t it?”

“It doesn’t matter what anyone else thinks.” I pulled her toward me, onto my lap. “You *are* Bristol Pendleton. You have been for longer than that paper made it so. You’ve always been mine.”

I reached into my pocket with my left hand then held her rings pinched in my thumb and forefinger, held between us, my own shiny ring already on my finger.

“Is it cheesy to do this on Valentine’s Day?” I asked. “I actually had this big thing in mind, but I can’t wait anymore —”

“It’s perfect,” she breathed, interrupting me. Tears glistened in her eyes. “It’s completely perfect.

“I know I asked the other night, but it was in the heat of passion while we were naked. Will you marry me? Again,” I asked. “Will you marry me again?”

She held out her fingers, so I could slide on the solitaire and diamond-encrusted band. “Yes. A hundred times yes.”

I brushed my lips over hers, mindful that we were parked in public where anyone could walk past. I doubted any media would be lurking around to snap us, but who knew?

“Can we do a renewal ceremony and reception this summer?” I asked.

“If you want to. I’m just glad we’re married.”

“I want to have something in front of everyone. Our families deserve it. You deserve it.”

She snuggled into me. “I love you, Axel. Talking about the future with you makes my heart happy.”

“I love you, too. You’re everything to me. So...while we’re talking about our future, our immediate plans are dinner tonight. I made reservations at *Barke’s Grille*.”

“Really? I’m surprised you got in on Valentine’s Day. It’s one of the nicest restaurants in town. Everyone wants to go there tonight.”

I winked at her. “I would have bribed him, if I had to, but I’m pretty sure he’s got a space for family and old friends. He’s rooting for Brixel to make it this time. I mean... We might end up in a corner of the kitchen, but we’ll have a table.”

“I don’t care. We could do fast food on a blanket in the living room, and it would be okay with me.”

“Now you tell me,” I groaned, playfully. Shifting her onto the seat beside me and handing her the food I brought, I pulled out my phone.

She opened her container.

“Oh, I love the veggie melt from *Nan’s!* What are you doing?” she asked, nodding toward the phone in my hand.

“Canceling the string quartet for tonight.”

“Goofball.” She bumped my shoulder with hers, then leaned closer and lifted her face. “How ‘bout you kiss me instead?”

“Right here where everyone on Main street can see us?” I teased.

“What better place? You’re my husband, and I want everyone to know.”

Clicking shut her takeout box, I carefully set it aside again then cupped her cheek. My lips pressed to hers, and it was a long time before either of us thought about food.

Thirty



Bristol

Flurries swirled through the air while we headed toward our Valentine date that evening at *Barke's Grille*. I sat in the middle of the bench again, right beside Axel, enjoying his heat on what had turned into a really chilly evening. Our fingers were twined on his thigh while we traveled in comfortable silence.

A call ringing through the dashboard of the truck startled us both, the display showing only a number since the name wasn't one of Axel's contacts.

"You know who it is?" I asked.

He shook his head, letting it go to voicemail. "Nope."

The call immediately rang again.

"I think you should answer. It might be something urgent." We both knew what had happened just days ago with his mother.

"Yeah..." His thumb flicked a button on the steering wheel.

"Hello?"

"Hey, Axel?"

"Yes?" It was clear from Axel's tone, he didn't know the caller.

"It's Troy Pressure."

"Um. Hi, Troy. What's up?" And why was he calling? My heart sped up at the possibilities, both from excitement and a tinge of fear I couldn't quite assuage.

“Look, I’m not gonna beat around the bush,” Troy continued. “I heard what your uncle did, which is some bullshit by the way. Did you hear what happened at the track today?”

My brow furrowed as I wondered what crap Darius might have pulled.

“No. I’ve been spending Valentine’s Day with my girl and avoiding all things NASCAR,” Axel answered. His fingers tightened around mine, silently reminding me we were together no matter what.

“Shit! Valentine’s Day. My wife is going to kill me. What?” he called to someone who’d said something to him that we couldn’t hear. “You sent her flowers for me? Thank fuck. Remind me to give you a big raise.” He took a breath. “Sorry about that, Axel. Just side a note—a great assistant will save your relationship on shitty days. Keep that in mind. Anyway. I’ve been chest deep in a shitstorm because one of my drivers, Martin Peevy, wrecked during a practice run today. He’ll recover, thankfully, but we weren’t even sure of that, earlier. It was bad. Real bad. Bad enough he’s out for the season.”

Fuck. And the season didn’t technically start until Sunday.

“He qualified yesterday. I could bring someone up from National, but I want someone who can handle Daytona with the big dogs, someone who knows what it’s like with these guys and won’t need a rookie stripe on their car. I need someone like you in that car. It’s yours for the season, if you want it.”

“I don’t know what to say,” Axel replied slowly, his body going tense beside me.

I practically bounced in my seat. *Oh my God!* Probably my worries should have roared into gear, but excitement won out. This was everything! Axel would get to race after all!

I squeezed his hand, and I was nodding when he looked over at me, concern in his eyes. I knew he was thinking he’d have to choose between racing or me again. Not true. We were older now, different, and we knew what it was like to be apart.

“Well, fuck. Say yes. You’re my top choice. You might have heard I’m running a third car next year,” Troy continued. “You do good this year, and the new car is yours.”

“He’ll do it,” I exclaimed before Axel could say something dumb like *I’ll think about it*.

“Good,” Troy crowed. “I need you here tomorrow. I was hoping you’d say yes, so I took the liberty of delaying your rig from leaving this afternoon. It’ll be here for you.”

“I’ll be there as soon as I can get a ticket,” Axel told him, his shock wearing away. I felt it. His excitement rolled off him, his body shaking with adrenaline now that the opportunity had pushed past his surprise and disbelief.

“Good,” Troy said again. “I’ll have my assistant handle it and text you the info. Welcome to the team, kid.” He hung up.

Axel pulled over to the side of the road. He turned in his seat to look over at me.

“Bristol...”

“I love you. It’s best for you.”

“But—”

“You’re not leaving me. You’ve said it a zillion times. This isn’t like last time,” I interrupted. I looked at my hand, playing with the ring on my finger. “We’ll be fine. You get to drive,” I breathed in awe. “For *Troy Pressure!* How cool is that? You’re idol!”

“Can’t even believe it. I feel like I’m dreaming. My career was done then—”

“Your career was never done. You’re too good for that.”

“You just love me.”

“Stop with the false modesty. You finished second in the series last year. Yeah, I love you, but it’s way more than that. You know it. I’m kinda surprised you haven’t gotten a call before now.”

He pulled his lip between his teeth, smiling and shaking his head before he stopped moving and his eyes honed in like me,

a predator to his prey. “Bristol...”

“I’ll miss you, but I’ll be here waiting. I can fly to where you are, too. We talked about that,” I hurried to assure him.

“No.” He shook his head, but spoke again before I could panic. “I know it’s a big ask, but... Come with me to Daytona.”

“I... Come with you?”

“Yeah. And not just to Daytona. Everywhere on the schedule. We can handle the move and payments and whatever from the road—even if our condo is vacant for a little bit. You can work on your book while you’re with me. We can work on that baby—which might already be cooking inside you. I don’t want to be without you ever again. It’s Brixel forever, right?”

“You know, this town will probably have a dang parade when they find out Brixel is alive and well,” I joked.

“Can you blame them? Greatest love story ever told.”

“I think there are a ton of couples around here who’d disagree with you. But I don’t.”

“So...will you? Will you come with me?”

I nodded. “I want to be with you, Axel. Wherever the road takes us. You better cancel those reservations with Barke, now. It looks like we have other reservations to make—and packing to do.”

* * *

Our night turned from a romantic outing to a surreal panic. On the way back to our apartment, Axel got a text from Troy. When I read it, we found he’d had his assistant book us redeye tickets out of Grand Rapids, leaving in just a few hours. The smart man had known without being told that I would be traveling with his new driver. That had definitely earned points in his favor with Axel, proving in another way that Troy was not like Darius.

Axel had never really unpacked, and most of his stuff was in his motorhome, so he’d been ready to go in minutes. On the other hand, I had had about an hour to pack enough to last me

through the middle of June, the first one-week break in the schedule.

“Just pack everything,” Axel said. Reaching up into my closet, he pulled down my nested suitcases. “What do you need help with?”

“My laptop is in its case in the living room. Put my chargers and my tablet in with it and put it by the door, so I don’t forget it. Call your mom and dad. I’ll call the library, my parents and Sutton on the way. She’ll come over and take care of the stuff in the fridge—but if you could make sure there are no dishes in the sink. How many suitcases can I take?” I asked feeling on the edge of panic as I threw underwear in one. Thank God, I did laundry yesterday.

“As much as you need. I can make room in my bag for you, too.” He pulled me into his arms and kissed me breathless.

“You can buy anything else you need on the road. Don’t worry. I’ll go take care of the stuff you asked me to do.”

“What about your truck?” I exclaimed.

He stroked his hands over my upper arms to calm me. “Baby, it’s okay. When I call home, I’ll ask Aston and Van to pick it up from the airport’s parking garage.”

Miraculously, I was ready to go in under forty-five minutes, but there had been no finesse to the jumble I’d stuffed into the cases, and I was sweating. And I’d managed to only have two suitcases, a small carryon I was making Axel bring for me, and my laptop.

The drive to Grand Rapids took almost two hours, and the snow had gotten heavier. I checked our flight several times, but it hadn’t been canceled. We ended up with an hour delay, though, while they de-iced the wings, but we were onboard and secure in our first class seats.

Since it was the middle of the night and Axel didn’t know if he’d have to drive later that day, he’d fallen off to sleep. While I sat beside him, cuddled in the airline blanket I’d been given, I marveled at how easily he’d dropped off. Apparently, the years on the road had trained him to sleep anytime anywhere.

My fingers tapped soundlessly on my tablet, and I glanced over at him. As if sensing me, his dark-brown eyes popped open. “You’re awake.”

“Can’t sleep. I’m not sure how you can.”

He shrugged. “I’d help you, introduce you to the mile-high club, but I hear you can get in trouble for that and I just got a car back.”

“I’d be mortified if we got caught anyway,” I confessed. “I’d rather wait and christen your motorhome.”

He kissed my shoulder, then reached up to cup the back of my head and pull my lips to his. “I can’t wait.”

His tongue pressed to the seam of my lips and with a low moan, I opened for him. My tablet tumbled to the floor as I leaned closer, tasting him and getting lost in his lips. I arched into him as his soft, biting kisses teased me with the promise of more and then he dove in and devoured, making me dizzy. Arousal burst to life, making me hate that we had at least three hours before we got to our home away from home.

I felt Axel fumbling between us, and our armrests lifted out of the way. The next thing I knew, I was in his lap and he’d scooted into my seat, his back to the wall. Holding me tight, he brought my head to rest on his chest, his solid heartbeat beneath my ear. Carefully, he tucked the blanket around us.

This was probably totally against the rules. Axel clearly didn’t care.

“Relax,” he whispered into my hair. “Get some rest.”

“I can’t.”

“Try, okay?” He slowly rubbed his hand up and down my back. “For me. Take deep slow inhales and exhales. Think about the feel of the sun on you when we get to Daytona, warming your skin and making you feel drowsy.”

He brought my lips to his again, kissing me with lazy exploration, his mouth and tongue claiming every part of mine, relaxing me more than any visualization could, even though it aroused me, too. After a long while, I cuddled into

his chest again while he continued the slow caresses up and down my back. His steady heartbeat lulled me like magic, and we both drifted off to sleep.

Thirty-One



Bristol

At the top of the empty stands where I'd chosen to watch practice, I yawned while I watched the #18 car flying around the track as Axel got the feel of the car he'd be driving. I wasn't sure if this was a regular practice time designated for him, or if a special allowance had been made, but just watching him took me back to old times when I'd watched him race at the local tracks.

I didn't yawn because watching him bored me. Quite the opposite! I could barely quell my excitement over this opportunity. It was just that we'd gotten to the motorhome just before four this morning. We'd had a few hours to sleep before Axel had needed to report to the Pressure hauler to meet with his new crew chief.

After I'd dawdled around our home away from home, finishing my morning coffee, I'd left the RV, to-go cup of my second coffee in hand, and made my way to the track. I'd been thrown curious looks while I walked across the grounds. Despite the rivalries on the track, I'd heard the drivers and their families were close with each other. They probably recognized Axel's rig, and to that end, did *not* recognize me as I exited it. I had no doubt Axel and his situation were the talk of the circuit, and by extension, I would be, too.

Sipping my coffee and letting the caffeine wage a battle with my fatigue, I kept my eyes pinned on Axel. There were no other vehicles on the track for him to race, but his car screamed past. I hoped he could channel that speed on Sunday.

This morning, he'd explained that the driver he replaced had qualified tenth, but the rules would have Axel starting dead last. He'd need every tick of speed and every inch of his skill to place well. A difficult task, but not impossible. I had faith in him.

I tensed as he rounded a bend, mere inches from the wall. My heart galloped as fear pulsed through me.

"He knows what he's doing," I whispered to myself. "He's a pro. He'll be fine. It wasn't as close as it looked from here."

Axel was already around the track, going by me again, before I got my wits back together. I took deep breaths, studying the speedway. With the pass I'd been given, I could access to the stands and all the drivers' areas. I'd picked a place to watch where I'd be alone. As happy as I was that we were here, I needed to acclimate, so I'd settled down away from the throngs of people, yet close enough to see the action.

I set my mostly full cup on the cement beside me and pulled out my phone to make notes in my writing app. Being here gave me ideas for another book. Not that I'd give up the Cherish Cove history I'd been working on, but this could be another project to look into.

Movement caught my attention as I navigated through the programs on my phone.

"You have got to be kidding me," I muttered under my breath while I pretended not to see the woman climbing the stands toward me, looking as if she should be on Rodeo Drive and not a NASCAR track.

With a sigh, I bypassed my notes app and activated a different one then set the device face down next to my coffee.

Leaning back on my hands, I turned my face toward the sun to soak in the rays. It was so beautiful here. Sunny. Warm. This was so much nicer than the snow we'd left behind yesterday.

"Don't even start your shit about Axel being yours," I warned when her shadow blocked my sunlight.

"As if I ever wanted him," Marta scoffed.

I raised an eyebrow but didn't look her way or respond.

"I see you've been moving fast, though," she taunted, her bitter voice poisonous. "A ring already? Girl. Axel only wants you to salvage his reputation and clean up his image. Do you really think you can keep a man like him? You're small town, and he's Hollywood."

"Axel is just as small town as I am," I replied, keeping my tone breezy even though her words hurt. "You can take the boy out of the village, but you can't take the village out of the man." I lifted my left hand to look at my gorgeous ring, letting her get a good look in the process. "And no... I haven't moved fast at all. Axel and I have been together since we were thirteen. And we've been married for almost seven years now."

Marta tried to hide her surprise, but I saw it.

"So," I snapped off. "You can try to smear him all you want, but it's not gonna work."

Marta scoffed. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Don't you? Are you really going to deny it? Both Axel and I already know it was you." We were pretty sure, anyway. And I really, really wanted her to admit it. Out loud.

She huffed, rolling her eyes. An act. I saw the tinge of worry in the widening of her eyes and the faint lines around her mouth. "You don't know anything."

"So why don't you tell me? I know you're the one who arranged for the fake pictures and video as well a hacking into his bank account."

"I never touched his bank account!" she exclaimed.

Well, that was easier than I'd thought it would be. With difficulty, I held back any hint of my triumph.

"But you did the other things. I mean, hell, Marta, you practically gave me proof on a silver platter back in Cherish Cove."

"Look," she growled. "You think you're pretty smart, but you don't know how to play this game, little girl. This is the big

leagues, not some small town dirt track.”

I raised an eyebrow, taunting her. “I’m not very into games, anyway. I just want the bullshit to stop.”

She shook her head. “Axel had his head up his ass too much to notice my advances, anyway. If he’d just embraced the bad boy press he was getting, let us edge up his image, I could have shielded him from Darius.”

“Are you *kidding*? That’s what it was all about? Making his image more exciting? For what?”

“I told you that you didn’t understand the game. Certain sponsors like some edge.”

“I don’t understand *your* game.” I understood Marta was a crazy ass bitch. That, I didn’t question. I didn’t need to be her brand of crazy to be able to understand her.

She waved her hand with its blood-red manicure. “More press. More attention. More people betting on if he’ll win or crack under the pressure. I would have been the good woman drawing him back from the edge. We would have been the circuit’s power couple. Not *Jack and Diane, two kids from the heartland*.” She rolled her eyes, and I had to bite back a laugh. Crazy *and* dramatic.

Besides... Axel with Marta? They couldn’t be more different. No, they wouldn’t be like me and Axel. They’d certainly be a mish-mashed odd couple, though.

“You think Axel is too boring?” I asked, picking that angle and ignoring she’d had designs on my man. “Clearly, you don’t know him well. He’s anything but *boring*.”

I sighed happily as if remembering his loving, steadfastly acting as if she weren’t looming over me. She wouldn’t cow me. I had no doubt I could take her out faster than those heels could topple down these bleachers, though. I wasn’t worried. The most I’d get was a bruise. If that.

“I’m not the only one who thought so. If he could have just played along, he wouldn’t have gotten fired.”

I glanced out at the track. The 18 wasn't racing around it anymore. He was probably in the Pressure Racing hauler meeting with his new team while they worked out any of the car's remaining bugs. There were probably some kinks since it was the backup vehicle, the primary one trashed yesterday.

I shrugged. "Seems to have worked out okay, though."

She blew out a disparaging breath. "Right. Driving for a cut-rate team."

"Your opinion."

"Facts, little girl." She shook her head. "Darius' crew knows how to make a car win. Axel could have been the best, if he'd just turned the other way a time or two. Could have gone and won it all this year. Now, it'll be Darius' new driver. We're out to win it, and we'll be leaving Axel choking on the dust."

"You seem awfully sure of that."

"Yep."

"Wanna share, because Ax is a top driver. A new car won't change that."

She scoffed. "A new car will make all the difference." She smirked. "Enjoy your visit to the big leagues. You'll be back on the dirt tracks before you know it."

"And you? What are you planning? Hooking up with another driver?" The woman might dress like she shopped at Saks, but I saw the avarice in her eyes. She was after a purse and not the kind on a shop rack.

Her shoulder lifted, her lips curling into a Grinchy smirk, before she spun on the ball of her foot to click away on her ridiculous footwear. Louboutin would be ashamed.

"All you need to know is, I'll be taking care of business, just like always," she sneered over her shoulder.

"Great," I called after her. "I'll look for Teddy in the gossip pages."

All I got was a huff in response. Frankly, I didn't need more. I could barely stomach the woman anyway. A bit of irrational

jealousy? Yes. And I knew it was indeed irrational. Axel wanted nothing of her. But the fact she'd tried to dig her blood-red claws into him still raised my gorge.

Reaching for my phone, I turned off the recording and slipped the cell into my pocket while I finished my coffee and watched the activity around the track. I'd been to NASCAR races before, of course, but only on race day. The sheer volume of people here for the entire week stunned me.

Frankly, I was kind of surprised I was alone in this section—and admittedly a little shocked Marta had managed to track me down here. Which made me think she'd actually followed me here from the driver's motorhome lot, stalking me so she'd have the chance to confront me.

My phone went off, and I pulled it back out of my pocket.

Axel: *I'm going to be done here in about twenty minutes. Lunch?*

Me: *Sure. What do you want?*

Before he'd picked us up at the airport in the wee hours this morning, Axel's driver had made sure the place was stocked with Axel's list of regular items. I supposed, I could head back and whip together lunch then maybe do a little of my unpacking.

Axel: *My favorite.*

Um...

Me: *Slim Jims and Pringles?*

Axel: *Ha Ha. No. You. Naked. Legs spread for me.*

Oh my... Heat flushed through me.

I looked around as if anyone nearby would have been telegraphed his message. Silly. And of course, I was still alone. But now, his words made me think of naughty things we could do in the stands. Not that we ever would. That was *not* the kind of press we wanted.

Me: *That's not much nutrition for a busy racer.*

Axel: *Says you. I'll see you in twenty. Be naked.*

Again...oh my. The Daytona sunshine had nothing to do with the warmth making me perspire now.

Thirty-Two



Bristol

Gathering my cup, I stood. My legs were a little wobbly, and again, it had nothing to do with location. My man stole my breath when I least expected it.

If I wanted to get back before Axel and freshen up, I had to get moving.

Thankfully, I hadn't taken Floyd, Axel's driver, up on the offer to come back to the track and drive me around for sightseeing today. I really had no interest in that. I wanted to absorb the atmosphere here. Plus the poor man's life had been all up in the air over the upheaval with Axel. He'd traveled here then had been getting ready to pack up and leave when he was told to stay—and pick us up at the airport in the middle of the night. The guy had probably headed to his hotel room to drink.

He'd still made me take his number just in case I needed him for anything.

Axel had been worried over me, too, but I'd assured him I was fine. I had my work, and I had a track pass. With all the people in the area, I could ask for directions if I needed them. It was far more important for Axel to meet with his spotter, crew and car chiefs, and Troy than to worry about me.

Passing security, I jogged toward my home-on-the-road, grinning when I remembered conversations with myself over exercise back home. See, here I was. In nice weather. Running.

I let myself into the RV then took the steps up into the living area. When internet articles called these rigs mansions of wheels, they weren't kidding. Axel's RV—I guess, *our* RV—was way nicer than our apartment. Done in pristine cream and stainless throughout, it had a plush living area with a large-screen TV. There was an executive-style desk and a kitchen his mom would probably drool over.

I hadn't even explored everything, either. Last night, I'd basically followed Axel through the shadows then fallen into the king-sized bed with him. Neither of us had even done more than toe off our shoes.

Our luggage hadn't made it past the top of the landing, right behind the driver's cockpit, and shoved slightly into the living room.

Standing there, looking around, I bit my lip. Did Axel really mean *naked* naked? Or just *ready* to be naked?

I leaned toward the latter, thinking of the sheer baby doll nightie I'd packed. It had languished in the back of my lingerie drawer, tags still on it, for years, and I'd packed it with the hope of it getting some "airtime" this trip. I dragged my suitcases to the bedroom. I wouldn't unpack them now, but take care of that task this afternoon after Axel went back to work. Hefting the smaller of the bags onto the bed, I quickly found the frothy pale-pink confection then set aside the luggage for later.

After a rush trip to the luxurious bathroom to freshen up then change, I climbed onto the bed and positioned myself in the middle. My anticipation ratcheted up when I heard the door open a few minutes later.

"Honey, I'm home," Axel called. "Are you back?"

I couldn't help but smile at the lightness in his tone. Even before Darius had severed their contract, his situation had weighed on him. It wasn't until now, when things had veered into a sharp upward trajectory that I realized how demoralized he'd been.

"In the bedroom."

A wide grin stretched across his face when he appeared in the doorway and leaned against the entry, looking at me with his arms crossed and surveying me sitting in the middle of the bed, my hands on the mattress beside one hip while my legs curled to the side. The lace and mesh baby doll and matching thong revealed more than they hid.

“You’re not naked, but I can’t complain. Fuck, Bristol, you’re every wet dream I ever had.”

My fingers trailed over my body from my shoulder and down between my breasts and to my hip. “And what did you do in these dreams?”

Axel crawled onto the bed. He stalked me, his body pushing my backward as he sealed his lips over mine. His scent mixed with a slight smell of oil from the garage, his taste minty when he brushed his mouth over mine. As the kiss deepened, it erupted fire through me and melted my core that was immediately slick and ready for him. My back was flat to the mattress before he released my lips and started a path down my torso, tasting every bit of skin along the way.

“I did this,” he hissed, shoving up the nightie and kissing my belly before he followed the fabric upward and captured a nipple in his mouth. I cried out, arching into him as he sucked hard. Wild pleasure seared through me. I held him to me as he suckled and nipped at the sensitive peak.

“Fuck, you taste good,” he growled as he moved to the other pebbled tip.

“You feel good,” I replied.

“Gonna make you feel amazing.” His hand skimmed along my thigh, bringing my leg around him while he set about reddening the areola and making it slick. Finding one of the ties at the side of my thong, he yanked on the ribbon. I wiggled to get it off while he pressed my legs open and moved toward his target to do what he’d promised over text.

“Play with your nipples while my mouth is busy,” he ordered. His teeth raked lightly over my hipbone then he was all business as his thumbs smoothed over my labia. His breath

was hot against my already overheated flesh when he parted me. “Such a pretty little pussy.”

“Axel,” I whined, not even caring that he reduced me to mewling, something I never did. Except with him.

“Needy, baby?”

“Damn it, Ax—” I cut off on a sharp gasp when his lip closed around my clit. Rumor was men couldn’t find the little nub, but my man had a built in compass leading him right to it. And once he got there...

“Oh...God!” I cried. My fingers buried in his lush hair. My hips canted into him while I shook from the spirals of electricity accompanying each draw of his mouth. “Fuck...”

“Such a naughty mouth,” he laughed before licking a path along my slit. “But the best tasting treat. So creamy and sweet and wet. And all mine.”

His fingers traced my opening while his wicked tongue returned to torment my slit. They didn’t tease for long, two digits slipping deep inside me. Our eyes met while he watched me reacting to him. I couldn’t see his mouth, but I was sure the monster was grinning while I writhed from the agonizing pleasure he doled out.

My eyes rolled back, and I moaned. Desperate for an anchor while he sent me careening toward the moon, I abandoned my breasts and fisted the blankets.

“Axel,” I gasped, the tension twisting tight in my belly and ready to escape its tether and fly free. “Axel...I’m...”

“Come,” he demanded against me, his fingers fucking harder. “Feed me.”

His carnal command, so dark, so...provocative with his lurid suggestion, slashed away the last sinew of my control. My body spasmed, my gasping cries filling the air as I came.

Axel loomed over me while I shook then his cock surged into me, his piercing abrading my walls with the perfect friction. He fucked me hard, him still fully dressed, his pants shoved down only far enough to free his erection, and me with my

nightie bunched up under my armpits. His mouth crashed over mine as our bodies clashed together.

I moaned into his mouth, my flavor filling my senses. We were lost together in the moment, rocking against one another, touching everywhere we could. Another orgasm taunted me, cresting then ebbing, over and over. I didn't care. All I cared about was Axel—being with Axel. Loving Axel. Being one with Axel. Having him deep inside me.

My Axel.

Staring up into his eyes, locking our stares, I cupped his cheek. I saw everything there. Our past. Our future. All his love. I mirrored it back to him, showing him all my devotion.

The power of it dragged us over, tumbling us into the roiling waves of release. Axel's jaw went slack, gaze going unfocused. His breath caught, and his warmth flooded into me. It pulled me into the abyss with him where we clung together, still undulating, still lost to anything else.

Perspiration covered us when we collapsed into each other, panting.

Axel rolled to keep his weight off me and pulled me with him, our limbs tangled.

"How long before you have to be back?" I asked when I could finally speak without having to stop to catch my breath.

"I had an hour. Maybe have to leave in twenty."

"You're gonna have to change your clothes," I teased.

Axel chuckled and kissed the tip of my nose. "Small price to pay. I think this might have been the best lunch break of my life."

I shook my head and rested my cheek over his heart, listening to one of my favorite sounds in the world. I couldn't deny I could happily spend lunch like this every day, too.

Thirty-Three



Axel

“My mom and dad are coming to the race,” I told Bristol while we worked in the kitchen that evening. We were actually meeting up with Huck Larson—one of the other Pressure drivers—and his sister, who worked for him. Conveniently, they were in the RV next to ours. We’d arranged a circle of chairs between the rigs and were doing BYOD—bring your own dinner. Huck had set up his portable firepit and mentioned he’d see if his friend, Quill, one of the other guys on the circuit, wanted to join us.

“Is that safe for your mom?”

I shrugged. “You know how she is. She’s insisting. I’m sure my dad checked with the doctor to be sure she can travel. I think the most important worry will be keeping Dad away from his brother. He’s ready to commit fratricide.”

I couldn’t exactly blame him. My uncle had pulled all kinds of shady shit on the family, and I felt like I discovered a new part of the shitstorm every day. To that end, my dad was pissed at me, but he’d get over it. Specifically, my accountant had deposited the money to cover my mom’s medical bills. We couldn’t get the amounts from my parents or from her providers due to privacy laws, but some digging had sussed out how much their loans were. My mom and dad could be as mad at me as they wanted; I didn’t care.

Beside me, Bristol sighed, her fingers tracing back and forth on the countertop while she stared blindly at the salad she’d

been making.

“What?” I asked, my senses going on high alert.

“That reminds me... Marta.”

“Don’t worry about her. She can’t touch us, and she’s part of Darius’ crap. She’ll probably leave us be now—”

“I don’t know about that,” she said, pulling out her phone.

“She found me in the stands today.”

She flicked her thumb across the screen then hit something. As she turned up the volume, I heard voices. While I listened to the conversation, my mouth dropped open. Disbelief and anger fought for dominance the farther the recording went.

“I’m not too good for you. You’re too good for *me*,” I growled, my hand in a fist. Despite Bristol’s reply to Marta, I knew Marta’s words had hurt her. And then the admission about why bullshit upon bullshit had been heaped on me the past few months and the unspoken implication that my uncle had been complicit in it all. When Marta started talking about the cars, it left me speechless, though I knew it shouldn’t.

Bristol wrapped her arms around me, silently giving me strength while I absorbed it all. It wasn’t strength I needed, though. It was a restraint on my fury.

“Can you send that to me?” I asked in a carefully controlled voice. I wasn’t sure what I’d do with the recording, but I wanted the evidence in my possession.

She nodded, worry filling her face. “Are you okay?”

“I’m fucking pissed. But I’m happier than I’ve ever been to be out from under Darius’ team. I’ll probably be questioning every little bad thing that happens to me for a long time, too.”

Troubled by the implications about rule-breaking with the car, I distracted myself by dishing out my food. I grabbed my plate and a soft drink while Bristol put away the salad and did the same.

“Let’s get outside before they think we’re not coming,” I said.

“I, uh, have a bit of an anti-social rep.”

“That must have been difficult for you. You’re so *not* anti-social.”

I half-shrugged. “It was harder not having you. The rest... It was easier to deal with.”

Now, it was especially difficult to know what she’d gone through. Bristol would tell me to knock it off with the guilt if she realized just how much it ate at me that she’d been alone in one of the worst episodes in her life. I could never express how grateful I was that she forgave me, that she was eager for us to have a child, even after that.

Huck and his sister were already outside by the fire when Bristol and I headed out. He stood, smiling wide as we approached.

“Hey! I was going to come knocking in a minute.”

“Sorry,” Bristol said. “My fault. There was some family drama I needed to tell him about.” She shuffled her plate and drink to one hand and held out her other. “I’m Axel’s wife, Bristol. Nice to meet you.”

“Wife,” Huck echoed, looking to me while she shook his hand. “Is that what you were doing over break?”

“Long story. But no. We’ve been married since high school. Like I said...” I added when his brows lifted. “Long story.”

He grinned. “I’d be interested to hear about that.” His finger circled to indicate the area. “What happens around the fire stays here. You don’t have to worry about me running to the press.”

I groaned at the reminder about my recent media coverage, but his sister, who had to be in her early twenties—maybe—waved. “I’m Novalee, but everyone calls me Novie.” She smiled at Bristol. “Besides traveling with Huck, I work for him. It’ll sure be nice to have another girl around. Are you going to be traveling with Axel for the whole season?”

“Yes,” I said before Bristol could even think to say otherwise. My wife grinned at me, but rolled her eyes.

With a quiet chuckle, she turned back to Novie. “I am staying for as long as I can. We just bought a new place, and *someone* needs to oversee our move for at least a few days.”

“It can wait,” I grumbled under my breath, but I was close enough to her ear that she heard.

“It can wait,” she agreed. “But not long.”

She sat in the chair closest to Novie. “But yes,” she continued. “I’m going to be around.”

I sat beside Bristol and stuck my drink in the chair’s holder, then looked over at Huck.

“Thanks for setting this up.”

He gave me a chin lift. “I didn’t say it earlier, but welcome to the team.” He raised a brow. “And not a second too soon.”

“Why’s that?” I asked.

“You’ve always been a bit of a recluse, so I guess you haven’t heard the gossip.”

I frowned. “I’ve been the center of plenty of it.”

He blew out a disparaging breath. “Oh, that bullshit? Whatever. No, this is bigger than that. More serious.” He leaned forward. “Career damaging.”

I leaned in, confused and wondering if I was about to be the butt of some joke, falling for something “serious” that turned out to be a laugh.

Huck glanced around. “You know I’m friends with guys on most of the teams,” he said so quietly, I almost didn’t hear him. “One of them is friends with someone on your old team. There are rumors of cheating.”

I sat back, shaking my head. “I... I never did. I...”

Huck waved away my words, while Bristol reached over and took my hand. “Why do you think no one has believed the shit that was shoveled around about you lately—no one on the circuit, anyway? You’ve never been that guy. There’s not a lot of talk between the crews about specifics, but your guys always mentioned—and by *mentioned* I mean griped—about

what a pain in the ass stickler you are since you get right in there to the grease and bolts.” He looked down a second before pinning me with his gaze again. “Something to think about when you suddenly found yourself without a car.”

I stared at him. Fuck, was he saying my uncle was pulling even shadier shit? Yeah, as of late, that came as no surprise. My mind drifted back to the recording of Marta that Bristol had taken. I needed to listen to it again.

“I guess so...” I murmured.

“You ever wonder why your old teammate, Waldecker, always wrecks the backend of his car when he burns out? Is he hiding something, you think?” He raised an eyebrow and my mouth dropped open.

“I...”

“Shit, I wasn’t gonna open with that,” Huck said. “Sorry.”

“Straight to the chase. Again,” Novie said, rolling her eyes at her brother. “He’s like that. No foreplay, just rushes right in.”

“Novalee!” Huck admonished. She ignored him.

“So how are you liking things with Pressure Racing, Axel?”

My head shook slightly as I caught up with the change of subject, still lost in the fact Darius was a dirty team owner. “It seems real good. I’ve followed Troy’s career for a long time.”

“He’s a great guy,” Huck agreed. “Gave me my big break three years ago.”

I nodded, wishing it were the case with me...except he hadn’t started his team six years ago.

As we settled in for dinner, we pushed aside shop talk, though what Huck had said and what Marta had implied about cars wasn’t far from my mind.

Thirty-Four



Axel

“That was nice, hanging out with Huck, Novie and Quill,” Bristol said while we got ready for bed. It hadn’t been a late night since Huck and I had to be to the hauler early tomorrow morning.

I nodded in agreement. It really had been refreshing to hang out with other drivers and just be guys for a while. I’d enjoyed that kind of camaraderie a few times when I’d been home for the week and realized how much I missed it. After Quill had shown up, I hadn’t enjoyed the two single guys flirting with Bristol, though. She’d seen oblivious to it, but I hadn’t been. It could be why I’d gone caveman on her and pulled her into my lap after we’d eaten. Novie had giggled at us while Huck and Quill smirked, clearly amused by my actions, too.

“It was nice. You and Novie seemed to be getting on.” I liked that they had made plans for next week, cementing the idea that Bristol would still be traveling with me. She’d said she would be, but sometimes, I had trouble trusting the sharp turn my life had taken over the past week. But fuck, was I thankful.

“She’s crazy,” Bristol said. “She doesn’t let her brother get away with anything, either. He clearly adores her—which has to be the only reason he keeps her as his assistant when she calls him out and teases him so much.”

The two reminded me a lot of me and my brothers. They only had each other, though, having lost their parents a few years ago. I knew from seeing them over the past few years that

Huck was relentlessly protective of his sister. I couldn't imagine he'd let her far from his watchful eye for any reason.

I chuckled. "Yeah, she does. Is that something you'd be interested in? Assisting? Me?"

She paused at the sink where she'd been washing her face then turned to me, an erotic vision in only her bra and panties. Suddenly, I didn't care about anything but getting her back into bed. Now.

"I wouldn't even know what to do," she said.

I raised a brow while I stalked toward her. "Anything I want."

"Oh really?" She smirked, crossing her arms under her breasts and managing to push them higher, which distracted me even more.

"Really. I could use some assisting right now, in fact."

"Is that so? What assisting?" she asked, egging me on.

"I need some help with something on the bed." Taking the last few steps toward her, I pulled her into my embrace. "Are you done in here?"

"Yep."

Swinging her up, I carried her to our bed, crawling onto the mattress with her in my arms. Positioning her under me, I pressed my lips over hers.

She immediately draped her arms around my shoulders, languidly kissing me back and undulating her body against mine while our legs tangled. My fingers traced the narrow strap of her bra down to the brief cup. I tugged it down and let her breast pop free. Immediately, I plucked at the pearled nipple. She moaned into my mouth, arching into my palm.

"I only ever want you. You know that, right?" She sounded breathless, my simple ministrations already stoking her arousal.

I pulled back slightly to look down at her. Her lips curled into a small smile.

“I’m not clueless to what’s going on around me,” she said. She cupped my cheek. “I’ve never, ever wanted anyone but you, even when I thought we were completely over for six years. The guys can flirt with me all they want. It won’t get them anywhere.”

Turning my head, I kissed her palm. “I know. I’m just—”

“Possessive?”

“A little.”

“Oh, just a little,” she teased.

Leaning in, I growled into her neck, nipping and tickling while she laughed beneath me. In moments, her giggles dissolved into moans as I made my way down her body, showing her with my mouth and hands how much I adored every bit of her and indeed would be possessive of all her sensual responses, all her sighs, all her mirth and all her...everything.

Soon, we found our bliss together with our cries filling the RV’s bedroom as we both came, Bristol’s body milking my release from me so hard I thought my eyes might cross. Claiming her brought instant peace to me, calming me in a way nothing else could.

I gathered Bristol to me, pressing my lips into her damp hair as she sprawled over my chest. “What a long day,” she yawned against me. “I feel like I’ve been up since yesterday morning.”

“You kind of have been. We should get some rest. Tomorrow will be another long day. I have to be on the track again, and Mom and Dad are flying in, too. They’re getting here around eleven.”

“Is someone picking them up?”

“It’s all set. Floyd will be getting them and driving them to their hotel. He’ll bring them back and forth.”

“Is that what he meant about being a taxi?” she asked. Early this morning, when he’d picked us up at the airport, he’d commented about a busy week of being a taxi. At the time, he’d meant taking Bristol and me wherever we needed to be. Floyd didn’t mind. As a widower, the NASCAR circuit had

become his life and his family. When it came to assisting me, he was indispensable—transporting me around the country, driving me anywhere I had to go, and setting up the RV—including stocking it.

“Yeah. He volunteered, actually. He’s met my family several times—in fact, he came on vacation with us a couple times. He and my dad get on well. Too well sometimes. They like to gang up on me.”

She rested her chin on her hand, smiling down at me. “Good.”

“Traitor.”

“Yeah. Spoiler alert: I’ll probably gang up on you, too.”

My fingers buried in her hair, pulling her lips up to mine. “As long as you’re with me.”

“Always.”

* * *

My dad was like a proverbial kid in a candy store as he stood at the freestanding stainless-steel countertop in the hauler, looking at race stats—mine versus the other drivers. Since he ran a team of four cars in the amateur league he was thrilled to be allowed to see this—something his brother had never allowed.

I appreciated his eye, too. As a substitute driver for another who’d already qualified, I’d be starting dead last in the pack. It would take all my skill to avoid getting wrecked by other’s back there while I navigated my way up the line toward the front runners. My chances of landing in the top ten, much less winning, were slim, but that didn’t mean I wouldn’t drive my ass off and try.

“Traitor!” a voice yelled followed by a ruckus of a toolchest being shoved and loose wrenches flying. Immediately, some of the crew moved closer to me, and I saw Troy emerge from his office as Darius stormed toward me.

“What the fuck are you doing in here?” Troy demanded, moving in right beside me.

“Talking to my ungrateful nephew,” Darius snapped as if he hadn’t brought on everything himself, firing me, and was now trespassing in another team’s hauler.

“Ungrateful?” I echoed, crossing my arms and standing square to him. “What should I be grateful for? You firing me without notice? You dragging me into what amounted to indentured servitude? You lying about paying my mom’s medical bills?” I took a step closer, not caring that we had an audience. “Or maybe I should be thanking you for orchestrating the smear campaign to ‘spice up’ my image because I was so boring?” I pointed at him. “Which was *your* fault.”

“You can’t just go drive for another team. I’ll sue your ass off.”

“No, you won’t,” I answered, not letting him agitate me. “My lawyer reviewed all the paperwork, as well you know since we’re suing you. You’re free of me. I’m fucking free of you. You have no hold on me anymore. There is nothing else you can do to me, and you brought this on yourself! Everyone knows you fired me. That *you* severed my contract. It’s been all over the news. And since you were the one to initiate it, I’m not bound by any conditions.”

“Because of your conduct,” Darius muttered under his breath, like a child being scolded.

“What conduct? Falling in love? You know all the other bullshit was just that. Bullshit staged by you and Marta. Me being caught up in the Pendleton Motorsports crap is done. I’m racing for Pressure, and I’m with Bristol. I wish you and Teddy the best of luck, which is more than either of you deserve. That’s it. Leave me the fuck alone.”

My dad stepped up beside me while Darius blustered. With Troy to my other side, the three of us were an immovable wall. I knew the crew were a second wall behind us.

“Get out,” my dad growled. Despite his low voice emerging in a calm, even cadence, I’d never heard him sound more deadly. “You are not my family. Not anymore. We never want to see or hear from you ever again.”

“And don’t you *ever* fucking skulk into my garages or haulers ever again,” Troy added, sounding almost as deadly as my dad, though his tone was clearly pissed. “I’ll have you physically removed then report you if you trespass again.”

A tic worked in Darius’ cheek while he clearly ground his teeth. Ignoring them, he glared at me. “You’re going to regret this. You’re going to pay for betraying me.”

Betraying *him*?

Before I could say a word, he spun on his heel and stormed out in a near-silent cloud of barely suppressed rage, though he probably would have slammed the door if the hydraulic hinges hadn’t impeded the action.

“Asshole,” my dad muttered. Shaking his head, he looked over at me. “*Please* crush him.”

Troy laughed, patting my dad’s shoulder. “I knew I liked you. You’ll be sitting with me on Sunday, right?”

My father grinned, returning to kid-meeting-Santa mode. “Of course. It will be our pleasure. We can cheer on Ax while he kicks that Teddy kid’s ass and makes Darius eat his heart out.”

Troy looked at me. “You okay, kid.”

“Yeah,” I replied, but deep down, Darius’ threats didn’t settle. With his words, he’d put a target on my back.

Thirty-Five



Bristol

Back and forth. Back and forth. From the front of the RV to the bedroom door then back. Though I was “reading”, my eyes tracked Axel’s progress while he paced.

The race was tomorrow, and his pre-race jitters were running full tilt. I knew the confrontation with Darius had him agitated, too.

“Are you okay?” I asked.

“Um-hmm,” he answered, his voice distracted as if he barely noted his rote answer.

“Are you worried about the race?”

“No.”

“Are you like this before every race?” He’d rarely gotten antsy like this back before he’d joined Pendleton Motorsports.

“What?” he asked, pausing. He gave a little shake of his head, and this time actually focused on me.

I waved my hand, indicating the pacing. “Do you always get like this before races now.”

He sighed. “No. I... I guess it’s probably just the whole ball of crap getting to me. My uncle and all that bullshit. Then proving myself to Troy. I want the spot on his team. Bad.”

Setting aside my tablet with the book I hadn’t actually been reading, I stood and went to him. My hands slid up to rest on his chest. “You’re going to get that spot. You’re a fantastic

driver, and everyone knows it. It's clear Troy admires you, too. He might be your boss now and expect a lot, but he likes you. And you... You're gonna go out there and drive your ass off, and no matter where you place tomorrow, it's not your only race this year. You have a whole season of races to prove you're as hungry for this spot as Troy thinks you are."

"Bristol..."

"These two weeks have just been a whirlwind. So much has happened, but we both know it won't always be like this. You've just been playing catch up ever since we arrived, since you came in late and you've never worked with this team. You're gonna do great, and next week, you'll have your feet under you."

He nodded, agreeing with me that next week would be better.

I was sure it would. Besides the stress of racing for a new team, there was the novelty of it all. He was all over the news, too. So were Troy and Darius. If we'd thought the gossip would stop when the season started, we'd been dead wrong. It was just different drama now, and all the commentators were eating it up.

It sounded as if most of them were firmly in Axel's corner, too. More than once, I'd heard them talk about Troy's major coup in contracting Axel Pendleton. I'd even heard that another team owner had been interested in my man, and if Troy hadn't swooped in as he had, they would have.

Axel ignored it all. He didn't want to hear any of rehashing or speculation. He was too busy for it, and he claimed it was nothing more than a distraction. Me? I couldn't really avoid it. While Axel worked, I hung out with Novie, and Novie had her ear constantly attuned to the NASCAR news.

She was in constant information-overload mode. I knew more things about the circuit, drivers and teams than I ever wanted to know. Not gossip; just straight up cut-and-dried facts. She'd also shown me around and introduced me to more people than I'd ever remember. I just hoped they'd all understand when I blanked on their names and their exact positions within the whole NASCAR operation's hierarchy.

And in a way, it was an operation, a big business.

“You’re right,” he sighed. He pressed his lips to my forehead. “I think I’m going to go over and talk to Huck. I need to ask him—”

I caught his hand. “No, you’re not. Huck’s already in bed, and you need to be getting there, too.”

It wasn’t that late, but Axel never stayed up late the night before a race. I knew from Novie that Huck would turn in by eight-thirty tonight.

Axel looked surprised, then his eyes narrowed. “How do you know Huck’s habits?”

“Jealous?” I teased.

He raised his brow. “Don’t make me kick his ass. Troy would be pissed if I wrecked his other driver.”

My arms looped around his waist, and I peered up at him. “There’s only one driver who interests me, and he’s right here. And you know that.”

“Yeah, I do. You’re my world, Brisk. You’re perfect. And all the guys will be after you once they figure it out.”

I blew out a scoffing breath. “You keep thinking that, big guy. But I know the truth. I’m the one who has to worry.”

“I’d never cheat on you,” he exclaimed.

“I *know* that. I just meant with pit lizards wanting you.”

“I haven’t noticed that.”

“Novie says it’s because you’ve always been oblivious to it. She...” I shook my head. “She seems to know an awful lot about everyone. She also hooked me up with a whole binder of information we’ll need. Schedules for everything taking place at each race, fundraisers and appearances, contacts, and more. Since you and Huck are on the same team, it’s pretty much the same for both of you. Somehow, I’ve become your de facto assistant.”

“I was serious when I offered that job the other night.”

“Were you? I was kind of distracted by other things your mouth was doing. And...something you wanted me to assist you with...in bed.”

He smirked, his eyes darkening. It took me back to when we were younger and always sneaking off together. Especially when he had excess energy before races, an agitation that pacing didn't seem to wear off. He hadn't been quite like this, but there had been one sure way to calm him.

In fact, the first time I'd dropped to my knees and taken him *in hand*, it was also the first time there had been something more than kissing and groping between us. I smiled at the memory. I'd rocked Axel's world, if I did say so.

And maybe, tonight would be a good time for a replay.

My fingertips skimmed over his sides before I caught his hand again. “Come on.”

“Where are we going?”

“You'll see.”

I pulled him back into the bedroom and shut the door.

“Bristol, I—”

“Shh...” My fingers pressed momentarily over his lips before I grasped his waistband and dropped to my knees. His breath caught, and his fly bulged noticeably as he caught my intention.

“Brisk... Fuck...”

“I hope so. But not yet,” I teased. I pulled his belt free of the loops then let it drop to the floor with a dull thud.

Immediately, I tugged free the button then his zipper. Curling my fingers on the waistband of his jeans and underwear, I yanked them down to his thighs. To my delight, his cock bobbed free, long and thick and fully hard, the apadravya glinting in the room's muted light.

My mouth watered while I bit the side of my bottom lip and studied the generous length and girth of the veiny shaft with its smooth, purply helmet.

My tongue shot out to dampen my lips. Grasping him, I moaned at the feel of the warm velvety skin against my palm. So soft, yet at the same time, so rock-solid. A droplet of precum pearled at his tip, and without pausing, I leaned in to lap it away. I moaned again at the salty-sweetness while Axel swore, his fingers burying in my hair.

“Bristol, baby, you don’t—”

“Let me,” I answered before he could tell me I didn’t need to do this. Our definitions of *need* were different. I really did *need* this. I craved him.

“I love doing this,” I told him as I leaned in and tongued his length, taking a moment to flick at his piercing in the process. “Making you shake. Making you swear. Making you lose control.”

His breathing shuddered from him. “Take me inside your mouth.”

“Bossy,” I teased, purposely trying to frustrate him.

“Let me have those pretty pink lips stretched wide around me while I fuck your sassy mouth,” he growled.

I hide my smile while I teased said lips along his shaft, giving him sucking kisses along the thickest throbbing vein. Just not doing the sucking he wanted...

The sound of a suppressed growl escaped him, and my grin widened, because my plan to distract him was working.

He caught my chin and dragged his finger along my bottom lip. “This brat mouth won’t be smiling so much while I’m fucking it.”

“I hope not.”

“You’re such a tease. You really deserve a spanking.”

“Promises, promises.” I’d heard that threat before, but it wasn’t anything we’d ever done.

Leaning in, I took mercy on him—on us both—and guided his cock toward me with my hand. He growled again when I drew

the tip along my mouth, tracing my bottom lip with it, before I licked away the creamy reward he left behind.

Before he could grit out another demand, I widened my jaw and sucked him inside where he longed to be, sucking in my cheeks around him.

“That’s right, baby,” he grunted. “Just fucking like that.”

Grasping my head and curling his fingers into my hair, he pushed forward while I moaned. Some women hated when a man took control like this. Not me. I loved when Axel snapped. And when it came to our sex, it didn’t take much. The change in him right now didn’t surprise me. When he got tense, pre-race, nerves, a super-dominant side emerged.

Tilting my head, I let him go as deep as he wanted, though I couldn’t stop my gag reflex when he hit my throat. A satisfied sound escaped him as he held still there, making me adjust. My eyes watered, and my fingers grasped his thighs, my nails digging in.

“Gonna keep being a brat?” he asked.

I nodded. There was no chance I wouldn’t.

“Good girl.” He pulled back but pushed in again before I completely regained equilibrium. Had I wanted to distract him? Any power I’d thought I had slipped away as Axel took over, climbing right into the driver’s seat.

“Not gonna come in your mouth,” he muttered, as he steadily pushed in and out, and I sucked as well as I could, losing rhythm while I tried to keep up. “Are you wet for me? Ready for me to bend you over that bed and take that tight pussy?”

My eyes locked with his, I nodded as well as I could with him fucking my mouth. God, I was so hot I thought I might come just from this. My body vibrated from the arousal, my core pulsing with each drive into my mouth. I sucked harder, craving his taste as much as I desired him fucking me.

Suddenly, he yanked free and pulled me up. Before I comprehended his quick motions, I was bent over the bed. He yanked down my yoga pants and panties.

“Fuck, baby, you’re dripping wet.”

“I want you,” I whined. Going onto to my toes, I angled myself for him, silently begging for what he’d promised me. Axel didn’t need an invitation, his cock pressed to my opening, the wide head invading my tight passage. I screamed into the blankets when he surged forward. Grasping my hips, he started a frantic pistoning that tore cry after cry from my lips.

“Oh God!” I panted. “Axel. Oh...”

“Take it. Take me,” he grunted, his thrusts growing harder, almost punishing as his balls slapped forward against my aching clit.

“Yes!” My toes curled, my fingers clawing the blankets, as my release crashed over me.

“Oh, fuck! Bristol!” he yelled as my fisting walls pulled him over. “Fuck...fuck...”

Heat filled me as his sated body blanketed mine, pressing me down into the mattress while his hips still ground into me. My eyes drifted closed, golden happiness glittering through me as he lazily kissed my shoulder and the back of my neck.

Mission accomplished.

Thirty-Six



Bristol

Watching the jets scream over the track on race day, I was so proud of my man while I stood beside him next to his car before the race. It was almost time for him to climb into his vehicle and start the engine. Unlike yesterday, the nerves rattled in me and not him. All morning, from the church service to last drivers' meeting to his crew powwows, Axel had been the consummate picture of complete Zen.

We'd seen his parents briefly today, and now, they were sitting with Troy. Everyone had been either all business or in a near-celebratory mood all day. Not me. I struggled hard not to let my fears show, though I was pretty sure my hands shook. I couldn't say why, but a looming sensation of dread kept trying to push into the moment. I struggled to keep it back and look serene—especially since camera after camera had panned our way or been right up in our space. Repeatedly.

That was a little disconcerting. Axel took it all in stride, his hand clasped around mine in public.

"They're just curious," he'd said, leaning sideways to whisper into my ear, his warm breath sending a tremor of awareness down my spine. "News is out about us being married, though it's not confirmed. They're all trying to figure it out. Star-crossed lovers or some shit, according to Huck. Plus there's the debacle over me moving from Pendleton Motorsports to Pressure Racing. The interest will wear away soon."

I knew cameras were recording us right now. Since the news of our secret had come out, there had been a media frenzy eating up everything about us.

I doubted their fascination would wane as soon as he thought, but I supposed we'd get used to it.

Beside me now, Axel pulled in a deep pull of air and slowly released it in a long gust.

"It's time," he said. His hand, with the thick gold band on it now, squeezed mine before letting me go for the first time since we'd stepped out to the track.

"Be safe, but kick ass," I told him.

"I will. Give me a good-luck kiss, then I'll see you in a couple hours. You want to go out to dinner tonight?"

A startled laugh burst from me. "Yeah, sure."

He leaned in, his brown eyes gleaming at me. "I love you."

One of my hands curled into his fire suit, fisting in the center of his chest. "I love you, too."

His lips brushed mine in a much more chaste kiss than either of us wanted.

"I'll see you in a couple hours," he said, stepping back all-too-soon. He winked. "Remember you're cheering for me, not Huck."

"I'll try."

His bottom lip curled between his teeth as he shook his head, holding back a laugh, then he turned toward his car where his crew waited to strap him in and hook him to his air system.

I fought back my worries while he climbed in. I wasn't sure why I felt so uncharacteristically emotional. His jest proved he knew how tense I was, so he'd tried to make me laugh. I couldn't help it. If anything happened to him... I wouldn't be able to handle it.

Had it been just over a week ago I'd hoped he'd driven over a cliff? That had been all lies. I'd wanted to hate him, but hate was the last thing I truly felt. Axel was my everything.

“Mrs. Pendleton?”

The name still startled me. I turned to find a woman, wearing a track pass and navy blazer, had appeared at my side.

“Can I show you to your seat?”

I nodded then followed her as she escorted me to the box where I’d watch the race. Troy smiled at me, giving me a nod when I slipped into the space beside Axel’s mom. Benz sat on Troy’s other side, no doubt so they could talk about the race’s play by play. Novie, who was there since her brother was part of Troy’s team, sat a short distance away, and I gave her a small wave. She bubbled with effervescent excitement, the direct opposite of the nerves gnawing at me.

Molly squeezed my fingers much as Axel had squeezed my hand a few moments ago.

“Nervous?” she asked. She was always so sweet, and I felt a little guilty. I should be worried about her. She was doing great, but she’d been in the car accident just over a week ago. I couldn’t even believe she was here. She’d insisted she had to come—to see Axel and so she wasn’t sulking at home, stewing about the person who’d somehow forced her off the road. The police had no clues, and Molly couldn’t remember much other than glancing over to see a blond-haired guy looking at his phone. It was likely the man would never be identified.

“I’ve seen him race hundreds of times.” How many of his races had I been to over the years when we’d been together? So many. Too many to count. It had taken up part of almost every weekend for as far back as I could remember. How could I not have known we’d end up right here?

“But this is different?” she observed.

“Yeah.”

“Do you need me to distract you?” she asked as the cars roared to life down below us, my pulse rate accelerating right along with the sound. My fingers tapped on my thighs as the pace car led the pack around the track. I leaned forward and watched the cars drive in formation behind it, many like Axel, weaving back and forth as they warmed up their tires.

“No, I’m okay. How are you doing?” I glanced down at her leg, stretched out in front of her.

“As well as can be expected.” She wobbled her head back and forth, then leaned toward me and grinned. “I’m pretty buzzed on the drugs they gave me—nudge me if I start snoring, okay?”

I laughed. No matter what Molly said, we both knew she wouldn’t be falling asleep. I still couldn’t believe she’d come here so soon after her accident, but I supposed if it were my son racing in such a transitional, career-boosting race, I’d want to attend, too.

“You know he won this last year?” I commented then my face got hot. This was Axel’s mom. Of course, she knew.

She nodded, not calling me on my stupid comment. “We were here for it. Last year was nerve-wracking. All they talked about was him being a star, all his promise. So much pressure on him all the time, but he performed and delivered. Then there was that nonsense the past few months.”

She shook her head, and I wondered how much Benz had shared with her about the situation with Darius.

I grimaced, hating what Axel had been through but grappling with the fact I was grateful, too. “I guess...if it hadn’t happened, he wouldn’t have come home, and I wouldn’t be here with him.”

Molly wrapped her arm around my shoulders and pulled me in for side-hug. “I have to believe he would have come home. You two would have found your way back to each other, eventually. But who knows how long that would have been?”

“Yeah, who knows?” I echoed, but the roar of cars passing us drowned out my words. The heat from the vehicles radiated all the way up to where we sat, like a blast of a furnace, taking me back to the past. Some sensations—the feel, the sound, the smell of the rubber, the blur of the unbelievably fast cars—never left you. Watching the race was one thing. Experiencing it in person was another level.

Troy leaned over and tapped my shoulder with a pair of headphones. “Here. You can listen to the team and get commentary on what’s going on, too.”

My head bobbed, excited to hear Axel while he worked. To get an inside “view” of the inner workings.

“Middle of the pack,” I heard. “Coming up on the 5. He’s going high—no, he’s swooping low. Go go go now!”

I cheered as Axel cleared the car to move forward. He may have started in the back, but he was steadily cutting his way through the competition.

“Where’s the 57?” Axel asked.

“He’s running tenth. Moving up, though,” the spotter reported. “Watch out. Watch out. The 11 is weaving ahead of you, trying to find his opening to pass.”

“Got it. I see him,” Axel said. “Going high.”

I stood with the crowd around me, watching Axel drift down as if he planned to go low. When the other car tried to block, Axel suddenly zipped up, going so close to the wall he should have left behind paint when he took the unexpected path. I cheered as he passed the 11 and then edged past the 57—Teddy!

Tenth! He was in the top ten!

I jumped to my feet, yelling. Axel crowed as he sped ahead, leaving Teddy a few lengths behind him.

“Yeah! He passed Teddy!” My fist pumped. I twisted to look at Molly, my eyes burning with the happy tears starting to well in them. “Oh my God!”

It was early, with half the race to go, but seeing Axel pass his old car was everything. *Everything*. Vindication at it’s most basic. *Eat that dust, Darius*.

Thirty-Seven



Axel

I wasn't out to win.

Okay, *of course*, I wanted to win. But mostly, I had a point to prove. I was a better driver than that betraying ass-kisser my uncle had replaced me with. Finishing anywhere in the field ahead of Teddy would be a victory in my book. So far, with luck, skill, and a fuck-ton of serendipity, I'd managed to find every opening I needed for moving forward from dead last to the front of the pack.

As we neared the final laps, exhilaration flowed through my veins, but my body was tense yet tired, dehydrated and damn hot. Sweat drenched me while I kept my focus trained to every little movement ahead of me.

Staying in third for most of the final quarter of the race fueled my determination to finish ahead of the Pendleton team. I didn't doubt Teddy and I would exchange paint when he tried to pass me before the end of this thing. He'd stayed right on my ass ever since I passed him. But he wasn't getting ahead of me, and there was no way I'd let him bump and spin me.

Yeah, there wasn't a lot I could control when it came to wrecks, but sheer determination had to count for something.

Knowing my family and Bristol—but especially Bristol—watched from the stands ratcheted up my need to do well. So did all the bullshit I'd endured to get here. I couldn't let that distract me, though.

I pushed it all out of my head as best as I could. I had too many other things demanding attention. My mind couldn't stray to anything but the car, the track and the information funneling in from my team.

"How're you feeling?" my new chief, Jon Paulson, asked. Jon and I had meshed like a pair of Legos this week, becoming an easily cohesive unit. I'd never worked so well with my old crew chief.

"Good. Car's running good, but it's pulling just a little to the right. Gonna need full fuel on the pit." Sometimes, teams did a partial fill and conserved gas to get to the end, but I didn't see that as part of my strategy this afternoon. Not with Teddy hot on my ass the whole time.

"We have to change out tires. You been on those too long to finish on them."

"All four?"

"Yeah."

"Whatever you think is best," I agreed. "And Teddy?"

"He's reporting something loose. They're gonna have to take a quick look—at least, they *should*—when he comes in. Might buy a couple seconds on him."

"You think?"

"Nah. But our guys are ready. They'll get you in and out ahead of him. Just don't speed into the pit and lose your position."

I didn't tell him "Been there done that." He knew. He'd seen it, and it had benefited the previous 18 driver. I'd learned my lesson in a crucial race a couple years ago. Speeding had caused me to lose second place in that race.

"I'll be a mile under. No worries."

"Hey, Ax?"

"Yeah?"

"Don't let the car pull you right into the side of the 57," he advised, referring to my earlier complaint about alignment.

“No worries. I don’t want to catch any of him.”

“Yeah, well, don’t go to the wrong stop. You’re the 18 now, not the 57. Good?”

I chuckled, letting him know I heard.

“Debris! Debris on the center track just ahead,” Ty, my spotter, yelled over the top of us.

I swerved, almost too late, narrowly missing someone else who was running a lap down from the leaders.

“What the fuck was that?”

“Something that got missed from the last pile-up,” Jon grumbled. “Good miss. Your bumper almost got Teddy, though.”

“Was that who it was? Thought I smelled skunk.”

We didn’t chatter while I navigated the following laps, wondering why they hadn’t thrown a yellow flag for clean up. I was damn sure glad they didn’t. The hours in the car were starting to wear on me, and I was sure I’d sweated out ten pounds of perspiration at this point. I wanted to be done, and I was in a good position.

Following Jon’s directions, I veered into pit row at the very last second and decelerated fast to avoid penalties. My ace team got me out faster than anyone else who’d pitted with me, but I still trailed the two leaders.

“How far ahead?” I asked. Jon knew what I meant.

“Less than five.”

“Kay.” My fingers tightened on the wheel.

Less than five seconds? Might as well be a century. Okay. Okay. I just had to finish and stay ahead of Teddy. Third was good, even if I could taste the win. Craved it. I’d already proved to Troy that he hadn’t made a poor decision in me.

Ahead of me, the two leaders jockeyed for position, and I looked for an opening, still wanting to take the checkered flag for a second year. We could go three wide. That would give the fans a thrill and offer me the break I needed to surge ahead.

But they were weaving too much, one trying for the lead and the other attempting to hold onto it.

Suddenly, they collided, one spinning and the other rocketing off the track and into a barrier. My heart leapt into my throat. Fuck! I veered to the first clearing I saw, hoping it really was *clear*.

“Go high!” Jon screamed, but I was already moving. “Go fucking high! They left the green out. No yellow! Go, go, go! Fuck, yeah! You have the lead! Yeah!”

I zoomed toward the wall, hearing a scrape that wouldn't slow me down as I squeaked past the wreck, narrowly missing debris.

“The 57 is behind you,” my spotter yelled. “The 19 is out. 33 is out. 57 is two lengths behind.”

I didn't look back, taking the wide-open track toward the checkered flag.

“Yes! Hell, yeah!” I screamed as I took the flag a couple milliseconds ahead of Teddy.

Ripping down the net at my side, I pumped my gloved hand in the air as I took my victory lap. Two years in a row, and this time, Bristol got to see me cement my place in history. Yes!

* * *

Bristol

My throat was sore from my screaming while Axel dominated the track. I jumped, my arms punching the air when he crossed the finish line in first place. He won! So proud and overwhelmed by emotions, I pressed my hands over my mouth, tears filling my eyes, while he took his victory lap. He'd done it. He'd actually come from the back and *won!*

Troy grabbed my arm. “Come on, honey. You can't miss the big moment of this. He's gonna want you there.”

Hustling down from Pressure Racing's luxury seating, we passed security then joined the phalanx of people waiting for Axel at victory lane. I had no idea who they all were, though I

recognized his team at the wall, ready to mob him when he exited the car.

I stood at the end of the throng, watching Axel do his burnout on the front stretch in a billowing cloud of smoke. As soon as the car stopped, he jumped out of his car. His crew surged over the wall. Someone handed him the flag and Axel ran toward the fence, waving the checkered and celebrating with the fans.

My smile stretched so wide my cheeks hurt, my hands clasped to my chest while I watched, my chest practically busting with pride for him.

As soon as he turned, his crew converged on him, and he was lost in a sea of bodies. Near me I heard a reporter talking excitedly into a camera, recapping Axel's drama and expounding on how he'd triumphed, winning the Daytona for the second consecutive year.

Everything was a blur as the car made its way to Victory Lane then Axel was there. Confetti and champagne foam flew. In the midst of it, his head emerged above the celebrating throng. He scanned the crowd gathered there. Our eyes met, and his lips curled into a sexy smile he only gave me. Troy gave me a small push.

"Go on, honey. He wants to celebrate with you, too."

I took off running toward him. Axel broke free of those surrounding him and caught me as I slammed into him.

"You did it! You did it!" I cried. "You won!"

"I won." He kissed me hard. "Kicked their ass."

He didn't have to say who *they* were. I knew. And he sure had!

"I'm so proud of you," I told him as he slid me back to my feet, my body still crushed against his sweaty, kinda stinky frame while his powerful arms banded around me. I didn't even care. I brushed my fingers over his damp hair. "You were amazing."

"It was so much better, knowing you were here. I love you," he growled, his adrenaline roughening his voice, and I knew

tonight would be wild when we got into bed. If we even made it to the bed. There was no adrenaline like victory adrenaline.

“I love you, too. Always.”

“Marry me?” he asked me. *Again*. A cocky grin quirked his lips. “On purpose this time.”

I laughed. “Yes, of course, yes.”

A flash to our side told me this was all getting caught in photos. I didn’t care about that, either. I especially didn’t care about media when Axel leaned in and kissed me. The hard but chaste press sent a sizzle burning through me. Full of promise, it wasn’t nearly enough, but it couldn’t be as passionate right here.

“Go,” I said quietly. “Go give your speeches. Do all the sponsor pictures and media interviews. We’ll celebrate later.”

A spark of mischief filled his eyes, and he leaned in to whisper in my ear, not letting anyone see the movement of his mouth and perhaps lipread his naughty words. “I’m putting a baby in you tonight. You want that?”

I closed my eyes, my breath shuddering as a chill ran through me—but it was a good chill, a shiver of anticipation and a beacon of approval. Years ago, I would have said no, but time had healed my pain enough to move on. And this wasn’t out of the blue. We’d had extended talks about it over the past days.

That didn’t dull the thrill that shivered through me, landing like a fiery arrow in my core. Damn him for getting me all aroused. On purpose. When we couldn’t do anything about it.

“Yes,” I whispered. I wanted a child with Axel more than anything. God knew, we’d had enough unprotected sex that I could be pregnant already.

“Are you wet now?” he asked, whispering in my ear again. I knew we were on borrowed time, but I couldn’t break away from this interlude just yet. After all this time, we deserved a moment.

“Maybe,” I teased coyly.

He pulled back, laughing. “You are.”

I made a face at him before moving away. “Get to work.”

I didn’t get far. I was tugged back to his side while my man was given his trophy, a heavy replica of the original Harley J. Earl Trophy. His crew chief received the Cannonball Baker Trophy, and Troy was handed the Governor’s Cup—things I only knew because they were announced as they were presented.

As soon as pictures were snapped, Axel handed off his prize and pulled me in for another quick kiss.

“Go work,” I repeated, laughing.

“Yes, wife. Nag nag nag,” he teased back.

The next hour swirled into a whirlwind of speeches and pictures, as well as the obligatory hat dance where Axel, Troy and the team put on one of their sponsor’s hats, had a picture taken then switched to another sponsor’s hat. Over and over and over. I’d never seen it before, but Novie who’d slipped in next to me explained what it was.

Sometime in the midst of it all, Axel’s parents had come to congratulate him before they left for their hotel, and I got pulled over to Axel for a couple more pictures.

I leaned into him, kissing his cheek before he headed off for a press-conference style interview. “I love you,” I said. “I’m heading back to the RV, and I’ll see you in bed.”

“Tease. How am I supposed to answer questions with that anticipation filling my mind?”

I just grinned, shrugging, then jogged over to where Novie waited before he could catch me into another kiss. Not that I didn’t want one, but the longer he delayed, the longer I had to wait for him to come home.

“It’s gonna be *hours*,” she moaned, her tone full of mirth, while her wavy blonde hair bounced around her shoulders like a happy cloud. “And Huck’s gonna be grouchy. He got spun early.”

I’d seen that. “He got back on the track, though.”

“Yeah, but he never regained much position. So...maybe, we can go chill at your place for a little bit?”

I glanced toward Axel, who was downing a Gatorade while he nodded at someone’s question. His fire suit was peeled down, hanging around his waist, to reveal the damp shirt beneath that clung to his cut muscles, muscles I’d trace with my hands and mouth later.

“Hours?” I breathed, my tone uncomfortably close to a whine. As a newbie to the professional circuit, I had no idea.

“Two, minimum,” Novie chirped, clearly unaware of the simmering need that would be tormenting me.

“Chilling sounds good,” I sighed. “Lead the way.”

Thirty-Eight



Axel

Winning was awesome, but no one had ever told me coming in second might be the real win when you just wanted to rush back to your wife. But this was my job, and I fucking loved it.

While I sat at a long table with Troy and Jon, my adrenaline from the win was momentarily waning. I knew it would amp up again when I was jogging back to my RV. It always did. How many night had I stood in my shower and jacked off to thoughts of Bristol? But not tonight. Tonight, I'd have the real thing.

For a couple hours, I'd talked to all the press and answered the same questions on repeat. I'd posed for pictures—and pretended *not* to pose for “candid” pictures. I'd signed autographs and stood for more pictures, this time with VIP fans.

As things were winding down, I heard sirens in the distance. Apparently, some race fans were partying too hard tonight. At least, the drivers' lot would be quiet—quieter, anyway. Quite a few of the rigs would already be pulling out tonight. Even before the win, Bristol and I had planned to stay until morning, though. So had Huck and Novie.

“Axel, tell us about the woman with you today,” a reporter called out. Normally, I tended to sidestep personal questions, redirecting toward the car, team, sponsors and racing, in general. Not tonight.

“That's my wife, Bristol,” I corrected with a wide smile.

“Wife?” he asked with raised brows, though I knew he wasn’t surprised. They were all aware of my new married status, since rumors had been reported over the past week. This was just a fishing expedition to get a confirmation.

I nodded with a wide grin.

“Did you get married over the off-season? Are there pictures?”

“Bristol and I have been married since the end of high school—since spring break that year. We were separated for a bit, but we’ve recently reconciled.”

Even more sirens blasted through the night and I glanced toward the door, concerned about whatever was happening. That didn’t sound like a response to a raucous party. It sounded like an emergency. I looked over at Troy, but he shrugged, shaking his head to tell me he had no idea.

A door flew open at the back of the room.

“Axel!” Quill burst into the room, yelling over the top of the people seated between us. He’d showered and changed into street clothes—something I couldn’t wait to do—but even from this distance, I could see his eyes were wild. My skin was starting to itch from dried perspiration, but now, it crawled with trepidation. Fear. I shot to my feet, dread heavy in my gut.

“Axel, it’s your rig. Come quick! We can’t find Bristol and Novie.”

Bristol. No! Fuck. *Fuck!*

The blood drained from me, replaced by pure, ice-cold terror. Bristol had been heading to our place to wait for me.

I didn’t remember running, but I was outside, tearing across the grounds toward my RV. Vaguely, I realized security, Quill and Troy flanked me. Before I could see the rig, thick acrid smoke filled the air, burning my eyes and throat.

Then I saw the bright orange flames coloring the night. Emergency vehicles, with blinding strobes flashing, filled the lanes in front and back of the lot where we’d camped. I staggered closer then saw the inferno that engulfed the entire

motorhome while blasts of water from the firehoses streamed onto it, seeming to have no effect. Even from the distance the scorching heat licked at my skin with unbearable force.

Frozen, I stared at the horrific scene.

“Bristol!” I yelled over the cacophony of emergency workers, vehicles and the panicked voices of bystanders. Huck was nearby frantically screaming for Novie, and my voice combined with his anguished cries. “Bristol!”

I had to get her out. I had to save her. I couldn’t lose her. We’d just—

Hands grabbed me and kept me back when I tried to dash toward the blaze. I struggled against them. “Let me go! Bristol! I have to get to her!”

“Son, no,” Troy said, his tone grim with unvoiced realizations, while he held me back along with the others restraining me. “Let them...work. There’s nothing you can do.”

He didn’t understand. I couldn’t just...watch. God...

“Bristol!” I yelled as if I could get her to materialize before me unscathed. “No...”

Tears and smoke burned my eyes, the moisture streaming unchecked down my face. All I could see were the flames. The paint blistering away from the metal walls, melting in the heat. Bristol trapped inside. All our hopes and dreams turning to ash.

“Please,” I begged, whispering the plea, not even sure what I was begging for other than for Bristol to be okay. For time to turn back. For this all to be a hideous nightmare. “Please. Please. Bristol...”

I sagged in the hands restraining me, dropping to my knees, still trying to get away, even if I had to crawl toward Bristol. Nothing mattered if she was gone. Not the racing. Not life.

I was pulled back again, my fingers dragging along the grass. Powerful arms hugged me to the body behind me while I struggled, out of my mind. Reality and common sense didn’t

exist. I had to get to my woman. I promised to always take care of her, to protect her. I'd promised...

"No! I have to—"

"There's nothing you can do," Troy rumbled. "I'm so sorry, but there's nothing you can do. We're not letting you run in there."

"No—"

"Get those cameras out of here!" Troy snarled at someone.

I hadn't known media had followed. I didn't even care if the world saw me crying. My heart, my purpose, smoldered within that blaze.

"Let me go," I pleaded. "Let me go to her."

His hold tightened, but he didn't say a word.

My body shook with the silent sobs wracking through me while I watched the fire reaching toward the inky sky, destroying my home. And with it, obliterating my entire hope for the future.

Thirty-Nine



Bristol

Sirens wailed through the night as Novie and I made our way back from the vendor booths where we'd decided to get some hot pretzels and Cokes. We were almost back when we saw the flames coming from the drivers' lot.

"Oh my God," I cried and took off running. We dodged through the crowd of people trying to see what happened.

"Bristol!"

I thought I heard my name screamed through the night. Axel.

"Let him be alright," I prayed as I ran to get back to the RV.

"Miss, you need to stop," the security guard said, not letting me enter. The whole while, I could hear Axel. Feel his anguish. God, was he involved with the fire? Was he hurt?

Panicked, I waved my badge at the security officer holding back bystanders. "He's screaming for me! I'm Bristol."

"George, let her in," Novie panted, catching up with me. "This is Axel Pendleton's wife. Girl, did you run track in school? Geez."

I didn't respond and couldn't laugh. I took off again as soon as George let me pass, dashing toward our motorhome and dodging anyone who thought to stop me.

"Axel!" I yelled. "Axel, I'm here." My breathless voice was lost in the chaos. As I got closer, I saw Axel on his knees. He struggled to stand while other's held him back. Darting to him

from the side, I crashed into him, wrapping my arms and legs around his body while the men restraining him released their grasps on him.

“I’m here! I’m here,” I gasped, hugging him tight. “I’m right here.”

“Oh, thank fuck,” Troy muttered, beside us, scrubbing his hand over his worry-ravaged face.

Axel’s arms were like iron around me as he pressed his face into my neck, his whole body shaking. Tears streamed down my face as I hugged him, kissing the side of his head.

“I’m okay. I’m okay,” I repeated over and over, running my hand up and down his back. “I’m okay.”

“Oh, God. I thought... Oh my God, Bristol.” His fingers buried in my hair as he lifted his head, and I saw his tormented, tear-filled eyes. His lips covered mine, kissing me wildly with no care as to who was around us. I felt us moving and realized someone was pulling us farther from the fire and the fire crews battling to put out the blaze.

Abandoning my lips, Axel pressed closed-mouth kisses all over my face. “I love you. I was so scared. Terrified. If anything happened to you... There’s no me without you, Bristol. There hasn’t been since we were thirteen. Even when we were apart, it’s always been *we*.”

My forehead pressed to his while I was still wrapped around him, his grip so strong I wasn’t sure he’d ever be able to let me go.

“I’m right here. I’m okay. I’m fine,” I whispered to him, trying to soothe him. I wasn’t sure how long we stood like that, murmuring our love, me giving him assurances. It was a long time, though, before he set me on my feet. He still held me clasped to him, and I rested my head on his chest, over his heart, listening to the steady thump.

Novie and Huck came to stand beside us, watching as the flames were put out. Since theirs was the rig closest to ours, the one on the other side leaving earlier, I was afraid they’d end up with severe smoke damage to it and their belongings.

Huck had his arm slung around his sister's shoulders, looking nothing but relieved.

"What happened?" Novie asked.

I shook my head. We hadn't come back here before heading over to the vendors. Everything had been fine when Axel and I left this morning.

"There's no way this just happened out of the blue," Axel rasped, his voice ravaged from his panic and his tone enraged.

"Are you saying you think someone set the fire on purpose?" I breathed, pulling back to look up at him.

"That's exactly what I'm saying. Has anyone seen my uncle? Or Marta?" Axel asked. "He threatened me. Has anyone seen him?"

"Axel, do you really think he'd...do something like that?" I asked.

"He threatened me—in the hauler the other day. It's not the first time I've heard him threaten someone—though I've never seen anything happen. And I had the audacity to move on from his team then win. He has egg on his face, and he was already furious before the race even started."

"Word is, he's been saying all kinds of shit about you—nothing anyone believes, but he's been on a tear this week," Huck said. He'd sent Novie to see how bad their place was and to pack some things, if possible. They'd be staying in a hotel tonight, too.

"You kids stay here," Troy said, reminding us he was still there. "I'm gonna go talk to the fire chief there, now that the fire looks like it's out."

"I'm gonna go check on Novie," Huck said, clearly still shaken at the idea his sister could have been in the fire. "See if our place has damage."

Axel and I both glanced toward our own RV—or what was left of it anyway. A charred burned out mess, some portions of the walls literally looking as if they'd melted.

“I’m sorry about all your stuff. Your laptop. You book and research,” Axel said, his arms squeezing me again. “I’m just glad you’re okay.”

“It’s just stuff,” I said, sad to lose some of my favorite clothes. But there were worse things in the world. I could have been in the RV. Or Axel could have been. We could have been sleeping... I shivered and shook my head to push away the thoughts. “Most of my notes and all my writing is saved on a cloud server.”

“I’ll get you another laptop—and anything else you want.”

I leaned my head on his shoulder. “I have you. We’ll deal with everything else later—after we get a new rig.”

He chuckled. “We’ll probably need clothes before then. At least one set for when I let you out of bed.”

“This does put a damper on our plans for the night, though,” I said.

“Hey,” Troy called, interrupting before Axel could say anything. He hurried our way with another man on his heels. Someone with the fire department, I assumed. Maybe a cop.

Axel released me then grabbed my hand. We met the pair halfway.

“Yeah?” Axel bit out.

“This is Officer Kelly,” Troy said and looked to the man.

“We can’t confirm without an investigation, but as far as we can tell now, the fire was intentionally set,” he reported. “Our investigator is on his way out to collect samples, but the broken bottles, strong scent in the kitchen area, and burn patterns are pretty good indicators. The fire and accelerant caught the upholstery and took it from there.”

“Like Molotov cocktails?” Axel asked. “That’s pretty...low tech.”

“Don’t need a bunch of tech to do much damage if you’re motivated and willing to get up close and personal with the work. Now, arson is usually for profit or from anger.”

“Anger,” Axel repeated quietly. He looked around, before again yelling, “Has anyone seen Darius or Marta?”

“I saw him fifteen minutes, maybe a half hour, before I came to find you,” Quill cut in from where he’d been lingering with some of the other drivers and their families. “To tell the truth, I don’t think I ever saw him haul ass like that. I thought he was just mad from Teddy coming in second when the driver he fired could have won for him. When I saw him, I thought he was headed toward his trailer, but now that I think of it, he was going the wrong way.”

“What way?” Axel demanded.

“Toward the gate.”

I put my arms around Axel as he sagged. As pissed as he’d been at his uncle, I knew he didn’t want to believe the man could have done this. No one wanted to think that badly of a relative. Deep down, he’d probably hoped no one had seen Darius.

However, his voice was a near-feral growl as he relayed everything he knew to a pair of police officers on the scene. They said they’d be checking on security footage and asking anyone who might have information to come forward. The security cameras weren’t near the wrecked motorhome, though, so I had my doubts about how helpful those would be.

“Fuck, kid,” Troy said after the cops walked away to canvass the bystanders. “You really are trouble.”

“Too much trouble?” Axel asked, his posture tensing.

“Fuck, no. Did you see that guy on the track today, kicking ass and taking names. I’d be a damn idiot *and* a fool to let him go anywhere—except to the next race, in my car. Let’s get you to a hotel, so you can get some rest—are you both okay? Do either of you need a doctor?”

“We’re okay,” Axel answered, and I heard the relief in his tone. Or maybe, I just felt it as he relaxed. Either way, I nodded in agreement when he peered into my eyes.

He glanced at the remains of our home away from home again.

“Fuck,” he muttered.

“Stuff can be replaced,” Troy said, echoing what I’d said earlier. “You two can’t. Let’s get you to a hotel—”

“I’ll take them,” Floyd said, stepping in. “I was at my hotel, and one of the guys came to tell me what happened.” He glanced over at where the firefighters still worked to wrap up things. “Damn. She was a good rig.”

“We’ll get another one,” Axel said. “This time, you can help design the front end since you’ll be driving it.” He looked at me. “And you can make the rest of it any way you want.”

“I don’t care about that—”

Floyd blew out a breath, interrupting. “Don’t say that. When you’re on the road most of the year, you’ll care. We’ll get the security system mounted right away—”

“Wait!” This time, it was Axel interrupting. “Did you install them? On that one?” He nodded toward the old RV.

“Well, yeah. As soon as they arrived. It’s all set up so movement triggers the cameras. I put in three small surveillance cameras—two on the outside and the one on the doorway. The feeds go to a cloud server I can access from my laptop.”

“So...if someone set the fire, it will be in the feeds?” I asked.

Floyd smiled wide, realization dawning. “Sure as hell will.”

“Gotcha, Uncle Darius,” Axel muttered.

“Well,” Troy said, more cheerful than I would have expected. “The police will want the recordings, won’t they? Can you access remotely from any laptop? I happen to have one in my motorhome.”

Floyd nodded.

“Let’s go,” Axel said. “He tried to kill Bristol—I know that was his plan. I want him caught red-handed.”

My blood ran cold, and I stepped closer to him, letting him enfold me in his arms again. I could be dead. But the thought

that Axel had been in that man's grasp for the past six years chilled me even more.

Forty



Axel

Leaning against the elevator wall as it jetted up toward our suite on the top floor, I couldn't let go of Bristol. Normally, the adrenaline from the race would be enough to keep me going into the evening, before I'd crash. But today with the win, the fire, thinking Bristol had been caught in the blaze, Darius... It would take a lot to relax me. A whole fucking lot.

The security feed had shown Darius at the RV. Darius *and* Marta. It was almost too stupid to be true. But there it was in black and white. Darius had been the one to go inside, using a key he must have gotten from Marta, who in turn, must have stolen it from me, somehow. She'd stood outside to act as lookout until they'd both hightailed it away.

"I called your mom and dad while you were talking to the cops. This is going to be all over the news, and I wanted them to hear from us first. They want you to call them as soon as you can," Bristol murmured, half asleep against me. While I'd been looking at the security footage, dealing with the cops and calling my lawyer to keep him in the loop, she'd been on her phone. Novie had come to Troy's, and I'd assumed they were taking care of hotel rooms. Apparently, Bristol had been contacting my parents, as well.

"I'll call when we get to the room."

"Clothes will be delivered tomorrow morning. We're stuck with these until then." She glanced at me, still in my fire suit,

though the top was still hanging around my waist. “Or the complimentary robes.”

“Or nothing.”

The lift dinged as the doors slid open, and I escorted Bristol onto our floor.

“I just don’t get it,” she said, breaking the silence as we walked. “Did he really think he’d get away with that? What did he have to gain other than misguided revenge? What did he have to lose? Everything. The man is a billionaire...”

“I... You know, I don’t think he’s completely stable. He has obsessive tendencies. His way or the highway and even then *still* his way. And Marta will do whatever he wants. I honestly think you nailed it—he wanted misguided revenge. And now, he’s put a whole host of people out of a job. And himself in jail.”

At our room, I waved the keycard at the lock then pushed inside, pulling Bristol with me. I immediately pressed her to the wall as the door shut and left us in darkness, save for the outside lights shining in through the large window. My mouth closed over hers, and she immediately opened for me, welcoming me in.

Wildness overtook me, but it had nothing to do with the rush from my win, and everything to do with the fact I’d almost lost her. We ripped at each other’s clothes. Our kisses were savage and seams ripped while we connected and frantically stripped. As soon as we were naked, I lifted her then surged into her wet core.

“Oh, God, Axel,” she screamed at the sudden invasion, but she didn’t stop me. She clawed at my shoulders, trying to get closer. Her fingers pulled at my hair, dragging my mouth back to hers while my cock pummeled into her, over and over, proving we were alive, we were one.

“Love you. Love you,” I muttered into her neck.

“I love you,” she wailed. “You feel so good.”

“You love my cock, don’t you? Love it more than me.”

“No. Yes. No...” she answered, her brain not online enough to tease or banter with me. We were all emotion and sensation. This was a place where we could lose ourselves. Where her soft body undulated against my harder one, a silky balm to my overwrought senses. Pinning her body with mine, I grasped her curvy hips and angled her for my pleasure. Her legs wrapped tighter around me.

“Fuck me, Axel. Fuck me with that cock I love.”

Okay, not so far gone that she couldn't tease.

“You can have it. You can any part of me you want. I'm yours. You're mine.” Sliding my hand inward, I stretched toward her pussy and found her clit with my thumb. I circled it in time with my drives into her molten heat, while I sealed my mouth over hers again to absorb all her cries.

My teeth gritted as she came, pulsing around my length and almost pulling me over. Almost... But I wouldn't let it happen. Not yet. I needed more of her first. I needed all her orgasms, every one she could bear tonight.

While she came down, I stumbled through the suite to our bedroom, still holding her in my arms, letting her bounce on my cock while I walked. We both groaned when I pulled her off me.

“On the bed. Elbows and knees,” I ordered.

She licked her lips, gazing up at me for just a second before she was on the king-sized bed, her sweet ass in the air for me. Bending toward her, I smoothed my hands over the pale globes before I leaned in and sank my teeth into one cheek.

“Fuck, Axel,” she moaned into the blankets.

“You want me to fuck you?” My fingers trailed through her wet folds, her arousal on my skin seeming to glisten in the lights coming through our windows. I pushed two digits inside her, simulating what I'd do again in mere minutes.

“No,” she muttered petulantly.

I pumped into her a few more times. Her walls sucked at me, begging for more. “Are you sure?”

“No.”

“You want me inside you, giving you all my cum and binding you to me forever?”

Her head turned on the blankets, and she gazed back at me.

“Yes, but I’m already yours forever. You’re my forever. I love you.”

“I love you,” I breathed.

“Then show me.”

I chuckled as I pulled away my hand the aligned my cock. This woman. She’d always have me on my toes.

“You better buckle in, baby. We’re about to have a wild ride.”

She sighed, pushing back on the head of my shaft and taking me inside. “I’ll go anywhere with you. Nowhere else I ever want to be.”

And as we sank into heaven for the second of many more times that night, I knew there was no place else I’d ever want to be without Bristol, too. Ever. Take everything else away; she was my home and my everything.

Epilogue



Bristol

A few months later

Happiness and contentment filled me as I stood in the middle of our new home and looked around. It wasn't our new-to-us RV, which was in North Carolina right now. It was our condo in The Wellston. Though we'd owned the place for months, it was only this week we were able to move in.

"Everything look good?" Barrett Wellston asked as he walked through the place with Axel.

"Everything's perfect," I said. "We're so glad to have a place here."

"We're glad to have you. Welcome home." After shaking both our hands, he left, and Axel came over to me. His arms looped around my thickening waist. True to his word, he'd knocked me up. I was due two weeks after the championship banquet this coming November.

"How are my babies doing?" he asked.

"We're tired and hungry."

"Why don't you go climb onto our nice new sleigh bed, and I'll bring you a sandwich and fruit."

"A mustard sandwich? And a lemonade."

He swallowed, no doubt trying to hide his feelings on my requests. "Whatever you want. Meat on that?"

I grimaced. "Ick. No."

He shouldn't be surprised. Meat had made me sick for most of this pregnancy so far.

"Okay... Mustard sandwich, fruit, lemonade. Got it. You know... Most women want ice cream and pickles."

“Not true,” I called over my shoulder, shedding my clothes on the way to the bedroom. We only had this one partial week before we had to be back on the road, and we were making the most of it in all ways. Moving into our new place, finally. Having *all* the sex. I had no doubt we’d be christening our new bed before I’d even finished the lemonade he brought. And that was okay with me. Food or Axel? Definitely my man won.

“Are your mom and dad coming over later?” I asked when he came into the room a few minutes later. He groaned as he took in the black lace panties and bra I wore while I lounged on the bed.

“What?” he asked, staring.

“Your parents? Are they coming over later?”

“Uh...I think so. Yeah. Brothers, too. Mom is bringing a whole box of wedding planning stuff for the renewal.”

“What’s left to plan? I have everything nailed down for next month.”

He shrugged. “But why are we talking about my family with you mostly naked?”

“I was just wondering how much time we have.”

“Not enough for everything I want; that’s for sure.”

I bit my lip, reaching for the clasp of my bra while he set the food on the dresser. “What about time for *part* of what you want?”

“Yeah. Definitely.” Prowling toward me, he crawled across the bed. His body forced mine back against the pillows. He paused to tenderly kiss the gentle swell of my belly before trailing his closed-mouth kisses up my body, until he was braced over me on hands and knees, pecking at my lips. His head angled back and forth, the kisses getting longer and deeper with each connection.

I sighed, draping my arms around his shoulders. “I love our new place.”

“Yeah? What do you love about it?” he teased, skimming his hand along my side to cup my breast. I moaned and arched into him, my nipples so sensitive I could come while he toyed with them—something Axel loved to explore. The lace of my bra abraded my areola as he gently pinched the tip.

“That our bedroom doesn’t share a wall with any neighbors,” I panted.

“That is pretty awesome. So is this front clasp.” He flicked it open then leaned in to cover my beaded tip with his mouth, sucking it into the warm cavern until I cried out from the sensations burning from my chest to my core. I forgot about the bedroom, my bra, anything but what he did to my body as he tried his best to work me into an orgasm. It was only Axel...Axel...Axel...

My hand fisted his hair, and the other clawed at the bedding as bliss seared through me.

“That’s right. Come for me, baby,” he growled just before pushing aside the other cup and attacking my newly revealed breast, licking and sucking while still pinching the other peak.

“I need you,” I begged, already pulling at his shirt. “Please...”

Reaching behind his neck, he yanked his tee up, releasing me for only a fraction of a second while it cleared his head and he dove down again. My hands went to his waistband, tugging open his pants and pushing them down just enough to wrap my fingers around his thick shaft. My thumb played with his apadravya before smoothing up over his tip to find the drops of precum that had formed.

I brought my hand up to my mouth, sucking the essence off my skin while I stared into his midnight-dark, heavy lidded eyes. If possible, his pupils dilated even more, and his hunger burned in his stare. I licked my lips.

“You’re playing with fire,” he warned.

“I want the fire. You’re taking too long.”

“Okay, that’s it,” he growled, getting up and acting as if he were mad. His throbbing erection and the way he yanked off his pants said otherwise. Grasping my legs, he pulled me to the

edge of the bed and tugged off my panties while I giggled. My giggles turned to moans a moment later as he sank inside and we found our real home. It didn't matter where we were—on the road or here in Cherish Cove—as long as we were together, *we were home*.

As one we found our release together, and afterward, Axel lifted me and adjusted us to lie against the pillows, cuddled together. He pulled the blanket over us while I rested my head on his chest, tracing his ridges of muscle with my fingertip.

“Want me to get your food?” he asked.

“Not yet. I just want to stay like this for a few more minutes.” It was nice, this downtime together.

Axel's fingers trailed up and down my spine, and my eyes drifted shut, just listening to the steady beat of his heart.

“Is your mom ready to go on the road?” I asked in a struggle to stay awake.

“Mmm,” he hummed. “Yeah. But now that Van and Ree have their own place, she doesn't feel like she needs to mother hen over them.”

“It's weird thinking of them on their own.”

“They're older than we were. Aston and Carrington will be around to keep an eye on them. Aston is stepping up to the plate for Dad here.”

Funny how things worked out. When Darius had ended up going to prison for first degree arson—because indeed, he'd thought I was in the bedroom when he'd set the fire—Benz had stepped in to keep the Pendleton team from sinking. Turned out, family money had funded the Pendleton Motorsports business, but Benz's much older brother had kept it a secret. And kept all the money. In a deal to avoid more prison time, Darius had signed everything over to Benz.

Troy had helped Benz navigate things, and while they were diehard competitors, they were also good friends now.

“Do you feel bad that you're not gonna be racing for your dad's team?”

“Nah. I kinda think it’s better not to. That way we can be family and not basically boss and employee. I’m looking forward to have Mom and Dad on the road with us, too.”

“I think your mom is most excited for next year when the baby is here.”

“Yeah.” Our new custom RV, designed with Floyd’s preferences and the baby in mind, would be ready then, too. The one we had now was new-to-us and really nice. We’d been able to buy it from another driver who’d retired last year. But we were looking forward to ours we’d customized together.

My stomach growled, and Axel chuckled, sliding out from under me and getting out of bed. “I’ll get your snack.”

I sat up against the pillows and drew the blanket up over me. “I kinda want a pbj and pickles now.”

He paused, staring at me with plate in hand. “Uh, okay. I guess I can put some turkey on this for me.”

That was my man, giving me whatever I wanted.

I snorted and made grabby fingers at him. “I’m just teasing you, but... How about if I get dressed and we eat in the dining room. I’ll make you a sandwich and get you a sparkling water. Since you got me my food.”

His lips curled up on one side. “Okay. Deal. But just put on a robe. I think we need to christen the dining room, too.”

I couldn’t help but return his smile. “I like that plan.”

Want a heads up on my upcoming projects?

I’d love if you’d join me over on [*Brynn’s Place*](#) on Facebook!

Books by Brynn Paulin

Orclandia

Making the Ogre's Naughty List

Kidnapped by Santor (coming soon)

Secret Billionaire Orc Next Door (coming soon)

Sizzle Beach

Fling with the Secret Sheik

Fifty Shades of Sun

Girl on a Beach Blanket

Guy with a Starfish Tattoo

Cherish Cove: The Wellston

Step Challenge

Finding His Love

Waiting For You

Hating Her Ex Valentine

Cherish Cove: Home For the Holidays

Jingle Belle's Rock

Ex Scrooge Me

Loving St. Nix

Beast of Christmas Past

Cherish Cove: Beach Please

Light My Fire

Reclaiming Love

Flipping for Love

Beach Please

Cherish Cove: Cherish Cove High

Revenge of the Curves

Geek Charming

Billionaire Club

Blind Date With the Billionaire

Billionaire Auction (co-author Tia Fanning)

Stranded With the Billionaire

The Billionaire and the Beast

The Problem With Billionaires

The Bad Boys

Bad Boy Biker Boots

Bad Boy Bossy Pants

Bad Boy Babymaker

Bad Boy Bandleader

Bolthouse Security

Pursuing Pansy

Loving Layla

Steamy in Sweetville

(writing as Whitney Quist)

Postcards in the Sand

Cuddle Up, Buttercup

Pants on Fire

No More Running

In Plain Sight

His Sugarplum Kisses

Paws for Love

Amaze Me

Something So Sweet

For the Love of Pete

The Monster Misterys

Vampire Bait

Wife Bait

Monster Bait

**Not the Good Guy (with Kyra Nyx)
and Kuznetsov Mafia (only Brynn)**

Enforcer

Soldier

Room Fifteen: Making Her Obey

Empire

Wedded

Lawfully Wedded By Mistake

Unlawfully Wedded

Wedded or Worse

New Midgard

Viking's Claim

Viking's Touch (coming soon)

Wall Street Princesses

Billionaire's Halloween Princess

Billionaire's Runaway Princess (coming soon)

Tales Undone

The Prince's Syn

Oh My Scot

Falling for Forever

#Bridesmaid Again

Hunter

Chords

Rising Storm

Rush

Dare to Love

Half Past Normal

Billionaire's Bunny

Quarterback Leap

Weathering the Storm

Penalty Call

Switched Up

Merry Loves Bright

Daly Way

Belonging to Them

Plays Well With Others

Fill Her Up

One for the Team

Briar's Cowboys

Roped by the Team
His Old Kentucky Home
Eye of Her Storm
Santa Secret
Mad About Her Cowboys
Passing Through
Under Their Protection

Tradition Bound

On Your Knees
In His Chains
Chain Me Up
Hers to Obey

Circle of Three

Boy Toys
Tempting Tamera
Halloween Pleasure
Forgotten Forever

Cruentus Dragons

Dragons Blood
Blood Bought

Blood Mates

Taboo Wishes

Punished

Kidnap and Kink

Yuletide Greetings

Mr. Smith's Whip

Dick Does Jane

Sybil Disobedience

Malloy Brothers (with Dakota Rebel)

Billionaire's Christmas Cruise

Billionaire's Beautiful Runaway

Billionaire's Best Frienemy

North Springs

Stocking Full of Cole

Love Notes

Standalone Books

Gifted

Broken Perfection

Shirtless in New York

Farmer Takes a Wife

Line of Duty

Quarantined With My Ex

Romero and Julian, a m/m romance

Holiday Bound, a m/m romance

Forbidden Reunion, a m/m romance

(includes the bonus short story All In)

The Orgasmatron

Special Force

Wedding Jitters

Truth or Dare

Buried Secrets

Grave Destiny

His Goddess

Fallen for Her

Heart of Ice

Ménage

Two Plus One

Behind Sin's Door

Pride

Snows

Lynxed

Historical

Twice an Eternity (Dual time period story)

Knight Time Kiss (Time Travel)

In the Dark

Brynn Dark

Mine Every Night

Forbidden Obsession

Swapped